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PLCs: A Recipe for Success? The Impact of Professional Learning Communities on Teacher Practice and Teacher Retention

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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examined elementary teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities (PLCs) and the impact they have on their professional practice, particularly concerning teacher retention. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to gain data on how teachers feel about the work they are engaged in when functioning as a PLC within their school. Through this research, teachers evaluated if the time spent in PLCs has improved their work lives and job satisfaction, thus impacting their commitment to stay in the profession. The findings revealed that teachers view PLCs as providing meaningful opportunities for professional growth, collaboration, and developing student-centered practices. Factors like principal leadership, PLC meeting routines, group dynamics, data accessibility, and teacher input emerged as significant motivators shaping whether teachers perceive PLCs as authentic drivers of learning and improvement. Positive PLC experiences promoting teacher retention were associated with a supportive professional culture, concrete opportunities for instructional mastery, beliefs that efforts enhanced student outcomes, and reduced feelings of isolation. The data highlights how PLCs, done well, create a renewed sense of collective efficacy, purpose, and commitment to the profession.

The research implications underscore that simply implementing the PLC structural model is insufficient for achieving positive outcomes if schools do not intentionally cultivate the enabling conditions and experiences that empower teachers to become invested and see the work as beneficial to their craft. Specific recommendations are provided for further research, district and school leaders, policymakers, and teacher educators to leverage PLCs as a catalyst for instructional improvement and teacher retention.

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Dedication

To my beloved mother, whose unwavering love, support, and belief in me knew no bounds. Through the brightest days and darkest nights, you were my constant companion, celebrating each small triumph with unbridled joy. Though you departed this world before witnessing the culmination of this journey, your spirit has been my guiding light, propelling me forward. This achievement is as much yours as it is mine. You are so deeply missed. To my father, whose quiet strength, wisdom, and remarkable work ethic have been beacons for me throughout my life. Thank you for instilling in me the values that made this journey possible. To my sister, Debra, my role model in perseverance and resilience. Your courage in the face of adversity continues to inspire me daily. To my nieces and nephews, Antonio, Madison, Ava, and Lucas, whose vibrant spirits fill my heart with pure delight. May the joy you bring me today be a light that guides you on your own journeys tomorrow. To my dearest friends, Kate and Karen, whose steadfast encouragement and faith in me carried me through the most challenging times. I am forever grateful for your friendship. And finally, to my son Hudson, the greatest love of my life, whose boundless exuberance and zest for living teach me daily that true sunshine transcends even the grayest of rainy days. You are my inspiration, my motivation, my entire world. To you, I dedicate this achievement and all that is yet to come—to infinity and beyond.

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editor, Betsey Christiansen, whose dedication, and commitment to ensuring the highest quality of my work has been truly remarkable.

Biographical Sketch

Jeannine Carr is currently working as an Elementary School Principal at Prospect Hill School in Pelham, New York. Ms. Carr attended Iona University from 1993 to 1997 and graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education. She attended the College of New Rochelle from 1997 to 1999 and graduated with a Master of Science in Special Education. She attended Mercy College and graduated with a Master of Science in School Administration and Supervision in 2005. She came to St. John Fisher University in the summer of 2022 and began doctoral studies in the Ed.D. Program in Executive Leadership. Ms. Carr pursued her research in professional learning communities (PLCs) under the direction of Dr. Stephen Draper and Dr. Jason Skeeter and received the Ed.D. degree in 2024.

Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study examined elementary teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities (PLCs) and the impact they have on their professional practice, particularly concerning teacher retention. Semi-structured interviews were utilized to gain data on how teachers feel about the work they are engaged in when functioning as a PLC within their school. Through this research, teachers evaluated if the time spent in PLCs has improved their work lives and job satisfaction, thus impacting their commitment to stay in the profession. The findings revealed that teachers view PLCs as providing meaningful opportunities for professional growth, collaboration, and developing student-centered practices. Factors like principal leadership, PLC meeting routines, group dynamics, data accessibility, and teacher input emerged as significant motivators shaping whether teachers perceive PLCs as authentic drivers of learning and improvement. Positive PLC experiences promoting teacher retention were associated with a supportive professional culture, concrete opportunities for instructional mastery, beliefs that efforts enhanced student outcomes, and reduced feelings of isolation. The data highlights how PLCs, done well, create a renewed sense of collective efficacy, purpose, and commitment to the profession.

The research implications underscore that simply implementing the PLC structural model is insufficient for achieving positive outcomes if schools do not intentionally cultivate the enabling conditions and experiences that empower teachers to become invested and see the work as beneficial to their craft. Specific recommendations are provided for further research, district

and school leaders, policymakers, and teacher educators to leverage PLCs as a catalyst for instructional improvement and teacher retention.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

The teacher shortage in the United States is hitting a crisis level. According to a survey by the National Education Association (NEA), 55% of educators are considering leaving the profession earlier than planned (Walker, 2022). In the summer of 2022, 72% of principals and district leaders nationwide reported not having enough applicants to fill open teaching positions, putting children's educational experiences at risk (Lieberman, 2022). A report on teacher shortages by Carver-Thomas et al. (2021) found that less experienced staff often fill open positions, which could lead to wider gaps in student learning loss and education inequality. The challenge of teacher retention has always existed, but the problem of retaining teachers has worsened following the COVID-19 pandemic. A January 2021 report found that 76.4% of teachers considered leaving their position during the 2021-2022 school year (Steiner & Woo, 2021).

Professional learning communities (PLCs) were critical to student success before the pandemic. They will be more critical in the coming years because this is the first time in teachers' careers that they will be responsible for recovering from such a sizeable academic disruption (Simmons, 2021). Therefore, the topic of professional learning and specifically PLCs, will continue to remain relevant in the education field. According to Simmons (2021), teachers' instructional planning in PLCs is crucial to pandemic recovery. With increased demands on teachers, it has become imperative that schools not only recruit highly qualified teachers but also find ways to retain them. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2019) stated that "professional learning is a fundamental element for the success of any

major educational reform," and professional learning strategies are a "key attribute of high-achieving systems" across the globe (p. 153). This study examines teachers' perceptions of the impact professional learning communities have on their professional practice, particularly concerning teacher retention.

Problem Statement

Teacher retention has always been a challenge for schools, especially in urban, rural, and high-poverty settings (Papay et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic compounded that, causing "the most significant disruption to educational systems in history, affecting almost 1.6 billion learners in more than 190 nations across all continents and causing widespread panic" (Zhdanov et al., 2022, p. 2). The pandemic has negatively impacted teachers' mental health and well-being, leaving many to leave the profession (Marshall et al., 2022). School leaders are exploring ways to build capacity for change and sustain improvement as school districts struggle to meet the provisions of the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), increase student achievement following the COVID-19 pandemic, and find ways to address the issues of teacher shortages.

Even before the onset of COVID-19, teaching was recognized as one of the most stressful professions in the United States (Gallup, 2014). However, the problem has only worsened following the pandemic. Several studies attribute teacher dissatisfaction to a variety of stressors, including increased job demands, lack of resources and social support, lack of input and control over school policies, and reported feelings of isolation (Carter-Thomas et al., 2021; Marshall et al., 2022; Papay et al., 2017). PLCs may be one potential response to increasing teacher retention. A PLC refers to "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, operating as a reflective enterprise" (Stoll et al., 2006, p. 223). The implementation of PLCs has

proven to have many benefits. Teachers involved in PLCs have reported experiencing higher levels of self-efficacy, high-quality professional development (PD), and greater job satisfaction (Dufour & Dufour, 2012). According to DuFour and Dufour (2012), PLCs will powerfully and positively impact student achievement if executed with fidelity.

With the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, and the current focus on closing the learning gaps further impacted by the pandemic, the need for successful PLCs has never been more urgent (Simmons, 2021). The closing of schools has affected 94% of the world's student population (United Nations, 2020). According to Simmons (2021), the instructional planning and problems of practice that characterize PLCs can help recover what was lost and fill in the academic gaps.

Easton (2015) shared a distinct set of habits that PLCs must cultivate to be effective. PLCs that are accountable, foster good relationships, employ various skill sets to operate, function according to passion and purpose, and engage in both learning and doing are more likely to improve student learning and teacher well-being (Easton, 2015). Though the benefits of PLCs have been researched, the continued high rates of teachers leaving the profession earlier than anticipated create a need for a continued focus on increasing teacher retention. According to Goldhaber and Theobald (2022), teacher turnover rates increased four percentage points above pre-pandemic levels, reaching 10% nationally at the end of the 2021–2022 school year. A report by Nguyen et al. (2022) examined the most recent available U.S. state data and found that there were approximately 200,000 teaching positions across the country that were vacant or held by underqualified teachers because qualified applicants could not be found.

Theoretical Rationale

A theoretical framework is significant to research studies because it supports the overarching theme of the research (Creswell, 2017). Constructivist learning theory guided the researcher's study, with a focus on the social learning division. The foundational concepts of this theory provided a framework for understanding how meaningful professional development that allows for a shared vision and collaboration can affect teacher practice, therefore impacting a teacher's decision to remain in the teaching profession.

History

In constructivist learning theory practice, learners are self-directed and construct knowledge through individual experiences (Chuang, 2021). The focus of the theory is hands-on and active learning to enhance engagement. Constructivism is often discussed in three divisions: individual constructivism, social constructivism, and contextualism (Chuang, 2021). In individual constructivism, knowledge is constructed from one's experiences, and meaning is made by the individual (Smith & Ragan, 2005). Conversely, social constructivism assumes that learning is collaborative and multiple perspectives are considered when learning (Smith & Ragan, 2005). As for contextualism, it assumes learning should be connected to real-life contexts with authentic assessment (Chuang, 2021). For this research, the focus is on social constructivism. According to Chuang (2021), social constructivism supports the idea that human development is social, and knowledge is constructed through interactions with others. Several psychologists, such as Vygotsky, Dewey, and Bandura, have theorized that social interaction is crucial in learning and development.

The work of Lev Vygotsky, a Russian teacher and psychologist, has become the foundation of much research and theory in cognitive development over the past several decades.

Vygotsky (1978) suggests that one learns best through interacting with others. Vygotsky emphasized that through collaborating with others, learners create an environment of shared meanings with peers (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky emphasized the importance that culture plays in cognitive development. He believes that we are born with basic abilities to develop cognitively, which are enhanced through our interactions with others (Brau, 2018). Vygotsky's guidance includes the zone of proximal development: the space between what a learner can do without assistance and what a learner can do in collaboration with more capable peers (Brau, 2018).

John Dewey, an American philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, also believed humans learn best through a hands-on approach (Williams, 2017). Progressive education, as described by Dewey, should include learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate and socially engaging (Dewey, 1938). Much like Vygotsky, Dewey's work claims that learners who engage in real-world activities can demonstrate elevated levels of knowledge through creativity and collaboration (Behling & Hart, 2008). Dewey stated, "If you have doubts about how learning happens, engage in sustained inquiry: study, ponder, consider alternative possibilities and arrive at your belief grounded in evidence" (Reese, 2013, p. 320).

A division of constructivism, the social learning theory, proposed by 20th-century psychologist Albert Bandura, has become one of the most influential theories of learning and development. Bandura (1971) argued that people could learn new information and behaviors by watching others. This theory focuses on an individual's learning through indirect learning experiences in a social context (Chuang, 2021). Bandura (1971) stated, “Man's capacity to learn by observation enables him to acquire large, integrated units of behavior by example without having to build up the patterns gradually by tedious trial and error” (p. 2).

The work of these three psychologists is present in the literature related to PLCs. Constructivism is a learning theory that supports the idea that knowledge is gained through action, reflection, and construction, and learning alongside peers positively impacts the learning process (Brau, 2018). The literature around PLCs is rooted in this theory, emphasizing the social context of learning, and examining how teachers benefit from working collaboratively and having a shared vision. As a result, PLCs support teachers in building new skills, changing their mindset and classroom practices, and supporting improvements in teacher well-being (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Stoll et al., 2006).

Criticism of the Theory

Though many educators have embraced constructivism, it is not without criticism. For example, Vygotsky (1978) believed innate abilities are the initial building blocks of learning. However, according to Bloom's taxonomy, learning starts with remembering and understanding (Brau, 2018). This requires structure to ensure that the learner can memorize and recall information. This lack of structure, which is not fully present in the social division of constructivism, becomes a limitation if the learner does not have a base to begin with (Alanazi, 2016). While this criticism is aimed more at children, this limitation can be overcome in a PLC setting by providing teachers with the resources and support needed to learn. PLCs provide teachers with the opportunity to learn from each other through social interaction, and they can also use Bloom's taxonomy to guide their learning and assess their progress (Chuang, 2021).

Kirscher et al. (2006) criticized constructivist approaches. They believe constructivism promotes a teaching style where students learn with minimal instruction. Kirscher et al. indicated that this type of learning could make students feel frustrated or lost. In addition, this practice ignores the importance and structure of working memory during the learning process (Kirschner

et al., 2006). Finally, researchers such as Kirschner et al. indicated that these approaches also ignore studies showing that unguided instruction is ineffective in learning environments. In the context of adult learning and PLCs, this means providing adults with opportunities to learn through collaboration, problem-solving, and reflection. It is also important to note that adults involved in high-functioning PLCs are often self-motivated and have a strong desire to learn. This could mean that they are more likely to be successful in a constructivist learning environment than younger learners.

Ruggie (1998) critiqued the implementation of constructivism theory. Ruggie explained that learners involved in a group activity, like a PLC, can fall into what he calls groupthink. According to Ruggie (1998), groupthink is when those who disagree with the dominant thinking of the group will not participate as much as those whose thoughts align with the majority. Gupta (2011) agreed, claiming that the dominant group dominates the conversation and drives the whole class toward their thinking, leaving some students behind.

Additional researchers posit that there are limitations to the logistics and implementation of constructivism. According to Brau (2018), the nature of constructivism is more abstract, making it difficult to know if the observed learning outcomes fully demonstrate achievement. Alanazi (2016) agreed and argued that learners need to display their learning outcomes more tangibly so that these outcomes can continue to shape students' thinking.

Time is also a critique when it comes to constructivism. When operating under the constructivist framework, there is an expectation that instructors spend time engaging learners (Brau, 2018). This requires much time out of the classroom while allowing time for reflection. This could become a problem if the implementation is not thoughtfully planned out.

Evidence of Theory Effectiveness

Several research studies have broadly demonstrated the benefits of constructivist learning, highlighting the benefits of peer interaction for learning and motivation. Owen (2016) conducted a research study among three innovative schools involved in constructivist learning within their PLCs. The case study highlighted PLC characteristics and positive psychology connections. Data sources were analyzed, including documents, surveys, and leader and teacher interviews. Findings suggest that teachers working in schools operating in established PLCs reported a sense of trust within their collaborative groups through shared norms, a shared vision, and collaborative practices (Owen, 2016). Owen contended that "through using well-functioning PLC processes, positive relationships and a sense of accomplishment and belonging are achieved" (p. 417). This aligns with the research focused on teacher retention, with teachers reporting that the presence of shared decision-making was a factor that contributed to their decision to stay in an organization (Wronowski, 2017).

A qualitative study by Nugroho et al. (2020) investigated the implementation of a constructivist mentoring program, as it was perceived by five teachers in Indonesia who were responsible for teaching English at a high school. The findings suggest that constructivist learning practices facilitated the development of mutual trust between the participants. Teachers reported undergoing a meaningful change as the learning activities became more fun and engaging. It was reported that working collaboratively helped the development of their professionalism by changing their attitude and mindset (Nugroho et al., 2020). According to Wronowski (2017), teachers are less likely to reach a "burnout" stage when they feel empowered.

Emerging from Bandura's social constructivist theory, Mintzes et al. (2013) conducted a study to examine the effects of PLCs on self-efficacy in science teaching. This was a mixed methods approach, with 116 teachers from two school districts participating in this 3-year project. Teachers were divided randomly into two groups, with one group receiving Lesson Study, a model for professional collaboration. Findings showed that teachers embraced the PLC concept, describing a strong sense of empowerment. Interviews with participants suggest that PLCs are a powerful vehicle to provide opportunities for collaboration, autonomy to try innovative ideas, and improved student outcomes. Teachers also reported an overall sense of self-efficacy due to their PLC work. These components are strongly supported in Bandura's (1971) work and the best practices described in many professional development programs (Mintzes et al., 2013).

Conclusion

The emphasis on collaboration among professionals is at the core of constructivist learning theory. The centralized focus of the framework allowed this researcher to examine and analyze this perspective when discussing professional learning communities and their impact on teacher practice and turnover. This approach holds that an educator involved in meaningful professional development that allows for collaboration can increase the sense of accomplishment, purpose, and a more extraordinary passion for teaching (Owen, 2016). Wronowski (2017) identified a collaborative environment and shared decision-making as factors contributing to a teacher's willingness to sustain their commitment to teaching. Despite the criticism associated with this framework, several studies have highlighted the benefits, including increased trust with colleagues, a shared vision, collaborative practices, and teacher empowerment (Mintzes et al., 2013; Nugroho et al., 2020; Owen, 2016).

Statement of Purpose

This qualitative study examined elementary teachers' perceptions of the influence of PLCs on their professional practice and the impact of PLCs on teacher retention. This study was designed to identify how teachers feel about the work they are engaged in when functioning as a PLC within their school. Through this research, teachers evaluated if the time spent in PLCs has improved their work lives and job satisfaction, thus impacting their commitment to stay in the profession.

Research Questions

The questions that guided the research are:

1. In what ways do elementary teachers perceive their professional practices are affected by their work within their PLC?
2. What are elementary school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC work?
3. How do elementary teachers perceive their experiences in PLCs affect their decisions to remain teachers?

Potential Significance of the Study

Several studies (Lieberman, 2022; Marshall et al., 2022; Steiner & Woo, 2021; Walker, 2022) indicated that an alarming number of teachers are leaving the profession, and COVID-19 has only exacerbated this issue in education. The increased demands that were placed on teachers during and following the pandemic have led to high rates of stress. Numerous studies (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Park et al., 2018; Schaap & de Bruijn, 2018; Stoll et al., 2006; Thornton & Cherrington, 2014) focused on the effective characteristics of PLCs, such as teacher collaboration and a shared vision, and the implication it can have on student achievement and

teacher satisfaction. At present, little research has explored the links between PLCs and the perceived impact they have on teacher practices and teacher retention.

This study is significant because it contributes to the current research on PLCs, identifying key elements that may increase a teacher's desire to remain in the profession. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, administrators are focused on closing achievement gaps, with qualified teaching staff being a critical prerequisite. PLCs provide teachers with job satisfaction, collaboration, and support, allowing them to feel like part of a team (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). When teachers remain in the classroom longer, students will benefit from a more experienced educator. Pursuing additional information on the retention of teachers adds to the current research and highlights strategies that can impact retention. Additionally, the thoughts and perceptions of teachers around their PLC work is an essential avenue of inquiry with significant implications for policy and administrative practice.

Definitions of Terms

Lateral entry – an "alternate" route to teaching for qualified individuals outside the public education system. Lateral entry allows qualified individuals to obtain a teaching position and begin teaching immediately, while obtaining a license as they teach (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

Teacher retention – the process of keeping qualified and experienced teachers in the profession (Aulia & Haerani, 2022).

Teacher shortage –a situation in which there are not enough qualified teachers to fill all the teaching positions in a particular school district, state, or country (Garcia & Weiss, 2015).

Teacher turnover –the change in the number of teachers from one year to the next in a particular school setting (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

Chapter Summary

This study explored the influence of professional learning communities on professional practice and teacher retention. This chapter examined the research surrounding the research problem, discussing how teachers leave the profession at alarming rates. This section also presented a theoretical framework for the study highlighting the importance of developing collaborative communities within schools. Key terms and definitions beneficial to understanding this topic were also explained.

This study determined if participation in a PLC affects a teacher's desire to stay in the field of education. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature pertinent to the study topic. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and methodology. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings, categorizing themes and codes resulting from the participant interviews. Lastly, Chapter 5 analyzes the findings, emphasizing the effects of PLCs on teacher practice and teacher retention, while offering recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

Introduction and Purpose

The need to keep effective teachers in the classroom exists in our nation's schools (Simmons, 2021). Unfortunately, the ongoing efforts of recruiting, training, and retaining teachers have not addressed the retention problem that educational leaders face. PLCs may be one potential response to increasing teacher retention.

This literature review begins with an examination of constructivist learning theory and its relation to the PLC framework. It continues with an examination of PLCs, their impact on student achievement and teacher perception, and the factors influencing their success. Finally, the causes of teacher retention and the influence professional development has on teachers remaining in the profession is discussed. The questions that guided the research were:

1. In what ways do elementary teachers perceive their professional practices are affected by their work within their PLC?
2. What are elementary school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC work?
3. How do elementary teachers perceive their experiences in PLCs affect their decisions to remain teachers?

Influence of the Constructivist Learning Theory on PLCs

The constructivist social learning theory and the framework of PLCs are closely connected. Constructivist social learning theory emphasizes the social nature of learning and the importance of collaboration (Brau, 2018). It is based on the idea that learners construct their own

knowledge through interaction with others and the environment. Professional learning communities are groups of educators who work collaboratively to improve student learning (Dufour & Dufour, 2012). PLCs are typically based on the principles of constructivist learning, as they provide opportunities for educators to share ideas, learn from others, and develop new practices (Easton, 2015).

Constructivist learning theory connects to the framework because both approaches emphasize the importance of social interaction and collaboration for learning. Constructivist social learning theory posits that learning is a social process that occurs through interaction with others (Brau, 2018). PLCs provide a structured environment for educators to collaborate and learn from each other, thus creating a supportive learning environment that helps educators feel safe (Dufour & Dufour, 2012).

Both approaches emphasize the importance of reflective practice for learning. Constructivist learners are encouraged to reflect on their own learning and to adjust as needed (Alanazi, 2016). PLCs provide educators with opportunities to reflect on their practice, share their reflections with others and learn from each other's experience (Easton, 2015).

Lastly, both approaches are focused on improving teaching and learning. Constructivist social learning theory is aimed at understanding how people learn best to improve teaching and learning (Brau, 2018). PLCs are focused on improving teaching and learning by providing educators with opportunities to collaborate and learn from each other (Burns et al., 2018).

Overall, constructivist social learning theory provides a solid foundation for the work of PLCs. They are both premised on the belief that learning is most effective when it is collaborative, inquiry-based, and situated in authentic contexts. By understanding how people

learn best, PLC members can create a learning environment that is conducive to professional growth and development.

Internal Factors that Influence Professional Learning Communities

Several empirical studies (DuFour & DuFour, 2011; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Prenger et al., 2017) highlighted the significance of PLCs in improving teachers' instructional practice. In addition to this research, some studies examined the social, organizational, and structural factors affecting learning communities. This includes principal leadership, teacher learning support, supportive relationships, and time resources.

A professional leader's actions in a school impact the effectiveness of the professional learning communities (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). Thornton and Cherrington conducted mixed methods research that involved case studies of four PLCs over 6 months. The study aimed to explore the organizational and structural factors influencing PLCs, focusing on leadership. As the four PLCs met, a research assistant video recorded the session and collected observational data. Each PLC also had access to a website containing resources related to PLCs, blogs, and material used to record reflective journal entries. Additionally, quantitative and qualitative data from two online surveys relating to leadership practices were analyzed using descriptive statistics. All the various data were analyzed to identify emerging themes related to leadership practices. The study found that support from the professional leader was necessary for the effective functioning of PLCs. Participants in the study also believed that relational trust was essential and influenced learning communities. The presence of trust made it more likely for teachers to feel comfortable engaging in collaborative inquiry with their colleagues. This study also concluded that dedicated meeting times and a meeting space positively impacted PLCs, giving them time to discuss teaching and learning (Thornton & Cherrington, 2014). This study

agreed with the literature that asserts an atmosphere of empowerment and trust is strongly associated with a healthy relationship with school administration, which could support a teacher's decision to remain at their school (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020).

Johnson and Voelkel (2021) agreed that leadership can influence a PLC. Their study identified leaders' skill areas to build and support highly engaged PLC teams. As part of the study, the 46 principal participants were first required to participate in an immersive simulation program that provided authentic experiences to support leaders in building leader self-efficacy in leading PLCs. Researchers used a mixed methods constructivist approach. Pre- and post-simulation data using a questionnaire was collected from the participants. In general, results showed improvement in the leaders' abilities to engage in leading PLCs following the simulation exercises. The three areas that emerged as essential skills leaders need to support effective PLCs included communication, active listening, and authentic engagement (Johnson & Voelkel, 2021). This supports the literature that contends strong administrative support helped encourage teachers to stay in the profession (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020).

Willis and Templeton (2017) also focused on leadership in PLCs in a qualitative study that explored the factors principals found to be significant when establishing and maintaining PLCs and the elements connected to how principals perceived the practicality of developing and sustaining PLCs. The study was conducted in a rural community in Texas, and participants were required to have at least 3 years of experience in their current school. Purposeful sampling was utilized, with participants being selected based on their availability, willingness to share information, and established PLCs in their buildings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and emergent themes were analyzed. Results indicated that buy-in from teachers and mutual trust were interrelated and were crucial factors in establishing effective PLCs. Principals reported that

empowering teachers to be leaders created community among participants and influenced positive outcomes for PLCs. The most common factor among principals' perceptions included that dedicated time for teachers to collaborate and meet as a PLC was essential to its success.

A quantitative research study by Lapoint (2021) examined the variables influencing faculty involvement in learning communities. The population for this study represented faculty who teach in higher education and have implemented some form of a learning community. The data was collected using the Organizational Climate for Teaching and Learning (OCS) questionnaire, which yielded 627 respondents. The variables that held the highest significance were categorized as culture variables, including the challenge of academic work, professionalism, and academic planning. The study's conclusion is consistent with much of the literature suggesting that the organizational setting's values, beliefs, and attitude impact a learning community's effectiveness.

A study by Preast and Burns (2018) expanded existing professional learning community literature to include how performance feedback and consultation can affect PLC implementation. The participants for the study were members of four PLCs, which consisted of fourth and fifth-grade teachers in a suburban area. During each PLC meeting, a consultant worked with them on examining data, monitoring progress, and problem-solving skills. In addition, the consultant completed the PLC Implementation Rubric during each meeting to obtain baseline and follow-up data. The consultant used the data to coach the teams on identified strengths and areas of focus. The results from the study indicated that PLC teams improved following the consultation and maintained these changes even after the consultation ended. In addition, teams showed more significant improvements in implementing PLCs with fidelity. Preast and Burns suggest further research to measure the impact of consultation on student outcomes. This study is vital to the

research literature because PLCs support teachers in feeling empowered, and teacher empowerment has been positively associated with career longevity (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020).

The studies discussed in this section provide evidence of the internal organizational structures of schools that can influence PLCs. The empirical findings demonstrate the importance of formal and informal structures as antecedents to developing PLCs. Skilled principal leadership, support from administration, dedicated time to collaborate with colleagues, and direct feedback to teachers are essential contributors to effective PLCs. They can impact how a teacher perceives their learning community. Without this foundation, it is almost impossible for teachers to share ideas for instructional practice and collaborate (Gray & Summers, 2015). When researching PLCs, it will be essential to assess these parameters as they could impact how teachers perceive their PLC experience.

Habits of Effective PLCs

Many researchers have analyzed the characteristics or habits necessary for PLCs to succeed. According to Easton (2015), there are five habits that PLCs should work hard to develop to be successful. First, the most successful PLCs hold themselves accountable for the learning and implement the necessary changes to be effective for their students (Easton, 2015). As stated by DuFour and DuFour (2012), “A defining characteristic of a PLC is that its members begin their decision-making process by learning together” (p. 9). Secondly, PLC members effectively use essential skill sets such as understanding the change process, developing shared leadership, and using dialogue to support productive conversations (Easton, 2015). Woodland (2016) also promoted dialogue as an effective trait and stated that highly developed PLCs will discuss their instructional practice's effects on student learning and achievement and how to

refine their instruction so that every student can demonstrate growth. Next, effective PLCs actively build relationships to develop and sustain trust and focus on learning and doing (Easton, 2015). Cosner (2011) agreed and stated that a lack of confidence prevents a team from meeting essential goals, increases teacher vulnerability, hinders communication, and interferes with a shared understanding, negatively impacting student learning. Lastly, PLCs must work according to their passion and purpose (Easton, 2015).

Hord (1996) provided a framework for developing and sustaining purposeful PLCs that are still widely used today. Hord (1996) identified five core components of functioning PLCs. Hord's research on PLCs originates from her tenure with Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) from 1986-2001. Hord's study identified a working definition of PLCs and an instrument to measure them. Hord's tool, the School Professional Staff as Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSLCQ), forms the basis for a framework to understand PLCs as they operate in schools. Within this framework, PLCs possess shared and supportive leadership, shared instructional practices, collective teacher learning, a shared vision focused on student learning, and supporting structures, techniques, and conditions. While the framework's five dimensions are measured separately, there is commonality through all the strands, with collaboration and sharing firsthand experiences for improving the school as the basis for the structure.

Schaap and de Bruijn (2018) conducted a mixed method and longitudinal case study to explore the characteristics affecting PLC development in schools and how these are interrelated. Four PLCs were followed for 3 years, and participatory research and questionnaires were utilized to understand the PLC's characteristics, collaborative activities, and collective outcomes. The questions were measured using a 5-point Likert scale. The results demonstrated that PLCs with

the strongest potential rated highest on the elements of reflective and meaningful dialogues between the members and positive support of school administration. The study also revealed an interrelation between task perceptions and members' ownership of a shared vision.

In identifying the habits of an effective PLC, educators are not just gathering and meeting but collaborating toward learning and growing (Stoll et al., 2006). The combination of effective characteristics of PLCs varies throughout the literature. However, several commonalities emerge frequently, and the literature agrees that no single attribute defines a learning community. Since the research states the importance of organizational structure and habits in PLCs as an agent for their impact on student achievement and teacher practices, it is essential to assess these parameters when researching PLCs.

Influence on Teaching and Learning

Studies suggest that successful PLCs can influence everything from teacher satisfaction to student performance (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Park et al. (2018) stated that when teachers are engaged in meaningful PLCs, teacher isolation is reduced, there is an increased commitment to the school's mission, and new knowledge is created, thus impacting student learning achievement. Park et al. (2018) conducted a study to examine how principal support, PLCs, and collective responsibility affected 11th-grade math achievement. The researchers used public school data from the U.S. Department of Education and questionnaires teachers used to rate the degree of principal support they received. Teachers' perception of PLCs was also measured using a Likert-type scale to rate 10 statements. The results showed that principal support positively influenced PLCs and collective responsibility, affecting student math achievement.

A 3-year study by Bruce and Flynn (2012) examined professional collaborative communities' outcomes on math achievement. The study used a concurrent mixed method approach involving over 200 teachers and 100 students. The researchers used quantitative evidence of student achievement and teacher efficacy shifts and qualitative evidence of how PLCs influence teacher practice and understanding. This study found that students taught by teachers participating in PLCs improved math achievement. This was seen in Year 2: districts that sustained their inquiry-based PLCs had greater efficacy and student achievement gains. For example, students taught by teachers participating in PLCs improved from pre- to post-achievement tests, with achievement being much more extensive in Year 3 than in Year 2. The qualitative data set showed that teacher collaboration positively affected teacher efficacy and student beliefs. Bruce and Flynn demonstrated that PLCs support teachers in feeling confident in their abilities to provide students with rich experiences, which helps students gain confidence. This is critical because it connects to the research, which states that a teacher's feeling of being ineffective may contribute to their decision to leave the profession (Hanushek et al., 2016).

Akiba and Liang (2016) found comparable results by analyzing statewide longitudinal survey data. The researchers examined the effects of six types of teacher–professional learning activities on student achievement growth over 4 years. They collected data from 467 math teachers in 91 schools and examined middle school mathematics scores on standardized assessment data. The findings indicated that participation in PLCs is more effective for student growth than other professional learning opportunities, such as enrollment in courses or individual learning activities. In addition, the positive effects of informal communication and teacher collaboration are consistent with prior empirical findings on teacher collaboration and professional learning communities.

Burns et al. (2018) conducted a quantitative study in which data was collected from 181 schools in Missouri, all of which were in their third year of collaborating with consultants on the PLC model. A rubric was used to assess each PLC, while standardized assessment data was used as a criterion for student learning. The study concluded that two factors of PLC implementation correlated positively with student learning: collaborative leadership and data-driven systems for learning. In addition, Burns et al. (2018) acknowledged that "many schools are adopting a professional learning community because it focuses on student data and creates a culture of collaboration to enhance student learning" (p. 394). This is consistent with the literature around PLCs, emphasizing the social context of learning and examining ways teachers benefit from working collaboratively. PLCs support teachers in building new skills, changing their mindset and classroom practices, and supporting improvements in teacher well-being (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Stoll et al., 2006).

A study by Owen (2015) investigated PLCs and their impact on student learning and engagement. The research involved a case study of three schools recognized as innovative within the Innovative Learning Environment (ILE) project. As part of the OECD, ILE is a project that studies the conditions and dynamics that allow young people to learn. The researcher in this study used semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers participating in a PLC. Note-taking and digital recordings of interviews were analyzed. The participating teachers were invited to amend their transcripts to add information or supply evidence of student learning. All teachers in the study perceived that PLCs supported changes in their practice. Teachers indicated increased student learning outcomes regarding achievement, social skills, emotional independence, and creativity. Significantly, critical impacts of effective PLCs included increased student and teacher well-being. Despite teachers in the case study citing distinct types of student evidence of

learning, caution must be exercised because the link between student achievement and PLCs is claimed in self-reports. However, the results of this study do highlight the impact PLCs have on teacher well-being and igniting passion in their work, which is related to teacher retention.

A limited number of research studies directly measure student achievement and assessment due to PLCs. However, many studies acknowledge the characteristics of PLCs correlated to student achievement. The focus of PLCs is on improving teaching and learning. PLCs help teachers to focus on student learning and provide them a forum to discuss student data and develop strategies to improve student achievement. This helps teachers stay focused on helping students succeed, leading to a sense of satisfaction. According to Owen (2016), positive emotions and a sense of meaning and purpose are essential to resiliency. Owen (2016) stated that this positive feeling about our work helps teachers to perform better.

Teacher Perception of Professional Development

A teacher's perception of professional development will significantly impact its effectiveness (Nadelson et al., 2012). Nadelson et al. researched the relationship between educators' attitudes and perceptions of PLCs and their student's performance. This study surveyed 145 K-12 teachers and utilized state-level achievement tests. Findings suggest that teachers have above-neutral attitudes and perceptions of their PLC, which might suggest to the researcher that they are meeting their goals. However, the study failed to find a direct relationship between PLCs and student achievement in state-mandated standardized testing scores. Nadelson et al. (2012) report this as a limitation, recognizing that state achievement tests are just one measure of a student's performance, and multiple ways students learn could be assessed.

Prenger et al. (2017) studied the factors influencing teachers' professional development in professional learning communities. Using a mixed methods approach, the researchers studied the effects of 23 networked PLCs. A quantitative survey, qualitative interviews, and logs were utilized, with teachers being the primary respondents. Prenger et al. found that motivation to participate was essential and influenced critical components of PLCs, specifically the perception of a shared vision. Additionally, their study found that those with a negative attitude toward the PLC negatively impacted the learning atmosphere. Prenger et al. concluded that motivation plays a crucial role in PLC outcomes. This study connects to the research by Owen (2016) that looked at the positive psychology approach in relation to PLCs. When teachers can consciously engage in positive work that makes them feel confident, they are more productive and feel a sense of value (Owen, 2016).

This research is significant to PLC research because motivation and the perception of a shared goal can significantly contribute to the success of a PLC, thus enhancing student learning and teacher satisfaction. Research has shown that "teachers with positive perceptions about their working conditions are much more likely to stay at their current school than educators who are more negative about their conditions of work, particularly in the areas of leadership and empowerment" (Hirsch & Emerick, 2007, p. 1).

Teacher Retention

The goal of the elementary and secondary public school system in the United States is to provide high-quality education to every student. To do so requires "an adequate supply of qualified individuals who are willing and able to serve as teachers" (Guarino et al., 2006, p. 173). Schools and districts need help to maintain standards for teaching quality while continuously recruiting bright new teachers and seeking to retain their most influential teachers. According to

Guarino et al. (2006), districts must determine which programs raise the quality of teaching most cost effectively.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated the preexisting teacher shortage crisis in the United States, highlighting issues such as stress, burnout, and retention, which have long plagued the profession (Gillani et al., 2022). Gillani et al. studied individual and system-level factors that may impact retention. This was a cross-sectional non-experimental design administered through a one-time survey. Participants comprised a national-level convenience sample of eligible full-time K-12 teachers in the United States. The questionnaire consisted of 171 items, rated on a scale from 1 (*no impact*) to 5 (*significant impact*), on topics related to their teaching experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings revealed that 43% of teachers reported a greater intent to leave the profession than previously reported prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Teachers reported a desire to leave due to dissatisfaction with their district's communication. Teachers also expressed an increased desire to leave because they could not provide input and felt their voices were not heard (Gillani et al., 2022). These findings are consistent with the literature on job satisfaction, as they touch on the relationships between autonomy and administrative support, which are connected to teacher retention (McConnell, 2017).

Both human and financial capital is consumed by the constant process of hiring and replacing beginning teachers who leave before they have mastered creating a thriving learning environment for students (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020). Hasselquist and Graves aimed to identify the factors associated with teacher retention. This case study focused on career and technical education (CTE) teachers in South Dakota with 7-15 years of experience. A focus group of four teachers were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The focus group interview was recorded and transcribed The transcript was coded to identify categories and

themes related to the group's experience. Qualitative analysis of the data revealed four themes related to teacher retention: (a) setting boundaries, (b) shifting priorities, (c) building a professional support network, and (4) innovating in the classroom. The Hasselquist and Graves study highlighted recommendations that included prioritizing the involvement of teachers in professional networking. Participants shared that they are more likely to continue teaching if they feel involved and have opportunities to gather ideas from other teachers to help them innovate. This study relates to the literature on PLCs that states they can reduce teacher isolation and increase teacher satisfaction (Woodland, 2016).

Shibiti (2020) conducted a study investigating the influence of retention factors on work engagement. A quantitative design was used, and 278 questionnaires were collected from a convenience sample of teachers from public schools in South Africa. The six retention factors explored included compensation, job characteristics, training and development opportunities, supervisor support, career opportunities, and work-life balance. A Likert-type rating scale from 1 (*strongly dissatisfied*) to 5 (*strongly satisfied*) was utilized. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to analyze the data. The findings revealed a positive significant relationship between retention factors and work engagement, implying that satisfied participants appeared to have a high level of work engagement. In addition, the study suggests that participants who were happy with the training and development in their school were more dedicated and absorbed in their work.

A mixed methods study by Geiger and Pivovarova (2018) explored one of the factors affecting teacher attrition-school working conditions. The data on working conditions was collected from a survey sent to teachers who participated in the Teacher Advancement Program (TAP) during the 2013-2014 school year. The final sample included data from 1,479 teachers

from 37 schools participating in the TAP program. The survey instrument used was the North Carolina Teacher Working Conditions (NCTWC) survey. The survey was focused on a school's working conditions, such as professional development, community support, and school leadership. All items were rated on a 4-or-5 Likert scale with one open-ended question at the end asking participants if there was anything else they wanted to share about their school. There were 313 responses to the open-ended question, which was coded and analyzed. The quantitative data revealed that schools where teachers rated their working conditions more satisfactory had lower attrition rates. In addition, teachers in high-poverty schools reported more positive and compelling relationships with their mentors when compared to teachers in schools with a lower percentage of low-income students. Most teachers who responded to the open-ended question cited intense satisfaction with their school leadership, professional development, collaboration, and collegiality (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). This study supports the research that teachers perceive working conditions as an essential reason to stay in their respective schools.

The findings of these studies have important policy implications and are significant to the proposed study. In all the studies cited, job satisfaction was linked to the feelings of involvement and engagement teachers felt when opportunities were presented to foster collegial relationships through professional opportunities. It is crucial for teachers to feel like they are impacting student learning while working in an atmosphere that promotes empowerment and trust. This literature is essential because these characteristics are closely associated with PLCs, making it an important aspect to explore further when addressing teacher turnover's negative impact on students and schools.

Effects of Teacher Turnover

High teacher turnover burdens schools and districts. Some of these burdens are explicit and include recruiting, hiring, and training costs. Others are more hidden and take the form of changes to the quality of the teaching staff. Turnover refers to the change in the number of teachers from one year to the next in a particular school setting (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Turnover has marked and lasting negative consequences for the quality of the instructional staff and student achievement (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

A case study by Levy et al. (2012) set out to create a model and methodology to document turnover costs for middle and high schools in the Boston Public Schools. The researchers developed a model based on Levin and McEwan's (2001) *ingredients method* for estimating costs to guide the methodology in the study. This method assumes that any cost analysis must begin by identifying all the ingredients or cost categories and determining their cost. For this study, the categories analyzed were separation costs for human resources, recruitment, and hiring; new teacher support; ongoing professional development; and salary gap. Four case study schools with chronically high turnover rates were chosen for this study. School and district data collection occurred between 2004 and 2008. To document costs, structured and semi-structured interview protocols were used with 31 participants, including teachers, human resources staff, accounting staff, and staff developers. District budgets were also analyzed to identify expenditures associated with turnover. Findings suggest that the cost of turnover was estimated to be $12,110,102, or 2% of Boston's total annual budget. Each teacher’s departure cost Boston at least $19,460. It is important to note that some schools' teacher replacement and professional development costs were undocumented. As a result, the actual cost of teacher

turnover may be underestimated (Levy et al., 2012). This study is relevant as it demonstrates the high costs associated with teacher turnover, making this a topic that needs continued attention.

A study by Sorensen and Ladd (2020) was grounded in the ongoing debate among researchers about how much teacher turnover will strengthen or weaken the mix of teachers in individual schools. This study utilized longitudinal administrative data from the North Carolina Education Data Center. The sample was restricted to teachers of math and English language arts (ELA) in the middle school Grades 6 to 8, as these subjects are student-tested areas. The analysis used 2 decades of administrative data on math and ELA teachers to determine school responses to turnover. The study confirmed that a high teacher turnover rate at the school level raises significant policy concerns. Math and reading scores dropped in areas with high teacher turnover rates. High-poverty, low-performing, and geographically isolated schools were more likely to rely on lateral entry teachers and provisional teachers in response to turnover than the average school (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). This study is relevant to the research because turnover leads to a mix of teachers with weaker qualifications and teachers with limited experience working together toward the school's educational mission (Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). According to Owen (2016), teachers must build a sense of identity and purpose with others, challenging each other's ideas and working towards a shared vision. Owen (2016) contends that well-functioning PLCs can improve teacher satisfaction and well-being.

Hanushek et al. (2016) also conducted a study examining teacher turnover's effects on the quality of education. The Texas Education Agency collected administrative records on students and teachers in this study. The student background data included program characteristics, gender, free or reduced lunch eligibility, and special needs or limited English proficiency classification. Student testing data from the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) was also utilized to

measure student achievement rates. The sample included students and teachers in Grades 4 to 8 for 1995-1997 and 2000-2001. The data was sorted and analyzed using an F-test analysis and a chi-square test. The data analysis showed that turnover adversely affected the quality of instruction in lower-achievement schools. The result is due to a turnover-induced loss of general and grade-specific experiences that comes from the departure of teachers. Findings support evaluation and compensation systems that link pay increases with performance to attract and retain effective teachers. This study by Hanushek et al. (2016) supports the belief that a lack of success leads many teachers to exit, particularly from low-achieving schools. This study is consistent with the belief that general professional development programs have been unsuccessful. However, a few studies suggest that a focus on feedback and mentoring might be merited (TNTP, 2015).

The research on teacher turnover is critical, and solutions designed to address retention issues are necessary. In 2007, the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) completed an 18-month study of teacher turnover costs in five school districts (National Commission on Teaching and America's Future [NCTAF], 2007). The selected districts varied in size, location, and demographics. enabling exploration of how these variations affected costs. In addition, the costs of recruiting, hiring, processing, and training teachers at the school and district levels were examined. Findings indicated that the cost of turnover varies from district to district, dependent upon the size of the district and the types of induction programs the district implements. However, in all cases, the cost of teacher turnover was substantial. According to the NCTAF (2007), teacher turnover can cost districts upwards of $7 billion per year, affecting the quality of teaching and interfering with efforts to close the achievement gap. The NCTAF (2007), warned:

> We must recognize that we have a retention problem before we continue to engage in a costly annual recruitment and hiring cycle, pouring more and more teachers into our nation's classrooms only to lose them faster and faster. This will continue to drain our public tax dollars, undermine teaching quality, and hinder our ability to close student achievement gaps. (p. 1)

Influence of Professional Development on Teacher Retention

According to McFarland et al., (2019) in a report for the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) districts that invested in proven professional learning have demonstrated higher teacher retention rates and increased student learning. A study by Luesse et al. (2022) evaluated The Academy for Teachers' professional development program, designed to support teachers in network building, and increased skill development, pride, and self-efficacy. An exploratory mixed methods approach was followed by a post-only non-equivalent quasi-experimental design of intervention effects, including in-depth interviews with participants. The researchers conducted 18 in-depth interviews with teachers, using line-by-line coding to analyze the results. The researchers further surveyed 175 teachers from New York City schools who participated in the Academy program compared to those who applied but did not participate. The quantitative data revealed positive findings for integrating material learned into the classroom, perceived professional pride, and teacher efficacy. The qualitative data illustrated mechanisms that support the success of the program. Participants in the study described professional development as a contributing factor to retention. However, it was not the driving factor in the teachers' intentions to remain in the profession. Network building was reported to be one of the most prominent outcomes of the PD, with teachers feeling optimistic about learning from others and gaining insight from different perspectives Luesse et al., 2022). This research aligns with the

characteristics of PLCs, such as collaboration and shared decision-making, that teachers report positively impacting their practice (Bruce & Flynn, 2012).

Rose and Sughrue (2020) conducted a phenomenological study to investigate if a school leader's knowledge of teacher challenges, and the support they provide in response to those challenges, would impact retention in the profession. This was a sequential-explanatory, mixed-methods approach. A survey of school leaders and teachers in Florida was conducted to collect quantitative data on school leaders' knowledge of challenges and factors for retention. Teachers and principals had at least 3 years of experience in their respective schools. Qualitative interviews were conducted with both groups to promote a greater understanding of the quantitative data. Other data collected included field notes and professional development documents for triangulation. Results indicated that teachers and leaders claimed that school leaders had some understanding of the challenges of teachers, and a clear gap in leader knowledge existed. Although some professional development opportunities were available, their impact was situational. Teachers did not note the impact of professional development on their decision to remain in the profession. However, teachers reported that their relationships with other teachers, more so than the programs, supported their challenges and promoted retention. The Rose and Sughrue study adds to the research and supports the idea that collaboration and shared learning are valued components of teacher practice and should be further studied regarding the impact these opportunities can have on retention.

These studies are significant because, as Luesse et al. (2022) report, most professional development research is limited to assessing the outcomes of formal experiences. Studies have yet to examine holistic PD models and their impact on teacher retention. The studies above highlight similar characteristics of professional development that teachers highly regard.

Collaboration and supportive networks were referenced above and are also included in studies that speak to the characteristics of effective PLCs, which will be discussed below. Based on the research, there is a link between effective PLC practices and student learning. However, more research is needed to examine how engaging in a PLC could influence a teacher's decision to remain in the profession.

Chapter Summary

The last 3 years have been a period of unprecedented turmoil for schools, but now school leaders are faced with the even more significant challenge of retaining teachers. Teacher retention will continue to be one of the biggest obstacles in K-12 education. As more people leave the profession and fewer teachers join, research indicates that there will be more unqualified staff in classrooms and fewer students taught by specialists (Hanushek et al., 2016; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020). Much research has also been conducted regarding teacher turnover trends, including financial implications from recruiting, hiring, and teacher training costs (Levy et al., 2012; NCTAF, 2007; Sorensen & Ladd, 2020).

Research also exists on the organizational factors that relate to teacher turnover. For example, research suggests that a commitment to remain in the profession could be enhanced if teachers had supportive leadership and felt engaged in their work (Bruce & Flynn, 2012; Rose & Sughrue, 2020). In addition, teacher working conditions, such as professional development, community support, and school leadership, are also areas that have been cited as reasons teachers may decide to stay in the profession (Geiger & Pivovarova,2018). Professional development, if it is based on sound evidence, can contribute to the retention of teachers, but teachers need to be adequately supported to participate (See & Morris, 2021).

During the pandemic recovery, schools must be intentional about their instructional planning and teacher development (Simmons, 2021). While many variables may be out of their control, schools can control the quality of the professional development provided to teachers. Many school districts utilize PLCs as a form of professional development. According to DuFour and DuFour (2012), PLCs are the optimal way to improve student achievement through continual progress in the teacher's professional practice. The extensive research surrounding PLCs speaks to a collaborative and supportive culture that allows all community members to work towards a shared vision (Gray & Summers, 2015; Willis & Templeton, 2017). Research shows that collaboration and supportive leadership are linked to teacher retention (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018).

While a substantial amount of research has been conducted separately in teacher retention and PLCs, research examining PLCs and the possible effect they can have on teacher retention is an under-researched area. Nevertheless, teacher retention remains a national issue in education, and PLCs may be one potential solution to the problem.

Chapter 3: Research Design Methodology

Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology for this qualitative phenomenological study, which examined teachers' perceptions and views of how PLCs impact instructional practice and teacher retention. This chapter will present an overview of the topic, explain the focus of the study, justify the design, and restate the research questions. It also describes the research context and the participants in addition to the data collection process. The study's primary purpose was to examine teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of PLCs and their impact on teacher retention using semi-structured interviews. PLCs encompass many effective characteristics related to teacher satisfaction; thus, when effectively implemented, may increase the retention of teachers.

Research Questions

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. In what ways do elementary teachers perceive their professional practices are affected by their work within their PLC?
2. What are elementary school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC work?
3. How do elementary teachers perceive their experiences in PLCs affect their decisions to remain teachers?

The essential characteristics of PLC models include a shared mission, vision, values, and goals; collaborative teams; collective inquiry; action orientation and experimentation; continuous

improvement; and results orientation (Dufour & Dufour, 2012). These characteristics correlate to teacher satisfaction, which strongly ties to teacher retention (Geiger & Pivovarova, 2018). Through this study, the researcher attempted to better understand teachers' PLC-related experiences and perceptions of the impact they have on teachers staying in the educational field. This type of inquiry is personal and, as a result, was best answered by applying a qualitative methods approach.

Research Design

A qualitative phenomenological study examined teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities and their impact on teacher retention. According to Creswell (2017), "Qualitative research is an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (p. 4). The study of teachers' perceptions of PLCs and teacher retention is personal because of the number of human factors that contribute and play a role in the process. Diverse groups of people form PLCs, and the success and failure of each one is personal. Qualitative researchers are interested in an inductive style, focusing on the personal meaning and the description of complex situations (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, the researcher chose to conduct a qualitative study.

When considering the factors of a qualitative research study, such as goals, purpose, theoretical frameworks, research questions, and intended participants, a phenomenological inquiry became the clear selection. Phenomenology focuses on understanding why something happens, how it happens, and the essence of the experiences for the people or group (Creswell, 2014). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a phenomenological approach is best suited for research where it is essential to understand several individuals' common or shared experiences. When meaningfully implemented, PLCs are an ongoing process where teachers reflect on their

practice. The goal of this research design was to capture, understand, and be able to communicate how the participants "perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2015, p. 115). A focus on qualitative data provided an in-depth understanding of the research questions and allowed the researcher to analyze a representative sample of perspectives through participant interviews. This study was focused on teachers' PLC-related experiences and their perceived impact on teacher retention.

Research Context

The study occurred in three elementary schools in a suburban school district in lower Westchester County in New York State. Each school includes kindergarten through fifth grade. The district in which these schools are located comprises four elementary schools, one middle school, and one high school. This district was purposefully selected for participation in the study because of staff members' regular involvement in the PLC model for the past 8 years. The district's reputation was considered in professional development, teacher efficacy, and employee satisfaction. This site is relevant due to the culture of continuing to improve instruction through a focus on PLCs. Additionally, the researcher was able to gain access to this site through employment in the district. The researcher received permission from the school district's superintendent and board of education to conduct the research at this site. The critical aspects of being representative, relevant, and timely were secured through the chosen location.

Research Participants

Teachers selected for this study provided their perceptions of and experiences with PLCs. Purposeful sampling was used to select the participants. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to choose participants based on their knowledge or experience with a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2014). The participants in this research study were included based on

their experiences with PLCs and their length of employment in the district. This enabled the researcher to deeply understand a specific phenomenon, PLCs, in this study.

This qualitative study targeted certified teaching staff from the three selected elementary schools. Specifically, the inclusion criteria for this research were that each participant be a certified teacher who was granted tenure from the district and is currently participating in a PLC for at least 3 years. Tenured teachers were chosen for this study because it means they have some longevity within the district. The sample size for this study was eight to10 teachers. The researcher selected a range to ensure the gathering of enough information to reach saturation. Creswell (2014) defines saturation as the point when gathering new data no longer provides a unique insight into answering research questions.

Instruments Used in Data Collection

A semi-structured interview process was used for this research study. This structure was chosen to allow participants to expand upon and introduce other lines of thinking that the researcher may not have anticipated (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). The researcher developed questions before the interviews, but time was allowed for follow-up questions and the development of emerging themes. The questions provided further prompts regarding the impact of PLCs on the teacher's practice, satisfaction, and decision to remain in the field of education. Once interview questions were constructed, the researcher checked for alignment between the research and interview questions. To ensure the reliability and validity of the instrument, interview questions were pilot tested with individuals outside of the study context who were familiar with the successful implementation of PLCs in elementary schools. The researcher obtained feedback to ensure that questions were clear and appropriately addressed the research questions.

Procedures Used for Data Collection

The goal of this study was to understand teachers' lived experiences with PLCs and the impact they have had on their decision to remain in the profession. Once a letter of support was received from the superintendent and the study was approved by the St. John Fisher University Institutional Research Board (IRB), the researcher emailed the three building principals, informing them of the study and recruitment of potential participants. After approval by the building principals, a letter of introduction was sent to the potential participant teachers in the three identified elementary schools. The introduction letter included:

- a brief description of the study
- how the data will be used
- how confidentiality will be maintained
- description of the process that will be used and how the interview will be conducted
- the time needed to complete the interview
- the criteria they need to meet in order to participate

Participants were asked to email the researcher if interested, and after confirming the participant met the criteria, individual, 60-minute interviews were scheduled via Zoom at a mutually convenient time. Using this design, the researcher offered teachers the ability to reflect, make suggestions, and speak to the impact of PLCs on teacher practice and retention.

Before interviews were conducted, participants were asked to sign a consent form to be returned to the researcher for their records. A reminder email was sent to each participant with the date and time of the interview. Participant identities were protected through coding to maintain confidentiality. Participants were coded by participant number (P1, P2, P3, etc.). At the end of each interview, the researcher summarized key points and asked for confirmation of

accuracy. Interviews were video recorded via Zoom and transcribed to prepare for the coding process (Creswell, 2014).

Procedures Used for Data Analysis

Creswell (2014) considers data analysis an ongoing process of continual reflection and reevaluation. Therefore, the researcher developed an ongoing analysis process for the data presented in the semi-structured interviews.

Data analysis took place in multiple stages.

Part 1 of the data analysis included closely reviewing and organizing the transcripts of each participant interview. This involved typing the field notes gathered during interviews and scanning and organizing all material to prepare for the analysis. Qualitative researchers should read the data and begin recording general thoughts in the margins about the data (Creswell, 2017).

After the transcripts were reviewed, thematic coding was necessary to analyze the interview data. According to Creswell (2017), coding is a process that involves bracketing or chunking the data and writing a word that represents that category. The coding methodology is appropriate for studies highlighting and honoring participants' voices (Saldaña, 2016). Following the initial reading and review of the transcripts, they were added to the qualitative software Delve. Delve's analysis feature, which enables researchers to identify patterns and trends in data more easily, effectively represented the participants and their perspectives (Delve, 2023). This categorical coding was further refined during subsequent readings. The researcher compared participant responses and validated themes once all the interview data was collected and coded.

The coding process that was employed is summarized as follows:

1. Conducted a first round of coding pass: Read through the transcripts and assigned codes to different data sections.
2. Created categories and subcodes: Once codes were assigned to the data, the researcher grouped them into categories and subcodes using Delve. This helped analyze the data.
3. Completed further rounds of coding: As the researcher continued to analyze the data, new codes or revised codes became necessary.
4. Created the final narrative: Once coding was completed, the researcher provided reports to explain the data and present findings to the participants for member checking, ensuring the validity of the data.

The codes and themes generated from the analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the research phenomenon, which was then detailed in narrative form to reflect the voices, experiences, and perspectives of the participants of the study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explained the research design and methodologies, including research questions, plan for the study, participants and sampling, and data collection and analysis procedures. A qualitative method was chosen for this study because qualitative research seeks to understand a person's perceptions, attitudes, and experiences (Creswell, 2018). This approach provided the researcher with data on teachers' experiences with PLCs and how they have impacted their decision to remain in education. This study was conducted with teachers from three schools within a Westchester County district. Participants included certified, tenured teachers who have participated in PLCs for at least 3 years. Semi-structured interviews with teachers were conducted to gather evidence of the perception of teachers. Data was collected and

analyzed through appropriate qualitative methods. Data was coded using categorical analysis to identify emerging themes.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine teachers' perceptions of the influence of PLCs on their professional practice and the impact PLCs have on teacher retention. The three research questions, developed and aligned with the problem statement, identified how teachers feel about the work they are engaged in when functioning as a PLC within their school. Through this research, teachers evaluated if the time spent in PLCs has improved their work lives and job satisfaction, thus impacting their commitment to stay in the profession.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

This qualitative phenomenological study examined teachers' perceptions of the influence of professional learning communities on their professional practice and the impact of PLCs on teacher retention. Qualitative data gathered through interviews captured the lived experiences of educators who were members of a PLC. This unveiled how these learning communities impact teachers' professional growth, instructional practices, and even their decision to stay in the profession. By analyzing teacher narratives, valuable insight was gained into how PLCs foster collaboration, address specific student needs, and create a sense of shared responsibility for student success.

Overall, this study, with a focus on teacher perceptions, provides valuable insights for creating strong PLCs that address the needs of educators, ultimately leading to a more stable and effective teacher force. Through coding, categorization, and thematic analysis, meaningful themes emerged from the participant's narratives. The findings of this study are organized by key themes, subthemes, and alignment to the research question, capturing the participant's experiences. Quotes from the interviews were selected and used to represent the participants' thoughts in connection with the research questions while also providing evidence of the themes outlined in Table 4.1.

Research Questions

The findings of this study answered the following research questions:

1. In what ways do elementary teachers perceive their professional practices are affected by their work within their PLC?

2. What are elementary school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC work?

3. How do elementary teachers perceive their experiences in PLCs affect their decisions to remain teachers?

Table 4.1

Research Questions (RQ), Themes, and Subthemes

Themes	RQ	Subthemes
1. Enhanced student learning	1, 2	Collaboration, data-driven decisions
2. Improved teacher practice	1,2	Increased teacher knowledge, problem-solving, collective efficacy
3. School-level benefits	1, 2, 3	Culture, teacher morale, alignment of goals
4. Job satisfaction	1, 2, 3	Feeling valued and supported, collegiality

Data Analysis and Findings

The findings of this study are organized by key themes, subthemes, and alignment to the research questions, highlighting the impact PLCs have on teacher practice and teacher retention. The aim was to capture the meanings of the participants' experiences in their PLC. The four key themes that emerged from the research were (a) enhanced student learning, (b) improved teacher practice, (c) school-level benefits, and (d) job satisfaction. The subthemes that emerged from the themes were (a) collaboration, (b) data-driven decisions, (c) increased teacher knowledge, (d) problem-solving, (e) collective efficacy, (f) culture, (g) teacher morale, (h) alignment of goals, (i) feeling valued and supported, and (j) collegiality. The most prominent themes and codes were

identified by analyzing the data from surveys, capturing the essence of teachers' perceptions about PLCs.

Theme 1: Enhanced Student Learning

One of the themes that emerged from the study that all participants discussed is the impact PLCs have on student learning. Participants shared how PLCs bring them together with colleagues to share successful teaching methods, discuss challenges, and develop new strategies. It aligns with RQ1: In what ways do elementary teachers perceive their professional practices are affected by their work within their PLC? and RQ2: What are elementary school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC work? Data from the interviews highlighted collaboration, data-driven goals, and a focus on student learning as contributors to enhanced student learning.

Collaboration

Collaboration is vital to PLCs because it fosters a shared focus on student learning. All participants shared this sentiment, and they spoke about how PLCs have allowed them to learn from each other and implement best practices in their classrooms, ultimately benefiting students through more effective instruction.

Participants shared that educators in a PLC can achieve many benefits that ultimately translate to better student outcomes by working together. According to the participants, collaboration in PLCs supports consistent instruction, targeted interventions, effective curriculum, and motivated teachers.

Consistent instruction emerged often in discussions around student learning. Participants felt that the collaboration that happens in PLCs ensures a more unified approach to teaching across classrooms. They felt that, as a team, they are more consistent with learning objectives,

expectations, and instructional methods. Participants shared that they feel more confident in their teaching when they know their colleagues are working similarly. Participants used words like "self-assured" and "self-confident," with P2 saying, "You feel your most prepared when you feel like your colleagues are supporting you, and you're doing the same things; you feel more confident." P4 shared a similar sentiment:

> In my PLC, we collaboratively decide together what we want to work on. For example, when I was in second grade, my PLC focused on one content area that we didn't think we had enough resources for. We worked as a team to pull together resources and organize them, having them ready at our fingertips. I just remember that year in second grade, feeling so much more ready, confident, and connected to my colleagues.

In speaking about collaboration, participants mentioned that teachers can identify struggling students early on by working together and developing interventions to get them back on track. This was evident from P3, who spoke specifically about how her PLC has helped her differentiate for the diverse needs of students in her class. She shared:

> I think PLCs are just invaluable. You learn from each other, and it raises the level of your confidence and your knowledge. I also think it validates everything that you're doing. For example, if you have a challenging class and maybe you're trying different things and it’s not working. By talking to my colleagues I get new ideas, we share different methods and I gain new insights into what I could do differently to reach a student and help them succeed.

The supportive and collaborative environment described by participants keeps teachers engaged and motivated, which translates to a more positive environment for students to learn. P1 shared this sentiment:

> Participating in PLC's have absolutely helped me stay motivated in my teaching career. I have been teaching for over 30 years, and as I said earlier, I consider myself a lifelong learner. Without the younger members of my learning community, I would be working harder, not smarter. For example, because of my PLC community this year, I am being taught by my partner how to use CANVA and create a professional looking writing tool kit. In the end, I want to offer my students every opportunity and advantage to excel in my classroom. PLCs have certainly kept me on top of my game.

In essence, collaboration is the engine that drives PLCs. By working together, educators leverage their collective knowledge and experience to create a more effective learning experience for all students.

Data-Driven Goals

In addition to collaboration, participants also related the student achievement they noticed from their PLC work to having clear goals that are data driven. Effective PLCs focus on analyzing student data to identify areas where students are struggling. The opportunity to utilize data to make decisions has promoted an environment in which decisions are based on evidence, thus supporting student learning. P1 reported that by working together, teachers develop targeted interventions and adjust their teaching approaches to better meet the needs of their students.

When participants spoke of being data driven, they shared that their goals for their PLC emerged from the data because their administration supports teachers in choosing their own PLC topic. Of the eight participants interviewed, the importance of teachers having a choice in the goal or topic being studied by their PLC was mentioned 16 times. This demonstrates the importance of teacher choice in boosting a PLC's effectiveness. Participants shared that having ownership in their PLC's focus helped them feel invested in the process. All participants

indicated they had a more positive attitude toward the work and felt a greater willingness to contribute ideas and experiences in PLCs where they were given a choice. P5 highlighted the impact teacher choice has on PLC work:

> Teachers have diverse needs in their class, especially after the pandemic. There are academic needs and social emotional needs that must be balanced and addressed. Having a choice in our PLC allows us the dedicated time to address current challenges. This targeted learning leads to greater improvement in my teaching practice as well as the students' learning.

P6 shared a similar sentiment:

> When deciding on our PLC goals for the year, we are challenged to focus our work on what best serves the interest of our students. We stay focused on how our work and learning will promote student achievement. This year, in particular, I felt like our PLC had the outcome clearly defined in our minds before we began the work: "How can our checklists support student success?" We remained focused on this each time we met this year. This lens kept us on task and allowed us to create valuable tools for our students to guide their learning.

The environment created by PLCs allows teachers to compare their own class data to peers and create new instructional strategies. P8 shared:

> The data from my class is always changing. Whether it is kids that are struggling, or students that need enrichment, you must plan for different groups in a limited amount of time. PLCs allow us that time—time to share strategies with colleagues and create instructional plans that meet the needs of all learners. They allow us to monitor progress and make instructional decisions that make sense for students as individuals.

P7 also spoke about the importance of data, not only to support students academically but also behaviorally. P7 shared, “Looking at data is so important; it helps you put plans in place to improve student outcomes.” When all the participants discussed improved student outcomes, each shared a common sentiment that when students show growth, teachers feel good about their work.

The theme of student learning is critical to highlight because the participants' responses align with the many studies that have shown a positive correlation between well-implemented PLCs and improved student achievement (Burns et al., 2018). As the participants pointed out, the effectiveness of PLCs depends on several factors, which include a focus on data-driven goals, teacher choice, and collaboration. As shared by P3, "I have always believed in professional development as a way to improve student learning. The better teacher I become, the better my kids will be for it." As the responses indicated, PLCs support student achievement and improve teacher practice, as discussed in Theme 2.

Theme 2: Improved Teacher Practice

Theme 2, improved teacher practice, is at the heart of thriving. This theme aligns with RQ2: What are elementary school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC work? In connection with the themes mentioned in the previous section, PLCs provide a structured environment for teachers to collaborate on specific goals for student learning. Participants commented that they shared best practices, observed each other's classrooms, and discussed challenges. This collaborative environment fosters a culture of continuous learning and improvement for teachers. Data from the participants revealed increased teacher knowledge, problem-solving, and collective efficacy as subthemes that emerged concerning improved teacher practice.

Increased Teacher Knowledge

Participants reported that teachers collaborate and learn from each other's experiences and expertise. This expands their knowledge base of teaching strategies, content-specific pedagogy, and best practices in assessment. P6 reported:

> It has made my teaching stronger. For example, I am working in a PLC focused on tiered writing instruction. I was able to target my students' needs and learned more about checklists and self-assessments to help students transfer what they learned. This has made my practices stronger and has made me a better writing teacher.

Participants were also asked about the efficacy of PLC work and how it has supported them. P2 reported:

> PLCs have supported my collegial relationships. If I need help, I go to my PLC colleagues and I'm going to ask them what worked well for them and what did not work. Having that professional learning time really helps with that. I think just being open and having that core group of teachers I can go to is helpful. I mean research says when you're around people who are high functioning and high achieving, you tend to become more high functioning and high achieving just to keep up. They motivate me to want to do more and to want to do better.

Participants reported that they gained exposure to a wide range of instructional purposes and resources by working with colleagues. P5 said, "PLCs have helped spark new ideas and have helped me develop more comprehensive understanding of effective teaching practices." P2 reported that PLCs have been especially helpful to her the first year she taught a new grade. This participant shared how she is more open to changing grades because she knows her PLC will provide consistent time with colleagues to help her learn the new curriculum. P2 said:

> The experience of changing grades and positions has actually been really good for me here. It's a big job to change grades, but PLCs have helped me to feel supported, especially when I moved from second grade to fourth grade. I felt like I had a team by my side and I was not alone.

Another participant shared a similar thought when she spoke about changing schools within the district. She discussed feeling isolated and stressed out because she did not have many opportunities to engage with teachers from that school before starting. However, once PLCs began, she explained how that changed. P3 shared, "They were listening to my ideas. I listened to their ideas. We kind of come up with different tools and different ideas. It made me feel more comfortable; like I was finally part of the team."

Enhanced Problem-Solving

The data revealed that PLCs have helped teachers tackle learning challenges head-on. By discussing common issues and brainstorming situations collaboratively, participants developed stronger problem-solving skills, specifically tailored to their students' needs. P4 highlighted the importance of the collective brainstorming that comes from PLCs, stating:

> I never feel alone. PLCs provide me a space to confront student learning or behavioral challenges together with colleagues. By sharing our diverse perspectives and experiences, we can brainstorm a wider range of solutions that I might not have been able to come up with on my own. This helps me to consider different ideas that I may not have thought of.

Many of the participants in this study spoke about how, within a PLC, they had the opportunity to learn from colleagues who may have tackled similar problems. P7 reported that she gained "valuable tools and approaches to solve problems" within her classroom. Participants also shared anecdotes about how the data-driven focus that comes from PLCs has helped them to

problem solve potential areas of difficulty for students and how to intervene to support them. P1 shared this sentiment and said, “My PLC has helped me move beyond the guesswork when solving problems related to student learning.”

Data also revealed that PLCs encourage a culture of experimentation and taking risks. Participants shared how they can pilot new solutions in their classrooms and share the results with the members of their PLC. P8 said:

> My PLC allows for safe exploration of new ideas and provides valuable feedback and support throughout the problem-solving process. My colleagues offer suggestions for improvement or share other approaches if my initial attempts don’t give me the results I was hoping to achieve.

As participants discussed how PLCs have helped enhance their problem-solving skills, reflective practice emerged as a topic. According to the interview data, PLCs encourage regular reflection on teaching practices. Participants shared that by discussing their experiences and challenges with colleagues, they gain new insights and identify areas for improvement. P7 shared her experience using the Cycle of Inquiry to guide her PLC goals, stating:

> It fosters a continuous loop of looking at data, giving a new strategy a try, giving each other feedback, and refining our goals based on observations. This continuous learning loop helps us to continue to reflect and improve our teaching over time.

Consistent with much of the research surrounding effective PLCs, participants reported a supportive environment where they work together, tackle problems, and share effective strategies. They reported continuously learning from each other's successes and failures. This collaborative problem-solving approach equips teachers with a wide range of strategies to address the challenges faced in the classroom.

Collective Efficacy

Collective efficacy refers to a group's belief in its ability to achieve a goal. As teachers in PLCs witness each other's successes and support each other through challenges, their collective belief in their ability to improve student learning grows stronger. Participants revealed that this sense of shared responsibility and confidence motivates them to keep striving for better outcomes.

One of the ways that the participants reported PLCs contributing to collective efficacy is through a shared focus on student learning. As reported, PLCs bring teachers together to collaboratively analyze data, discuss instructional practices, and develop common goals for student achievement. One participant shared that "the shared focus fosters a sense of collective responsibility and purpose." Participants reported holding each other accountable for the work they are doing in their PLC. A similar thought was shared by P3, who said, "The collaborative problem-solving we engage in during PLC time builds confidence in my group's ability to take on challenges."

Participants also spoke about mutual support and accountability when speaking about collective efficacy. They reported feeling like their PLCs provide a safe space for them to discuss challenges, offer feedback, and support one another. This sense of camaraderie and shared accountability strengthens their belief that they can overcome obstacles. P2 said, "It is the camaraderie of other adults that can really keep you going. I mean, I love my school, and I feel like we've had some good fun along the way. It's the community, and PLCs help foster it." P7 also shared a similar thought:

> Yes, I think we trust each other more, and that has helped me feel like there is a sense of community…we are in this together. There is a shared responsibility and a shared goal.

> This has helped me develop a sense of community with my colleagues. We discuss successes together, but also challenges.

PLCs create an environment where educators feel valued, supported, and empowered to work together towards a common goal. This collaborative spirit strengthens collective efficacy. As P1 stated:

> Teaching can be very isolating if you don't have relationships with the teachers you work with. They have helped me stay motivated because what we are studying in our PLC is always changing based on a need we are seeing in our class or on the grade. What we are spending our time studying is relevant and timely, so you are motivated to learn new things and apply this learning right away to see how it goes.

Improved teacher practice is both a cause and effect of effective PLCs. By providing a platform for collaboration and reflection, PLCs equip teachers with knowledge, problem-solving skills, and collective confidence they need to continuously improve their practice. This, in turn, leads to a more positive learning environment and ultimately, increased student and teacher achievement.

Theme 3: School-Level Benefits

In alignment with Research Questions 1, 2, and 3, all the participants spoke about the various school-level benefits of PLCs. The participant responses made it evident that PLCs are a powerful tool for enhancing the school environment. By fostering collaboration and shared responsibility, PLCs benefit not only students and teachers but also the overall school culture, teacher morale, and alignment of goals.

School Culture

Data from the interviews revealed that PLCs cultivate a more positive school culture. Participants reported a sense of collegiality when working together, moving beyond isolated classrooms and become part of a learning team. P3 shared how so many teachers are leaving the profession early. She said, "I could see why teachers would want to leave; this profession could be very isolating." She shared experiences from previous districts where PLCs were not part of the school culture and discussed how teachers rarely had an opportunity to collaborate. P6 also spoke about isolation:

> I have worked in other districts where I have felt like it was just me and the kids all day, every day. There weren't many opportunities to collaborate, especially on topics of our choosing. Working in a school that has PLCs in place has been invaluable. I have dedicated time with colleagues to work on things that are of value to me and my colleagues. I look forward to our PLC meetings. It feels like I am finally in a school that really promotes a culture of learning, not just for the kids but for the adults.

Throughout the interviews, participants continually referenced the collaborative spirit that PLCs bring, breaking down silos between grade levels and fostering a mutual respect and appreciation for diverse teaching styles. P1 shared how each PLC member brings a different strength and level of expertise to the group. She went on to say how this has helped her to appreciate the different perspectives each member brings. Participants also spoke about feeling more connected to a shared mission, with P7 saying "PLCs create a stronger sense of community within the school."

The interview data also revealed a shared sense of purpose that teachers feel when working in a PLC. Participants' experiences in PLCs spoke to teachers feeling like they are a part of the overall mission of the school. As P4 stated:

> I feel like I am invested in the overall success of the school, not just my classroom. There is a sense of community and support from all the teachers, and other teachers will often ask what I am working on in my PLC. Everyone is working toward the same goal of helping students grow. We are in this together.

This also speaks to a more positive and supportive environment that is created through the collaborative nature of PLCs. As P8 shared:

> I absolutely would recommend PLCs to other teachers if they are serious about building an even stronger working relationship with their colleagues within the school and in some cases the district. My most positive experiences as a teacher have come from running programs, inspiring school-wide events, and working with my colleagues in a PLC. Over the years PLCs, among other projects within the school, have allowed me to make lasting connections. Lifelong friendships and bonds can be forged when you get to know your colleagues outside of the classroom walls. Additionally, having the time to better my professional growth is priceless.

Teacher Morale

Several participants reported that PLCs contribute to improved teacher morale. They felt that the collaborative nature of PLCs provides a much-needed support system for educators. Teachers can share challenges, successes, and best practices. Participants expressed that this type of open exchange allows for constructive feedback and problem solving, reducing feelings of isolation and burnout. Additionally, PLCs empower teachers by giving them ownership over their professional development. By working together to identify areas for improvement and develop strategies, teachers feel a sense of agency and control over their practice, leading to increased job satisfaction. P7 said, “I work with a phenomenal group of teachers. They have

motivated me, inspired me, and really lifted me up to be a better teacher." P1 shared a similar thought:

> I have especially loved working in PLCs with teachers across grade levels within our district. I have forged amazing relationships that would have never been possible without these professional opportunities. Years later, I can still reach out to some of these members and ask for their support, advice, and encouragement when faced with particular challenges. I hope they feel the same way about me. It is because of the cooperative environment among our members that the PLC fostered, that we forged these relationships and in turn our students benefit.

It was evident from the responses that when participants see their efforts working together, it can be a big morale booster. This was articulated when they shared anecdotes about the professional learning that happens in their PLC. Participants felt that the ongoing focus on learning helped them to feel more engaged. They also related positive morale to the problem solving that happens in PLCs. As one participant shared, "Being in a PLC makes the work much less stressful than trying to figure everything out on your own."

Alignment of Goals

PLCs promote alignment of goals within the school. Participants reported that through regular collaboration, they can ensure that curriculum, instruction, and assessments are working in concert to support student learning. They can also share data and discuss student progress, and identify areas where instruction needs to be adjusted to meet the needs of all learners. As P8 stated, "This shared focus on student achievement brings a sense of collective responsibility, ensuring that we are all working toward the same educational objectives and goals."

Common assessments were highlighted when the participants discussed the alignment of their goals to the school goals. During PLC time, teachers discuss progress monitoring. One participant shared, “We use part of our PLC time to look at the common assessments we are using to keep track of our goals. It helps us to identify areas where instruction might need to be adjusted.”

Six participants related the alignment of goals to the administrative support and guidance they receive. It became apparent that when an administrator holds the teachers accountable to ensure goals are aligned to the school’s goals, as well as the district’s strategic plan, it impacts the entire school. P6 discussed beliefs concerning this perspective:

> We meet with our principal and discuss how our PLC goal is connected to the school and district goals. This allows us to design assessments that help us to critically assess our teaching as well as student progress. Assessments that are thoughtfully constructed create a culture of results and continuous learning.

PLCs offer a powerful model for school improvement. By fostering a positive culture, boosting teacher morale, and promoting alignment of goals, PLCs create an environment for teacher and student success. The entire school community benefits when educators feel supported, empowered, and focused on a common goal. When speaking about her PLC community, P3 stated:

> The teachers I am lucky enough to work with in my PLC are lovely and they're here to learn and they're supportive and they're eager and curious. They're happy. They're happy to be here. So, I just, I've always felt really grateful. I feel like working here is like a fairy tale.

Theme 4: Job Satisfaction

One of the more powerful themes that emerged from this study was job satisfaction. When teachers feel they are part of a community working towards a common goal, they are more likely to experience fulfillment in their profession (Aulia, 2023). Participants shared how PLCs can have a positive impact on teacher job satisfaction. The interview data aligns with all three research questions, particularly with RQ3: How do elementary teachers perceive their experiences in PLCs affect their decisions to remain teachers? Data from the interviews highlighted increased feelings of value and support and collegiality as leading contributors to satisfaction with their work as teachers.

Feelings of Value and Support

Like many of the subthemes mentioned, participants expressed feeling valued and supported by PLCs because they foster collaborative problem solving, a focus on student success, teacher-driven solutions, peer recognition and appreciation, and shared challenges and successes.

PLCs facilitate opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and shared leadership. As the participants expressed, teachers can sometimes feel overwhelmed or isolated. P2 stated, “The ability to be able to lean on my colleagues has been a game changer, especially with the increased demands following COVID.” Within PLCs, teachers can come together with their collective expertise and tackle challenges they may be facing. P4 shared, “So PLCs have always been very useful for me. I've always been happy and amazed at the level of professional learning that we do here. Working together with my colleagues is incredibly useful.” This collaborative spirit lightens the individual burdens teachers sometimes feel, and also fosters a culture of mutual trust, which is essential when discussing job satisfaction. As P6 shared:

> I feel the work is relevant and all participants are invested in the work. Because our work is usually based on student data or need, our students benefit from what we learn. Our teaching improves therefore impacting their learning. Another benefit is the time I get to work on a topic of my choice, with colleagues of my choice. I feel like we have built strong relationships and really support each other.

The interview data collected also revealed that PLCs contribute to a culture of celebration and recognition. One participant shared how education seems so fast-paced and it's easy for a teachers' accomplishments to go unrecognized. P8 communicated:

> My PLC members are so supportive. We usually spend the first few minutes of our PLC celebrating our successes, whether big or small. It could be something we tried in our teaching that went really well or a student success…it doesn't matter. We just spend time celebrating and supporting each other.

Connected to a culture of celebration were also sentiments about the support participants receive from their principal. All the participants shared that their principal gives them one faculty meeting a month dedicated to their PLC work. This translated to participants feeling support from their administrator. One participant shared how her principal creates opportunities at faculty meetings for teachers to share any successes from their PLC work. By providing avenues for teachers to share their PLC work, teachers feel supported and valued. As P1 stated:

> You have to make sure you are working with colleagues who are professional and bring the same level of motivation that you bring. Another challenge is leadership. PLCs always work better when there is administrative support: support with time, resources, scheduling, logistics, and even being interested.

This culture of celebration boosts morale and as P2 stated, “it makes the work feel significant and I feel a sense of worth.”

Participants also mentioned the ways PLCs contribute to their professional learning, increasing their sense of feeling valued and supported. Unlike traditional professional development models, which sometimes feel disconnected from the day-to-day realities of teaching, PLCs offer a more personalized approach. As P5 reported:

> PLC provides a system where you have some choice in what you want to pick. Rather than through the years where we were just told what we needed to do or sat in a PD where someone just spoke at us. The professional development just felt very dry and kind of stale, like it was just busy work, until we started implementing PLCs consistently.

Participants reported that meaningful dialogue and the autonomy and relevance in a PLC leads to enhanced job performance. They reported feeling a “sense of agency” and “empowerment” when speaking about their PLC work. This sense of community and purpose can be a powerful driver of teacher satisfaction and well-being.

Collegiality

The camaraderie, support, and collaboration that characterize collegial relationships plays an essential role in shaping teacher job satisfaction. Within the context of this study, PLCs emerge as a powerful catalyst for nurturing collegial bonds among teachers.

One of the ways in which PLCs were reported to cultivate collegiality is through the sharing of expertise and resources. As P1 said, “PLCs help us to showcase our strengths, whether it be in curriculum design or classroom management.” Participants felt that this establishes teachers as valuable resources for each other. In discussing her school’s culture, P5 said, “It’s

difficult to describe but there is a feeling of mutual respect among our school community. We have strong relationships with each other, and I admire my colleagues tremendously."

Moreover, participants reported that PLCs provide structured opportunities for collaboration, problem solving, and innovation. Many participants expressed this sentiment, with P7 sharing:

> It seems like after COVID and following the whole science of reading discussion, there have been so many curriculum changes. We are implementing a new phonics program, a new science program, and following COVID the technology demands have increased. Everything is so fast paced, but when challenges come up, I can lean on my PLC team for support. We brainstorm ideas, share strategies, and really just work together. Whether it's about differentiating or implementing a new technology program, I know I am not alone. It feels less overwhelming when I talk to my team.

Furthermore, PLCs offer a platform for peer observation and feedback. Participants reported that at times the only feedback that they seem to get is from a formal observation. PLCs provide regular feedback loops that provide teachers with validation from their peers. P5 shared:

> I love teaching so whether I was involved in PLCs or not, I have always attempted to better myself and my craft. However, I believe that this style of learning community has motivated me as a senior teacher to keep learning and honing my skills in order to be a better teacher. Perhaps the best example of this is participation in a MTSS [Multi-Tiered System of Support] PLC. Being able to decompose student data with classroom teachers, administrators, AIS [academic intervention service] support teachers, reading teachers, psychologists, and resource room teachers, to support student achievement was an awesome experience.

P4 described a similar experience:

> Whether it is offering constructive criticism, sharing observations, or providing words of encouragement, the feedback I receive from my PLC is invaluable. For example, I recently asked one of my PLC teachers to come in and observe my morning meeting and I got the best feedback. Practical strategies and ideas that I could implement the next day to help my morning meeting run smoother. I benefit and the kids benefit. It's a win-win.

PLCs affirm teachers' efforts and contributions, fostering a culture of mutual respect and support that seems essential for building collegial relationships.

The interviews also revealed how PLCs create opportunities for social interaction and celebration. Participants reported not only working together but also celebrating together, something that is sometimes hard to find time for with all the demands of teaching. All participants spoke about the meaningful social connections that happen because of PLCs. Each participant shared a similar thought when asked if PLCs have made them stay in their profession. They spoke about the reasons, including collaboration, a sense of community, the camaraderie, shared learning, supportive environment, and focus on student growth, all of which are characteristics of effective PLCs. As P8 articulated:

> I think what PLCs provide definitely have made me want to stay. I think the most important is the relationships I have forged and the collaborative spirit I have with my peers. This definitely makes me want to stay in my school…the people make me want to stay. PLCs foster this and help the work feel less stressful and more fun and engaging. I also feel satisfied when my kids do even better because of something new I learned or tried. It makes teaching exciting and that also makes me want to stay.

Chapter Summary

This chapter addressed each research question and discussed the themes and subthemes that emerged from the data analysis. The four key themes that emerged from the research were (a) enhanced student learning, (b) improved teacher practice, (c) school-level benefits, and (d) job satisfaction. The subthemes that emerged from the themes were (a) collaboration, (b) data-driven decisions, (c) increased teacher knowledge, (d) problem-solving, (e) collective efficacy, (f) culture, (g) teacher morale, (h) alignment of goals, (a) feeling valued and supported and (j) collegiality. Chapter 5 of this study offers further insight, discussing the implications of the findings, acknowledging limitations, offering recommendations, and presenting the study's conclusion.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Introduction

In education, where the demands are high and the stakes even higher, fostering a keen sense of collegiality among teachers is not merely a luxury: it is a necessity. This study examined teachers' perceptions of PLCs and their impact on their teaching practice and decision to remain in the profession. Job satisfaction among educators is intricately linked to their sense of efficacy, engagement, and, ultimately, their ability to foster student success (Hasselquist & Graves, 2020). Among various strategies employed to cultivate teacher satisfaction, PLCs emerge as a potent force, offering a framework that enriches professional development and nurtures a culture where teachers feel genuinely valued and supported.

Chapter 4 analyzed the data collected from the teacher participants regarding their experiences with PLCs, unveiling their voices. Chapter 5 shifts focus to explore the core of this research: teachers' perceptions. By analyzing these perceptions, we aim to better understand the intricate relationship between PLCs, teacher practice, and teacher retention. Moreover, the discussion will offer valuable insights for educators and administrators seeking to create thriving PLCs that empower teachers and benefit student learning.

Guided by three pivotal research questions, this investigation navigated the complex terrain of teachers' perceptions within PLCs. First, it explores how elementary teachers perceive their professional practices to be influenced by their engagement within PLCs. Second, it probes into the depths of teachers' perceptions regarding the efficacy of their collaborative endeavors within these communities. Finally, it scrutinizes how teachers' experiences within PLCs shape

their decisions to persist or depart from the teaching profession. Three research questions guided this study:

1. In what ways do elementary teachers perceive their professional practices are affected by their work within their PLC?
2. What are elementary school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC work?
3. How do elementary teachers perceive their experiences in PLCs affect their decisions to remain teachers?

With these research questions as a guide, this chapter embarks on a journey of inquiry to present the findings and unravel the relationship between PLCs, teacher practice, and retention. Following the findings, the limitations of the study will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research based on the findings. By highlighting the nuanced perspectives of elementary teachers, this study seeks to inform educational stakeholders, policymakers, and practitioners alike, offering actionable insights to strengthen the foundations of teaching and learning in elementary schools. As the discourse unfolds, the voices of educators resonate, underscoring the pivotal role of PLCs in cultivating pedagogical excellence.

Implications of Findings

The significance of the findings are presented by research question and each section examines the perceptions of the participants about their professional practice.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: In what ways do elementary teachers perceive their professional practices are affected by their work within their PLC?

In recent years, PLCs have become an increasingly popular model for teacher professional development and collaboration. As discussed, these communities involve groups of teachers working together, typically within the same school or district, to continuously improve their instructional practices through shared learning and reflective dialogue. This study surveyed teachers about their experiences in PLCs. Based on the information they presented, there are several ways that teachers perceive those communities as having impacted their professional practice.

Increased Collaboration. One of the primary ways teachers perceive PLCs impact their practice is that they facilitate increased collaboration and sharing of practical strategies among colleagues. Teachers report having more opportunities to collaborate with colleagues by participating in PLCs. The regular meetings and interactions within a PLC provide a structured time for teachers to engage in collaborative work that may not occur otherwise. Teachers explained how they shared lesson plans and materials and discussed what instructional strategies were working well. This increased collaboration helps disseminate effective teaching practices across the school.

Beyond just one-off strategy sharing, the collaborative nature of PLCs allows teachers to develop new lessons, materials, and assessments together, iterating and refining them based on collective knowledge and real-time results. This deeper collaboration around curriculum development and delivery leads to greater consistency in effective instruction across the school.

Professional Growth. For several key reasons, PLCs facilitate professional growth and peer learning among teachers in ways that directly impact their classroom work and instructional practices. First, the learning in PLCs is relevant, providing contextualized learning opportunities

for teachers. It is grounded in the specific curricula, student needs, and daily teaching challenges, thus providing a teacher-driven learning process.

In effective PLCs, the learning agenda is driven by the needs teachers identify through analyzing student data and their instructional practice. Teachers have agency in determining their learning goals and processes, making the learning more meaningful, engaging, and action-oriented to improve outcomes. Unlike more generalized professional development, PLCs allow teachers to dive deeply into instructional problems of practice that are highly relevant to their classroom contexts (Easton, 2015). This makes the learning more authentic and applicable, providing job-embedded learning. The learning happens as part of the regular collaborative cycles and work of the PLC, not in a disconnected workshop or course. Teachers can immediately apply new strategies, get peer support, and continue adjusting through an embedded, iterative learning process.

The peer-to-peer learning that occurs in a PLC can be compelling. Tapping into peer expertise by structuring PLCs around peer observation, team planning, and sharing of successful practices, teachers learn efficient instructional techniques directly from colleagues who have deep mastery. Regular PLC meetings and discussions allow teachers to learn new pedagogical strategies and content knowledge from their peers. Having different perspectives helps expand their knowledge and skills. The PLC process includes analyzing student data, developing lesson plans, observing each other's classrooms, and providing feedback (Easton, 2015). This process exposes teachers to a broader range of effective instructional methods their peers use. Sharing successful strategies across grade levels and content areas helps build all teachers' pedagogical knowledge and skills.

Focus on Student Learning Data. The increased focus on student learning data that characterizes PLCs impacts teachers. At the core of PLCs is analyzing student assessment and performance data (Stoll et al., 2006). This data provides teachers with concrete evidence about effective instructional strategies and areas needing improvement for different groups of students. It aids teachers in identifying strengths and weaknesses and adjusting their instruction accordingly. By basing their decision on this data rather than anecdotal evidence, teachers can make more informed decisions to better meet the needs of their students.

A data-driven focus helps teachers target their efforts for continuous improvement. Regular data analysis cycles in PLCs allow teachers to monitor student progress over time closely. This helps to identify gaps or learning obstacles early so timely interventions or support can be implemented for struggling students before they fall too far behind. The data illuminates which students need differentiated or supplemental instruction. Unlike one-off professional development days, PLCs support continuous learning over extended periods (Akiba & Liang, 2016). This allows teachers to gradually enhance their skills through cyclical learning, application, analysis, and refinement.

With an emphasis on data in PLCs, teachers also gain an increased sense of accountability for their impact on student learning outcomes. The data provides an objective feedback loop connecting their work directly to quantitative student performance indicators. This accountability can motivate teachers to continuously refine and improve their teaching practice (Owen, 2015). This focus on data at a team level, not just individual classrooms, also promotes a culture of collective responsibility for the learning of all students. Teachers collaborate to understand root causes and develop strategies to improve performance across the board.

Supportive Learning Environment. PLCs have provided teachers with a safe space for vulnerability. PLCs create a culture of trust, respect, and supportiveness among the members. PLCs provide a safe, collaborative environment for teachers to openly discuss their challenges and get feedback and advice from peers they trust. It allows teachers to feel comfortable being vulnerable by asking questions and opening their practice for peer feedback. Without this safe environment, teachers may resist sharing problems or trying new strategies for fear of looking incompetent. This supportive culture helps drive professional growth and encourages professional risk-taking.

PLCs' collaborative nature also helps reduce isolation and increase feelings of support. Elementary teachers spend most of their day working alone in their classrooms. Having a dedicated team to connect with, share with, and learn from on an ongoing basis can reduce negative emotions like loneliness, stress, and demoralization that hamper effectiveness.

PLCs help build relational trust, critically essential for teacher learning and growth. Teachers are more open to honestly critiquing each other's work, providing feedback, and seeing advice as credible when it comes from trusted colleagues they respect. PLCs provide frequent opportunities for these coaching conversations and constructive feedback to occur. This continuous feedback loop supports professional growth when delivered through supportive collaboration built on trust. This trust facilitates productive growth.

The study data also revealed increased accountability and collective responsibility. With the ongoing meetings, data analysis, and shared goals in a PLC, teachers feel an increased sense of accountability and collective responsibility for student learning across the school. The accountability structures and relational trust built within PLCs encourage more openness among

teachers to discuss what strategies are and are not working. This creates opportunities for more honest reflection and feedback on improving ineffective practices.

The emphasis on student learning data keeps teachers' work grounded in tangible outcomes and results. The data highlights successes to replicate and gaps to address, helping drive continuous learning improvement and ensuring classroom efforts remain fully committed to maximizing student learning. The supportive learning environment inherent to effective PLCs fosters care, trust, and a collegial culture, providing an essential foundation that amplifies and enables collaborative learning and improvement efforts. Teachers feel empowered to take risks and open their practice in productive ways that ultimately impact student learning. By making teachers learn an integral, ongoing part of a collaborative culture, PLCs can create a more robust environment for professional growth directly tied to improving classroom instruction and student outcomes. Teachers perceive these opportunities as impacting their work in profound, sustained ways.

Considerations. By providing dedicated time, structures, and safe environments for this type of in-depth collaboration and sharing of pedagogical practices, PLCs are seen by teachers as valuable vehicles for building their instructional capacity in ways that can directly impact and elevate classroom teaching across a school or district. However, the research also indicates that teachers' experiences vary based on school leadership, meeting scheduling, group dynamics, and available data sources.

The teachers who participated in this study spoke about strong administrative support when discussing their experiences. This is critical for success. Administrative support helps establish the structure and the framework for PLCs within their school (McConnell, 2017). This includes defining goals, setting up meeting schedules, and ensuring that the PLC aligns with the

overall mission and objectives of the organization. Having sufficient dedicated time for PLCs to meet during the contractual day is essential. School principals must ensure a consistent meeting schedule, protecting the PLC meeting times from conflicts and interruptions. Principals should also check in with teams, ensuring agendas, protocols, and facilitation guidelines are used to help with effective time management.

Additionally, administrators are vital in providing the necessary resources for PLCs to function effectively. This could include funding for professional development, access to relevant materials and technology, and support for collaboration among the members. Administrators should also ensure that teachers access quality sources of student performance, assessment, and demographic data. Teacher capacity and practical training to analyze data sources are essential to PLC success. Administrators should also promote accountability by ensuring members are accountable for their roles and responsibilities within the group. This could involve setting clear expectations and recognizing achievements.

When implemented effectively, PLCs are generally perceived by teachers as a valuable form of job-embedded professional learning that positively impacts their classroom practices. Strong principal support, smart scheduling, nurturing positive PLC group norms, and robust data availability enable these communities to live up to their fullest potential as levers for school improvement.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked: What are elementary school teachers' perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC work?

Teachers' perceptions provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of PLCs in achieving their intended goals (Nadelson et al., 2012). If teachers perceive that their PLC work is

beneficial and impactful, it suggests that the PLC structure and activities are likely effective in promoting professional growth and improving teacher practice. Understanding teachers' perceptions of the efficacy of their PLCs is also crucial in helping educational leaders make informed decisions, promote teacher engagement, and ultimately enhance the effectiveness of professional development efforts within the school community.

Professional Growth. Many strategies and techniques commonly used in PLCs promote professional growth among educators. As mentioned earlier, the collaborative planning utilized in PLCs allows for sharing ideas and instructional strategies (Dufour & Dufour, 2012). Analyzing student data together supports teachers in identifying trends, areas of growth, and areas needing improvement. This data-driven approach provides opportunities for professional development in data analysis and interpretation. Implementing a peer observation and feedback system also allows educators to learn from each other, reflecting on their own practice and refining their teaching strategies. Some teachers in the study reported using action research projects in their PLC to address scientific challenges and explore innovative teaching methods. This hands-on approach to professional development promotes inquiry and reflection. Book studies and article discussions around educational literature have also occurred in PLCs and have provided teachers with opportunities to explore contemporary issues in education.

PLCs empower teachers to take on leadership roles within their group. Teachers are responsible for facilitating meetings, leading professional development sessions, or coordinating collaborative projects. This not only fosters professional growth for individuals but also strengthens the overall capacity of the PLC. PLCs also encourage self-reflection and peer reflection practices (Easton, 2015). The teachers interviewed in this study were familiar with various protocols that helped the group facilitate meaningful conversations. Participants also

reported becoming more familiar with digital tools to help facilitate communication and resource sharing among PLC members.

Educators can create a supportive and collaborative environment that promotes continuous earning, reflective practice, and professional growth by incorporating these strategies and techniques into PLCs.

Improved Instruction. Teachers could clearly articulate examples of how the collaborative PLC processes have expanded their instructional toolkit and use of effective practices, demonstrating a positive perception of their PLC. Adopting new strategies learned through collaboration with peers, such as implementing a new reading technique for a struggling student, was reported. Teachers perceived their ability to differentiate lessons better and provide targeted interventions by closely analyzing data directly from their PLC work. Peer observation also provided teachers with valuable feedback to enhance their practice.

This research on PLCs can help identify how collaborative structures and practices improve teacher instruction. This information should be used to refine PLC models and provide targeted support to educators in areas such as curriculum development, pedagogical strategies, and assessment practices.

School Culture. Teachers' perceptions of their PLC work can positively or negatively impact the school culture (Woodland, 2016). Teachers in this study viewed their PLCs as providing valuable professional growth opportunities through rich collaboration. This cultivates a culture of continuous learning and improvement. The supportive environment participants reported promotes an open culture of risk-taking to enhance instruction. All the participants viewed their PLCs as productive, building relational trust and collective responsibility, which

fosters a positive culture of shared accountability for student success. The data from this study shows that PLCs reduce teacher isolation and strengthen a collegial, team-oriented culture.

Considerations. Elementary teachers' views about whether their PLC processes genuinely enhance instruction, build collaboration, and impact learning outcomes will shape their beliefs about the larger school culture. Positive PLC experiences reinforce a healthy culture of professionalism, a growth mindset, and collective efficacy (Park et al., 2018). Negative PLC perceptions often reflect deeper cultural dysfunctions around trust, disconnected leadership, and a lack of accountability for results. How teachers experience and make sense of their PLC work can powerfully influence the shared norms, values, and professional orientation that define a school's overall culture. School leaders must be attuned to these perceptual dynamics to help remove barriers that may hinder the success of PLCs.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked: How do elementary teachers perceive their experiences in PLCs affect their decisions to remain teachers?

Teachers' perception of their experiences participating in PLCs can impact their decision to remain in the teaching profession (Nadelson et al., 2012). Based on the data in this study, the characteristics surrounding well-functioning PLCs positively impact a teacher's commitment to remain in the teaching profession. Several aspects of positive PLC experiences can contribute to higher retention rates: supportive professional culture, professional growth, and improved outcomes.

Supportive Professional Culture. A supportive professional culture fostered through positive experiences in PLCs can influence a teacher's decision to remain in the teaching field. PLCs provide consistent mentorship from experienced colleagues and rich opportunities for

collaboration. This helps newer teachers feel guided and supported. This counters the sense of isolation that often plagues teachers early in their careers and can lead to high attrition rates. Having a community to learn from eases the transition.

Effective PLCs cultivate relational trust, respect, and a sense of belonging among staff members. Teachers feel like they have a team of friends they can rely on. This positive social–emotional support strengthens their professional commitment and desire to stay despite inevitable challenges.

Within a healthy PLC culture, teachers perceive clear pathways for continuous professional growth through peer observation, collaborative planning, and analyzing student data. Knowing that they can keep developing as educators motivates and increases feelings of self-efficacy. This also promotes collective responsibility and a shared organizational purpose centered on student learning. Teachers' individual efforts feel more impactful when united with colleagues toward a joint mission, elevating their work's meaning.

A strong supportive culture stemming from positive PLC experiences provides a potent intrinsic motivator for teachers. It nourishes their emotional, social, and psychological needs in ways that uplift engagement, perseverance, and long-term retention in what can often be a challenging profession (Owen, 2016).

Professional Growth. When teachers perceive their PLC as a rich source of ongoing professional learning, it can reignite their passion and enthusiasm for teaching—regular exposure to new instructional strategies, pedagogical knowledge, and chances for mastery learning safeguards against feelings of stagnation that can lead to burnout. Teachers gain concrete new skills and competencies directly applicable to their practice through activities like peer

observation, collaborative planning, and analyzing student data. This sense of building their professional toolkit cultivates feelings of growth and efficacy as an educator over time.

Effective PLCs provide opportunities for teachers to take on leadership roles and give them a voice in shaping goals and initiatives. When teachers feel empowered to have real input and take ownership, it increases their investment in not just receiving professional development but driving it. Unlike the one-size-fits-all approach, PLCs allow professional learning to be grounded in the specific curricular needs, student learning data, and instructional challenges teachers face daily (Easton, 2015). This tailored approach to growth resonates as highly practical and meaningful.

When these elements create an environment where teachers feel they are continuously enhancing their professional skills and impact in the classroom, it elevates their career satisfaction. Perceiving clear pathways for meaningful professional growth is reinvigorating.

Improved Outcomes. When teachers believe their PLC efforts are translating into measurable improvements in student achievement it validates their sense of efficacy as an educator. Seeing tangible evidence that their collaborative work is making a positive difference in young lives reinforces their feelings of professional purpose and impact.

Closely monitoring student data and progress over time provides an inherent feedback loop that connects PLC work to tangible results. Positive student outcomes become motivating accomplishments that generate job satisfaction and a desire to persist through challenges to continue achieving success. As a school's PLC processes become associated with improved student outcomes over time, they can foster institutional pride and trust, enhancing teachers' morale and professional commitment. They feel part of an effective, prestigious learning organization.

Considerations. When teachers positively perceive that their PLC is a valuable investment in their professional growth and efficacy as educators, it can increase their motivation, satisfaction, and commitment to remain in the profession. The collaborative support, professional learning, and student impact they experience get reinvested.

However, if teachers predominantly view their PLC work as frustrating, inauthentic, or lacking apparent enhancement of their practice and outcomes, it can fuel feelings of burnout, stagnation, and a lack of self-efficacy. These negative experiences may push teachers to consider leaving for another school environment or exiting the profession entirely.

Of course, PLC experiences exist amid many factors like compensation, working conditions, and administrative support that also play a significant role in teacher retention decisions. However, this research suggests that successful PLCs can be a powerful driver in keeping teachers engaged, inspired, and committed to their schools and the profession. School leaders must be attentive to how teachers perceive and experience these professional learning communities.

Limitations

This study adds to the literature on PLCs and teacher retention. The researcher sought to decrease the study's limitations, which are inherent in every study. This study examined teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities and their impact on instructional practices and teacher retention. The study was conducted in a Westchester County, NY district where PLCs are well established: time is dedicated to PLC work and ongoing professional development is provided. This means that there could be several limitations to the study.

Generalizability

Generalizability is a potential limitation in a study examining teachers' perceptions of PLCs and their impact on teacher practice and retention. Since the study was conducted in just one district in Westchester County, the findings may not be generalizable to other districts or regions with different contexts, resources, and PLC implementation models. Teacher populations, school environments, resources, and administrative support structures vary significantly between urban, suburban, and rural areas. The socioeconomic and cultural factors of the Westchester community may not generalize well to more diverse districts.

This district's level of PLC support, scheduling, and professional development may also be unique. Other districts may take very different approaches to implementing PLCs regarding personnel, processes, and data use that could sway teacher perceptions. Additionally, if this district has had more training and commitment of resources, the positive impacts may not translate elsewhere.

School district characteristics can also impact the study. Characteristics like school size, grade levels, funding levels, curricula, leadership, and policy contexts can vary between districts. The potential benefits or challenges of PLC work could manifest very differently in elementary versus secondary schools or affluent versus under-resourced districts. Factors like the district's teaching workforce characteristics, staff turnover rates, and overall school performance could impact generalizability.

By being confined to a single district, no matter how comprehensive the study, findings are inherently limited in their generalizability to the broader landscape. Teachers' PLC perceptions could look markedly different across different contexts.

Self-Selection Bias

Self-selection bias is another notable limitation. Teachers in a district with well-implemented PLCs may inherently have more positive perceptions, skewing the findings. Teachers who dislike or struggle with the PLC model may have left the district, underrepresenting negative perspectives.

Over time, the district's reputation and commitment to the PLC process could have drawn in teacher candidates predisposed to favor the collaborative model. These self-selected teachers energized by PLCs could skew the overall sample toward more positive perceptions than the general teaching population. Additionally, teachers who feel ambivalent or indifferent may have been less inclined to volunteer for the study, leaving out more moderate perspectives.

These self-selected dynamics could produce a sample of teachers whose perceptions about the efficacy of their PLC, its impact on instruction, and its influence on retention are more polarized toward the extremes than those of the overall population.

Social Desirability

Social desirability bias is another limitation of this study. Social desirability refers to the tendency of participants to respond in ways they believe will be viewed more favorably by others. Teachers may feel pressure to report more positive perceptions of PLCs since it is an initiative prioritized and supported by the district. Concerns about negative evaluations could lead teachers to overstate the perceived benefits or underreport criticisms. Participants may be reluctant to criticize or express overly negative views about PLCs for fear of seeming oppositional or ungrateful for the provided time or resources. Differences in PLC group dynamics or implementation variations could influence teachers' experiences and perceptions.

Recommendations

In this study, the researcher sought to assess educators' perceptions of PLCs and their impact on teacher practice and retention. Based on the potential limitations discussed, some recommendations could strengthen further research. Recommendations for districts to implement PLCs is also discussed in this section.

Recommendations for Future Research

To increase generalizability, the study could be replicated across multiple districts and settings with diverse geographic, demographic, and implementation contexts for PLCs. This would provide a more representative sample to analyze different perspectives. Longitudinal data collection could be employed to track the same teacher participants over multiple years. This would allow monitoring of how PLC experiences and perceptions evolve.

To mitigate self-selection bias, the study could randomly select participants rather than rely on volunteers. This would provide a more representative sample and reduce self-selection biases toward teachers already strongly predisposed to certain PLC views. The study's results could also be compared to broader data on teacher retention and turnover rates. Additionally, future research can move beyond solely self-reported interview data by triangulating teachers' perceived impacts with other data sources. This could include classroom observations, student achievement data, teacher effectiveness ratings, and retention rates.

A comparison study could also be used to look at sample teachers without PLCs or from a non-PLC environment to differentiate PLC-specific impacts from external factors influencing teacher practice or retention. Additionally, to help mitigate social desirability biases, the study could emphasize protecting participant anonymity or confidentiality by using third-party data collectors. Data could also be collected on how PLCs are structured, led, and supported at each

school site to identify how implementation variations across the district may moderate teacher perceptions. Teacher variables like years of experience, grade level, and subject area could also be explored to see the perceived impacts PLCs have on teacher practice and retention.

Recommendations for School Administrators

Implementing recommendations like these could enhance the methodological rigor, validity, and generalizability of findings from research examining this increasingly prevalent teacher professional development model. The findings could guide the administration in optimally structuring, scheduling, and facilitating PLCs. It could also outline the training and professional development staff needed to maximize the positive effects of PLCs and their impact on teacher learning and outcomes. Furthermore, understanding factors that shape positive or negative teacher perceptions of PLCs could inform administrators' strategies to build investment, counter resistance, and increase engagement in PLC processes.

Evidence of positive impacts from PLCs can justify directing funding, time, and resources to support the widespread implementation and sustainability of high-quality PLCs across districts. This research gives leaders vital insight into how teachers perceive and experience PLCs as a model for continuous improvement. Their voices can help ensure that PLCs live up to their potential to positively impact educators, instruction, and student outcomes. By linking PLC experiences to factors promoting teacher retention or attrition, the findings can shape policies and working conditions to ensure PLCs cultivate an environment that attracts and keeps effective educators.

Conclusion

PLCs have emerged as a pivotal strategy in contemporary education, offering teachers opportunities for collaboration, professional growth, and support. This dissertation investigated

the impact of PLCs on teacher practice and retention, exploring their effectiveness in enhancing instructional practices, fostering teacher satisfaction, and ultimately contributing to teacher retention within schools. Through an in-depth analysis of existing literature, case studies, and empirical research, this study has shed light on the multifaceted role of PLCs in shaping the landscape of education. The central thesis of this dissertation posits that PLCs play a crucial role in transforming teacher practice and positively influencing teacher retention rates within educational institutions. Throughout this dissertation, several key points have emerged regarding the impact of PLCs on teacher practice and retention: collaborative learning and professional growth, enhanced instructional practices, and teacher satisfaction and well-being.

Collaborative learning and professional growth are foundational components of PLCs, facilitating the exchange of ideas, expertise, and resources among educators. Research conducted by Dufour and Dufour (2012) emphasized the importance of creating collaborative structures within schools to support ongoing professional development. They argued that PLCs provide teachers with opportunities to engage in collective inquiry, analyze student data, and collaboratively design and implement instructional strategies tailored to meet the diverse needs of learners. Aligned with the research, this study demonstrates that through this collaborative process, teachers not only deepen their understanding of content and pedagogy but also refine their instructional practices based on evidence of student learning.

Enhanced instructional practices facilitated by PLCs are pivotal in improving student learning outcomes and school effectiveness. Research from various scholars (Cosner, 2011; Dufour & Dufour, 2012) supports the notion that participation in PLCs is associated with the adoption and implementation of evidence-based teaching strategies, differentiation of instruction, and the effective use of data to inform instructional decisions. DuFour and DuFour (2012)

emphasize the importance of using data to drive instructional decision-making within PLCs. They argue that effective PLCs establish protocols for analyzing student assessment data, identifying areas of need, and collaboratively planning targeted interventions to address learning gaps. By systematically collecting and analyzing data on student progress, teachers can make informed instructional decisions, tailor their teaching to meet individual students' needs, and monitor the impact of their instructional practices over time. This aligns with the research from this study that shows participation in PLCs is associated with the adoption and implementation of enhanced instructional practices. By engaging in collaborative learning experiences, educators have the opportunity to learn from one another, refine their teaching strategies, and make data-informed decisions that positively impact student learning. Thus, PLCs serve as catalysts for instructional improvement and school effectiveness in diverse educational settings.

Teacher satisfaction and well-being are crucial factors that contribute to overall job satisfaction, retention, and effectiveness in the classroom. Research indicates that PLCs play a significant role in fostering a supportive work environment, enhancing teacher satisfaction, and promoting well-being. Hirsch and Emerick (2007) examined the relationship between teacher collaboration and job satisfaction. They found that teachers who participated in collaborative activities, such as PLCs, reported higher levels of job satisfaction compared to their counterparts who worked in isolation. Collaborative practices within PLCs, such as shared decision-making, collective problem-solving, and supportive relationships among colleagues, were identified as key factors contributing to teacher satisfaction.

This study utilized a qualitative phenomenological approach, using semi-structured interviews to collect data from eight teachers across three schools in a Westchester district. The data was analyzed to identify key themes in teachers' shared perceptions and lived experiences.

The findings revealed that teachers view PLCs as providing meaningful opportunities for professional growth, collaboration, and developing student-centered practices. Factors like principal leadership, PLC meeting routines, group dynamics, data accessibility, and teacher input emerged as significant motivators shaping whether teachers perceive PLCs as authentic drivers of learning and improvement. The research evidence from this study also underscores the positive impact of PLCs on teacher satisfaction and well-being. By fostering collaborative cultures, providing social support networks, and promoting a sense of professional efficacy, PLCs contribute to a positive work environment where teachers feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed. Investing in the development and implementation of effective PLC structures is essential for promoting teacher satisfaction, enhancing well-being, and ultimately improving student outcomes in schools.

The impact of PLCs on teacher retention is a critical aspect of their effectiveness within educational institutions. Garcia and Weiss, (2017) posited that participation in PLCs is associated with higher levels of job satisfaction, increased professional growth opportunities, and a greater sense of belonging within the school community, all of which contribute to improved teacher retention rates. Hord (2006) found that PLC participation was associated with higher levels of organizational commitment among teachers, as well as increased intentions to remain in their current teaching positions. Teachers who felt connected to their colleagues, engaged in collaborative problem-solving, and had opportunities for professional growth within their PLCs were more likely to stay in their schools long-term. Consistent with the research, this study demonstrates that participation in PLCs is associated with improved teacher retention rates. By providing opportunities for collaboration, professional growth, and support, PLCs contribute to a positive school culture where teachers feel valued, engaged, and connected to their professional

community. Investing in the development and implementation of effective PLC structures is essential for promoting teacher retention and building a stable and cohesive teaching workforce within schools.

The findings of this dissertation hold significant implications for educational policymakers, school leaders, and practitioners. In an era marked by teacher shortages and high turnover rates, understanding the role of PLCs in supporting and retaining teachers is paramount. By investing in the development and implementation of effective PLC structures, educational institutions can cultivate a culture of continuous learning, collaboration, and support, ultimately leading to improved student outcomes and school success.

Moreover, recognizing the importance of PLCs underscores the need for systemic changes within educational systems. Policies should prioritize the establishment of supportive school cultures, allocate resources for professional development initiatives, and provide time and space for teachers to engage meaningfully in collaborative practices. Additionally, efforts should be made to address barriers to participation in PLCs, such as workload pressures, competing priorities, and inadequate leadership support.

As this dissertation concludes, it is evident that PLCs have the potential to transform teacher practice and enhance teacher retention in schools. However, the journey does not end here. Moving forward, it is imperative for stakeholders at all levels to continue advocating for and investing in the development of robust PLC structures. Furthermore, future research should focus on longitudinal studies to explore the sustained impact of PLC participation on teacher practice and retention over time. Additionally, investigations into the specific characteristics of effective PLCs, as well as strategies for overcoming implementation challenges, will contribute to the refinement and optimization of PLC initiatives in diverse educational contexts.

In essence, the journey towards fostering supportive, collaborative, and sustainable learning communities within schools is ongoing. By embracing the principles of collaboration, continuous improvement, and shared leadership embedded within PLCs, educators can cultivate environments where both teachers and students thrive, laying the foundation for a brighter future in education.

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