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Stakeholder Participation and Perceptions in Professional Learning Communities: A Case Study in a Small, Rural School District

by
Rachel M. Kowalski

An Applied Dissertation Submitted to the
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education
and School of Criminal Justice in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Education

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2024

Approval Page

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Statement of Original Work

I declare the following:

I have read the Code of Student Conduct and Academic Responsibility as described in the *Student Handbook* of Nova Southeastern University. This applied dissertation represents my original work, except where I have acknowledged the ideas, words, or material of other authors.

Where another author's ideas have been presented in this applied dissertation, I have acknowledged the author's ideas by citing them in the required style.

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Rachel M. Kowalski
Name

April 9, 2024
Date

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Abstract

Stakeholder Participation and Perceptions in Professional Learning Communities: A Case Study in a Small, Rural School District. Rachel M. Kowalski, 2024: Applied Dissertation, Nova Southeastern University, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice Dissertation. Keywords: Professional learning communities (PLCs), communities of practice, teacher perceptions, PLC implementation, paraprofessionals, rural and small school districts, principal and administrator participation, collaboration

This applied dissertation explored the interplay between collaboration within PLCs and classroom teacher perceptions of PLC implementation within a small, rural district. It examined how the involvement of different stakeholders in PLCs connects to overall perceptions of professional learning communities and how the participation of principals, administrators, and paraprofessionals shapes collaboration. The unique setting of a small and rural school district allowed the study to consider close interpersonal relationships that are common within these settings since these districts have limited human resources and individuals serve in various capacities within the organization. When stakeholders actively participate in PLCs, concerns arise about the authenticity of discussions, inquiry, and learning. Limiting genuine PLC work can compromise the effectiveness of PLC collaboration and implementation, thus impacting student outcomes.

The qualitative case study solicited participation from classroom teachers in a small and rural school district through interviews to support an understanding of stakeholders' participation. Additionally, PLC documents such as minutes and agendas were analyzed in the context of interview data and emerging themes. Exploring stakeholder participation and perceptions yielded valuable insights into the dynamics of implementing PLCs.

An analysis of the data revealed that diverse stakeholder involvement fosters expanded professional development for paraprofessionals and new teachers and may result in rapid professional growth. For administrators, there is a delicate balance between accountability and autonomy of PLC teams. The findings provide specific strategies administrators can employ to promote distributive leadership, enhancing learning outcomes for PLC members. Other findings demonstrated that paraprofessional participation is particularly enriching for PLCs. The research drew on Senge’s learning organization theory, and outcomes underscored the significance of systems thinking, shared vision, and team learning as constructs to consider when considering PLC composition and implementation. The data and findings are especially relevant to administrators and leaders in rural and small school districts.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are groups of educators aimed at nurturing innovation, exchanging ideas, and engaging in inquiry-driven processes centered around data, teaching, and learning. PLC members focus on enhancing teacher practices and improving student outcomes through regular communication and meetings. These communities of practice provide a platform for the collective capacity of all staff and participants to engage in inquiry and learning. This structure empowers individual educators to evolve professionally within a team framework in the quest for continuous improvement in order to enhance student and school outcomes (Admiraal et al., 2019; DuFour & Eaker, 2009; Hord, 2004; Hord, 2009; Hord & Roy, 2013; Stoll, 1999).

PLCs work together to address the critical and ever-changing needs of students. The collaborative nature of a PLC provides the deliberate and planned opportunity for teachers to share resources, lessons, content, and pedagogical knowledge with peers to improve students' academic outcomes. This is accomplished through collaboration and leadership delegation, resulting in enhanced collective efficacy (DuFour et al., 2005; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). PLCs are organized around the following six characteristics: maintaining a shared mission, values, and goals; constructing a collaborative culture; taking part in collective inquiry and learning; action-oriented conversations and activities; commitment to continuous learning and improvement; and hands-on activities and work driven by data and results (DuFour & DuFour, 2010; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004).

Statement of the Problem

In the research of PLCs, a critical gap exists in understanding the influence of PLC composition and stakeholder involvement, particularly administrators and paraprofessionals, on student outcomes. While PLCs emphasize collaboration and learning, little is known about how specific stakeholder participation within these communities of practice influences PLC implementation and outcomes, thus posing a significant gap in the current research literature (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Canales et al., 2018; Dimarco, 2021; Elfarargy et al., 2022; Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Willis & Templeton, 2018). When specific stakeholders, particularly administrators, actively engage in PLCs, there is a concern regarding the authenticity of collaboration, inquiry, and learning, potentially undermining the meaningfulness of PLC work and influencing perceptions about implementation and effectiveness. Consequently, this can limit the impact on teaching, learning, and student outcomes. When PLCs are not authentic, the collaboration model suffers greatly, and the PLC intervention has little impact on school improvement. When specific stakeholders, especially administrators, take an active and participatory role in PLCs, there is a concern as to whether the team's collaboration, inquiry, and learning are genuine. Meaningful and transparent collaboration is the lynchpin of PLC work, and there is concern about whether specific stakeholder involvement dampens the efforts and then influences perceptions surrounding PLC implementation and effectiveness.

The Research Problem

To ensure student achievement and success, district and building educational leaders continuously seek research-based approaches to support and empower educators.

Among the strategies that have gained extensive recognition and implementation around the world is establishing PLCs in schools and districts (DuFour et al., 2016). PLCs foster teacher collaboration and combat the prevalent issue of professional isolation seen within the education community (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Philpott & Oates, 2016). This research explores the intricate dynamics of stakeholder participation within PLCs in the unique context of a small and rural school district in a north central U.S. state. Small school districts located in rural areas have barriers that other large districts do not, including limited resources and instructional staff, which are critical to PLC structures.

The school community is often the cornerstone of a rural community, and the leaders and staff are particularly influential. However, small and rural districts rely upon a much smaller pool of resources than their counterparts with larger budgets (Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023; Jung, 2023; McHenry-Sorber, 2019; Showalter et al., 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). As such, the optimal makeup of PLCs and level of participation is of great importance to the decision-makers and leadership within these communities. When structuring PLCs, leaders need to consider composition and how the participation of administrators, principals, coaches, and other stakeholders shape educators' perceptions of PLC implementation and outcomes in small and rural school communities (Adamson et al., 2023; Huijboom et al., 2021; Richmond & Manokore, 2010).

Professional learning communities, anchored in inquiry and learning within an educational organization, have been shown to increase teacher knowledge in pedagogy and content using a team learning approach (Christ et al., 2017; Crippen et al., 2010) as well as supporting positive shifts in teacher practice (Doğan & Adams, 2018; Little, 2020). Effective PLC structures increase accountability among stakeholders for learning, often resulting in a shared vision and purpose for student outcomes, changing mindsets about students, and increasing collective teacher efficacy (Lee, 2020; Little, 2020; Moulakdi & Bouchamma, 2020; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). Finally, improving student outcomes is a typical result of PLC implementation through reflective practice (Bolam et al., 2005; Burns et al., 2018; Doğan & Adams, 2018).

Background and Justification

This research explores and extends upon existing research, examining how the multifaceted collaboration among various members of PLCs, including classroom teachers, administrators, paraprofessionals, and instructional coaches, influences educator perceptions of PLC implementation overall. Previous research has delved into the perceptions of teachers and various stakeholders regarding PLCs, as well as the implementation of PLCs in small and rural settings (Admiraal et al., 2019; DeJong et al., 2021; DeMatthews, 2014; Elfarargy et al., 2022). However, a notable gap exists in understanding the PLC composition and the participation of paraprofessionals, central office staff, administration, and principals, as well as how educators perceive PLCs.

Small and rural school districts often contend with limited resources, a smaller workforce, and frequent turnover in district and school administration (Adamson et al., 2023; Canales et al., 2018; Hvidston & McKim, 2019; McHenry-Sorber, 2019; Willis & Templeton, 2018), and face unique challenges in implementing effective PLCs. In small and rural school districts, it is necessary to include staff from all layers in PLCs. The researcher aims to fill this critical void by examining how the involvement of all staff, from paraprofessionals to the superintendent, in the PLC process shapes the overall perception of PLCs within the context of a small and rural school district.

Deficiencies in the Evidence

The absence of such research, which considers the distinct challenges and the imperative need for broad stakeholder participation, leaves substantial gaps in the current literature concerning PLC development and sustainability in small, rural educational communities. This study seeks to address these gaps identified by investigating perceptions of stakeholder involvement within PLCs, employing a qualitative case study approach to explore how such involvement impacts the perception of PLCs in a small and rural district. Ultimately, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the role of PLCs in fostering collaboration and improving educational outcomes for students and professional outcomes for educators in these unique settings.

Audience

Within small and rural communities, one will encounter tiny school districts, often consisting of just one school building. Occasionally, these districts will encompass a handful of schools spanning multiple grade levels. These districts will typically be overseen by a school board whose members may possess minimal to no experience in education and, at times, will require enhancement of their knowledge regarding best practices in the field (Lavalley, 2018; Sherif, 2020). Rural school board leadership will benefit from having such research at their fingertips. Understanding PLCs through this paradigm will significantly benefit these local decision-makers.

Similarly, typically, the superintendent and building administrators will be less experienced as the pay will be low, housing will be expensive, and the skills and expertise required will not be as in-depth in these settings, while the experience needed and required to supervise school buildings with significantly more students and stakeholders will be more significant (Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Pendola & Fuller, 2018; Williams, 2020). Arming school and district administrators with research through this specific lens will be critical for implementing PLCs in small and rural districts. Research also demonstrates that teachers are often inexperienced or lack certifications when serving rural and small school communities (Colson et al., 2021; Jung, 2023). When these teachers can engage in reflective practice and participate as collaborative learners in the PLC inquiry process, they leave armed with pedagogical strategies and ideas to support effective teaching and learning.

Setting of the Study

Situated in the rural landscape of a north central state in the United States, this study will focus on a small, rural school district surrounded by family or small commercial farms and recreational lake communities. The close-knit school district encapsulates the essence of rural education. While modest in size, the schools play a pivotal role in the lives of its residents, serving as a significant organization in and for the community. The district has approximately 585 students enrolled in preschool through 12th grade. The district fosters an environment where every student is not a name on a roster but an essential member of an academic family. The staff members, numbering around 100, are the backbone of the organization and, arguably, the community as a whole.

Within this staff, around 50 educators, some certified and a few not yet, shape the future of the district and community. The administrative leadership team includes three leaders who guide the district and school operations, teaching, and learning. At the helm is a superintendent charged with steering the district toward its academic goals and ensuring its long-term success. An elementary principal manages two separate school buildings, providing the necessary direction and support for primary grade levels. Completing this administrative trio is a principal dedicated to the secondary building, where middle and high school students from the community and surrounding areas attend.

Researcher's Role

As both a researcher and the district superintendent, the researcher situated herself in a unique position to embark on this research while also being armed with years of experience in curriculum and instruction in more extensive and more urban settings, where PLCs were composed primarily of only teachers. It is imperative to highlight that the district operates on a foundation of collaborative and delegated leadership, where the collective expertise of our team of educators plays a role in decision-making. An involved school board of committed community members further ensures accountability and transparency in the decision-making process. This research serves as an extension of the district's commitment to continuous improvement. By exploring this topic, problem, and purpose through research, the researcher/superintendent is both modeling inquiry-based practice and the importance of engaging in research-based work. It is the hope of the school board and the superintendent that this research contributes to the broader discourse of highly effective practices for rural educational organizations and inspires informed changes that enhance the educational experiences of those within similar communities nationwide.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to obtain and describe data that informs stakeholders about the implementation and outcomes of PLCs, specifically delving into how the participation of specific stakeholders influences educator perceptions of PLC implementation and outcomes in a small and rural school district. Participation and involvement are examined through the lens of PLC team collaborative meetings and electronic communication that occurs as part of PLC team meetings and work after meetings, as well as agenda preparation and brainstorming. The case study approach allowed the study to address specific stakeholder involvement as it relates to job titles and roles, including building principals (or identified as school administrators), central office/district office administrators (the superintendent), paraprofessionals, teachers, as well as instructional coaching staff from the local intermediate school district.

This research will investigate the nuanced dynamics within PLCs in small and rural settings by examining archival materials such as PLC agendas, minutes, and interviews to examine stakeholder participation within the composition of the PLC. This approach and purpose shed light on the interactions and contributions of various stakeholders. The research sought to understand how the presence of administrators, principals, and instructional coaches in PLC activities and team meetings influenced educators' perspectives on the effectiveness and outcomes of PLCs. By examining the experiences and perceptions of educators in a small and rural school district, the findings will contribute valuable insights into implementing PLCs in settings and contexts with similar resources.

Definition of Terms

Specific terminology frequently arises when discussing and researching PLCs in educational settings. Certain terms might be unfamiliar to those unaccustomed to PLC structures and outcomes. To facilitate comprehension, a comprehensive list of these terms and their respective definitions pertinent to the scope of this study is provided.

Professional Learning Communities

Seminal works on PLCs will commonly define and describe these as collaborative groups of educators who meet regularly to engage in ongoing inquiry structured around reflective practice, discussion of curriculum, data, pedagogy, best practice to improve teaching and learning, and student outcomes (DuFour & DuFour, 2013; Hord, 1997; Stoll et al., 2006).

Stakeholder Participation

For purposes of this research, this is an individual's involvement in PLC communication (in-person or electronic) and team PLC meetings on a regular and recurring basis. Stakeholders commonly include teachers, principals, district office administrators, instructional coaches (including content area coaches), and support staff (Dimarco, 2021).

Intermediate School District

An Intermediate School District (ISD) is a regional educational service agency that typically serves as a regional or county-level administrative structure that offers educational services and support to school districts within a specific geographical region. The ISD will often offer a wide range of services, including support for curriculum and instruction, student mental health and wellbeing, special education, technology, pupil accounting support, and financial and human resources (Anderson, 2022).

Instructional Coach

An instructional coach is a teacher leader who has formalized their role into a title to support educator development, primarily teachers. This individual provides mentoring and curricular, instructional, and pedagogical support to a teacher or a team of teachers in a variety of contexts and settings and focuses on improving teacher practice, student engagement, and achievement through direct modeling, coaching, and PLC collaboration (Glover et al., 2018; Knight, 2019).

Teacher Leader

This school leader can be described as a seasoned teacher who typically takes on additional roles that could include mentoring new teachers, leading professional development sessions, serving on curriculum development teams, and providing coverage for administration during an absence or occasionally performing administrative tasks supervised (Bradley-Levine, 2022; Doraiswamy et al., 2022).

Paraprofessional

A paraprofessional is a school-based instructional employee who is typically a part of the support staff, responsible for supporting teachers in a specific context throughout each school day. For example, some settings may have paraprofessionals for Title 1 students, instructional strategies, office work, health care, English language learners, and mathematics classrooms, or they may serve special education classrooms for all students or as a 1:1 aide (Bronstein et al., 2020; Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012; Morin et al., 2022).

School-Based Administrator or Principal

This educational leader heads a building or building with direct care and control over staffing, programming, and operations. For purposes of this research, this individual would also provide direct supervision and evaluation of the teachers, paraprofessionals, and other school staff. (Holland, 2004; Bouchamma et al., 2019).

District-Based Administrator or Central Office Administrator

Commonly referred to as “district office” or “central office,” this individual or group of individuals are the leader(s) of the district programming, forming a vision with all stakeholders. This individual does not directly supervise school-based teachers and staff but provides supervision, mentoring, coaching, and leadership to school-based administrators/principals (Honig & Rainey, 2019). In small and rural districts, it is typical for the district superintendent to serve as the sole district or central office administrator (Canales et al., 2018).

Singleton Teacher

An educator who serves as the sole teacher in their school or district is responsible for instruction in a specific grade level, course, or content area. These teachers are often isolated in the traditional PLC structure, without colleagues teaching similar curricula or age groups. They cannot directly collaborate with colleagues in their immediate workplace and school environment (Hansen, 2015).

Summary

While PLCs may serve many settings well, contributing to a collaborative culture with delegated and shared leadership, the authenticity of collaboration should be considered when various stakeholders plan an active role. Genuine participation through the inquiry and learning process is fundamental to the success of PLCs within the organization, and this contributes to the ability of all stakeholders and students to adapt, learn, and thrive.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Schools and districts today are changing and expected to innovate quickly to serve students effectively through high-leverage systems, structures, and evidence-based strategies. Political, social, and economic pressures are prevalent in local education, with many demanding rapid reforms and elevated student outcomes. These pressures significantly impact the daily operations of schools, including at the classroom level. (Burns et al., 2018; Hudson, 2023). When specific stakeholders take on a participatory role in PLCs, there is a concern as to whether the PLC collaboration, discussions, inquiry, and learning are genuine and authentic, potentially impacting the effectiveness of the PLC intervention overall. Through a qualitative case study, the researcher aimed to understand how stakeholders' participation in PLCs influenced educators' perceptions of PLC implementation and outcomes while considering the context of a rural and small district with limited staff and resources.

Learning Organization Theory (Senge, 1990) provided a framework for this research to address and understand the problem, formulate research questions, create an interview protocol, conduct data analysis, as well as situate and present the findings. A review of the literature on PLCs, in general, reveals a myriad of previously researched topics and research questions, and a variety of lenses have been applied over the past two decades (Anderson & Olivier, 2022; Bolam et al., 2005; Bouchamma et al., 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Burns et al., 2018; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huggins et al., 2011; Lee, 2020; Leonard & Leonard, 2005; Richmond & Manokore, 2010; Stoll et al., 2006). However, a literature review on stakeholder participation in PLCs revealed deep gaps. Much of the research siloed itself into a particular group (i.e., principals, instructional coaches, paraprofessionals), and much of the research was dated (Bouchamma et al., 2019; DeMatthews, 2014; Dimarco, 2021; Elfarargy et al., 2022; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Hord & Hirsch, 2009; Horton & Martin, 2013; Somprach et al., 2016). Similarly, a review of research and work on PLCs in small and rural districts indicated that inquiry has been siloed mainly on “solutions” that rural districts seek to fill the need for collaboration, such as virtual PLCs (Inouye et al., 2023; King, 2011). Educators' perspectives and the challenges of PLC implementation are often ignored in the research (Glover et al., 2018; Hansen, 2015; Parsley & Barton, 2015; Willis & Templeton, 2018).

Learning Organization Theory

The problem of authenticity in PLC collaboration is grounded in Learning Organization Theory, initially developed by Peter Senge, and was primarily used to study organizational learning, adaptability, and collaboration (Senge, 1990). The theory underscores the value of collaboration and learning among team members and across the entire organization. Through pooling knowledge, experience, and insights, teams can leverage their collective knowledge and personal mastery to construct a shared vision and purpose to address the complex challenges of schools today (Admiraal et al., 2019; DuFour & Eaker, 2009; Wesley & Buysse, 2001). The concept of PLCs situates itself in the construct that organizations can learn as long as individuals’ beliefs, skills, capabilities, and mindset toward improvement and learning are matched with an environment conducive to collaboration and change (Hord, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Örtenblad, 2007; Senge, 1990). This theory provided a lens through which PLC inquiry and learning shaped the participation and perceptions of various stakeholders. Senge's learning organization theory and related constructs served as an organizing framework for examining stakeholder participation and perspectives in PLCs in the context of a small and rural school district.

Learning Organization Theory is broad and can be applied to various organizations, including educational communities. PLCs share the core principles of learning, collaboration, and improvement, making this an appropriate lens for enhancing organizational effectiveness (Doğan & Adams, 2018; Stoll et al., 2006). Of interest to this research is how people within organizations acquire, interpret, and apply knowledge to improve their performance. The PLC structure is anchored in reflective practice continuous improvement and focuses on ongoing growth. PLCs are set up to allow for collective examination of data and analysis of student outcomes by providing a vehicle for educators to make informed decisions (DuFour, 2004; Hord, 2008). Developing a shared vision and purpose, team learning, engaging in feedback loops and open dialogue, and fostering genuine collaboration and learning within organizations are all critical components of this theory (Senge, 1990).

Authentic collaboration and learning as an individual and part of a team, within and across the organization, is paramount. The shared vision and purpose must drive the entire organization or team, requiring genuine collaboration of team members to align their commitments toward shared goals (Senge, 1996). Senge’s theory emphasized open dialogue, requiring all stakeholders to understand the interconnectedness of the actions, reflections, learning, and decisions, as individuals within the organization know that they have a shared stake in the future of the entire community, making this especially important for PLCs as courageous and candid conversations are commonly part of implementation and process (DuFour & DuFour, 2013; Kiriakidis & Schwardt, 2011;

Noreen, 2021; Senge et al., 2012).

In learning organizations, individuals and teams encounter challenges; exploring their perspectives drives innovation while challenging existing beliefs, assumptions, and biases (Senge, 1990). The PLC process is connected with Senge's theory as individuals are expected to engage in a feedback process, constructively working with team members authentically, with no reserve and no limitations placed upon oneself or others within the collaborative process (DuFour et al., 2020; Garcia & Weiss, 2019). In the context of PLCs, learning organization theory highlights the critical nature of authentic collaboration in fostering meaningful inquiry, interactions, and learning for all stakeholders. These components allow for a culture of learning and improvement when individuals and teams work together genuinely to enhance performance, increase outcomes, and work toward goals collectively (Senge, 1990; Senge, 1996; Senge et al., 2012).

Large or small, school communities are learning organizations engaged in improving all aspects of the student experience and community. Much of the literature on PLCs is grounded in the theory that learning is social by nature, where stakeholders share their teaching practices and learning outcomes (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Senge, 1990; Yeo, 2002). In the field of educational research, literature touts PLCs as a method for schools to reduce isolation, engage in collaborative learning, build capacity within teachers and leaders, and usher in sustainable change (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2004; Hord, 2004; Senge et al., 2012). Professional learning community models draw from learning organizational theory, and constructs emerge from these models (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008;

Senge, 1990).

With the publication of *The Fifth Discipline* by Peter Senge (1990), the notion that schools could operate as learning organizations or communities of practice became popular or mainstream, and PLCs developed from there. Senge (1990) rooted a successful learning organization's core work in five disciplines that provide lifelong opportunities for study and practice: personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systemic thinking. Senge argued that the "practices" are what an individual does, and the "principles" are driving ideas (Senge, 1990). Reflective practice is central to each of these disciplines. For the disciplines to work cohesively together, there must be a shift in the stakeholders' mindset in the organization. Within a learning organization, lifelong learning is the centerpiece of the theory (Eisler, 2015; O'Neil, 2002; Senge, 1990).

More recent research only builds upon the validity and usefulness of Senge’s work and the theory, providing opportunities for debate on how learning is best achieved and practiced regularly in the organization. Updated works underscore for scholars and researchers that, ultimately, organizations are comprised of humans, of people. These individuals continuously live, think, and learn through various lenses provided by the modern age (Anderson & Olivier, 2022; Jackson, 2021; Noreen, 2021; Robinson, 2020). From the digital transformation of organizations to how knowledge and learning are managed and shared rapidly and then communicated through a global landscape with various perspectives, learning organization theory continues to be relied upon today (Hsu & Lamb, 2020; Jackson, 2021; Robinson, 2020).

Constructs of Learning Organization Theory

The constructs of Learning Organization Theory informed this study’s research questions, methodology, interview protocol, data analysis, and presentation of findings.

Learning Organization Theory: Personal Mastery

Senge (1990) argued that truthful engagement and reflection on one's own practices are at the core of personal mastery. An organization's growth and productivity are dependent on the personal development of the individuals within the organization. If individuals do not advance, the organization will find itself at a standstill (Senge, 1990; Senge, 1996). Individuals who consistently practice development are fully aware of their shortcomings and lack of knowledge in a particular area and know where opportunities for growth lie, and an individual practicing vision and capacity building understand how they will grow to achieve that (Eisler, 2015; O'Neil, 2002; Senge, 1990). The key to personal mastery is that one has one's vision and efficacy, but one's growth intertwines with the organization's growth (Eisler, 2015). Bui and Baruch (2010) have identified antecedents to accompany this model: personal values, motivation, individual learning, personal vision and development, and training. In a healthy organization, the growth of teams and individuals is paramount for sustainability (Admiraal et al., 2019; Bui & Baruch, 2010), while teacher motivation, self-efficacy, and mastery of goals have demonstrated correlate with increases in student motivation (Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015).

Learning Organization Theory: Mental Models

Mental models, or awareness of assumptions, biases, and generalizations, are also crucial in this case study. Mental models are the ideas and beliefs individuals use to drive decision-making and actions, and these give meaning to human experiences (Bui & Baruch, 2010; Tarnanen et al., 2021). An individual should reflect on their awareness and attitudes toward personal perceptions, as bias can be a component of problems of practice (Eisler, 2015). Senge (1990) discussed that mental models are embedded norms or views that often impact how individuals act, perform, or think. Senge (1990) argued that moving a learning organization forward for all members requires leaving behind these biases that are often commonplace within organizations. Understanding mental models is essential to fostering openness within the organization, as changing the culture is often a priority and paramount for improvement (Eisler, 2015; Senge, 1990).

To highlight the importance of the mental model construct in relation to teaching and learning within schools, understanding one's mental models is crucial for staff to work alongside colleagues and administrators (Ford & Moore, 2013). Senge contended that these mental models are of particular interest to school stakeholders, as they are ingrained assumptions and beliefs in the fabric of how teachers understand their immediate landscape and the overall field of education and how they change it (1990; 1996). Mental models have gained considerable interest from researchers when examining collaborative settings with experienced or veteran educators, given their foundation in past experiences, knowledge, and existing ideas. These models have served as anchors to explain teacher and student actions (Jones et al., 2011; Moseley et al., 2010). In rural and small districts, there is a greater likelihood that the teaching staff comprises more veteran educators (Gutierrez & Terrones, 2023; Jung, 2023). Senge promoted examining mental models as part of learning within organizations, as these may limit change and reform overall (Senge et al., 2012; Thompson & McKelvy, 2007). Of particular interest to this research, a 2021 examination of teachers' mental models revealed the need for leaders to build psychological safety for teams and ensure there is alignment between administrators and the school community to enhance professional learning outcomes, aligned with previous research emphasizing school cultures that foster a mindset of trust, risk-taking, and support promote collaborative learning (Thompson & McKelvy, 2007; Tarnanen et al., 2021).

Learning Organization Theory: Shared Vision

Focusing on a common purpose nourishes the commitment of members to the PLC team and vision. A common understanding among all stakeholders is critical to a thriving professional learning community (Senge, 1990). Senge claimed that shared visions emerge among the organization and the people within. Creating and fostering a shared vision is a discipline that anchors an organization in continuous learning. Senge's later work focused on learning organizations within a school context; he identified a common misconception about the shared vision that is supported by recent research, articulating a shared vision is not the responsibility of the principal or authority figure (DeMatthews, 2014; Ezzani, 2019; Senge et al., 2012). For an organization and PLCs, by extension, to be sustainable, all stakeholders should participate in creating the vision. When the shared vision is not the creation of all, a superficial vision is imposed on the organization (Eisler, 2015; Senge et al., 2012). Shared visions are often at the root of enthusiasm, creating experimentation and creativity that is then disseminated throughout the organization. A collective vision drives the work and encourages individuals to work towards established goals through collaboration and individual effort to work toward an organization's future (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Senge, 1990; Thompson & McKelvy, 2007).

A sense of purpose and a collective understanding of the goals has been critically important to PLCs' work. A shared vision and goals are indicators of a high-functioning PLC and serve as the centerpiece of teacher collaboration in PLCs (Admiraal et al., 2019; DuFour, 2009; Hord, 2008). Shared goals effectively promote understanding the purpose behind meetings and collaboration time in the PLCs. Schools with PLC collaboration focused on shared goals have effectively promoted increased student outcomes (Moolenaar et al., 2012). For a team to experience high levels of efficiency and success, Bolam et al. (2005) found that these must be in place. It is also vital for shared goals to focus on teaching and student learning rather than other assigned managerial tasks (Hord, 2004). A shared vision is at the crux of a PLC working together in the interest of student outcomes.

The importance of a collaborative vision and goals highlights its significance as part of PLC implementation, as a vehicle for increasing motivation for teaching and student learning; focusing on teacher discussion of shared goals resulted in increased ownership, self-efficacy, and teacher buy-in (Anderson & Olivier, 2022; Colson et al., 2021; Rosenholtz, 1991; Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015). A learning organization faces many obstacles to systemic reform and success if a shared vision is not in place, and there is evidence that supports creating and sharing a common vision facilitates overall teaching and learning improvement (Admiraal et al., 2019; Krijnen et al., 2022). A shared vision provides another lens through which to investigate the problem at hand.

Learning Organization Theory: Team Learning

Team learning is an organization's ability to develop and build capacity in individuals on the team and engage in collective learning effectively and efficiently. Group interaction is critical for transforming individual thinking and learning into a cooperative approach and action to reach common goals (Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 2012). In the construct of team learning, dialogue plays an essential role since "the goal of team learning is to align people's thinking and energies through dialogue" (Thompson & McKelvy, 2007; Wesley & Buysse, 2001). Senge stressed that all stakeholders should view educator collaboration as an approach to teaching and learning rather than an event, as a PLC is not teachers and administrators merely talking and working in groups. He argued that the PLC should involve everyone so that individual and group aspirations are a driving force and capabilities are built together (Senge et al., 2012). Personal beliefs and attitudes about the worth of team learning are likely to significantly impact attempts to implement PLCs successfully (Kiriakidis & Schwardt, 2011; Leonard & Leonard, 2005). A PLC team meeting is a "living laboratory" for problem-solving and work that improves teaching practices and student learning. An individual PLC's accomplishments should energize the larger organization and further build a transformational culture of the district and schools within, and developing a common language around learning should be prioritized by administrators (Eisler, 2015; Kiriakidis & Schwardt, 2011; Thompson & McKelvy, 2007).

Learning Organization Theory: Systems Thinking

Systems thinking encompasses policies, decisions, and relationships interconnected in the learning organization's broader context (Senge, 1990; Senge, 1996). Systems thinking provides a framework for describing and understanding how behaviors and decisions by individuals within the organization shape the entire system (Caldwell, 2012; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 2012; Wesley & Buysse, 2001). Senge identified that recognizing patterns and interactions within structures, in conjunction with external and internal change factors, facilitates the learning organization's continuous improvement (1990). Systems thinking is when an individual can see beyond their own "bubble" or lens and have the capacity to see the more complex connected systems and structures in the organization (Senge, 1996; Senge et al., 2012). Senge argued that when individuals within the system see beyond their own work, deeper patterns emerge, allowing them to organize appropriate actions (Bui & Baruch, 2010; Caldwell, 2012; Senge, 1990). Senge (1990) argued that the constructs of mental models, team learning, shared vision, and personal mastery are antecedents of systems thinking. The construct of systems thinking will be another lens through which to examine the authenticity of PLCs and any hindrances that occur because of stakeholder participation.

PLC Frameworks Emerging From Learning Organization Theory

In the late 1990s, PLCs offered school and district leaders a vehicle for driving reform and school improvement. Anchored in Senge's learning organizational theory, seminal works on PLCs began to spread throughout educational communities with leaders armed with the work of DuFour and Hord (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Hord, 2004; Senge et al., 2012). PLCs improve student learning among educational organizations (Bunnaen et al., 2022; Doğan & Adams, 2018; DuFour, 2007; Hord, 2004; Park et al., 2018). In the existing literature, there is a consensus on the elements necessary to build PLCs in schools, centered on Hord's (1997) research-based characteristics of PLCs. DuFour is influenced and conceptualized by Senge's (1990) learning organizations.

PLC Framework: DuFour and Eaker, "Professional Learning Communities at Work"

DuFour and Eaker's research and work (DuFour, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998) are the forces behind learning organizations being referenced as "professional learning communities" in education. DuFour and Eaker argued that using the "organization" in the title provides a structure. Simultaneously, a community could be individual teachers or stakeholders linked by a common problem of the practice or even common curiosity (DuFour, 2004; DuFour & DuFour, 2010; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). DuFour has since passed, but the work has continued through the Solution Tree organization and was updated as recently as 2020 to include new research (DuFour et al., 2020). DuFour and Eaker (1998) described three ways PLCs support teacher and student learning through collaboration structures. First, the structure allows for reflection on teaching practices. It places individuals on a team to share in problem-solving through a solution-oriented approach, allowing the collective team to build competency. Second, maintaining focus on student learning and sharing responsibility and accountability builds collective efficacy (Anderson & Olivier, 2022; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Evert & Stein, 2022; Meyer et al., 2020; Moolenaar et al., 2012; Voelkel & Chrispeels, 2017). Finally, it is through engaging with other stakeholders who share a common purpose for improving teaching and learning that PLCs will find opportunities and outcomes (Bolam et al., 2005; Bouchamma et al., 2019; Bunnaen et al., 2022). Administrators, instructional coaches, and other leadership team members provide a supportive structure for improvements to take shape (DuFour, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2020; Thessin & Louis, 2019).

Rooted in Senge's work, there is an expectation that work occurs within the framework of shared mission, vision, and goals developed collaboratively. Collaborative teams work independently but also interdependently to achieve common goals that are collectively established. There is a consistent focus on student outcomes and results, as all stakeholders are engaged in continuous improvement (DuFour, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2020). DuFour and Eaker (1998) envisioned six particular components to PLC work, similar to Senge's constructs: (a) a shared mission, vision, and values; (b) collective inquiry; (c) collaborative teams; (d) action experimentation; (e) continuous improvement; and (f) results in orientation. DuFour and Eaker defined PLC as a community as "educators [creating] an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Through this PLC model, teachers and administrators can shift their school culture to build capacity and improve student achievement (DuFour, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). DuFour and Eaker's work was rooted in learning organization theory and will provide insight into PLC authenticity related to stakeholder participation.

PLC Framework: Hord’s PLC Model

Also anchored in Senge's work, and like DuFour and Eaker's (1998) PLC model, Hord's PLC model focuses on cultural shifts that must occur with districts and schools as they work to become a learning community. This cultural shift is paramount to this model (Hord, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Hord identified that the PLC is a vehicle for increasing efforts towards efficient school improvement since the ultimate purpose is to effectively foster effective teaching and learning, which results in high levels of student learning (Hord, 2008). Hord drew upon Senge's learning organization theory to articulate the underpinnings and constructs of PLCs (Hord, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

In alignment with Senge's discipline of team learning, Hord emphasized the importance of reflective dialogue as a shared learning vehicle. This dialogue is a component of transforming both team and individual learning. The importance of reflective dialogue, including peer coaching and knowledge sharing, is highlighted in recent research (Hord, 2004; Noreen, 2021; Senge, 1990). Hord's articulation of PLCs includes five key dimensions: supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and learning application, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice (Hord, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008); all have demonstrated to be critical components in recent examinations of PLCs (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Carpenter, 2014; Ezzani, 2019; Hairon & Tan, 2016). One aspect critical to this current study is that both Hord (2004) and DuFour and Eaker (1998) emphasized the importance of school leadership in developing a shared vision and establishing conditions for learning within the learning organization. This construct will be significant because the composition of PLCs and stakeholders' roles within the structure is considered part of the identified problem and focus of the inquiry.

Conceptualizing and applying Senge's learning organization theory to most educational organizations is not straightforward; however, the literature demonstrates its value in examining the authenticity problem in PLC collaboration. The transferability of Senge's theory of learning organization is shown in seminal works on PLCs and by leading researchers on PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; Hord & Sommers, 2008). The theory supports this current research as a lens for examining the problem, formulating questions yet to be considered, collecting and analyzing data, and reporting findings and next steps for further research. The framework additionally provides a lens to assess gaps in the literature concerning stakeholder participation and the literature relevant to small and rural schools.

Gaps in the Literature: Stakeholder Participation

The composition of PLCs, stakeholder participation, and the optimal amount of collaboration within the PLC are central to the research. In contrast, the authenticity of PLC collaboration is explored through the lens of such participation and its complexity and methods. Through a case study approach, the perspectives and complexities of collaboration among leaders, teachers, principals, administrators, instructional coaches, and district and central office administrators were at the centerpiece of this study, as well as how those variables connect to the authenticity of PLCs. The input, involvement, and participation of specific stakeholders posed questions about the genuine nature of the work.

It was challenging to locate existing research and literature on PLC composition and particular stakeholder groups who guide, lead, and participate in PLCs. It was even more difficult to find existing literature on how this participation influences perspectives and the authenticity of collaboration. A review of the existing literature was built on the little elements of data that are available in PLC-related research. Due to the lack of recent research examining these groups through the lens described, the following literature review will be organized based on the roles of stakeholders and research conducted on their contributions to PLCs. The classroom teacher's role within the PLC will be examined first to set the context, as classroom teachers are the core participants of PLCs.

Then, the role of school administrators/principals and other central office and district administrators in PLC participation will be examined, as well as instructional coaches. This will provide a synthesis of the existing related studies but will also serve as evidence of the lack of literature available on PLC composition and the problem of PLC authenticity and stakeholder involvement. Embedded in the literature review are clear instances where research should be extended to shed light on perspectives and participation of specific stakeholders and how current research does not currently address variables such as stakeholder involvement and PLC authenticity. This gap provided a window to ensure that this study's research questions and findings will contribute to the body of research.

The Classroom Teacher and Teacher Leaders

There is abundant research examining teacher isolation's negative impact (Dodor et al., 2010; Ostovar-Nameghi & Sheikhahmadi, 2016; Rosenholtz, 1991). Isolation results in low levels of self-efficacy and low job satisfaction, and isolation persists despite the birth of PLCs decades ago (Carpenter, 2014; Rosenholtz, 1991). Despite efforts to build PLCs, teachers remain isolated due to varying levels of PLC implementation (Fried & Konza, 2012; Servage, 2009). However, the reasons for PLC failures related to stakeholder involvement and authenticity of collaboration are unclear and are part of these studies. New teachers, in particular, are impacted by isolation as they often face pressure to learn and grow accelerated; however, novice and veteran teachers are impacted by isolation from their peers (Rosenholtz, 1991). One of the ways to combat teacher isolation is through implementing PLCs (Admiraal et al., 2019;

Anderson & Olivier, 2022; Davidson & Dwyer, 2014; DeJong et al., 2021; Kilgore & Griffin, 1998).

Examining the role of classroom teachers in their PLC, one of the central issues identified in past research is how PLCs facilitate the building of teacher leadership (Bradley-Levine, 2022; Carpenter, 2014; DeMatthews, 2014; Doraiswamy et al., 2022; Wilson, 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). There are recent calls for exploration into the role of teacher leadership connected to teacher work in PLCs (Hairon & Tan, 2016; York-Barr & Duke, 2004), but current work reveals that distributive leadership involving teachers is effective (Ezzani, 2019; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). One element in current literature is the debate over how teacher leaders are defined, often depending on the setting. The concept of leadership in the PLC may emerge in informal and formal ways and through various channels. Leadership may not necessarily mean an identified or specified role; leadership can be demonstrable through informal conversations and coaching, team conflict resolution, or even modeling without having the title of leader (Horton & Martin, 2013; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Variables of trust, respect, and participation expectations contribute to the idea of PLC authenticity, and trust emerges and is cultivated through collaboration, but trust also promotes collaboration (Kramer, 2010).

Through a qualitative case study of three schools in the Midwest, participants were asked to provide insight into shared leadership structures, PLC practices, and the various roles of teachers and leaders in this work. The findings demonstrated how teachers engaged in the PLC were shaped by the trust placed on teachers by administrators and the level of respect for teachers as professionals at the school site. The issue and concept of trust that emerged in the literature (Carpenter, 2014) were crucial for several aspects of the study at hand. Carpenter (2014) also wrote that shared leadership is key in PLCs as it creates opportunities for professional development and continuous improvement and allows for the development of shared goals and values. These key takeaways were worth exploring as part of the semi-structured interviews, especially as they related to stakeholder participation and the genuine nature of the collaboration occurring within PLCs.

Other considerations for this inquiry provide insight into the level of participation and other variables related to the teacher experience within the PLC. Wilson (2016) wrote through the lens of change management, as change is a source of anxiety for many educators. One particular finding of interest is that leaders should consider shifting into leaders of change rather than leaders who represent change, as teachers view these two things differently and the support of PLC shifts (Wilson, 2016). An examination of Singapore PLCs (PLTs) demonstrated that the actual event of a PLC did not automatically lead to spontaneous conversations of a collegial and collaborative nature, even if led by a leader. There were various levels of engagement and openness with team members, and trust was central to their willingness to share practices, again highlighting the need for trust to lay the groundwork for authentic collaboration.

This study also pointed to teachers' conflicting agendas in PLC and leaders' agendas (Hairon & Tan, 2016). Similarly, researchers found that PLC initiatives that are considered “top-down” do not lead to an authentic commitment to collaboration. In this study, top-down discussions were characterized by discussions led primarily by administrators, who also created the agendas. This approach did not encourage teacher-led collaboration as much as when teachers and teacher leaders drove the collaboration agenda and ideas. Their findings point expressly to teachers driving agenda creation to impact student outcomes further (Fried & Konza, 2012), which is essential because principal reliance on instructional coaches to facilitate the agenda as an intermediary was common throughout earlier research (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; DeMatthews, 2014). This sheds light on stakeholder participation within PLCs and how the activities of specific individuals can influence perspectives based on their specific role of locus of control within the district or school.

The School Administrator as a Learner and Influencer in PLCs

Dated literature examining school leaders, administrators, and principals' roles and work leading teachers in PLCs (DeMatthews, 2014; Hord & Hirsch, 2009; Somprach et al., 2016) revealed that this was an emerging area of study as PLC initiatives grew in the first 20 years of the decade. However, newer research also leaves gaps to be explored as it relates to how principal participation in PLCs influences perspectives on implementation and outcomes, and these lack clarity as to how authentic the collaboration is when principals are active participants (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Canales et al., 2018; Dimarco, 2021; Lash et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2020; Willis & Templeton, 2018).

Initially, suggested approaches for principal support of learning communities included the following: setting expectations for teachers to keep the knowledge fresh and new, making data available for analysis, teaching decision-making skills, and showing teachers the research behind the rationale (Hord & Hirsch, 2009). These suggestions initially signaled that principals have a substantial oversight role in PLCs, and learning is the focus of the teacher participants. As presented previously, teacher input is crucial to buy-in and authentic engagement with initiatives (Anderson & Olivier, 2022; Colson et al., 2021; Maloney & Konza, 2011; Rosenholtz, 1991; Schiefele & Schaffner, 2015). One consideration of the initial presentation of principal participation, as shown in early work on PLCs, is that teachers saw principals as providing oversight rather than being a valuable resource within the PLC structure. Updated research into distributive leadership is an emerging conversation of the literature, revealing that the principal and administrator focus is only sometimes oversight, and their role may be more participatory (DeMatthews, 2014; Ezzani, 2019; York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Distributive leadership occurs when teacher leaders or teachers take on a more active role in the team's short and long-term learning and collaboration. DeMatthews' study focused on distributive leadership within the PLC context. This case study examined six elementary schools in Texas that were identified as schools with high-functioning and effective PLCs. Principals and teachers were observed for an academic school year and interviewed to understand how leadership was distributed across the school to facilitate effective PLCs (DeMatthews, 2014). The research revealed that some principals appeared to be more involved with the management of PLCs, while others allowed teachers and teacher leaders to grapple with practice problems before stepping in. This study's implications reiterated that most research has focused on either teachers or administrators and not the "interactions, challenges, and relationships" at the core of their collective work together (DeMatthews, 2014). Building upon previous work on principal leadership and teacher collaboration within the context of PLCs, Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) examined practices supporting their grade-level PLCs by deploying a mixed-methods approach. Through interviews, observations, and document analysis, the researchers focused on the roles of individuals and PLCs at each school and honed explicitly in on teacher use of data. Significant findings, including the aim of principals to "support" PLCs rather than viewing themselves as having a participatory role (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016), are echoed in the previous DeMatthews research. The principal engaged with instructional or data discussions through modeling rather than engaging as if they were to deliver instruction or develop interventions independently.

While principals may provide support and guidance and sometimes refrain from engaging in direct PLC participation, there are indications that their role is critical when examining the PLC's impact on student achievement. Studies spanning many years demonstrate that principal leadership emerged as the most impactful component of PLC processes, frequently demonstrating that PLC processes have to be in place before significant reforms and response to intervention can take hold in the building (Bouchamma et al., 2019; Dimarco, 2021; Huggins et al., 2011). Evidence shows us that rather than principals providing oversight of PLCs, it is the carrying of weight or responsibilities as part of the team that leads to crucial transformational reform; this is so much the case that principal preparation programs commonly include coursework on PLCs and how principals actively participated as part of the team (Huggins et al., 2011; Lash et al., 2023; Meyer et al., 2020; Willis & Templeton, 2018).

The Instructional Coach

Instructional coaches are becoming increasingly common in schools across the nation. The widespread use of literacy and instructional coaches is a common component of reforms at the federal, state, district, and individual school levels (Elfarargy et al., 2022; Galey, 2016; Kraft et al., 2018). The expertise of an instructional coach is believed to help teachers engage with content planning, creating assessments, making sense of data, and focusing on sound pedagogical practices. This support aids teachers in instructional practices to encourage student achievement (Horwitz et al., 2011; Kraft et al., 2018; Marsh et al., 2015; Taylor & Gunter, 2009). Instructional coaches' roles within PLC have yet to be widely researched overall, primarily through examining how the participation of instructional coaches influences PLC perceptions.

Limited research is available on these instructional coaches' unique role within PLC structures, contributing to the research gaps that would inform this research problem. Most of the research revolved around the role that instructional coaches play when it comes to data analysis and the inclusion of data in PLC agenda creation, discussions, and work (Glover et al., 2018; Knight, 2019; Marsh et al., 2015; Taylor & Gunter, 2009). The use of data to create instructional opportunities, remediation, and enrichment for students is paramount in a PLC, and it is the most common focus of research examining the role of an instructional coach. PLC discussions in the context of data, guided by a coach, resulted in instructional and pedagogical shifts and a more laser focus on student learning and equity (Horwitz et al., 2011; Marsh et al., 2015). The collection of research demonstrates that the instructional coach is instrumental in PLC work but provides little insight into how authentic the collaboration is when instructional coaches participate.

Marsh et al. (2015) emphasized the need for the coach to foster intrapersonal relationships with the teachers and the team, and these findings point to positive outcomes if a well-received coach participates in the PLC and if the teachers find the coach credible in their experience and knowledge. Recent findings suggest that if instructional coaches enhance teachers' instructional capacities through collaboration and work collaboratively to create a psychologically safe space for all, they are typically embraced as team members (Elfarargy et al., 2022). Together, these provide insight into genuine collaboration and stakeholder participation of those in other roles and how these studies can contribute to developing research questions for the current research problem.

Paraprofessional Participation

Very few studies in the existing literature examine PLCs through the lens of paraprofessional participation. Paraprofessionals, who usually work closely with the students requiring assistance and support, are often the staff members with the least education, preparation, and training. In the context of PLCs, teachers who help supervise these staff members often receive no training in how to supervise, collaborate, and work alongside them in different staff capacities (Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012; Jones et al., 2012; Fried & Konza, 2012). Additionally, paraprofessionals report that they are often left to make critical decisions and act independently due to a lack of time for collaboration with classroom teachers (Giangreco et al., 2010). The voices of paraprofessionals are scarce in the current literature on PLCs and educational literature overall: collaboration between teachers and assistants or paraprofessionals has been shown to be an under-researched area, little attention has been paid to teacher-paraprofessional working relationships (Biggs et al., 2016; Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012; Jones et al., 2012; Fried & Konza, 2012).

Considering Senge’s theory, it is important to note that paraprofessionals and teachers consider continuous learning differently in the context of professional improvement. In regards to teacher proficiency, paraprofessional participants focused on teacher organization, skills and knowledge, and professionalism but omitted mentions of a willingness to learn. On the other hand, teachers often cited paraprofessional skills, knowledge, and willingness to learn (Biggs et al., 2016). While not focused on paraprofessionals as participants in PLCs, prior literature has shown that district and school administrators must establish dedicated time in the schedules for collaborative interactions and lesson planning involving paraprofessionals and teachers. Additionally, administrators should ensure opportunities exist for attendance at professional development sessions for both groups aimed at equipping them with the necessary skills for collaboration in and out of the classroom setting (Biggs et al., 2016; Devecchi & Rouse, 2010; Jones et al., 2012; Wei et al., 2009). Recent teacher shortages have left paraprofessionals in positions to substitute often and provide classroom-wide support, and these professionals are seeking training that supports expanding roles, including instruction (Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012; Jones et al., 2012; Fried & Konza, 2012).

The District or Central Office and PLC Participation

Little is also understood about the role of the central or the district office in school-based PLCs, which is not apparent within the current literature (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Horton & Martin, 2013). Most work focuses on the district or central office team supporting principals as leaders or principal PLCs (Canales et al., 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Horton & Martin, 2013; Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Horton and Martin (2013) sought to examine the role of district administration in the development, success, and sustainability of PLCs through a case study approach. Although the researchers examined the role of the district administration, there was little evidence that examined the role of any district staff within the PLC as an active participant or even an observer; there was no indication that a district administrative team had interacted in the PLC itself or with the teachers in the PLC. The data collection surrounded the principal viewpoints on how well the superintendent and district office assessed readiness for change and then managed the implementation efforts of PLCs in the district. District leadership focuses on principal development rather than the development of teacher leaders and instructional coach leadership (Horton & Martin, 2013).

In a small and rural district, the role of a superintendent looks different from that of a superintendent in a large district (Hvidston & McKim, 2019; Sherif, 2020; Willis & Templeton, 2018). Administrators are less concerned with managerial tasks and more with teaching and learning "on the ground," working with and supporting principals, building administrators, instructional coaches, and teachers (Anderson & Olivier, 2022; Thessin & Louis, 2019). The research problem posed for this study seeks to address whether PLC collaboration is authentic or dependent on specific stakeholders' participation. Since the setting is a small and rural district, the superintendent leads through a hands-on approach at this site, leaving both aspects of this problem that have yet to be addressed by current literature.

As you have seen through the review of the literature, an examination of specific stakeholder participation in PLCs is dated for most stakeholder groups, is siloed and focused on one particular group, leaving substantial gaps to explore how stakeholder participation influences PLCs and how authentic the collaboration is (Galey, 2016; Huggins et al., 2011; Kraft et al., 2018; Taylor & Gunter, 2009).

Gaps in the Literature: PLCs in Small and Rural School Settings

While a plethora of literature and research can be found addressing a wide variety of topics concerning the work of PLCs, there needs to be more inquiry into how small, rural school districts implement PLCs with limited resources and staff at all levels. This review of research will provide an overall synthesis of the findings. Still, it will also demonstrate the lack of evidence available on how this further contributes to the problem of stakeholder involvement in small and rural districts and how this contributes to the authenticity of team collaboration. While some research examines the solutions for small and rural districts, it must grapple with the essential variables for considering stakeholder involvement and how this shapes perspectives overall.

Work that considers PLCs in small and rural districts is also limiting, as it has most often examined how to create collaborative opportunities, such as implementing virtual PLCs or PLCs on social media (Inouye et al., 2023; King, 2011). Some inquiries have also revolved around the role of "singleton" educators as part of learning communities and the lack of access to content area collaboration (Evert & Stein, 2022; Hansen, 2015). While PLCs are well-documented to be successful vehicles for improving outcomes in large urban districts (Anderson & Olivier, 2022; Ronfeldt et al., 2015), the atmosphere and environment of small and rural districts drastically differ, leading to a need to explore the literature surrounding PLCs in small and rural settings to inform this research further.

Literature Review Summary

The convergence of the Learning Organization Theory and the literature reviews of PLC stakeholders and PLCs in small and rural districts informs the approach and lens by which the research problem of PLC authenticity with stakeholder participation will be examined. The synthesis of these areas together highlights the importance of effective collaborative learning in all educational settings, as all contexts share principles of shared learning and continuous improvement. Through the research problem, purpose, and research questions, Learning Organization Theory can be applied to ensure stakeholder participation, and as a result, PLC composition is optimal for PLCs in small and rural schools.

Research Questions

A qualitative case study methodology will address the following purpose and research questions. This study will describe how stakeholders' participation in PLCs will influence educator perceptions of PLC implementation and outcomes in a small and rural school district. The research questions will be anchored in the review of available literature, guide the qualitative case study procedures and decisions made throughout the research process, and develop the interview protocol and document analysis protocol to be described as part of the methodology.

The following research questions guided this qualitative descriptive case study and the development of interview questions and document analysis protocol:

1. Research Question 1: What are classroom teachers' perceptions regarding stakeholder participation in small and rural school district PLCs?
2. Research Question 2: How does the participation of principals and administrators shape PLC collaboration?
3. Research Question 3: What are the ways in which the inclusion of paraprofessionals in PLCs contributes to team learning?

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the methods, procedures, and analyses utilized to conduct this study, examining authenticity and stakeholder participation within PLCs. A qualitative case study approach best addressed the study's distinct features, and the approach was used to investigate and describe connections between stakeholder involvement, educator perspectives, and PLC authenticity. Through case study design, the investigator explored a case within a contemporary setting or context (Creswell, 2013). Utilizing a case study approach is best aligned with the need to gather perspectives and capture the unique voices of classroom teachers immersed in the work of PLCs. A case study for this research was most appropriate and aligned with the research problem, purpose, and research questions (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2011; Yin, 2018). The qualitative method of the case study allowed the researcher to capture and demonstrate how this topic has many layers, as demonstrated by how this problem and the research questions were framed in the literature review.

Aim of the Study

This qualitative case study explored how stakeholder participation in PLCs influenced perceptions of PLC implementation and outcomes within a small and rural school district. The investigator identified stakeholders commonly involved in PLCs, such as classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, intermediate school district staff, instructional coaches, principals, and central office administrators. The research aimed to understand how the participation of these stakeholders influenced educator perceptions of PLCs. The researcher also addressed the unique aspects of PLCs in small and rural school districts within this case study. The results obtained from this inquiry will have implications for leaders and educators, particularly in small and rural school districts where fiscal and human resources may be limited. Focusing on specific stakeholder participation in PLCs, this investigation will now contribute to the existing body of work and bridge critical gaps within the academic research community, as demonstrated by the literature review and lack of overall and current research in this area of study. The contributions of this investigation provide more profound guidance for leaders in small and rural communities considering PLCs as an educational intervention for school reform and improvement.

Case Study Research Approach

Stake (1995) described case study methods when there is a need for an in-depth and contextual analysis of a limited number of events and relationships that form as a result. The value of a case study is that it provides a thick and rich description of a real-world phenomenon, which often has unique characteristics that require in-depth exploration to understand complexities (Merriam, 2014; Yin, 2018). In the case of a small and rural school district, with fewer than 50 teachers and fewer than 20 PLC meetings per year, a comprehensive understanding of perceptions of PLCs can be accomplished most effectively through a case study approach; a level of detail is needed to contribute to knowledge, and the phenomenon is bounded by time (Yin, 2018). While interviews are the centerpiece of this case study, collecting and analyzing documents, PLC agendas, and minutes were crucial as the second data source. Creswell and Creswell (2022) highlighted the importance of using multiple data sources to ensure that corroboration, convergence, and correspondence occur between various sources. The use of PLC documents also contributed to the reliability and validity of the data collection, emerging analysis, and findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These PLC agendas and minutes provided valuable insight as the themes from interviews emerged.

Through a case study approach, the researcher could interpret data and describe themes or trends because data collection occurring in natural settings is responsive to the location and the individuals under study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Case studies are ideal when multiple data sources are needed to contribute to the bounded case, explore the research questions, and provide both the opportunity for the research to engage in exploration and have explanatory aspects by nature (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). A case study approach allows voices to be heard through an inclusive and equitable method, providing rich information as it acknowledges the complexity and nuances of school district settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Edmonds & Kennedy, 2016; Patton, 2002). Overall, the case study approach was the best vehicle and research design to fill the needs presented by this study's purpose, problem, and research questions.

Participants

Individuals engaging in the research process as participants comprised instructional-based classroom teaching staff from the small, rural school district. Permission to conduct research at this site was obtained from the School Board President (Appendix E). Each teacher within the population of the research setting who had attended at least three PLCs during the school year received the recruitment materials via email (Appendix D) during Phase 1 of the data collection process. All three school buildings within the district were represented within the participant pool, and all possible participants received the recruiting materials from an administrative assistant. The school district predominantly employs white females across all positions. Chapter 4 will later delve into a detailed discussion of specific demographics for each participant as demographic data relevant to the research questions were collected during the interview process. The possible pool of participants included classroom teachers, a large percentage having longstanding tenures within the organization, as the district employs mostly veteran and seasoned teachers. This feature of the research site aligns with evidence indicating that educators in rural districts tend to remain in positions for extended periods due to strong connections with students and families, which are more entrenched and visible within smaller communities (Ingersoll & Tran, 2023 & *Spotlight: Characteristics of public school teachers by race/ethnicity*, 2019).

The research site, where participants were recruited, comprises a three-building school community in the Midwest region of the United States. As a case study, a large sample size was not required (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Given the unique nature of the setting, there was a limited number of classroom teachers to recruit from. The target number of interview participants was seven classroom teachers. Due to the anonymous recruiting process, given the researcher's leadership position in the district, it is unknown to the researcher how many possible participants expressed interest in the study. This will be discussed later as a significant feature of the recruiting and consent process. There is a longstanding debate within the qualitative research community regarding the number of sources of evidence and the number of interviews that should be conducted (Marshall et al., 2013; Priya, 2020; Yazan, 2015). However, Creswell recommends three to five interviewees per case study, while Yin recommends at least six (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2009). Seven interviews were conducted as part of this study.

When examining a phenomenon or problem, it is critical to ensure that the potential participants are individuals or from groups that are most knowledgeable or experienced are those that provide rich, in-depth information for data collection and analysis and that the choice of participants is specific to criteria relevant to the study purpose or research questions (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Gentles et al., 2015; Palinkas et al., 2015; Patton, 2015). All genders, ages, experience levels, and educational backgrounds were welcome to participate if the individual was a classroom teacher. Any teacher who had attended less than 3 PLCs was excluded. Given the role of the investigator, the superintendent of the school district, an administrative assistant who does not supervise personnel and has no direct reports distributed recruiting materials and collected informed consent. The administrative assistant selected participants randomly once they met the parameters for inclusion and exclusion criteria. Some participants did reveal themselves to the principal investigator as part of routine conversations. However, the engagement of the administrative assistant ensured the researcher had no knowledge of which individuals had volunteered to be a part of the research but were not selected, nor had knowledge of how many individuals had provided consent but were not randomly selected.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection for a case study can take on a variety of forms and can include observations, documents, and interviews (Creswell, 2013). Interviews and document analysis were used for this study, given the complexity of PLCs and the context in which they operate in this setting. Qualitative research emphasizes understanding the significance of participants' experiences and requires data collection tools that grasp and interpret this meaning effectively (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher prepared interview questions and an interview protocol, allowing participant feedback and responses to address the research questions, including questions that aligned with the theoretical framework (Appendix A). Additionally, other data came in the form of PLC meeting documents, including agendas from all district PLCs and minutes created during the PLC meetings. These were analyzed utilizing a document analysis protocol (Appendix B). While focus group research was considered, the researcher determined this was a poor choice for this particular study, as participants may be pressured in a group setting to provide socially or politically correct responses (Grossoehme, 2014).

Instrument: Interview Guide for Individual Stakeholder Interviews

The first data collection method, a semi-structured interview (Appendix A), was selected and utilized because it is one of the most critical sources of case study evidence and provides the opportunity to obtain and analyze more authentic and trustworthy data (Yin, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were designed to delve deeply into participants' perspectives and experiences related to the research problem, purpose, and questions (Knott et al., 2022). Yin (2018) describes the interview as a critical source of evidence in case study research and is used to gain in-depth information from stakeholders. These interviews were strategically structured to gather insights relevant to the research questions and the case so the researcher could explore and analyze perspectives and experiences based on the theoretical framework, the research question, and other data collection methods, such as document analysis (Yin, 2018). The researcher of this case study authored the interview questions (Appendix A), which were designed and inspired by the literature review, problem statement, purpose of the study, and research questions. Generally, Yin’s work was used to create interview questions that are open-ended and sequenced, ask “how” and “why,” and ensure the interview was semi-structured so that clarifications, re-stating, and follow-ups can take place to deepen the data collection process (Yin, 2011; Yin, 2018). Other resources utilized by the researcher to create the interview questions assisted the researcher in organizing the questions and provoking the interviewee's excitement and engagement (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Roberts, 2020). There were several examples of participants becoming very engaged and excited when specific questions were posed, resulting in robust, thick, rich data that will be presented in Chapter 4.

Another consideration of the data collection and instrument design process was the iterative strategy used to craft the tool and questions that were then leveraged during the semi-structured interview process. Crafting interview questions involves a process of refining and adjusting that is based on continuous feedback and analysis. As the interview data accumulated, the researcher utilized the interview protocol. However, some clarifications were provided to participants as each interview took place so that the researcher could ensure clarity, depth, and relevance (Srivastava & Hopwood, 2009). Using an iterative approach allowed the researcher to identify questions that could create interest. This approach enabled the researcher to adapt and improve the interview questions and protocol throughout the data collection process to ensure compelling questions were used. These questions elicited the most relevant information from participants aligned with the research questions, enhancing the trustworthiness and validity of a qualitative study (Giordanengo et al., 2019). The interview instrument (Appendix A) reflected the central components of the study and comprised interview questions intended for the semi-structured interviews. The interview questions were shared with each participant before the interview to build confidence and connections between the researcher and the participant (Jacob & Furgerson, 2015). The research questions were shared via e-mail approximately 6–12 hours before the interview to ensure the data collected was not rehearsed but that the participant felt at ease and comfortable in the process. The researcher opted to engage in a semi-structured interview process, which allowed for some deviation and in-the-moment decision-making as part of the interview as long as the interview stayed on topic and focused (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This decision proved valuable, as some questions seemed to be duplicative to participants, and interviewees were repeating information or straying from the focus of this particular study by no fault of their own. Interviews were timed and recorded on audio only. After the researcher engaged in the IRB process and obtained the letter of Institutional Review Board Approval (Appendix F), seven one-on-one interviews were conducted, which lasted between 40 and 11 seconds to 54 minutes and 28 seconds. Most interviews lasted under 45 minutes; this data will be outlined in Chapter 4.

Instrument: Document Review Guide for PLC Agendas and Minutes

While teacher agency is critical to PLC implementation, PLCs must be set up for successful implementation with structures allowing teams to thrive. One such structure is the expectation that PLC leaders and teams create and maintain agendas and produce minutes from PLC preparation, conversations, and meetings. These agendas and minutes are evidence-based structures that increase the likelihood of PLC success (*Scheduling*

Practices for Professional Learning Communities, 2013). Previous studies demonstrate that agenda and minutes documents provide evidence of shared goals, progress, and collaborative knowledge sharing. These documents are intended to support a cohesive and consistent focus on student learning (Chua et al., 2020; Chuang & Ting, 2021; *For maximum impact, align professional learning with high-quality instructional materials*, 2021; Huijboom et al., 2023; Philpott, 2017). Utilizing PLC agendas and minutes as a data source in this study is supported by previous peer-reviewed research on the outcomes of PLCs (Owen, 2014; Yazan, 2015). PLC agenda and minutes documents were made available as part of the site approval and IRB process, and the data within supported the exploration of educators' perceptions concerning PLCs and the participation of various stakeholders. Most of the agendas and minutes were data-rich, provided a glimpse into what content was discussed in PLC meetings, and dated back to early in the current school year before advertising about the study was made available to staff. Each set of documents included a listing of the participants, an agenda of items covered, notes on progress, and next steps for each item. Though most documents shed light on the problem, purpose, and research questions presented, some did not.

The document analysis instrument for this study (Appendix B) was developed based on the research purpose, research problem, research questions, and literature review, and the researcher created an original instrument based on influencing literature and best practices. All of these were synthesized to create a document analysis instrument based on best practices to look for patterns, codes, and overarching themes from the research questions (Bowen, 2009; Chanda, 2021; Morgan, 2022). Document analysis is commonly used to validate, triangulate, and corroborate other sources of qualitative research, which is aligned with case study research (Bowen, 2009). This tool was utilized to extract themes from the PLC documents that could be connected to themes from the interview process.

Procedures

After obtaining IRB approval from Nova Southeastern University, the researcher commenced research based on a structured timeline of procedures, all of which guided the data collection, analysis, and overall research. The IRB process supported the researcher in ensuring study completion, which was ethical, but that also ensured that future researchers who wished to extend or validate research in similar contexts could do so (Brown, 2022; Makel et al., 2022). Phase One lasted 2 weeks, including the initial anonymous recruitment of seven classroom teachers and the informed consent process. Phase Two spanned just over 2 weeks and included conducting interviews, document collection, and analysis. Finally, Phase Three consisted of participant validation and member-checking processes to support the findings. Each participant was asked to review a document to check interpretations of data as prepared by the researcher. During this phase, participants were contacted via email; some received the email and acknowledged it, others did not reply to the email, and no participant indicated the interpretations needed adjustments.

Recruitment and Consent

This study's recruitment and consent process began at the outset of Phase I through an organized and transparent approach. An administrative assistant emailed an initial email communication, recruitment flyer, and informed consent to all potential participants meeting the inclusion criteria. Since the researcher is also the district superintendent, this was done to support the mitigation of any coercion or potential bias. In this email, participants received comprehensive recruitment materials and the approved informed consent document. The informed consent forms (Appendix C) were enclosed. It was communicated in the email that participation was entirely voluntary but that if participants wished to participate, they would need to sign and return the informed consent form to the administrative assistant, along with their availability, so that interviews could be scheduled. To ensure clarity, detailed information about the study, its associated risks and benefits, and the voluntary nature of participation were presented in an easily understandable format using materials approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Nova Southeastern University. Despite clear instructions, some participants did reveal their desire to participate to the researcher; however, the administrative assistant kept the process anonymous by not revealing the other interested participants and the total number of individuals who wished to participate.

Once interviews were scheduled, the in-person interviews were conducted and recorded for transcription and coding purposes, utilizing Zoom audio. All recorded files were securely stored on a password-protected Google Drive, accessible exclusively to the researcher. Throughout the study, the emphasis on informed consent was clear, ensuring that participants fully comprehended their rights as participants and staff members at the site. During the lead-up to the interview, it was consistently communicated that their involvement would not impact their roles or relationships within the district. The researcher prioritized continual reminders of the voluntary nature of participation and reminded each of the option to withdraw without repercussions, which was reiterated throughout the study. This was done during the interviews, aligning with ethical guidelines of qualitative research and safeguarding participant autonomy.

Data Collection

Both interviews and document collection took place over 3 weeks during Phase Two. A total of seven interviews were conducted, averaging 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and held in the office of the Secondary Guidance Counselor, which provided a non-art administrative space. The Guidance Counselor was not eligible to participate in this study, as this individual does not participate in an instructional PLC. This office provided a psychologically safe space for the interviews. Interviews were audio-recorded, and transcripts were stored on a password-protected Google Drive. Document collection included selecting PLC agendas and minutes from the current school year’s PLC Document Google Drive; the researcher made copies of these documents for coding purposes and stored them in a password-protected Google Drive.

Member Checking

Member checking is a transparent process that enhances validity and credibility, supports rapport and relationships with participants, and reflects the researcher's collaborative approach and willingness to seek clarification, elaboration, new insights, and perspectives after the interview process (Birt et al., 2016). Member checking is pivotal in safeguarding data accuracy, analysis, and concluding an ethical study. This process was systematically conducted with all involved participants after data collection. The significance of this member-checking process is ensuring that the viewpoints and experiences contributed by the participants and utilized in this research faithfully mirror their lived realities. It serves as an avenue for ensuring the accuracy of data and the faithful representation of participants' experiences within the research context (Birt et al., 2016; LaCroix, 2023).

Since member checking encompasses participants offering feedback on the precision of the researcher's interpretation of their statements, in the final phase, participants received an email containing the interview transcript with mark-ups, including codes and themes that were synthesized using best practices in qualitative research. This process aimed not only to validate the accuracy of the transcribed data but also to support the fidelity of the coding methodology utilized in the study. Participants were provided and then reminded of a 5-day window to provide feedback and corrections, emphasizing the importance of their input in refining the interpretation of collected information. Each participant was asked to review the document and provide clarifications of accuracy if necessary. This collaborative member-checking process underscored the commitment to transparency and accuracy in the research findings.

Data Analysis

In qualitative studies, data analysis is inductive and coincides with a constant comparative method (Creswell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Patton, 2015). Interview data was transcribed using the Zoom tool and converted to Word so the researcher could use the coding process. PLC meeting documents were analyzed for comparable themes and to identify themes not previously identified in interviews (Stake, 1995). The researcher deployed these data analysis techniques grounded in best practices in qualitative research and practiced by the researcher as part of doctoral coursework. The researcher did the coding by hand, using Google pass-word protected documents and the tools available to the researcher to indicate codes and create an audit trail, and no software was used.

Organization of Interview Transcripts and Documents

This research involved thoroughly storing and handling collected data to ensure confidentiality and transparency. All interview sessions were recorded using audio and transcribed using the Zoom platform's transcription feature. No video was recorded or used. These transcriptions are securely stored in a password-protected Google Drive and are accessible solely by the researcher, ensuring confidentiality for all participants. Although PLC documents approved for use in the study through the IRB process are available and accessible for all district staff, document analysis protocol forms (Appendix B) developed for this study will be stored in the same password-protected Google Drive as the interview transcripts, enhancing the security of all sensitive research materials.

Saldaña's model (2013) offers a comprehensive framework for data analysis in the context of a case study qualitative approach. This model emphasizes a systematic coding and thematic exploration process for detecting insights from various stakeholders and sources. This research study and analysis process adhered to Saldaña's model using an inductive approach, where the data undergoes open coding, allowing emergent themes and patterns to surface. From there, initial codes were subjected to axial coding, establishing relationships and connections between identified themes. The iterative nature of Saldaña's model allowed for comparison across multiple data sources and ensured a robust understanding of the case (Lester et al., 2020; Olson et al., 2016; Saldana, 2013). Each data source contributed uniquely to the overall narrative of Chapters 4 and 5, and applying Saldaña's model allowed for the extraction of themes and patterns from each source. The transcripts and documents were coded using an analytical, inductive approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Miles et al., 2014; Saldaña, 2013; Saldaña, & Omasta, 2018).

An audit trail in qualitative case studies provides transparency and evidence of rigor and contributes to the overall trustworthiness of data collection, analysis, and the research process. By establishing an audit trail, a researcher can document their actions, decision-making, and reflections throughout the research process. This documentation further provides insight for reviewers, bolstering the validity and credibility of the study. The importance of maintaining an audit trail is highlighted by Saldaña (2013), who underscores its role in demonstrating the systematic nature of qualitatively designed research. Later, Saldaña and Omasta (2018) stressed the need for a detailed audit trail, which is detailed and includes methodological decisions and traces the evolution of data analysis and interpretation. An audit trail provides transparency as well as a roadmap of the researcher's reflexive insights, aiding in validating the findings, study credibility, and interpretations resulting from the research (Giordanengo et al., 2019; Nowell et al., 2017; Patton, 2015; Saldaña, 2013; Saldaña & Omasta, 2018). For this research, an audit trail was essential and done meticulously as part of the researcher's role in the school district. It was essential to ensure a transparent coding and data analysis process.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

Maintaining ethical standards was a primary concern. Given the qualitative nature of this study, which delved into the participants' experiences, there was a small potential for private details to be exposed. Ethical considerations were critical at every phase of the research process, from its conceptualization and inception to data collection, analysis, reporting, and publication. This comprehensive approach ensured that ethical principles were diligently upheld at each stage of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Throughout the interviews and analysis of documents, the researcher anticipated the needs and common pitfalls of qualitative case study research so that these could be avoided and that no information obtained violated the ethical guidelines set for this study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019).

The ethical dimensions of this study encompassed several critical aspects of maintaining rigorous ethical standards. Firstly, voluntary participation and the assurance of participants' ability to withdraw without facing penalties. Participants were informed of their voluntary involvement and empowered to withdraw from the study if they wished to do so, as there would be no repercussions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Rigorous measures were implemented to preserve the anonymity and security of collected data. Data was safeguarded through security measures, ensuring confidentiality and preventing unauthorized access or use. The name of the research site and the participants are protected and will remain anonymous. A pseudonym was assigned to each participant for identity protection. Each participant was randomly assigned to a common name for individuals between 25 and 55 years of age, according to the Social Security Administration (Allen & Wiles, 2015; Heaton, 2021; *Top names over the last 100 years*, 2022). The researcher used the most famous names in the nation, avoiding “Participant 1” or “Participant A” to emphasize the real-world implications and relevance. These proactive steps aimed to maintain the confidentiality and integrity of the data but also sought to engage the reader while upholding the ethical standards governing research.

Institutional Review Board

The researcher sought all appropriate permissions, and approval was obtained from Nova Southeastern University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the local school district's School Board President. The NSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) adheres to the 2018 updates of the federal regulations, referred to as the "Common Rule," which oversees IRBs in the United States. The official document outlining the Common Rule, formally known as 45 CFR 46, can be found on the United States Department of Health and Human Services website (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Before the start of data collection, each participant signed a consent form that intentionally outlined the purpose of the research, expectations of the participants, protections, and confidentiality statements and provided a clear outline of how participants are free to withdraw participation at any time, without consequence.

Voluntary Participation

This study upheld the value of voluntary participation, and through the procedures, the researcher took many extra measures to ensure this. Individuals engaged in the research willingly and openly. As seen throughout Chapter 4, participants provided a level of transparency and honesty in responses that demonstrated authentic interview discussions. Participants were informed and reminded of their ability to withdraw from the study without repercussions at several points. As part of informed consent, comprehensive details outlining the study's objectives, procedures, and potential risks were articulated from the start. However, reminders of voluntary participation went beyond the informed consent process (Baker et al., 2016). Reminders were embedded into all conversations with participants and during the interview process. The research demonstrated respect for participants' autonomy, ensuring they always knew their participation was and remained entirely voluntary and that they could discontinue involvement at any stage (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Security and Anonymity

Ethical issues arise when data is managed inappropriately; therefore, researchers must always be cautious and intentional when storing this information (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Intentional steps were taken to ensure that participation remained anonymous and that data was secure. Careful measures were used to safeguard the anonymity and security of the data collected. All electronic files containing sensitive information are password-protected to restrict unauthorized access. Access to the data will be limited to the researcher, and no physical documents will be kept to prevent unauthorized handling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015).

Power Differential and Reflexivity

Recognizing the power differentials between the researcher and participants is crucial in qualitative research. To address this, the researcher adopted reflexive practices, engaging in continuous self-awareness and written reflection to mitigate the influence of inherent power imbalances (Maxwell, 2013). This approach allowed for ethical engagement with participants, ensuring their voices were heard and valued. Power differentials refer to the varying levels of influence, control, and authority of individuals and groups charged with or involved in research. In qualitative research, power differential plays a significant role in understanding the dynamics between researchers and participants, and this position allows the researcher to interact with the exchange of information between the researcher(s) and the participants. As Braun and Clarke (2013) highlighted, imbalances in power may lead to situations where participants feel pressure to participate or provide responses due to perceived authority or societal hierarchies, which could compromise the voluntary nature of their involvement. According to Maxwell (2013), power imbalance could shape the interactions during data collection, potentially impacting the willingness of participants to divulge their true perspectives, and this could result in voices being prioritized or marginalized within the findings, distorting representation of viewpoints and journaling by the researcher, connecting with each participant, and reminding them that the researcher was there only as that aided in this aspect.

Sometimes, researchers hold perceived, actual, or inherent power due to their positions, which can influence the dynamics of the research process; some of this can and should be mitigated (Bourdeau, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Darwin Holmes, 2020). Mitigating power differentials in research involves ethical considerations and practices to ensure equitable participation and minimize disparities. Ensuring a safe and respectful environment for participants is crucial (Brannen, 2017). The office of the Guidance Counselor proved to be a great physical space for these interviews. Regarding the research goals, procedures, and potential impacts, transparent goals are fundamental in empowering participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013& cl). Encouraging open communication and active listening allows participants to express their perspectives freely (Mertens, 2014). Obtaining informed consent and the option to withdraw at any research stage fosters a sense of agency, which the researcher reminded participants of at each stage, sometimes multiple times. The researcher's reflexivity and acknowledgment of their position, biases, and thoughts also mitigate power differentials, enabling a more balanced and ethical research process (Flick, 2018). Collectively, these strategies worked well at minimizing power imbalances and promoting an environment for authentic research for this case study.

Reflexivity, an awareness of the researcher's influence on research practices and outcomes, acknowledges the dynamic interaction between the researcher's role and the research subject, illuminating how these aspects impact the research process (Haynes, 2012). While simultaneously serving as the district's superintendent, the researcher recognized the personal nature of the topic, acknowledging the inherent advantages and challenges stemming from this direct association with the research. Maintaining a continuous focus on the significance of her positionality, the researcher consistently prioritized engaging in reflexivity throughout the study. This deliberate practice supported a nuanced understanding of the researcher's impact on shaping the study and its findings.

To mitigate bias and maintain reflexivity, the researcher extensively used journaling as a self-reflection tool throughout the design, data collection, analysis, and write-up phases. This practice also allowed the researcher to contemplate interview responses, observations, document analysis, and personal thoughts and emotions during the process. Consistent reflection about researcher motivations, underlying assumptions, and personal connections to the research supported an understanding of how these factors could influence research decisions and outcomes (Haynes, 2012; Nowell et al., 2017).

Ensuring the trustworthiness of this study was crucial for the researcher due to academic, professional, and personal considerations. Meticulous efforts were deployed to uphold accuracy and fidelity in the study methods and the findings. The member-checking process was central to these efforts and ensured that participants were engaged in reviewing, scrutinizing, and validating the collected data (Birt et al., 2016; LaCroix, 2023).

Potential Research Bias

As a district superintendent overseeing multiple schools within the educational system, the researcher's role encompasses a broader scope of responsibilities that influence the learning environment of around 600 students. The researcher guides school principals and staff, ensuring adherence to the district's strategic plan, the community's vision, and state standards while fostering a culture of continuous improvement across all departments to improve and enhance learning. This involves overseeing school and classroom activities, guiding instructional methods, leading inclusive curriculum design and educational practices, and integrating technologies to enhance staff and students' teaching and learning experiences. Moreover, the researcher plays a pivotal role in developing the vision for and facilitating professional development opportunities and ensuring an environment conducive to rapid academic progress. Overseeing the day-to-day operations of multiple schools within the district is central to those responsibilities. Identifying areas for improvement and implementing strategic initiatives to address gaps are integral parts of what the researcher does to ensure the educational system's overall efficacy, efficiency, and growth.

Researcher Experiences With PLCs

As the researcher delved into the current study of PLCs as a vehicle for enhancing student outcomes, it is critical to acknowledge and address personal biases shaped by extensive experience within PLC school and district environments. The researcher was deeply involved in PLC practices, witnessing their varied implementations and impact on student achievement in relatively small urban districts (2,000 students) and vast districts (200,000 students) comprising students from many backgrounds. These experiences have fostered a strong belief in the efficacy of PLCs as a catalyst for academic improvement. Awareness of these experiences and constant reflection are key.

Management of Potential Research Bias: Memoing, Bracketing, and Journaling

All researchers bring their assumptions, experiences, and biases as they approach the research they are engaging in, and the essential piece is that the researcher is aware of this (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). To balance the potential impact of these biases, the researcher used bracketing and journaling strategies throughout the research. Managing bias through techniques like bracketing ensured the researcher could set aside biases or preconceived beliefs. At the same time, journaling provided the opportunity to write down reflections and potential biases during the research process. Together, these supported the researcher in avoiding personal beliefs and assumptions regarding PLCs. Acknowledging and using methods to manage this allowed for a more impartial analysis of the gathered data and improved the rigor and validity of the study (Caelli et al., 2003; Morse et al., 2002; Ortlipp, 2015). Deliberately considering beliefs and assumptions through a reflective journal, the researcher intentionally recognized the significance of her values and experiences. The researcher used these tools through a journaling process to constantly work toward unbiased research.

Limitations

Limitations represent potential liabilities within a research study; typically, these factors fall outside of the researchers' sphere of influence. Constraints arise when aspects of the survey remain beyond the researcher's control, potentially leading to adverse effects (Gay et al., 2015). An identified limitation in this research design pertained to the researcher's position as the primary district leader within the school district. While a limitation, this was addressed through a variety of interventions. One method was through extensive journaling, a widely accepted reflexive approach in qualitative research, where the researcher writes about his or her own potential bias, experiences, choices, and actions in the research (Cruz, 2015; Ortlipp, 2015). A written journal was kept and used throughout each phase, including during Chapter 3 construction. Additionally, as a case study, the findings described are specific to the immediate case and can sometimes lack comprehensive transferability to broader populations. Case studies primarily aim to comprehend a single case rather than establish general truths applicable across diverse populations, limiting their transferability. The researcher in a case study can contribute to future studies for other researchers to take on, aiming for transferability by furnishing descriptive data to assess potential applicability (Merriam, 2014).

Summary

This qualitative case study examined stakeholder involvement within PLCs and its influence on implementation and outcomes in a small, rural school district. Exploring educator perspectives, it sought to provide insight into how stakeholder engagement influences the authenticity of PLCs. In consideration of the specific setting, it aimed to bridge gaps in understanding how resource limitations, unique circumstances, and team makeup in small and rural districts may also shape PLCs. The study was structured and executed to ensure ethical compliance; it considered the investigator's role at the research site and provided a replicable framework for future researchers. There was an emphasis on voluntary participation and withdrawal options for participating. Data collection included in-person interviews and gathering PLC documents, including agendas and minutes. Questions for in-person interviews and the document analysis instrument were inspired by a review of the literature on PLCs, including constructs of Senge's Learning Organization Theory. The member-checking phase supported transparency and credibility by involving participants in data review and feedback, and this further aligned with a collaborative research approach. The research prioritized ethical practices and participant confidentiality, recognized power imbalances and power differentials, and the researcher used methods to manage those dynamics. Recognized research methods such as bracketing and journaling strengthened the research while allowing the researcher to acknowledge potential biases and limitations openly and honestly.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter summarizes the findings of the qualitative research case study investigating perceptions of stakeholder involvement within PLCs. It explores how such involvement, PLC composition, and participation shape perceptions of professional learning communities in a small and rural district.

Introduction

When some participants, especially administrators and paraprofessionals, engage actively in PLCs, a concern arises about the authenticity of the collaboration occurring. Stagnant or guarded collaboration can diminish the impact of PLC endeavors and influence perceptions regarding their implementation and effectiveness. Consequently, this participation by specific stakeholders may restrict PLC's impact on teaching, learning, and student outcomes. The case-study design was utilized to examine the authenticity of PLCs and any hindrances that occur because of stakeholder participation.

To accomplish this, the researcher collected data by conducting individual interviews with classroom teachers and all PLC participants who met inclusion and exclusion criteria. The researcher also analyzed key documents generated from PLC meetings to achieve triangulation. To summarize the findings, the qualitative data was analyzed for codes, categories, and patterns that shaped the themes. The findings are structured to highlight the significant themes discovered in the data, aligning with the three research questions.

Data Collection, Analysis, and Member Checking

This case study included in-depth, semi-structured interviews with seven participants, all classroom teachers within PLCs. Since this was a small study, data was coded and analyzed by hand. Each interview was transcribed into a computer file for analysis from the Zoom transcript and checked by the researcher for any gaps. The researcher's primary focus during this process was to identify the recurring categories, patterns, and themes through open and axial coding. The interviews and documents support the development of codes, categories, and themes discussed in this chapter. In addition to journaling and notetaking during the live interview, the researcher listened to the audio recording of each interview alongside the transcript at least twice to complete multiple layers of coding, including axial coding, journaling, and memoing, which resulted in the development of an audit trail. As the initial codes were developed and refined, the researcher utilized the approved document analysis protocol to examine and code PLC documents to ensure the codes, categories, and themes aligned with other sources of evidence. The average length of the interviews was 51.32 minutes, providing rich content for the researcher to share findings.

Table 1

Participant Interview Lengths

Participant	Length of Interview (Minutes: Seconds)
Mia	42:53
Judith	36:50
Ava	55:03
Alex	48:16
Jenna	45:58
Kelly	50:07
Kathy	40:09

To support research credibility, the use of PLC documents that included minutes and agendas was leveraged during the coding process. This allowed the researcher to ensure the study's validity and corroborate evidence as interviews were poured over and revisited to create meaning. The researcher crosschecked the documents with themes to ensure that viewpoints were represented. A member-checking process was also necessary during this phase and after identifying themes. This process permitted each participant to examine interview findings, significant patterns, and emerging themes and review their participant profile for accuracy. Each member check was done through email to ensure confidentiality and privacy and to create additional evidence and document trails. All participants found the findings accurate, and no changes were required. The participants agreed that their perceptions were represented accurately and completely.

PLC Participant Profiles

This case study explored the experiences and perspectives of seven participants in a PLC, all K–12 classroom teachers from a small and rural school district. Through in-depth interviews, each participant could share their experiences relating to stakeholder involvement in PLCs. Background information on each participant will set the context for the analysis, discussion, and findings. The following portraits provide an overview of each participant and their unique perspectives related to years of experience, approaches to lifelong learning, previous participation in PLCs, relevant training in PLCs, leadership, and extracurricular roles. Such information provides a context for how their background shaped and supported the themes. Pseudonyms, aliases, and data are used to preserve anonymity.

Jenna Brown

Jenna has 4 years of experience in the education field, all within a small rural district. She has taught at multiple grade levels, has a BA, and is working on her MA. Besides district-level training, this participant received college-level course instruction in PLCs. The PLC makeup of this participant includes special education personnel and educators specializing in high school and middle school science. Although new to teaching, the participant brings previous experience with PLCs from their first year, where they engaged in regional PLCs outside the district.

Mia Miller

Mia has a teaching career spanning over 26 years, primarily in small rural school districts. Although she has briefly taught in larger organizations in more urban settings, Mia's professional journey has predominantly been shaped by her experience in small and rural communities but does include limited experiences in charter and urban settings; one district did engage in a collaboration that resembled PLC structures. Mia’s PLC looks like many within small and rural school districts, and she routinely collaborates with a group that includes paraprofessionals with direct student involvement and educators responsible for support classes. Mia has served in various leadership roles, serving as a mentor, student teacher supervisor, instructional leader, class advisor, and education student supervisor, and is responsible for school improvement efforts as part of the school instructional leadership team. In addition to school district training, Mia has received formal training in the work of PLCs.

Kathy Anderson

Kathy has dedicated 2 years to classroom teaching in a small and rural school district, with added substitute experiences that were also in small, rural school districts. Kathy is an elementary teacher pursuing further education. The participant is involved in two PLCs, one with a teaching partner that has been disrupted due to staffing issues and another that operates vertically. This primary PLC includes collaboration with a paraprofessional who works across all school levels and another who provides one-on-one support and grade-level teachers spanning multiple grade levels. Kathy’s previous experience with PLCs includes formal training received through a summer Solution Tree conference. Solution Tree is a known professional development provider for those seeking to learn about PLC implementation.

Kelly Johnson

This participant has 18 years of teaching experience, primarily in elementary education, but with some experience in elective content areas. Kelly’s teaching experience extends beyond small, rural settings, including time in urban charter schools with larger student populations. She holds multiple master's degrees, all education-focused. While she has participated in grade-level meetings led by stakeholders other than teachers, Kelly does not have formal training in PLC implementation. In her current PLC, the team has one paraprofessional and an administrator who has served in dual roles as a principal and upper elementary teacher.

Alex Smith

Mr. Smith has 19 years of teaching experience in the same small and rural district, with some prior student teaching experience in more populous school districts. His teaching experience spans both elementary and secondary content areas, and Alex holds a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Teaching. He has held various roles outside their classroom responsibilities, including leadership positions. He states he has previously worked in a PLC with a different structure. While Alex does not have formal training in PLCs, he does have experience with other teacher collaboration frameworks and accompanying professional development. His current PLC is made up of four social studies teachers, teaching a variety of contents, and one paraprofessional. He shared that administrative team members have visited his PLC this year.

Judith Wilson

Judith brings 2 years of teaching experience as a secondary teacher in a small, rural community, with prior professional experience as a manager in non-profit organizations. She holds a bachelor's degree outside of education and is currently focused on obtaining a Master's in Educational Leadership. Judith works beyond the school day and has several posts in extracurricular activities. Her current PLC has teachers from the same content area but also in supporting roles. She received formal training in PLC implementation at a Solution Tree conference attended last summer.

Ava Davis

Ava has accumulated 14 years of teaching experience, primarily in elementary education, with most of their career spent in a small, rural district. However, she also has experience in suburban districts in a nearby county. In her previous district, she participated in collaborative structures similar to PLCs, focusing on grade-level teacher collaboration. Before teaching, Ava served in various roles, such as paraprofessional, school support staff, and substitute teacher. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Education and is currently pursuing a Master's degree with a focus on literacy. She is a lead mentor for new teachers in the small and rural district where she teaches. Ava attended a PLC Solution Tree training just recently that examined PLCs through the student lens, in addition to district PLC training this school year.

Themes

After completing the open coding process and axial coding, codes were categorized into categories, forming three primary themes: Professional Growth with Diverse Stakeholder Involvement, Administrative Balance: Accountability and Autonomy, and Paraprofessional Perspectives: Micro vs. Macro. An analysis of data from transcribed interviews and PLC documents, including agendas and minutes, produced these themes. The themes are identified here and later described, linking to each participant's experiences and perceptions.

Common themes emerged from the participants' experiences, and although some experiences were unique to each participant, commonalities emerged that have informed the themes discussed in this chapter. Each interview was coded first, first through the lens of the research questions and a second time for descriptive, emotional codes but also direct quotes. From these codes, memoing, bracketing, and journaling formed an audit trial that led to categories. The categories were refined from a third set of interview coding to form three themes. Each section of discussion in this chapter includes direct quotes from the participants to exemplify and support the identified themes. The table below represents the themes, categories, and codes that emerged from the interviews and documents.

Theme 1: Professional Growth with Diverse Stakeholder Involvement

Table 2

Themes, Categories, and Codes

Themes	Categories	Codes
Theme 1: Professional Growth with Diverse Stakeholder Involvement	PD for paraprofessionals PL for new teachers Unequal participation	Para PD Inexperience in field New Teacher PL Quiet Paras
Theme 2: Administrative Balance: Accountability & Autonomy	Assistance, alignment, and access Power of pop-in Authenticity Mixed mindsets 1:1 limited view Relationships	Access Assistance Productive/Efficient Alignment Pop-In Mindset Autonomy Authenticity
Theme 3: Paraprofessional Perspectives: Macro and Micro	Elevating student experiences and perspectives	Student Voice Building view 1:1 v building

The first research question explored classroom teachers' perceptions regarding stakeholder participation in small and rural school district PLCs. The participants shared a variety of stakeholders that comprised their PLCs, offering a wide range of experiences regarding PLC composition for this case study. Each stakeholder group brings unique perspectives, expertise, and priorities, enriching the collaboration process. PLC environments could be predominantly teacher-driven; others may have more balanced representation from other stakeholders.

Table 3

PLC Composition

Participant	Paraprofessionals	New Teachers	Administrators
Mia		X	X
Judith		X	X
Ava	X	X	X
Alex	X	X	X
Jenna	X	X	X
Kelly	X	X	X
Kathy	X	X	X

When participant interviews and PLC documents were reviewed, the theme "Professional Growth with Diverse Stakeholder Involvement" emerged to represent central pieces of the data collected, as participants emphasized that they perceived having a variety of stakeholders in PLCs to be a vehicle for supporting the of both new teachers and paraprofessionals. Through the interviews, it was shared that as participants, these two groups of educators can significantly benefit from participating in PLCs due to the learning opportunities provided.

Mia attributed paraprofessional participation in PLCs to learning that they would not usually have access to the field of education:

> We have to scaffold it, right? They [paraprofessionals] are not coming in with the educational experience or the educational licensing that teachers have. They are at

> a different level. We have to be able to give them something, but their information is valued as well. I think [learning] has been fostered in PLCs because they are in the field with teachers. Without the PLC structure, it would have just been lunchtime water cooler talk…it wouldn't have had the same structure for learning.

This participant also suggests that PLC participation of paraprofessionals on a team with teachers contributes to their understanding of the art of teaching in classrooms:

I think PLCs might delve into the ‘why' more than what they do on a regular basis.

> On a regular basis, they assist the students, but sometimes, they really don't know why we're doing some of that. So, when they can be in with the teachers [during PLC], and the teachers are having those discussions, they can hear about the 'why'... then it pops out in the peripherals in the classroom. They are like, 'Oh! Yes.' It helps them see through a teacher lens, not just a student lens.

Judith agreed that the PLC structure allows paraprofessionals as participants to engage in learning not available through other avenues in the school:

> I think for paraprofessionals who are newer and are trying to learn, like what the standards are, then yes, I think that it is helpful for them to learn where the teachers are coming from and what we are trying to do with the students.

Jenna and Judith shared that, as new teachers, engaging in PLCs with a diverse composition of stakeholders, such as PLCs with paraprofessionals and principals' frequent involvement, contributed to their professional development as new educators. Judith said this:

“It has helped. This helped take some of the pressure off, especially collaborating with teachers in [another subject area], which helped take some of the pressure off of being one of the only core teachers."

And Jenna reflected:

> I think that PLC benefits us a lot, because otherwise, I would be literally completely alone as a first-year teacher trying to figure things out. So, it just gives you more with more people there, without even needing a mentor program or whatever. It gives you mentorship towards things that I might not have even thought about until someone said, 'Oh, this is what I do in my room.' I get good ideas from other teachers that I don't think we would have had the discussions on if we didn't have that opportunity to meet. This year, being able to understand a lot more of the standards and how to implement them in the classroom has been a part of the PLC work. So, I feel like I'm not alone in what I'm doing. These experiences allow me to know that I can go to either the middle school or high school because I hear about all of it, so I am able to assist with those things.

Ava highlighted the importance of PLCs having a variety of stakeholders for all to benefit:

> Our [upper elementary] teacher, new to the district, was very quiet at our PLCs at the beginning of the year, but we have pulled in some of the great resources that she's used at other schools, and now I feel like she has a voice and she's not, I feel like she has a voice.

Mia agreed with many interviewees on the importance of having newer teachers in PLCs:

> Nobody ever wants to do it alone… because there is safety in a team… and there's "team" in a team; there is somebody that they can go back to. And, if it's not their strong suit, that's okay. That's where their growth potential and vulnerability are.

And Kelly shared this, having a unique perspective from previous experiences in a prior district, "The first school that I was at out there, we had a lot of new teachers… when I got there, I was one of 4 new third-grade teachers. In that case, it would have helped to have a PLC."

Participants also shared inequities in the PLC meetings regarding paraprofessionals' and new teachers' contributions, and they were commonly less participatory. Recognition of these differences commonly came out during the interviews, and this data was triangulated in several PLC documents that were analyzed as part of this study. Alex explained that with participants from different backgrounds and in various roles, it is important to create a culture of psychological safety to address this issue:

> The big thing is making sure the paraprofessionals realize their voice matters. And just because they're not a teacher, we still want their input, and thoughts and ideas. And sometimes that's hard. Because a lot of times, in those situations, those people are less likely to just throw something out there. This could be personality driven or… it could be culturally driven. Maybe it is "oh these people went in and did the college thing, and had, you know, certifications and things like that. And I don't."

He went on to say that creating a sense of psychological safety is important for PLCs with new teachers as well:

> It's... I just think that it's almost the same as with new teachers. A lot of times, if you are one of the veteran teachers, again, have an open mind on newer teachers' ideas as well. Without being like, 'Yeah, we've done that for ten years. It doesn't work. That's dumb. Let's move on.' You've got to be willing to, even if you do think, 'Oh man, I've done this, maybe they do it differently and it is going to work.'

Similarly, Mia added this about how paraprofessionals are treated in PLCs and provided a rationale or insight as to why they may hold back on contributing as participants:

> I don't think they are? treated any differently. They're waiting for guidance to know what to do. Because some of them are just starting an educational journey. And they're afraid of saying the wrong thing or doing the wrong thing or it not making sense and putting themselves out there; so they just observe unless they're invited [to participate].

Alex emphasized the importance of ensuring they are included and that other participants seek relationship-building:

> I think it's an added benefit to have [paraprofessionals] there because… you're talking and having discussions that are going to affect what they're doing in the classroom as well. It’s gonna take a little more work on your PLC team to make sure those people feel comfortable. Not always. Sometimes you are gonna get some strong-willed individuals, who are gonna be like, “well, this is what I think.” And that's great. That's fine. But, it is a different dynamic that leads to them being part of the team. And you have to make sure you build relationships.

> Like asking them, “like, what do you think… what have you seen with the kids that you're working with or in the classrooms?” Actually genuinely wanting and giving them the opportunity to give their opinion makes a difference. Because they do, they're gonna see things differently than what you do.

Jenna, who had previously served as a paraprofessional, had similar experiences and explained this, based on her experience as both a paraprofessional and classroom teacher in PLCs:

> As a paraprofessional, I would, like, sit back and listen, just to hear how the dynamics would go, like how the conversation would be structured. And I mean, I would take away things from it, but I don't think I would put my two cents in immediately.

Judith suggested that unequal participation among paraprofessionals may not solely stem from differences in background and experience:

> I think the way that we share is not necessarily different. However, I don't think that the paraprofessionals feel like they're contributing the same amount.
> And they've said that to me. Because they only have such a small group of students.

Kelly pointed out that classroom teacher participants may have more information to share during PLC because of their lack of experience in education and that they are new to the field quite often:

> I know that we have a lot to share, and [the paraprofessional] does every once in a while, but at other times, is not engaged with the conversation. I'm not so sure that

> [the paraprofessional] is really adding a lot to it or taken away from anything. If you are teaching, you just have more of that educational knowledge versus others.

Judith added this take on discussions that happen within PLCs:

> Our paraprofessionals do not always have as much to contribute. Because they don't do all the same areas as us. Like sometimes, maybe, the paraprofessionals are a little bored when we're discussing things that don't necessarily directly impact them. They just sit there…sit there and look around. But I mean, they participate in the conversations that we need to have, but then they get left out a little bit, but they're beneficial at other points of time.

In terms of paraprofessionals participating alongside teachers, Kelly said it depends on their background and what they feel they can add to the PLC:

> I don't always think that some of them add value each time; some of the teachers always add value. I think sometimes, maybe not on purpose, feel like they are less than. I think they're more quiet, more reserved. Some are more assertive, and often adding their opinions to things and others are more quiet and reserved.

Judith offered an idea for why they may not contribute and predicted that they may have a preference for another PLC setting with homogenous participants:

"In our PLC with our special education, they don't feel like they can contribute as much. They have voiced that they would like to be able to get together occasionally to compare with each other cause they switch around so much."

Theme 2: Administrative Balance: Accountability & Autonomy

The second research question explored the participation of principals and administrators as they participated in PLC collaboration. The participants shared various perspectives, perceptions, and viewpoints as part of their experiences. Categories emerged that illustrated this theme and structured the dynamics between educators and administration with regard to PLC participation. Ava shared the following of her principal, which provides the essence and sets some context for this theme, “She is right in the trenches with us figuring things out, looking at the data.”

Administrators Provided Assistance and Support Alignment

Administration support with alignment emerged in all interviews and is evident in several PLC documents, supporting triangulation. During interviews, the word alignment was within the context of administrators offering guidance in PLC meetings to ensure that the PLC's goals and activities align with the school's and school district's overall educational objectives.

Ava shared that administrator participation was especially helpful in launching PLCs or alignment purposes. She recalled the initial stage or the first day of PLC meetings. She explained that she was unsure of some roles, expectations, and documentation requirements and that the principal's informal visit and explanation during a PLC meeting proved more beneficial than receiving instructions through email, providing clarity and guidance on how to proceed, but in the moment.

Kathy provided a similar example of an administrator supporting a grade-level PLC dividing up work instead of engaging in collaborative practices. This participant described an instance during a professional development session where PLCs worked together on assessments. An administrator provided guidance and suggestions to the team and suggested working collaboratively on formative assessment instead of dividing the work. The teacher said the administrator's input helped provide clarity and direction, guiding the team toward their goals.

Other participants illustrated using examples of how they viewed principal support as helpful in aligning efforts with expectations of PLC work and school vision. Here is a contribution from Mia to illustrate this category within the theme:

> I think role model presentation is one. Sometimes when our group gets stuck, because there are so many things for us to look at, [administrators] give us some guidance and direction. Just like in a classroom, as a teacher, administrators will usually reframe a question, or kind of spark our interest in another way, to make sure that we can go without guiding us, or to see what we are going to come up with. Which is something no different than what we as teachers would do with our students. Also, just like whenever you get a group together, there's always that potential that some are going to fly on their own, and some are going to need a little bit of guidance. We did have an administrator come in to remind us of some of our norms and kind of revisit that mission. Administrators have been there [in PLC] to ensure the growth potential can be maximized.

Ava illustrated the importance of guidance by administrators and principals as participants in PLCs; an example was from when the team was examining some student data:

> Having a principal there is helpful for sure when we're looking at data. And then we're kind of like, 'What's the next step?' She's like, 'Okay, now take this piece, and what would you do with it? Why don’t you gather this?' That just happened today because we were talking about what to plan for our next PLC. Do we want to continue with this particular topic, or are we ready to move on? The principal

> said, 'Do you feel like you had closure on this topic? Are you ready to bring it to the next one, or are you ready to move on?'

Jenna explained perceptions of administrative participation through the lens of productivity:

> Honestly, I feel like if there's an administrator there, we're more productive. We're more likely to be on track with our conversations. And it's when the principal is in there we are able to like discuss things that we're hoping for, or to be a part of. Definitely more productive. I mean, it's kinda like being with your friend, and then like the teacher comes around, you guys get back on track.

Kelly similarly suggested that the presence of the principal facilitates discussions and encourages active participation from the team, “The PLCs are more targeted. They're more focused. Because in my opinion it has to do with the accountability.”

Kathy added that the engagement levels of the PLC members are often improved when a principal or administrator is a participant:

> I think it improves engagement. It’s easy to fall off task, especially, because I think, we're a small district, we're all friends, so it's easy to get distracted and off topic, but obviously if your boss is there you don’t want to get distracted and off topic. Obviously if your boss is there you want to remain on task. So it just, that's how I think it affects ours.

Jenna also detailed this about the participation and the differences in the environment when a principal or administrator is participating:

> More often, I believe it was more focused and on track. And I think, when she left, it kind of... And we were able to still continue to do work, but I think it was

> more... I think there was definitely that difference when there's an admin in here. I mean, like, if we're off track or whatever, she brings us back on track verbally. And then, you know, we just kinda go through what it says for us to do.

Judith described the PLC as being more collaborative when a principal participated:

> It is more collaborative when the principal is in there. However, I don't feel like the meetings are necessarily effective as it relates to involving students."

> However, another participant reflected on participation and principal presence, "I feel like when admin comes in there are always teachers that, are maybe a little quieter, not as vocal as they are outside of [PLC].

Jenna hypothesized that the administrator's presence might pressure other participants to ensure all voices are heard and indicated that sometimes those voices are marginalized at different times in the absence of administration:

> When the administrators are present, or when they just pop-in and leave, I feel like if they stayed other participants wouldn't shut down what others have to say as quickly they would list actually almost be forced to listen to. Like that is a support by the admin because they would let's actually almost be forced to listen to others.

Support with obtaining resources emerged as a significant aspect of administrator participation in PLCs, as shared in interviews by more than half of the participants. Participants shared instances of feeling supported and assisted within PLCs when administrators were participants, citing the provision of specific resources that they believed would not have been accessible without PLC participation. Jenna gave this example:

> There was one time that we were talking and discussing about what resources we could use to help the students with informational text, and how to help with that in their diagnostics. The administrator shared resources and gave ideas for resources for us to be able to use immediately while they were collecting and looking into other resources. Knowing that there are resources, the administrator was willing to give us at that time… it almost like boosted our hope.

Alex shared similar experiences with resource support:

> The purchase of the periodicals came from our PLCs. We said, "Hey, across the board, these are some of the things that we could build into our classes, but maybe we don't have as many resources as we'd like, or even a common resource that we could use. All of us could use the same resource to have some common data. If I'm doing one thing, and somebody else is doing another, and we're both pulling data, that doesn’t align, having that discussion and then asking our building principal to say, 'Hey, this is what we were talking about,' and her coming down saying, 'Okay, what are you guys looking for?' and us finding it and her saying, 'Okay, shoot me the info, and I'll figure it out.'"

The Power Of The Pop-In

The power of pop-in visits as a means for other PLC participants to access administration to obtain feedback and guidance emerged as part of the theme, with most interviewees expressing their experiences and perspectives on widespread and informal interaction. Access to administrators emerged often in the interviews, and documents also demonstrated this. Alex reflected on how that access was supportive to teachers and the team:

> I think sometimes there are questions that we might bring up, specifically when there's an administrator present. Because we might not have the answer or we might not have the background of, 'Hey, why are we doing this? Here's our question.' And it's something that, sometimes, it's easier to pose that question than to send an email and have all five of us shoot a differently worded email asking the same question. So, it is nice to have that periodically where an administrator is in there so we can say, 'Hey, here's our next question' or 'We brainstormed this. Here's our thinking. Is that a possibility?'

Kathy shared this about administrative participation and the importance of a pop-in visit:

> I like having principals and administrators pop in and give feedback because it's good to get their point of view. I like to hear everyone's point of view and see what we're working towards. There has often been a topic that you're like, “I really wish that the teachers could just talk about this?” I really don't mind when [administrators] come into our PLCs.

Judith shared a similar reflection about the efficiency of having an administrator participate in PLC:

> If we have a question, instead of putting it on the agenda to be addressed later, when she's in there, we can just ask, and then that's either on the agenda to be addressed later when she's in there, we can just ask.

Mia connected PLC and the accessibility to administrators to “hot topics” within a building:

> Whenever there is a hot topic, there seems to be a difference of opinion among some. Whenever there's a difference of opinion from an outside source that is an extension of our PLC, that tends to get us off on a tangent, where then we can't get refocused. But then, if an administrator pops in, it's just like when a teacher steps out of the classroom; they get everybody back on track. Teachers in PLCs to me are like students, so when there's a level of accountability, and it’s not the gotcha… it's a "Can you come in and check on us to make sure that we're on the right track?"

Ava also felt pop-ins were fairly positive experiences for most participants, especially as they observed PLC work without interrupting the progress:

> When administrators pop in, they stop to see that things are going okay. But then there are also times when someone isn't comfortable when an administrator is there. We appreciate that the administrator doesn’t interrupt, and they are like, "Hey, I'm here to watch for a little bit," they just pop in. They watch for a second, a couple of minutes, and then they’re like, "Okay, I'm going to go to a different PLC and watch there.

Kelly said she viewed this participation as not a "pop-in" but a "check-in." and suggested that "pop-in" could potentially have a negative connotation, possibly implying an unexpected or intrusive visit. In contrast, a "check-in" is seen as a more intentional action to ensure everyone is comfortable and address any questions or concerns. The participant went on to say that an administrator's short and intermittent participation in

PLC also allowed that administrator to fulfill their responsibilities and monitor PLCs more effectively. The participant stated that the principal was typically able to ensure PLCs were focused without dominating conversations or interactions and had observed that the principal was present for an appropriate amount of time but also recognized the need to step back and exit to allow others space to engage freely.

Authenticity

One primary concern regarding stakeholder participation is that of authenticity in PLCs. Issues related to authenticity may impede open communication and genuine collaboration. From the interviews, this construct seems to stem from various factors such as hierarchical structures within school districts, fear of potential judgment or evaluation by administrators, or even a lack of trust among colleagues. Lack of authenticity may result in less meaningful dialogue and prevent the exchange of best practices. Jenna shared "side effects" of pop-in visits that could impact authenticity:

> Teachers could be, almost judged on how they act in the PLC…sometimes you can let loose and talk to your colleagues. But I feel like if an administrator is there, then it wouldn't be a lot of relationships built, it would be data and professional talking. When would that relationship be built?"

Alex shared this perspective on the authenticity of PLCs when a principal is present:

> For a PLC to truly work, it has to be consistent regardless of who's present. The conversations and questions should remain the same every time. There shouldn't be any adjustment because of someone's arrival. It's not about putting on a show just because we know someone important is joining. We should focus on

> discussing the topics we've always discussed. In my opinion, that's when a PLC is at its best.

Kathy said this of authenticity in PLC conversations when a principal is present, “Sometimes, some people don't want to share due to what they think the administrator might think.” And one participant. who is a new teacher, shared concerns that discussions may not be as authentic:

> Administrators should just be able just to go in, and visit, and be a part of those conversations, but not be there the entire time. Because it almost feels like they could be micromanaging or babysitting that group. I think just popping in and out, to let them know that they are there to help them... Like not there to sit there, and babysit your job. I think that if an administrator joins the PLC all of the time, [members of the PLC] would feel like they're always being watched, and so they wouldn't be able to have that actual conversations that are needed or the relationship-building piece.

Mia also had a similar sentiment on PLC authenticity and administrative participation, “Sometimes I think yes, [it is authentic], sometimes I think others are guarded.” Similarly, Ava connected the authenticity concept with data or performance metrics that could impact their evaluation:

> Teachers may feel forced to answer [questions] when they might not otherwise do so. They might be caught off guard if a principal asks them a direct question about their data, and teachers might think that this is tied to their evaluation. The collaboration, any part of that PLC, could result in discussions about data. So, if they talk about data and say, 90% of my students failed this test, teachers

> probably don't want the principal to hear that. And they might not share or divulge that information, but it would be healthy for us to know why and talk about it. And it extends; say we wanted to do a reteach, or maybe with some different material, but that might not happen. I don’t think some teachers may be forthright if the information reflects poorly on them as a teacher.

Kathy said that discussions may be more authentic when school principals are not present, suggesting that without the principals' presence, there is more freedom to have genuine conversations and address issues openly. The participant also noted that sometimes discussions can become disconnected in the absence of administrative figures who typically help maintain focus.

Several participants discussed the concept of “pop-in” visits. Some participants explained the importance of administrative participation in PLCs but suggested periodic participation should help to avoid hindering open discussion. In the interview with Alex, he stressed the need for administrators to allow teams to establish rapport and comfort before fully engaging or when teachers may teach unfamiliar subjects, contents, or grade levels for the first time.

Administrative Participation: Accountability and Mixed Mindsets

During the interviews, there were varied perspectives regarding administrator and principal participation. While some described it as beneficial, sharing specific appreciation about the insights and support they bring, others shared their reservations or that of other PLC members and systemic uncertainty regarding administrative presence. The findings demonstrate diverse attitudes surrounding administrative involvement in PLCs. Within this theme, it became evident that there were varied attitudes regarding the involvement of principals and administrators in PLCs. Participants often intertwined the concept of relationships, but accountability was quite frequently discussed in this context. Ava said this about the intersection of administrative participation in PLCs and accountability:

> I come in from a different lens because I am the leader of this particular PLC. So when [administrators] come in, I'm thinking in the back of my head, “am I doing what I'm supposed to be doing as and am I keeping everyone on track?” So, I feel an accountability piece being held when they're in the room. But I don't feel threatened by that. I feel supported. I think it's beneficial to have the best of both worlds, a great balance between the presence of the principal being right there at the table with us, for a quality amount of time. But their absence is beneficial as well because we can be candid.

Alex conveyed that if administrative control is too restrictive, teachers and PLC team members may feel disempowered and undervalued:

> If it is administratively driven, and administration is driving it to the point where they are like, “Hey, you guys are behind the wheel, but I'm also giving you the very narrow road to go down,” -- the PLC teams and the teachers will not feel like their thoughts, ideas, or voices have any real meaning to either change or influence what you're doing. Then that's the problem. The teachers and PLC team members have to feel like their voice, and the discussions, and the work they're doing in the PLC, actually make a difference in. Not just what they're going to do in the classroom, but what they’re going to do as a group going forward: without having to get the proverbial green light from the admin every time.

It's crucial for educators to feel that their contributions, ideas, and discussions in PLCs have genuine significance and can drive meaningful change, both in their individual classrooms and collectively as a group, without constantly seeking approval from administrators. Mia illustrated accountability through the lens of the teacher-to-student relationship to illustrate her perspective:

> Teachers and PLCs to me are like students. So, when there's a level of accountability, it's not the gotcha. It's a … "Can you come in and check on us to make sure that we're on the right track?" Because teachers by nature sometimes can be people pleasers. Right? And they want to follow the rules. They want to follow the expectations, because, that's innately why they're here. And I think that the accountability factor is there. We happen to have the agendas, and knowing that our administrators are going to look back at those, and follow up… so there is something to fall back on, to ask about the next steps. With that, even though they're not there, they are there [in PLC].

Alex and Judith shared similar perspectives regarding administrative involvement and its correlation with the timeline of PLC implementation of extent of implementation. One participant believed that in the early stages of development, PLCs should be open and free among teachers to determine the best collaborations. Both suggested that administrators can play a role in fine-tuning the process once the PLC is more developed and accepted by everyone, as they have an overall view of the organization. Another participant shared similar reflections on administrative participation and the level of PLC implementation. The participant believes administrators should have a hands-off approach and only conduct periodic pop-in visits to monitor alignment and engagement in PLCs. This participant suggested that the first few visits should be announced beforehand to establish a level of comfort and trust among participants. Over time, as administrators become more familiar with PLCs, the presence of principals or administrators should become more organic and integrated into the PLC process. Additionally, Alex emphasized the importance of professional feedback during these visits and suggested that administrators should focus on offering assistance rather than observing. Overall, this participant suggested that the participation of administrators in PLCs should evolve naturally and be carefully managed by administrators.

Theme 3: Paraprofessional Perspectives: Micro vs. Macro

The third research question explored the dynamics of team learning within PLCs and the role of paraprofessionals. The question was designed to understand perspectives regarding how their inclusion relates to the collective learning experiences of the team. The participants shared examples of experiences with paraprofessionals who support students and classrooms throughout the entire building, as well as those considered to be “1:1” or those who primarily support one specific student. Some categories that illustrated this theme were that paraprofessionals often have a “macro” view of all classrooms and all students, but there are constraints to this role. Most participants discussed the elevation of student classrooms and instructional experiences by paraprofessionals within PLCs. Additionally, the role of a 1:1 was often addressed as limiting in the context of PLC contributions.

Participants generally shared positive examples regarding the participation of paraprofessionals and, in some interviews, described their value to the PLC and the students overall. Many references differ in their perspectives based on whether they were assigned building-level support or were considered 1:1 to work primarily with one student. Jenna, a former paraprofessional and now classroom teacher, emphasized that paraprofessionals are valued members of the team, not merely assistants. She explained play a crucial role in understanding and implementing educational standards and assessments inside the classroom, so their involvement in PLC was natural and helpful. This participant provided the rationale that while teachers oversee many students, paraprofessionals often work closely with a smaller group, allowing them to offer insights and perspectives on student progress and assessment results that other PLC participants may not have.

Many participants discussed paraprofessional participation in the context of student perspectives, enriching the collaborative learning process within PLCs.
Ava said “Multiple perspectives are very important. They will bring in that student…that student piece that we might be overlooking and just a fresh new idea.” She went on to describe general examples of working with a 1:1 paraprofessional in the classroom, expressing that the paraprofessional's involvement in the school is primarily interactions with students. The participant values the paraprofessional's insights during PLC meetings, where they can share observations and strategies based on their work with individual students. The teacher highlighted the effect of this collaboration, where ideas generated for one student's benefit can potentially benefit others as well. Later, when asked about what other insights she may have about how other participants have viewed paraprofessional participation:

> Each teacher approaches it differently. Some would look at the paraprofessional as, "Why are they here? They don't have the educational background that we do."

> Then went on to say that others come from a lens of, "They're bringing the students. They're looking at it from a student's perspective a little bit more, maybe even for example from the perspective of a special education student. A little deeper than what we would."

Kelly had the experience of working with paraprofessionals who had been in education for many years and said that paraprofessionals often have a unique understanding of student's needs and progress because they work more closely with them, individually or in small groups. They suggest that paraprofessionals can provide valuable feedback on students' performance, especially if they are experienced and able to analyze data.

Judith provided this insight through the lens of what paraprofessionals are able to observe each day:

> They get to see what all of the other teachers are doing and what's working and what's not, as opposed to what the teachers think is working and is not. Just when they can see when certain students are struggling in a class with the way that a teacher is explaining something versus another teacher, that they have in the way that they explain it. Those are just the teaching and getting the content, and they see if it's effective or not. So, you know, you're thinking about this balance of stakeholders, that, you know, paraprofessionals. I think it just gives that extra depth of the students because they are spending more time with those students that we are trying to, I mean, we're trying to help everyone, but it helps. It helps us determine what our lowest level of support is to go up to build. Classroom

> teachers cannot know each student like that because they have more on their case load, paraprofessionals have less.

Kathy related it to the physical proximity of paraprofessionals to students within the walls of the classroom:

> Because they sometimes work one-on-one with a student, they would see where things would and we challenges students or things aren't challenging them enough. Because as a teacher, you're up and walking around looking around the room, versus a paraprofessional is sitting there with the student usually. So, they would have a different perspective on how things are.

Mia felt the same about how that focus on students brings a different perspective:

> Sometimes they're really, really focused on just a couple of students where teachers have a larger roster. So sometimes they're really, really focused on just a couple of students where teachers have a larger roster. Right. So, they know in quality what genet teachers know in quantity. Our paraprofessional has really, really, really gotten to know students, so when we were looking at some of the 6th-grade data, some of the things that we were thinking might be some of the contributing factors. She could say, "Oh, what did you consider this? Did you consider that?" Because she has a deeper relationship with her than what we can acquire in a 49-minute timeframe. Was it just about the student? Or is it have you considered this about XYZ and DI usually transfer it to others… they have the perspective and awareness that we might not have considered.

Jenna had similar reflections about how the instructional discussion for students is elevated:

> I think their participation, it goes back to students. For example, that instructional strategy discussion. A paraprofessional might say that it might work for this one student I've been noticing. Then we're all able to talk about, 'Hey, let's give this assessment through Google Classroom or Google Forms instead of paper, but they can listen to it if they need it because this one student needs to listen to it more often.' Okay. Almost like they have their unique perspective on a couple of students maybe might bring you back to some of the what-ifs when you're thinking about planning. Paraprofessionals give input on those students that may be missed. Like, I know that one of my in my class, there was one student that if I didn't have the paraprofessional giving me that information and that data, they probably would have fallen through the cracks. And being able to have a paraprofessional in our PLC or having a paraprofessional be involved in those conversations really helps the depth, like the instruction for future be driven a certain way.

Alex provided this about the specific role of a paraprofessional in supporting instructional decisions:

> It depends on what they're doing. Some of our paraprofessionals are specifically there for one student, you know. It's not that they can't help other students, but it's like, "Hey, this is my one." So sometimes they see things from a different perspective. They work with smaller groups of students. They might say, "In this group, it seems like they struggle with..." Or if the articles are longer than a specific amount they might make suggestions for modifying it. That helps because sometimes I forget that kids work at different paces.

Kathy shared reflections on the unique roles that paraprofessionals play with students, especially those who are 1:1 all day with a specific student, and how those experiences support PLC discussions:

> I think closer relationships sometimes with students help because they also see them outside of the classroom, like at recess, so they have that connection, and sometimes they have more patience. For example, if you teach a lesson and a student isn't grasping it, they might approach it more patiently, making students feel more comfortable expressing what they don't understand. I have a student who struggles with counting backward, so during that group, I was looking for accommodations. One paraprofessional gave us the idea of "skip counting" numbers to help them find the numbers faster.

Kathy also reflected on what paraprofessionals contribute based on their roles and experiences in the building each day:

> They don't always have as much to contribute because they don't cover all the same areas as us. For example, one is a general paraprofessional for the fifth-grade classroom, while another works with only one student, focusing solely on what he's doing. That paraprofessional is one-on-one, all day, every day; you know everything about that student. Last year, [a family member] worked with a specific student, and we knew everything about his family. That kid feels almost like family to you, and then if you're one-on-one, you have more of an across-the-board relationship and can see more common errors to support PLC discussions.

Summary of Findings

From all of the data collected and analyzed, there were clear themes. One central theme of participant responses was that PLCs foster continuous and sometimes rapid professional growth for new teachers and paraprofessionals because of the involvement of diverse stakeholders. Participants pointed out that some had other experiences and expertise, leading to more impactful professional learning for some stakeholders. Many participants described a balanced approach that administrators must have to prioritize accountability, autonomy, alignment, and assistance during PLCs. Participants discussed paraprofessionals supporting students across the building and in a 1:1 role. They noted the macro perspective paraprofessionals bring but acknowledged constraints. Most emphasized how paraprofessionals enhance student experiences in PLCs while highlighting the limitations of the 1:1 role.

This chapter provided the findings and themes that emerged from the interviews of the seven participants in the study. The participants' perspectives and analyzed documents indicated that professional growth for some participants was enhanced through the involvement of diverse stakeholders, that there is a delicate balance between accountability and participant autonomy regarding administrative participation, and that paraprofessional participants contribute uniquely to PLCs by having both micro (1:1) and macro (building-wide) perspectives. Chapter 5 will provide an interpretation of these findings, situate the findings in the context of previous literature and give recommendations based on the findings and limitations of the current study.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The final chapter of this qualitative case study offers a review of the research, connecting and situating the findings within the context of the theoretical framework and existing literature. Additionally, the researcher provides discussion of the study's implications and limitations and provides recommendations and suggestions for stakeholders and educators in the field, including administrators, small and rural teachers, and decision-makers. This chapter also identifies and explains potential avenues for future research based on the limitations and findings.

Research Overview and Background

Since the inception and widespread roll-out of PLCs in K–12 education, research has often investigated PLC impact and relationships to student growth and achievement, teacher efficacy, instructional and teaching methods, and organizational culture (DuFour, 2004, 2015; DuFour & DuFour, 2010; DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Due to location and limited resources, rural schools do not offer the same level of opportunities for professional development as larger school systems (Steeg, 2016). The composition of PLCs is seldom examined, and there is limited research on rural educators' perceptions of PLC implementation and participation in this context. After thoroughly reviewing the available research that revealed very little, the researcher aimed to examine PLC composition, stakeholder participation, and perceptions of small, rural school district PLCs.

To provide more context, the researcher had previously been employed by large school districts in the central Florida region, often visiting multiple PLCs each day as a content specialist and district administrator. The experience of leaving that particular professional setting and then later working and leading in a small and rural district was eye-opening for the researcher, who saw significant differences in PLC implementation. There are glaring differences between large and small districts related to PLCs and the quantity and quality of professional learning opportunities. In these settings, there are often only one or two teachers per grade level or content area, posing barriers to collaboration around common assessments, data sharing, lessons, and best practices. All of those activities are common in PLC work.

By using a case study approach, the researcher aimed to understand PLC composition in a small and rural school district and how various stakeholders engage and shape PLC work in these settings, including frequency and methods. The study sought to explore the extent of participation from different stakeholder groups, their roles within PLCs, their perceptions, and any challenges or barriers they encountered. Through this investigation, the researcher aimed to provide insights that could inform the development, implementation, and enhancement of PLC practices within small, rural school districts, ultimately aiming to support collaboration efforts that have demonstrated to support continuous improvement of schools and districts (Admiraal et al., 2019; DuFour & Eaker, 2009).

Data collection included document analysis and seven semi-structured interviews focused on PLC composition and participation of administrators, principals, paraprofessionals, and instructional coaches were used for data. The preconception of the researcher that PLC's authenticity would vary based on stakeholder participation was not a prominent theme in the data collection and analysis. Perceptions that connected with authenticity did not come out of the interviews immediately or emerge from the initial planned interview questions; instead, it was follow-up questions as part of a semi-structured interview that shed light on this aspect and revealed several different perspectives on this dynamic alone.

The findings related to paraprofessional participation in PLCs were more prominent than the researcher had anticipated. Within the results, there were clear distinctions around the specific roles of paraprofessionals and how and what they contributed to PLCs, and this emerged in both the documents and interviews. The researcher also believed that instructional coaches participated more in PLCs in small and rural school districts more frequently than once thought. In the data collection phase, it was clear that participants had few experiences to share when asked about instructional coaches, while PLC documents revealed only one instance of an instructional coach participating in a PLC. This could have been influenced by the sampling methods and sampling outcomes selected in the study. Participants interviewed were members of PLCs who had little contact with instructional coaches or outside support, and sampling was not aimed at including participants from select PLCs.

Limited research was located by the researcher regarding the composition of paraprofessionals in PLCs. In small and rural districts, all staff play a crucial role in developing PLCs to foster student-focused professional collaboration. Rural school districts encounter challenges in implementing PLCs, including constraints related to common planning time and distribution of staff across grade levels or subjects, supported by research demonstrating resource disparities impacting the implementation of PLCs across school systems (DuFour & DuFour, 2015). Almost a quarter of all schools in the United States are considered rural, and these schools often have “singleton” teachers

(Hansen, 2015). These districts grapple with ensuring that singletons, the only individuals on a grade-level team or the sole content teacher, can collaborate regardless of their unique roles. The school district site in this study is one of those districts; those circumstances necessitate unique compositions of PLCs, where leadership collaboratively works with teachers to combine contents or grade levels based on a united and common goal to ensure that collaboration is available to all staff.

Interpretation

Understanding perceptions of stakeholder participation is critical for leaders, including district administrators and principals, as they look at enhancing collaboration to support student achievement. Valuable insights can be gained to understand the dynamics of collaboration of PLC members, the effectiveness of current practices, and the potential challenges occurring within the PLC structure when various stakeholders participate. The primary focus of this qualitative case study was to explore perceptions and perspectives regarding stakeholder participation and implementation of PLCs. When leaders understand these perceptions, they can work towards optimizing PLC stakeholder composition and participation to ensure support for implementation and success. Three research questions guided this study and were refined over time to demonstrate an understanding of the qualitative research process:

Research Question 1: What are classroom teachers' perceptions regarding stakeholder participation in small and rural school district PLCs?

Research Question 2: How does the participation of principals and administrators shape PLC collaboration?

Research Question 3: What are the ways in which the inclusion of paraprofessionals in PLCs contributes to team learning?

Three main themes emerged from the data: Professional Growth with Diverse Stakeholder Involvement, Administrative Balance: Accountability and Autonomy, and Paraprofessional Perspectives: Micro vs. Macro. The findings will now be discussed within the context of these three themes, connecting each theme to a discussion of the findings and what the findings mean. Then, each finding will be discussed within the context of Senge's Learning Organization Theory.

Professional Growth with Diverse Stakeholder Involvement

A key theme defined by the data was the importance of inclusive collaboration and engagement of various stakeholder voices in PLC to foster comprehensive professional development for paraprofessionals and novice teachers. The data analysis revealed that the participation of more than classroom teachers in PLCs provided the opportunity to see rapid and sustained growth for educators who were fairly new to teaching or served in a paraprofessional role to provide classroom support. PLCs allowed those specific PLC members to be commonly exposed to diverse perspectives and varied discussion topics that deepened their knowledge base and helped cultivate a more complex view of their school and how students' learning and needs connect to their role. In interviews, participants pointed to an exchange of ideas with both groups that would not usually happen in the day-to-day of a school building. In the document analysis, it was common to see references to paraprofessional and new teacher inquiries, contributions, and next steps.

This data suggests that participation in PLCs with various voices and perspectives allowed new teachers and paraprofessionals to gain deeper insights into the reasons behind classroom practices. Participating in PLCs, these specific team members would have accessibility to learn about the "why" behind instructional decisions. This understanding enables paraprofessionals to view classroom practices from a teacher's perspective rather than just a staff or student's perspective. For new teachers collaborating with other teachers, administrators, and paraprofessionals in PLC meetings, their learning is scaffolded on each end: both understanding administrator views and expectations more so than they would have in traditional 1:1 meetings, and also gain insight as to the student experiences from paraprofessionals – all valuable insights, ideas, and strategies they may not have encountered otherwise.

Interviews revealed that teachers recognize paraprofessionals may not have the same professional experiences or licensing as educators. However, participants acknowledged that their insights and contributions as PLC participants were still incredibly valuable. PLCs provide a structured environment for collaboration and learning, allowing paraprofessionals to engage with teachers and benefit from their experiences in the field. Without the structure of PLCs, this rapid learning for new teachers and paraprofessionals may not be possible.

Administrative Balance: Accountability and Autonomy

Interview and document analysis revealed that administrators must maintain a delicate balance between PLC participation to ensure accountability but do so in consideration of team and participant autonomy. The data demonstrated that this is best achieved by balancing assistance and support to PLCs but providing autonomy as needed to ensure distributive leadership. This balance must be achieved to foster a collaborative and effective learning environment for educators. While administrators play a vital role in guiding, facilitating, and supporting PLC activities, they must have a hands-off approach or be able to “read the room” to ensure the PLC participants remain psychologically comfortable to collaborate and PLC teams remain aligned with goals, standards, and expectations. In the data, it was clear that administrators should establish clear objectives, monitor progress, and provide necessary resources and support to facilitate PLC activities. However, these stakeholders should approach this in a manner that does not micromanage teams or their activities in each PLC. As evidenced by the findings, excessive oversight can stifle creativity and motivation among participants and undermine the collaborative spirit at the heart of PLC work. Interview data underscored the value of administrators in providing guidance and clarity “on the spot” during PLC meetings. Other interviews, supported by documents, demonstrated that in these PLC settings, administrators were viewed as facilitators, helping to steer discussions and maintain focus in PLC discussions, some participants even noting that the presence of administrators often led to more focused discussions and enhanced accountability amongst their fellow team members.

PLC participant autonomy is essential for fostering efficacy, ownership, engagement, and commitment within PLCs. Educators thrive in environments where they can explore ideas, try new practices without judgment, and take ownership of their professional learning journey. In the data, many examples emerged demonstrating that administrators contributed valuable resources and assistance and provided guidance and direction to ensure appropriate resource support. However, the PLC structure, by design, capitalizes on diverse expertise, perspectives, and insights. When PLC members curate and drive the agenda, set goals, and collaboratively make decisions, they are empowered to set the agenda for the work, as evidenced by interviews and PLC documents. However, for administrators and principals, it is key to balance autonomy and accountability with just enough participation to ensure that PLCs remain focused, productive, and aligned with district and school priorities. This delicate balance fosters a culture of collaboration, innovation and risk-taking, and a focus on continuous improvement.

Overall, the data demonstrated the complex interplay between administrative participation, authenticity, and accountability within PLCs, highlighting the need for careful navigation of all small and rural school district administrators in order to optimize the outcomes of PLCs. Most favorably discussed what was referred to as "pop-in" visits by administrators so that they could offer immediate feedback and guidance. However, some documents and interviews revealed concerns about the genuineness of discussion and perceived evaluative components while administrators engaged in PLCs. Very few shared that authenticity in PLC conversations may be compromised during administrator engagement. However, participants commonly revealed that they felt pressured to present a favorable image when administrators participated in PLCs. Participants mostly shared that PLCs valued administrative insights and participation in discussions. At the same time, some cautioned against potential micromanagement, so striking a balance between oversight and teacher autonomy is crucial for administrators who want to ensure that PLCs are fostering genuine collaboration and meaningful dialogue in PLCs.

Paraprofessional Perspectives: Macro and Micro

In the context of PLCs, the participants' experiences with paraprofessionals highlight how their inclusion contributes to the collective learning experiences of the entire PLC team. All participants shared examples of how paraprofessionals enriched the collaboration and learning processes within PLCs, whether the paraprofessionals provided building-level support or worked primarily with individual students or small groups. It was revealed in documents and interviews that paraprofessionals often offer unique perspectives and insights based on their close interactions with students in the classroom environment, sometimes even hearing and experiencing student feedback firsthand, and this often provided valuable contributions to the team's learning process. This data also underscores how paraprofessionals, through their focused work with smaller groups of students cited by participants often, can offer insights and perspectives on student progress that may not be readily available to other PLC participants. Participants highlighted the importance of paraprofessionals' multiple perspectives, particularly in addressing student needs, emphasizing how paraprofessionals' involvement in PLC meetings allowed them to share observations and strategies from their interactions with individual students.

Context of Findings

In light of the emerging themes, it is essential to present the findings through the lens of previous findings to demonstrate overall agreement and convergence with existing literature and extend previous findings. Additionally, the findings will be situated within the theoretical framework.

Themes, Findings, and Existing Literature

Findings from this study reiterate the importance of PLCs as an effective vehicle for enhancing both student and staff experiences within schools and school districts, regardless of size or location. As highlighted by DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008), the foundational elements of PLCs include a shared vision, collaborative teams working towards common goals, and a commitment of all to continuous improvement. The population of participants from a small and rural school district in this study is unique. It differs from much of the research presented in the literature review, which should be a consideration for setting context, limitations, and future research endeavors. As discussed in the literature review, prior research has tended to overlook the dynamics of stakeholder participation and PLC composition essential to understanding PLC environments and structures. The current study reinforces existing knowledge but adds depth by addressing gaps within the literature.

Participants highlighted the significance of involving diverse stakeholders in PLCs as a resource to support both new teachers and paraprofessionals. When considering the role that PLCs play in the rapid professional growth of paraprofessionals and new teachers, as discussed in the findings, this highlights the critical role of PLCs in mitigating the challenges of isolation experienced regularly by novice teachers, supported by previous research (Flinders, 1988; Rosenholtz, 1991). Through interactions with veteran teachers, experienced staff, and administrators as collaborative learners, new teachers and paraprofessionals gain insights and work collectively with others to develop solutions and contribute to learning. This connects with previous literature suggesting that PLCs can be utilized as a means to battle teacher isolation and facilitate professional growth (Admiraal et al., 2019; Anderson & Olivier, 2022; Davidson & Dwyer, 2014; DeJong et al., 2021; Kilgore & Griffin, 1998).

This research also connects with research on paraprofessional development, although very limited, that highlighted the barriers faced by paraprofessionals: limited training, absence of serving as a decision-maker, and the lack of learning opportunities with classroom teachers (Capizzi & DaFonte, 2012; Jones et al., 2012; Fried & Konza, 2012). The findings in this study align closely with the perceptions of classroom teachers, who, when asked, frequently see paraprofessionals as staff who are often “willing to learn” (Biggs et al., 2016). The research findings highlight the importance of fostering collaborative learning between teachers and paraprofessionals; some studies suggest that enhancing and expanding communication channels and collaboration time, granting access to staff information, meetings [such as PLCs], and emails, are desired and will contribute to maintaining effective team learning between teachers and paraprofessionals (Douglas et al., 2015; Wilson & Bedford, 2008). These connections to previous research emphasize the potential of PLCs to cultivate and support professional growth, particularly for individuals at various stages of their careers.

The findings revealed that administrators provided crucial assistance and support in aligning and supporting PLC efforts. This support was consistently highlighted across interviews and corroborated by PLC documents, emphasizing the importance of alignment with broader educational objectives. Participants regularly and consistently shared administrators' significant role in facilitating PLCs and supporting teams with requests. These findings and previous literature underscore the essential role of school leaders in shaping PLCs. The theme of Administrative Balance: Accountability and

Autonomy within the context of PLCs connects to the intricate dynamics of leadership, collaboration, and collective autonomy as both supportive and distributive leadership (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; DeMatthews, 2014; Ezzani, 2019; Hord, 1997; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) and teacher autonomy (Little, 2020; Lee, 2020).

Recent discussions on distributive leadership within the literature suggest a shifting perspective in the last decade, indicating that principals' and administrators' focus may occasionally extend beyond mere oversight to encompass more participatory roles (DeMatthews, 2014; Ezzani, 2019; York-Barr & Duke, 2004). Building upon more recent research by Huijboom et al. (2023), this study aligns findings emphasizing the significance of collective autonomy in driving PLC initiatives and outcomes, as professionals having autonomy are considered to enhance motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2014). In the current study, interviewees consistently used the word “support” to describe PLC administrators and principals as stakeholders. This aligns with previous findings of the role of principals to "support" PLCs rather than viewing themselves as having a participatory role (Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016), which is echoed in the DeMatthews (2014) research as well.

Balancing accountability with autonomy to cultivate a learning environment is easier said than done; by understanding and embracing this delicate balance, leaders can effectively plan for PLC implementation and leverage this structure to ensure professional growth and continuous improvement on behalf of students. Carpenter (2014) proposed that nurturing shared and supportive leadership is critical to cultivating a positive atmosphere and enhancing morale within PLCs. Carpenter emphasized the role of shared leadership in fostering mutual respect among members to set the tone for PLCs.

Buttram and Farley-Ripple (2016) contended that administrators significantly influence PLCs by fostering collaboration and facilitating teacher engagement as role models in this world. Similarly, Olivier and Huffman (2018) underscored the imperative of honing leadership abilities at the school level among PLC members to bolster the success of the PLC model. Additionally, DuFour and DuFour (2015) asserted that sustaining a PLC hinges on member commitment and the presence of a transformational leader fostering a collaborative school environment.

Learning Organization Theory

The constructs of Senge's Learning Organization Theory are where the current research finds alignment and purpose for future considerations, recommendations, and practice. The theory emphasizes the importance of fostering continuous learning and collaboration within organizational structures like school districts and schools, despite their size or makeup. Senge (1990) defined a learning organization as one where individuals continually enhance their learning and refine their practices to achieve desired outcomes. Senge highlighted the significance of organizational culture, structures, and systems in enabling or hindering learning. Senge argues that authentic learning in organizations involves generative learning that enhances the organization's ability to innovate. Senge theorized that a learning organization should consider survival insufficient and should actively foster innovation and opportunities to collaborate around innovation to thrive in changing environments (Perkins et al., 2007). The themes that emerged from the data in this study align closely with the constructs of Senge’s theory.

Professional Growth with Diverse Stakeholder Involvement

Leithwood et al. (2019) and Senge 1990 argued that collective learning benefits individuals and groups within an organization. The findings in this study illustrate individuals' efforts in PLCs to improve their skills and capabilities. Both paraprofessionals and new teachers were two groups that emerged from interviews and documents as individuals who consistently participated in PLCs to enhance their mastery of skills through the learning and collaboration that PLCs provided. It was described in most interviews that this was done rapidly through the PLC process with diverse stakeholder involvement, as those individuals were exposed to far more perspectives in the PLC setting than in the typical day-to-day settings of a school.

While personal mastery and shared vision form the foundation of Senge's theory, teamwork requires collaboration and collective action towards common objectives, a core aspect of PLC work. Team learning, described by Senge (1990), refers to the efforts of the team to align and enhance the capabilities of the collective to achieve desired outcomes. Senge theorized that when teams participate in learning and continuously improve, they further enhance outcomes and foster accelerated growth among members compared to individual learning. The collaborative nature of PLCs discussed in interviews and demonstrated in the PLC documents proved effective in facilitating rapid learning and skill development among paraprofessionals and new teachers. By engaging with diverse stakeholders, including often very experienced educators, administrators, and peers, individuals within these groups were exposed to countless perspectives, insights, and best practices, more so than they would have through traditional professional development throughout the school year. Many interviews revealed how this exposure enabled them to understand better instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, and even professional norms, such as protecting student data and confidentiality. All interview participants reported that the participation of stakeholders beyond classroom teachers was meaningful, and that this involvement contributed to the professional growth and efficacy of new teachers and paraprofessionals, most new to their roles. These findings suggest that PLC structures with diverse stakeholders serve as a catalyst for accelerating paraprofessional and new teachers' learning. Through ongoing discussions, decision-making and sharing of best practices within these PLC settings, individual participants are exposed to collective expertise. As a result they are more likely to leverage new ideas, quickly adopt new knowledge and skills, resulting in classroom practices that best impact students and then contributing to swift, professional growth.

Administrative Balance: Accountability and Autonomy

During data analysis, it was evident in both interviews and PLC documents that teachers expected and desired a precise balance from administrators when they participated in PLCs. Senge (1990) said that learning organizations must generate an environment and foster a culture conducive to learning, and distributed leadership directly influences teacher collaboration through the intervention of professional learning and an innovative culture. Research has demonstrated clear advantages in distributing leadership among diverse stakeholders within the school community, thus enhancing collaborative practices (Ma & Marion, 2023). Without building this foundation of collaboration and distributive leadership, administrators, and principals participating in PLCs could cause frustration and resistance. Through interviews, participants recognized that administrators modeled the value of collaboration, reflective practice, personal mastery, and continuous improvement by actively participating in PLC activities.

The construct of a shared vision is most profound as it relates to this theme. Having a shared vision will help gain and then maintain momentum. Shared visions are reinforced and will frequently increase commitment, and as PLC discussions unfold, clarity may improve, and enthusiasm for the vision will grow. Interviewees often asserted the importance of administrator participation so teachers and staff could access administrators during PLC meetings. They shared that it was necessary in these settings in order to receive assistance in obtaining resources and assistance with a task or agenda item, and some also expressed that they wanted to be able to access the administrator to inquire as to whether their work was aligned with the vision of PLCs. By actively participating in PLCs and facilitating conversations to align with the school and the district vision, administrators contribute to a sense of shared purpose and often give on-the-spot direction to other stakeholders.

Senge's construct of team learning also aligns closely with the PLCs and administrator and principal participation, as well as the data emerging in this study. Team learning is characterized by the collaboration that takes place among educators to address school issues (Park, 2008). Collaboration as a prevalent factor in schools achieving high levels of student success, and the advantages of collaboration are particularly evident in smaller schools with a close-knit collegial atmosphere, as teachers cultivate a strong sense of shared responsibility for both student progress (Jones, 2009). The data shows that administrators and principals are active participants alongside teachers and other participants in PLCs. Administration often contributes their expertise, experiences, and problem-solving efforts. These administrators and principals promote collaboration by sharing, engaging, and promoting shared accountability among all stakeholders.

In the context of Learning Organization Theory, these findings also relate to another construct, a systems approach that emphasizes understanding the interconnectedness within an organization (Senge, 1990). Senge emphasized that relationships are central to this and that effective school leadership should prioritize initiating relationships, discussion, and dialogue as part of systematic and strategic thinking (Feldman, 2013). In schools and school districts, interconnected systems and structures operate together, or they do not work effectively or efficiently, thus impacting the functioning and effectiveness of the schools to increase student achievement and outcomes. PLCs in small and rural school districts support a systems thinking approach where all stakeholders can better understand how different components within the district interact and influence each other. It was evident in interviews and PLC documents that this was a function of PLCs, and the participation of many stakeholders in PLCs supported systems thinking within the district.

This construct of the theory emerged repeatedly from documents and interviews. Common examples include decisions regarding curriculum, interventions, or budget allocations that directly impact teaching practices and, thus, student outcomes. The findings also showed that administrators may utilize PLCs to understand perspectives and feedback from all staff when making decisions that affect everyone regarding curriculum, directives, or building procedures and policies.

Paraprofessional Perspectives: Macro and Micro

During the interviews and through document analysis, it was revealed that paraprofessionals often had insights into the student experience that classroom teachers may not have, as they had micro and macro views of the schools in their unique roles. The dynamics of team learning within this theme align closely with Senge's learning organizational theory; Senge emphasizes the importance of team learning in developing the capacities of all individuals and the importance of dialogue, which allows teams to focus on structural issues through a problem-solving lens. Senge (1990) describes team learning as the efforts of the team to align and enhance the capabilities of all to achieve desired outcomes. Interviews revealed how paraprofessionals often support collaborative learning in PLCs, whether they provide building-level assistance or focus on individual or small-group student support in their role. Interviews revealed the significance of diverse viewpoints introduced by paraprofessionals, especially when related to students. They have both macro and micro views each day, whether they work with single students or they visit all classrooms in the building each day. This experience of micro and macro school views enhances the discourse within PLCs because it enhances team dialogue, which is central to team learning. Paraprofessionals contribute to team learning through this dialogue by sharing their unique experiences and perspectives from their observations of, and interactions with, students, interactions that look different, and providing different feedback and data than teachers receive from students. Paraprofessionals contribute to the collective learning processes by having these micro and macro views of schools and student learning, leading to deeper insights and solutions for supporting students.

This theme also reflects how shared vision and team learning are interconnected. Developing a shared vision and purpose, team learning, engaging in feedback loops and open dialogue, and fostering genuine collaboration and learning within organizations are all critical components of the theory (Kiedrowski, 2006; Senge, 1990). Individuals within an organization are joined together with a common purpose and work collaboratively toward it. For instance, paraprofessionals in PLCs directly contribute to student experiences at micro and macro levels, and their contributions often elevate student classrooms and instructional experiences. This dynamic demonstrates the importance of team learning, where stakeholders come together to share different knowledge, data, perspectives, experiences, and resources in order to reflect and improve on their practices and to support the practices of others. These consistent practices result in collective learning to achieve common goals. Still, in this case, it also acknowledges the limitations of specific roles, such as paraprofessionals who are 1:1 with students, and how that unique context may impact quantity or quality contributions to PLCs. This underscores the importance of effective team dynamics, a critical aspect of Senge's theory.

Finally, according to Senge (1990), all participants will bring mental models, deeply held assumptions, perspectives, and beliefs about teaching, learning, students, schools, and the classroom environment. Data collection and interview responses clearly showed that mental models influence how educators approach collaboration, problem-solving, and decision-making within PLCs. Classroom teachers have often mentioned that paraprofessionals do not have the educational backgrounds or experiences that may contribute to PLCs as teachers do. However, little was mentioned about the previous careers or the educational level that their paraprofessionals had achieved. Mental models about the roles and identities of each stakeholder emerged from the data, influencing their contributions, participation, authenticity, and reception to feedback in PLCs. Many times in the interviews, participants revealed mental models that may come into play regarding the participation of paraprofessionals. These participants often have far less education than classroom teachers, which was addressed in most interviews; however, it was unclear how each participant knew the educational background of all paraprofessionals they engaged within PLCs. Mental models play a significant role in PLCs, often shaping the perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors of all PLC members, in and out of the PLC setting (Bui & Baruch, 2010; Tarnanen et al., 2021).

Limitations

In qualitative research, providing transparency of the limitations and setting a context for how these limitations may have impacted findings is essential. Presenting study limitations includes describing the steps that were taken to mitigate such limitations, explaining the implications, and providing alternative methods (Price & Murnan, 2004; Ross & Zaidi, 2019). Importantly, from other research studies on PLCs, it is evident that not one PLC is the same (Huijboom et al., 2021). This is especially true of PLCs in small and rural school districts, where various factors will determine the makeup, composition, and PLC structure.

This research occurred within a single school district, with a potential pool of about 40 participants; however, only seven experiences were included. One limitation is the small sample size, which is common and typical in qualitative research. Creswell recommends three to five interviewees per case study, while Yin recommends at least six (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2018). The necessity to collect thick, rich data led the researcher to conduct seven interviews as part of this case study. The perspectives and experiences shared by classroom teachers as part of the anonymous recruitment process may be specific to this research context, and they might not represent what other potential participants may have included in interviews. While PLC documents, including minutes and agendas, were utilized to ensure triangulation and corroboration, these limitations remain.

Other limitations are all interconnected and pertain to the extent of participants' openness during interviews. While exhaustive efforts were taken to create an open and supportive environment, participants may have been hesitant to disclose their perspectives or experiences fully due to the role of the researcher. Countless measures were described to avoid this, and the researcher has positive and strong relationships in the district, but this is a consideration. Furthermore, participants may have responded to interview questions with responses or answers that they believed were acceptable, or which they thought may benefit them professionally or personally. This could lead to responses that do not fully reflect their true thoughts, perspectives, or experiences. Participants were reminded that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw at any time without repercussion. The member-checking process allowed participants to share perspectives outside of the interviews. Based on the directness of responses shared in interviews, the researcher does not believe this to be an overarching issue, but it should be considered. The researcher conscientiously worked to minimize bias and personal opinions about PLCs through a journaling process and through reflexivity, ensuring that the data collected remained objective and reflective of the perspectives of the participants and documents. However, the potential for bias in interviews is acknowledged, although steps were taken to mitigate any potential bias or decision-making not aligned with best practices in qualitative research. By maintaining transparency during the entire research process, and actively engaging in self-reflection, the researcher aimed to sustain the integrity of the study.

Implications

This study is relevant to small and rural school districts because of several aspects. First, small and rural districts often face unique challenges in implementing educational initiatives, one being PLCs. These challenges can include limited resources, scarce professional development opportunities, or constraints related to staffing and scheduling. By examining the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders within these schools, this study offers valuable insights into how PLCs can be effectively implemented and sustained in resource-constrained school environments. The findings of this study shed light on the specific needs and concerns of small and rural school districts regarding PLC composition and implementation. By understanding the perspectives, teachers and decision-makers can develop targeted plans to support the successful implementation of PLCs. Considerations include addressing issues such as the role of paraprofessionals and the balance of administrative oversight, as many administrators are considered part of PLCs and are active participants. Small and rural school districts are tight-knit communities where many staff members are considered friends or may be related or family to other staff. Through fostering a culture of collaboration within PLCs, these districts can leverage their staff's collective expertise and resources to address local challenges and improve professional learning opportunities and student outcomes. This study has implications for future research and the practices of administrators and leaders in small and rural school districts.

Future Research Recommendations

The findings from this study indicate the need for further investigation into the dynamics of PLCs within small and rural settings, mainly focusing on the experiences of participants and the impact of composition and structures on PLC implementation. Examining the themes that emerged, research examining the role of stakeholder participation and new teacher and paraprofessional job satisfaction and retention is suggested. Furthermore, based on the findings, an examination of the involvement of paraprofessionals who support building-wide goals compared to paraprofessionals who support single or small groups of students is warranted. This is because the interviews revealed apparent nuances of paraprofessionals' involvement in PLCs based on their specific roles.

Future researchers could also consider similar approaches with some changes to the research design. First and foremost, this present case study provides insights to support the development of a questionnaire or survey that could be utilized in the future as part of a quantitative study examining similar research questions. Due to the lack of research on the topic of PLC composition and participation, identified previously in the literature review, the interview questions and protocol were rooted within the theoretical framework. This current study could inform tools to design a quantitative approach, which could be administered anonymously to gain deeper insights and address some of the identified limitations.

Other suggestions revolve around the data sources, should future research delve into similar research questions and related problems of practice. First, future researchers should consider additional triangulation methods by visiting several PLC meetings before the interviews and document analysis. This would assist the researcher in converging the qualitative study to include observations, interviews, and document analysis. Another added layer for a future qualitative study could include focus group interviews, which may allow participants to engage in an interactive discussion on the composition of and participation in PLCs. This interaction would facilitate a reciprocal exchange of ideas among participants who may not come to them during interview settings (Guest et al., 2017).

Lastly, future research should consider including interviews with administrators and paraprofessionals to thoroughly examine this study's research questions and problems. One concern that prevented this approach from being used in the current study was the need for multiple perspectives as part of a case study. The specific site only had two principals available for participation, and the number of paraprofessionals as potential research participants was also under ten, leaving concerns about voluntary participation. Future research could examine the inclusion of other participants by deploying an alternative research design to aid in accomplishing this alternative approach to conducting a study that would consider these additional perspectives in the qualitative data.

Recommendations for Practice

The first recommendation underscores the importance of providing ongoing professional development for both principals and PLC participants, especially administrators. As a best practice of PLC implementation, districts, and schools should provide continuous and ongoing professional learning for staff who work and learn in collaborative communities (DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour & DuFour, 2010). Complete and effective PLC implementation requires leadership to understand the importance of shared and distributive practices. School districts and buildings will run more efficiently using distributed leadership where collaboration and consultation occur organically, rather than principals approaching decisions independently with no input from staff (Bezzina, 2008; DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Since distributed leadership recognizes the importance of other stakeholders (Spillane et al., 2004), principals and administrators should regularly attend PLCs as part of a model that ensures support, feedback loops, and accountability. These leaders should attend professional learning alongside the PLC Lead or key figures in the PLC. Given the themes that emerged in this study, professional learning should focus on developing common and shared goals aligned with the school’s mission and vision or school culture. This recommendation is supported by extensive research on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and emphasizes the importance of defining the organization's mission, vision, values, and goals to drive overall improvement and progress (Brodie, 2013; DuFour, 2004, 2014, 2015; DuFour & DuFour, 2006; DuFour & DuFour, 2010; DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Easton, 2015).

Similarly, the second recommendation is that leadership teams cultivate a data-driven environment within PLCs and intentionally model it throughout the school year. One method is administering an anonymous survey each semester, asking PLC participants for their feedback on administrative participation in an attempt to gauge how such participation impacts the overall PLC implementation efforts and progress.

Additionally, it is recommended that administration teams consider utilizing an internal form to track administrators' frequency of visits and administrator contributions and outcomes. The tool would not be evaluative for either the administrator or the participants. The tool would be used so administrators could reflect on their contributions as PLC participants and how they have balanced support with accountability. This would also ensure that all PLCs are given opportunities to feel the support described in the findings and that no PLC is visited too often to feel hindered in their efforts.

The third and final recommendation is that leadership should include paraprofessionals in PLCs within small and rural district settings. This recommendation stems from the interviews demonstrating that it is imperative that paraprofessionals are included in PLCs within small and rural district settings. Analysis of the interview data illustrated the contributions paraprofessionals offer to PLC discussions and collaborative processes. Paraprofessionals often bring a wealth of firsthand knowledge about student needs, learning styles, and classroom dynamics that complement the expertise of teachers and other participants with different lenses. Paraprofessional perspectives are a crucial asset in nurturing an understanding of student challenges and tailoring instructional support to meet diverse needs. Involving paraprofessionals in PLCs cultivates a culture of shared responsibility for students. By relying upon the collective expertise of all stakeholders, including paraprofessionals, PLCs can more effectively address the needs of students in small and rural district settings. Leadership within these districts should prioritize the active involvement of paraprofessionals in PLCs.

Conclusion

This study investigated the dynamics of stakeholder participation in PLCs within small and rural school districts. Significant insights have emerged by exploring stakeholder participation, PLC composition, perceptions of classroom teachers, and how these relate to PLC implementation. The study highlighted the importance of diverse stakeholder involvement in fostering professional learning for paraprofessionals and new teachers, the delicate balance between support, accountability, and autonomy when administrators participate, and the role of paraprofessionals in enriching the PLC environment. Drawing on Peter Senge's learning organization theory, the research underscored the significance of systems thinking, shared vision, mental models, and team learning as constructs to design PLC composition and implementation, as all of these constructs were connected to findings.

The findings demonstrate the need for administrators and PLC participants to engage in professional learning together and suggest that administrators should foster distributive leadership to optimize learning outcomes for all learners. The researcher advocates for further research into the dynamics of PLCs within small and rural settings, focusing on PLC composition, stakeholder participation, and the impact of structural factors on implementing PLCs in small and rural school settings. This study contributes to the existing literature on PLCs by providing insights into their functioning within small and rural school districts and with specific compositions of participating stakeholders and perceptions of teachers.

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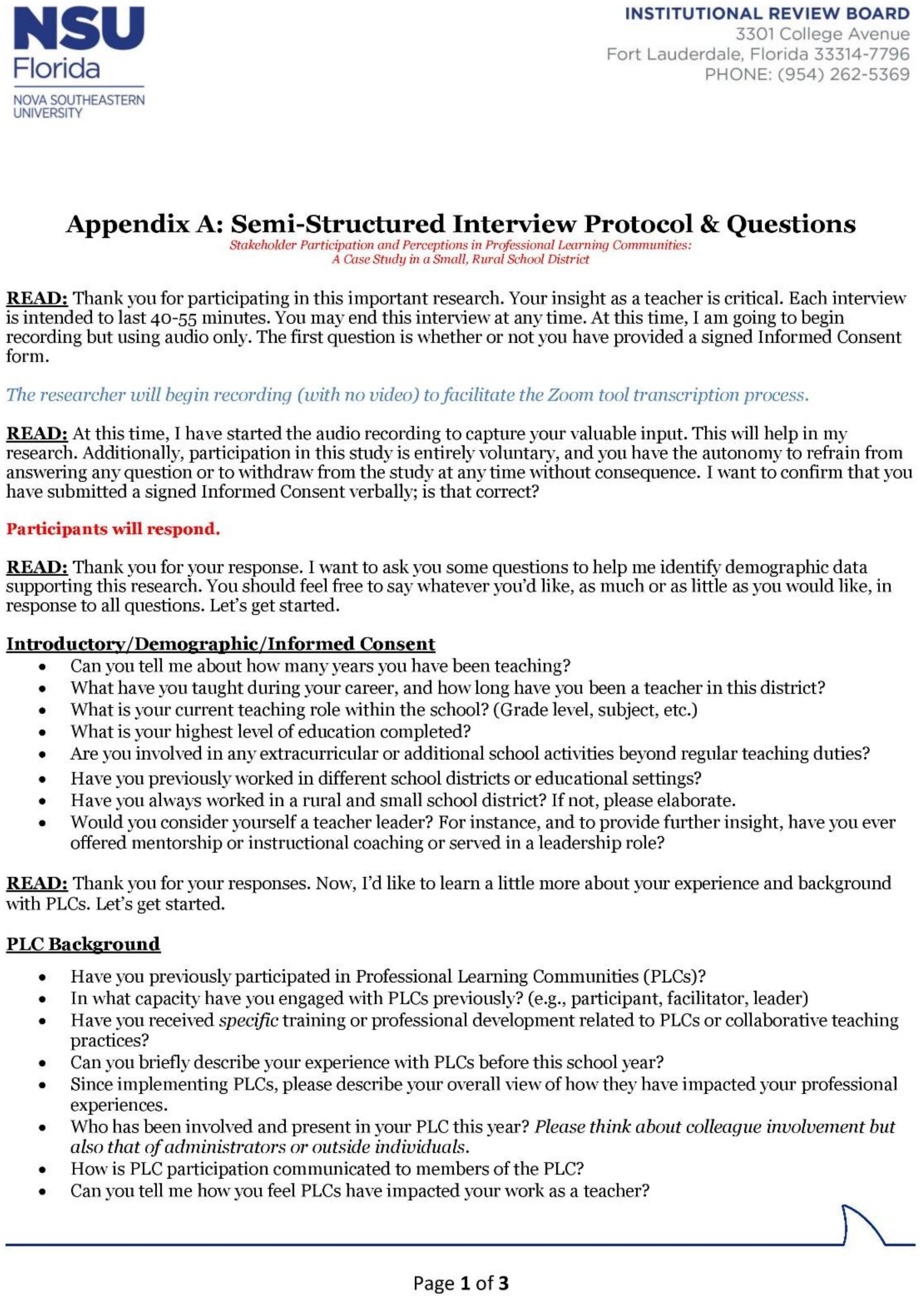
Appendix A

Interview Questions and Protocol



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Appendix A: Semi-Structured Interview Protocol & Questions

Stakeholder Participation and Perceptions in Professional Learning Communities:
A Case Study in a Small, Rural School District

READ: Thank you for participating in this important research. Your insight as a teacher is critical. Each interview is intended to last 40-55 minutes. You may end this interview at any time. At this time, I am going to begin recording but using audio only. The first question is whether or not you have provided a signed Informed Consent form.

The researcher will begin recording (with no video) to facilitate the Zoom tool transcription process.

READ: At this time, I have started the audio recording to capture your valuable input. This will help in my research. Additionally, participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the autonomy to refrain from answering any question or to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. I want to confirm that you have submitted a signed Informed Consent verbally; is that correct?

Participants will respond.

READ: Thank you for your response. I want to ask you some questions to help me identify demographic data supporting this research. You should feel free to say whatever you'd like, as much or as little as you would like, in response to all questions. Let's get started.

Introductory/Demographic/Informed Consent

- Can you tell me about how many years you have been teaching?
- What have you taught during your career, and how long have you been a teacher in this district?
- What is your current teaching role within the school? (Grade level, subject, etc.)
- What is your highest level of education completed?
- Are you involved in any extracurricular or additional school activities beyond regular teaching duties?
- Have you previously worked in different school districts or educational settings?
- Have you always worked in a rural and small school district? If not, please elaborate.
- Would you consider yourself a teacher leader? For instance, and to provide further insight, have you ever offered mentorship or instructional coaching or served in a leadership role?

READ: Thank you for your responses. Now, I'd like to learn a little more about your experience and background with PLCs. Let's get started.

PLC Background

- Have you previously participated in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)?
- In what capacity have you engaged with PLCs previously? (e.g., participant, facilitator, leader)
- Have you received *specific* training or professional development related to PLCs or collaborative teaching practices?
- Can you briefly describe your experience with PLCs before this school year?
- Since implementing PLCs, please describe your overall view of how they have impacted your professional experiences.
- Who has been involved and present in your PLC this year? *Please think about colleague involvement but also that of administrators or outside individuals.*
- How is PLC participation communicated to members of the PLC?
- Can you tell me how you feel PLCs have impacted your work as a teacher?

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READ: Thank you for your responses. I want to learn a little about your work in a PLC where an administrator or principal has participated. Please go beyond "yes" and "no" if it makes sense. Also, when the word "principal" is used, it can mean "administrator" and vice versa. The idea is to understand your input on principal and administrator participation in PLCs. Let's get started.

Principal and Administrator Participation

1. How does the principal's active involvement in PLC meetings affect the atmosphere and engagement levels?
2. Is there open communication when the principal or administrator is in the PLC meeting?
3. How do principals or administrators participate in PLCs? Is it verbal? Written? Observational? Please describe this participation.
4. In your experience, how does the principal's input during PLC discussions influence the direction and focus of collaboration during PLC meetings?
5. When a principal or administrator participates, how does this individual discuss vision and continuous improvement?
6. How does the principal's engagement in PLC activities impact **your** willingness to share ideas and experiences during these sessions?
7. Have you ever seen an instance where bias or mental models are "hidden" by other participants because of the participation of a principal or administrator? If so, how?
8. Describe an instance where the principal's involvement directly improved problem-solving or decision-making within your PLC.
9. How does the principal's presence or absence in PLC sessions influence the content of discussion among participating teachers?
10. In what ways does the principal's support and guidance during and after PLC discussions contribute to taking ideas and moving them into actions, plans, and next steps?
11. How does the participation of a principal or administrator hinder or support PLC discussions and completion tasks?
12. Can you discuss any changes or improvements you've observed in PLC dynamics and outcomes due to increased OR decreased principal participation?
13. Can you describe an example of how the principal's engagement affects the overall morale and sense of camaraderie among teachers within the PLC?
14. Can you describe any previous (before this year) experiences or instances where principals or administrators actively participated in PLCs? How did their participation influence the collaborative learning environment?
15. Can you describe the ideal level of involvement you believe principals or administrators should have within PLCs to ensure effectiveness without overshadowing educator contributions?
16. Can you share any concerns about potential power dynamics or the influence of administrative hierarchy on open dialogue within PLCs?
17. Could you discuss any concerns or potential challenges educators might have regarding strong administrative involvement in PLCs? How might these be addressed?
18. 15. Have you observed any changes in the collaborative nature of PLCs when there is direct participation from administrators? If so, could you describe these changes?
19. 16. Have you observed any changes in the effectiveness of PLC discussions or decision-making processes when principals or administrators are actively engaged compared to when they are not involved?
20. Have you observed any changes in the team dynamics or outcomes of PLC discussions when administrators are actively engaged compared to when they are not involved?

READ: Thank you for your responses. I want to learn a little about your work in a PLC involving paraprofessionals or other outside support. This might include an ISD Instructional Coaching team member or a instructional support vendor. Let's get started.

Other Stakeholder Participation

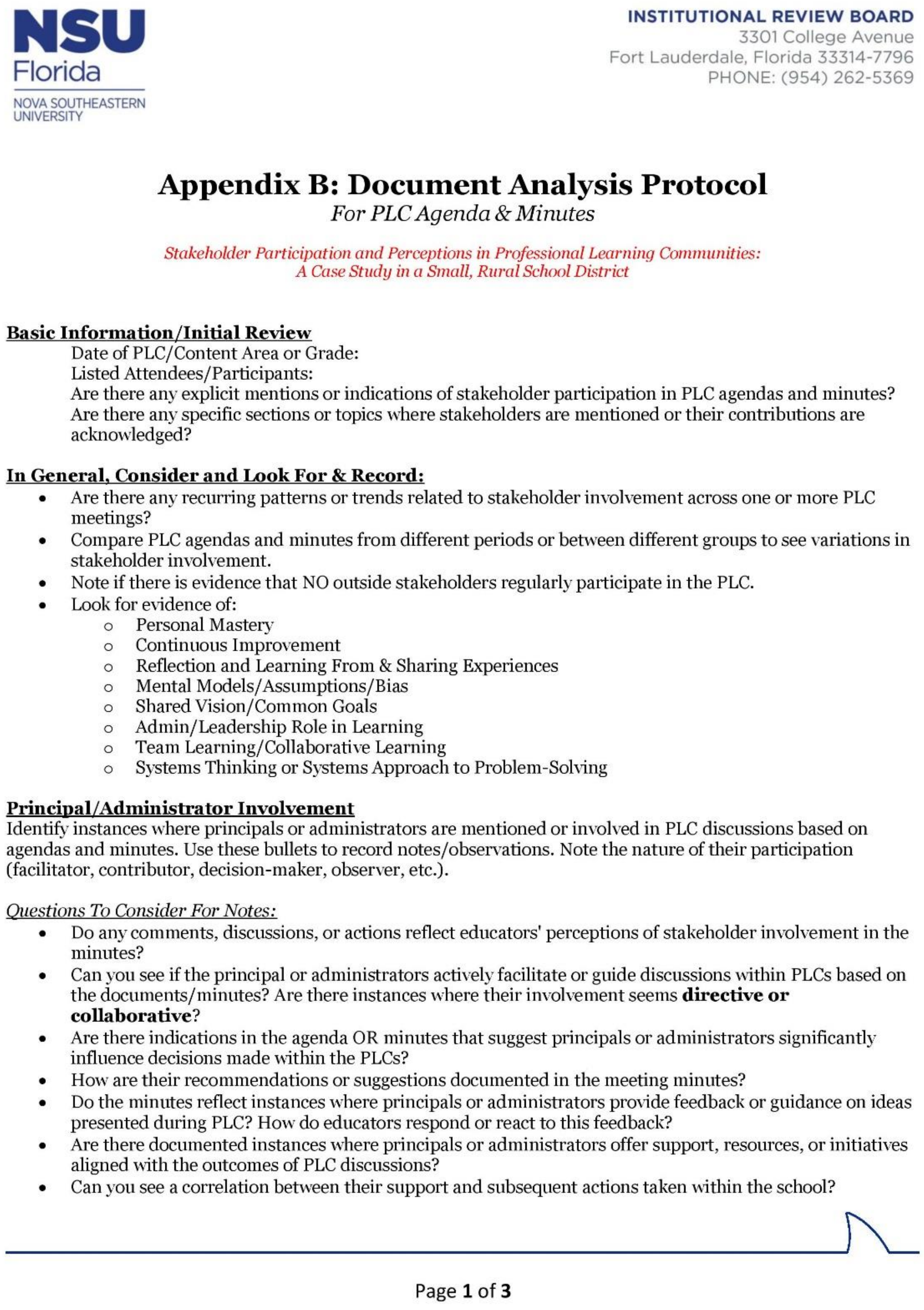
1. How do educators approach or contribute to PLCs when paraprofessionals or other instructional support are present?
2. Why might the contributions of paraprofessionals within the PLC be different from those of classroom teachers, and how does this impact collaboration?
3. When considering the involvement of stakeholders other than admin/principals, how do educators view the balance between guidance and independence or autonomy in PLCs?
4. How does engaging paraprofessionals in PLC activities contribute to fostering a shared vision among educators for student outcomes?
5. Have you observed any changes in the team dynamics or outcomes of PLC discussions when paraprofessionals are actively engaged compared to when they are not involved?
6. How does integrating paraprofessionals' experiences into PLC discussions foster a more inclusive and supportive learning environment?
7. What challenges, concerns, or reservations might educators have about paraprofessional involvement in PLCs? What challenges, if any, do you foresee?
8. Why and how might the involvement of paraprofessionals impact decision-making processes within the PLC?
9. What unique perspectives or insights might paraprofessionals bring to PLCs that differ from those of educators or administrators?
10. Why should PLC discussions consider the varying levels of experience and training between paraprofessionals and classroom teachers?
11. How does the involvement of paraprofessionals impact the exchange of best practices and resources within the PLC?
12. How does the presence of instructional coaches from an outside organization affect collaboration and teamwork dynamics among educators within the PLC?
13. How do you perceive the role of instructional coaches within the context of PLCs? What unique contributions or support do you anticipate they might offer?
14. Do instructional coaches from external organizations encounter resistance or challenges within the PLC environment?
15. How does the active involvement of instructional coaches from an external organization influence the level of engagement and participation among educators within the PLC?
16. How might the participation of instructional coaches external to the school district impact the overall dynamics and interaction patterns within the PLC?
17. How might the external perspective of instructional coaches contribute to bridging gaps or overcoming limitations in traditional approaches within the PLC?

READ: Thank you for your responses. We are almost done. At this time, and before we conclude, please share if there is anything essential about your experiences in PLCs that we haven't touched upon. Also, please ask any questions you have for me.

The researcher will end the Zoom audio recording after the participant can answer.

Appendix B

Document Analysis Protocol



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Appendix B: Document Analysis Protocol

For PLC Agenda & Minutes

Stakeholder Participation and Perceptions in Professional Learning Communities:
A Case Study in a Small, Rural School District

Basic Information/Initial Review

Date of PLC/Content Area or Grade:
Listed Attendees/Participants:
Are there any explicit mentions or indications of stakeholder participation in PLC agendas and minutes?
Are there any specific sections or topics where stakeholders are mentioned or their contributions are acknowledged?

In General, Consider and Look For & Record:

- Are there any recurring patterns or trends related to stakeholder involvement across one or more PLC meetings?
- Compare PLC agendas and minutes from different periods or between different groups to see variations in stakeholder involvement.
- Note if there is evidence that NO outside stakeholders regularly participate in the PLC.
- Look for evidence of:
    - Personal Mastery
    - Continuous Improvement
    - Reflection and Learning From & Sharing Experiences
    - Mental Models/Assumptions/Bias
    - Shared Vision/Common Goals
    - Admin/Leadership Role in Learning
    - Team Learning/Collaborative Learning
    - Systems Thinking or Systems Approach to Problem-Solving

Principal/Administrator Involvement

Identify instances where principals or administrators are mentioned or involved in PLC discussions based on agendas and minutes. Use these bullets to record notes/observations. Note the nature of their participation (facilitator, contributor, decision-maker, observer, etc.).

Questions To Consider For Notes:

- Do any comments, discussions, or actions reflect educators' perceptions of stakeholder involvement in the minutes?
- Can you see if the principal or administrators actively facilitate or guide discussions within PLCs based on the documents/minutes? Are there instances where their involvement seems **directive or collaborative**?
- Are there indications in the agenda OR minutes that suggest principals or administrators significantly influence decisions made within the PLCs?
- How are their recommendations or suggestions documented in the meeting minutes?
- Do the minutes reflect instances where principals or administrators provide feedback or guidance on ideas presented during PLC? How do educators respond or react to this feedback?
- Are there documented instances where principals or administrators offer support, resources, or initiatives aligned with the outcomes of PLC discussions?
- Can you see a correlation between their support and subsequent actions taken within the school?

- How do educators discuss or evaluate the contributions of principals or administrators in the meeting minutes? Are there indications of appreciation or otherwise regarding involvement?
- Do educators express feelings of empowerment or limitation in their contributions?
- Is there any evidence where educators feel their autonomy is appreciated or stifled in PLC discussions?
- Can you identify references or descriptions in the minutes that suggest the leadership style of principals or administrators within the context of PLCs?
- How do educators react or respond to these leadership ideas, input, feedback, or other involvement?
- Do educators express feelings of comfort or hesitation in sharing ideas or opinions during PLC meetings in the presence of principals or administrators?
- Are there instances where open dialogue seems encouraged or stifled due to stakeholder involvement?
- Are there instances where educators acknowledge or value the contributions made by principals or administrators within the PLC meetings? If so, are these contributions reflected in subsequent actions or decisions?

Paraprofessional Involvement
Look for instances or discussions involving paraprofessionals in the PLC agendas and minutes.
Use these bullets to record notes/observations. Note the nature of their participation (facilitator, contributor, decision-maker, observer, etc.).

Questions To Consider For Notes:

- Are there explicit mentions or any indication of paraprofessionals' participation in PLC agenda(s) and minute(s)?
- How are their contributions or involvement documented within the discussions if they are in attendance OR not in attendance?
- Can you understand paraprofessionals' roles or tasks during PLC meetings from the agenda or minutes?
- Are there any instances where their contributions are highlighted or recognized or NOT recognized/dismissed?
- Can you identify instances where paraprofessionals collaborate with teachers that arise from PLC discussions?
- Do the meeting minutes indicate instances where paraprofessionals offer support, resources, or assistance based on PLC?
- How do educators respond or utilize paraprofessional support based on agendas and minutes?
- How do educators perceive the impact of paraprofessionals' within PLCs? Is anything evident from the documents?
- Are there reflections on how their participation influences the dynamics of the entire team?
- Can you discern any discussions of value brought by paraprofessionals to the PLC discussions from the meeting minutes?
- Are there documented instances where other PLC members express the effectiveness or relevance of paraprofessionals' support in their roles within PLC meetings? How do educators describe the support provided?
- Can you identify instances where educators engage in collaborative interactions or idea-sharing with paraprofessionals during PLC meetings?
- Do any interactions reflect teamwork or mutual support, and how?
- Are there instances where educators acknowledge or value the contributions made by paraprofessionals within the PLC discussions? How is this recognition reflected in subsequent actions or decisions?

Instructional Coach/Other Involvement
Identify instances where instructional coach(es) are mentioned or involved in PLC discussions based on agendas and minutes. Use these bullets to record notes/observations. Note the nature of their participation (facilitator,

contributor, decision-maker, observer, etc.).

Questions To Consider For Notes:

- How are any instructional coaches mentioned/documented/articulated in the PLC agendas and minutes?
- Are there specific coaching strategies or interventions highlighted in the discussions?
- Can you identify instances where instructional coaches collaborate with educators to develop or implement initiatives based on PLC discussions?
- How are these collaborative efforts documented or acknowledged?
- Are there indications in the meeting minutes of instructional coaches offering or implementing coaching or professional development opportunities stemming from PLC deliberations?
- Can you discern any impact or reaction from educators regarding these opportunities?
- Do educators frequently reference instances where instructional coaches provide feedback, guidance, or resources based on PLC discussions? How do educators respond or act upon this guidance?
- What relevance do teachers place on instructional coach guidance in PLCs, and how is that evident or not in the agenda and minutes?
- Can you discern any documented changes in teaching practices or methods that would or have resulted from the guidance or support offered by instructional coaches during PLC meetings? How do educators express these changes (or lack thereof) in the minutes?
- Are there references or discussions in the minutes about how instructional coaches' involvement aligns with educators' professional goals or growth areas?
- Do educators talk about their interactions with instructional coaches as contributing to their professional development?
- How do educators discuss the collaborative atmosphere or team dynamics when instructional coaches actively engage in PLC discussions?
- Are there indications of increased collaboration or strategic thinking?
- Can you identify instances where instructional coaches offer personalized or differentiated support based on educators' needs discussed during PLC meetings? How do educators respond to this support?

Appendix C

Informed Consent

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General Informed Consent Form (v2023-08-31)
NSU Consent to be in a Research Study Entitled
Stakeholder Participation and Perceptions in Professional Learning Communities:
A Case Study in a Small, Rural School District

College: Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice

Principal Investigator: Rachel M. Kowalski, Ed.S., M.Ed.

Faculty Advisor/Dissertation Chair: Barbara Packer, Ed.D.

Site Information: Colon Community Schools; 400 Dallas Street, Colon, Michigan 49040; 269-386-2239.

Funding: This study is unfunded.

Introduction:
The first part of this consent form gives you a summary of this study. We will give you more details about the study later in this form. The study team will also explain the study to you and answer any questions you have. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. Whether or not you want to participate in this study is your choice. Please take your time to decide about participating. You can discuss your decision with your family, friends, and other trusted people.

What is this study about?
This research study is designed to test and create new ideas that others can use. This research study aims to learn how teachers, principals, and other staff in our school community work together to improve things as part of professional learning communities. The study aims to understand how the involvement of stakeholders impacts PLC implementation and perceptions. The study also seeks to shed light on PLC effectiveness in small and rural school districts.

Why are you asking me to be in this research study?
You are being asked to be in this research study because you are a Colon Community School District teacher and you are a participant in a professional learning community in a small and rural school district. You may teach at one school site or multiple school sites as part of your role. However, you are a classroom teacher within the district. This study will include seven (7) classroom teachers from the district, as a collective site.

What will I do if I agree to be in this research study?
While participating in this research study, you will participate in one interview with the researcher, which will be held in Ms. Kevnick's office at Colon High School. The interview will last between 40-55 minutes. The interviews will take place in the winter of 2024. Your name will not be used in this study, and there will be no consequences for participating or not participating. You are giving your time so that the researcher can better understand educational interventions and how stakeholder participation in PLCs supports staff and student outcomes. At a later stage in the study, the researcher will engage in a

“member checking” process that allows participants to review data for accuracy and provide feedback to the researcher. Participants will be invited to thoroughly review and validate the collected information using an email-based approach. The significance of this member-checking process is ensuring that the viewpoints and experiences contributed by the participants and utilized in this research faithfully mirror their lived realities.

Research Study Procedures – If you choose to be in this study:
You will participate in an individual interview about your experiences with professional learning communities. This interview will take place in winter 2024, lasting approximately 40 - 55 minutes. During this session, you'll be asked open-ended questions about your involvement. After interviews, the researcher will also provide the opportunity to review data and researcher interpretations to ensure accuracy. This process is done via email and is not anticipated to take as long as the initial interview. In writing, you will be able to clarify any inconsistencies between the raw data and the researcher’s interpretations.

- As part of the screening process, you will return your signed consent form to Olivia Spidle and include your availability for interviews to support efficient interview scheduling if you are selected.

Are there possible risks and discomforts to me?
This research study involves little risk to you. To the best of our knowledge, the things you will be doing have no more risk of harm than you would have in everyday life.

- The nature of this research study inherently involves minimal risk or discomfort for participants. As the district superintendent and researcher, I emphasize that the interview process revolves solely around understanding your experiences within professional learning communities (PLCs)
- The questions posed during the interview are tailored to gather insights into your perspectives on PLCs, seeking to understand your experiences and viewpoints. These inquiries are not intrusive or uncomfortable; they aim to delve into your professional experiences within educational settings.
- Your participation poses no foreseeable risks beyond the routine experiences encountered in your everyday professional life within an educational context.
- Additionally, participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you have the autonomy to refrain from answering any question or to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

What happens if I do not want to be in this research study?
You can leave this research study at any time or not be in it. There will be no penalty or loss of services. Any information collected about you **before** the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 36 months from the end of the study. Any information about you or from you will not be used in this study or recorded if you request this.

Are there risks if I leave the study early?
Tell the researcher if you are thinking about stopping or have decided to stop. Then, your participation in the study will stop immediately. There is no risk to you if you do not complete the final withdrawal procedures, and you can choose not to participate in them.

What if there is new information learned during the study that may affect my decision to remain in the study?

Any information that may impact your decision to remain in this study will be given to you by the investigators. You may be asked to sign a new Informed Consent Form if the information is given after joining the study.

Are there any benefits to taking part in this research study?
The possible benefit of your being in this research study is that you can contribute to your practices as an educator and the broader educational community. By sharing your experiences and insights regarding professional learning communities (PLCs), you contribute priceless firsthand knowledge that enriches our understanding of effective practices in educational settings. Your input aids in shaping interventions and practices aimed at enhancing the collaborative learning environment within PLCs, benefiting not only yourself but also educators nationwide. Your contributions empower decision-makers, including educational leaders, administrators, and policymakers, to make informed choices rooted in real-world experiences and perspectives. Ultimately, your participation catalyzes positive change in educational practices, fostering environments that facilitate continuous improvement, learning, professional growth, and improved student outcomes across educational settings. Your willingness to share your experiences makes a meaningful impact on the advancement and refinement of educational practices, benefiting educators, students, and the field of education.

There is no guarantee or promise that you will receive any benefit from this study. We hope the information learned from this research study will benefit other people with similar conditions in the future.

Will I be paid or otherwise compensated for being in the study?
You will not be given any payments for being in this research study.

Will it cost me anything?
There are no costs to you for being in this research study. Ask the researcher if you have any questions about what it will cost you to participate in this research study. This could include bills, fees, or other costs related to the research.

How will you keep my information private?
The only potential loss of privacy in this study is information shared with the Principal Investigator. Otherwise, privacy is ensured and will not be breached. Each 40-55 minute interview is recorded on Zoom, using only audio (no video), to assist the researcher with transcription. This Zoom audio recording file is then stored on a password-protected Google Drive, the password of which is only known to the researcher. The transcript and notes from the interview will be typed on a secure document, available only to the researcher. Organizations or people that may review and copy your information include:

- Members of the research team
- NSU Institutional Review Board and other representatives of this institution responsible for overseeing the research

Your personal information may also be given out if required by law. If information from this study is published or presented at scientific meetings, your name and other personal information will not be used. All confidential data will be kept in a secure, password-protected document. All data will be kept for 36 months from the end of the study. Documents will be destroyed after that time by the researcher setting a calendar reminder and scheduled email to destroy and permanently delete all documents at the end of the 36 months.

Whom can I contact if I have questions, concerns, comments, or complaints?
If you have questions now, feel free to ask us. If you have more questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact:

Primary contact: Rachel Kowalski, Ed.S., M.Ed., can be reached at 248-770-5761 between 7 AM and 7 PM.

Research Participants Rights
For questions/concerns regarding your research rights, please contact:
Institutional Review Board
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369 / Toll Free: 1-866-499-0790
IRB@nova.edu

You may also visit the NSU IRB website at www.nova.edu/irb/information-for-research-participants for further information regarding your rights as a research participant.

Research Consent & Authorization Signature Section

Voluntary Participation - You are not required to participate in this study. In the event you do participate, you may leave this research study at any time. If you leave this research study before it is completed, there will be no penalty to you, and you will not lose any benefits to which you are entitled.

If you agree to participate in this research study, sign this section. You will be given a signed copy of this form to keep. You do not waive any of your legal rights by signing this form.

SIGN THIS FORM ONLY IF THE STATEMENTS LISTED BELOW ARE TRUE:

- You have read the above information.
- Your questions have been answered to your satisfaction about the research

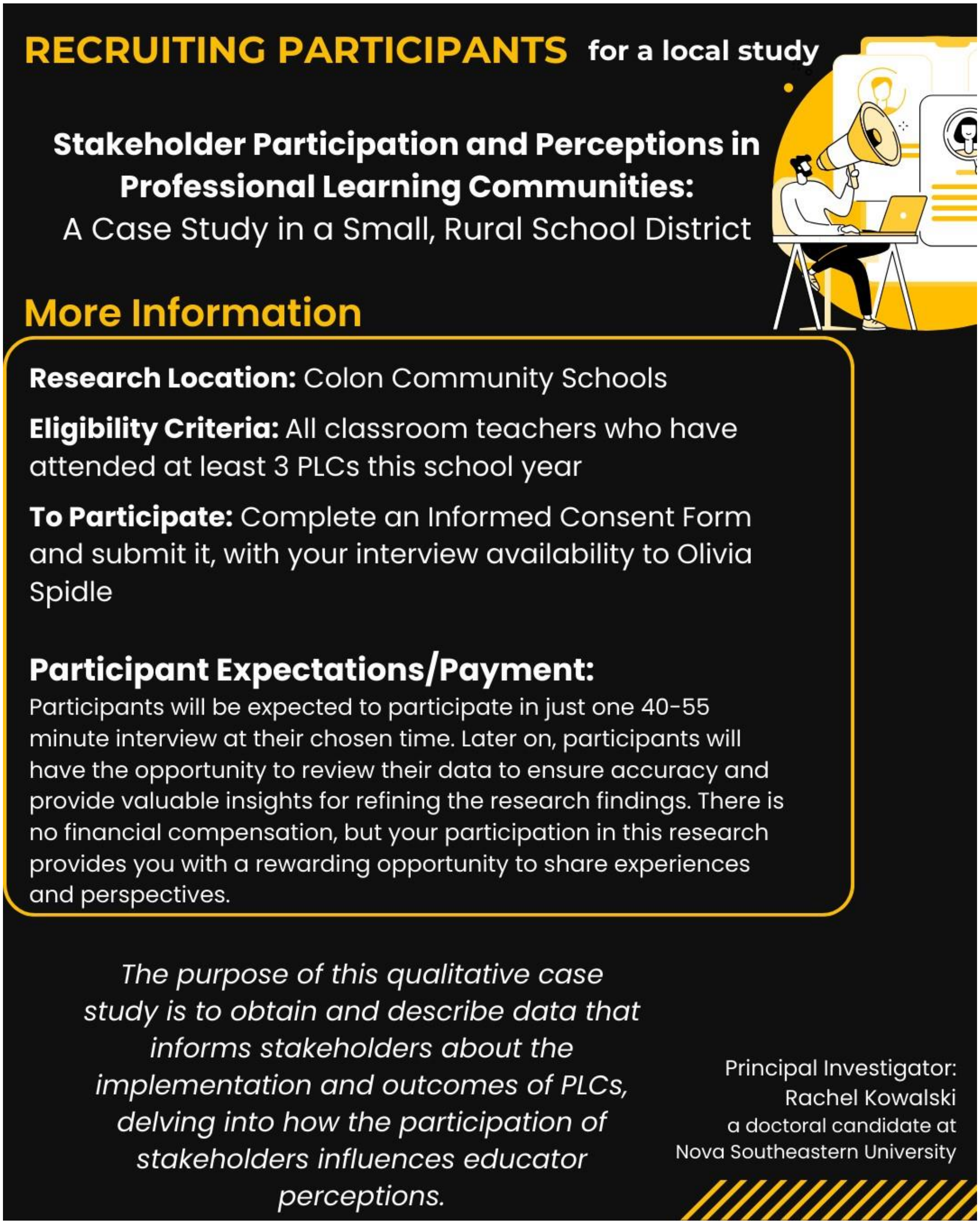
Adult Signature Section

I have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study.

Printed Name of Participant	Signature of Participant	Date
Printed Name of Person Obtaining Consent and Authorization	Signature of Person Obtaining Consent & Authorization	Date

Appendix D

Recruitment Materials



RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS for a local study

Stakeholder Participation and Perceptions in Professional Learning Communities:
A Case Study in a Small, Rural School District

More Information

Research Location: Colon Community Schools

Eligibility Criteria: All classroom teachers who have attended at least 3 PLCs this school year

To Participate: Complete an Informed Consent Form and submit it, with your interview availability to Olivia Spidle

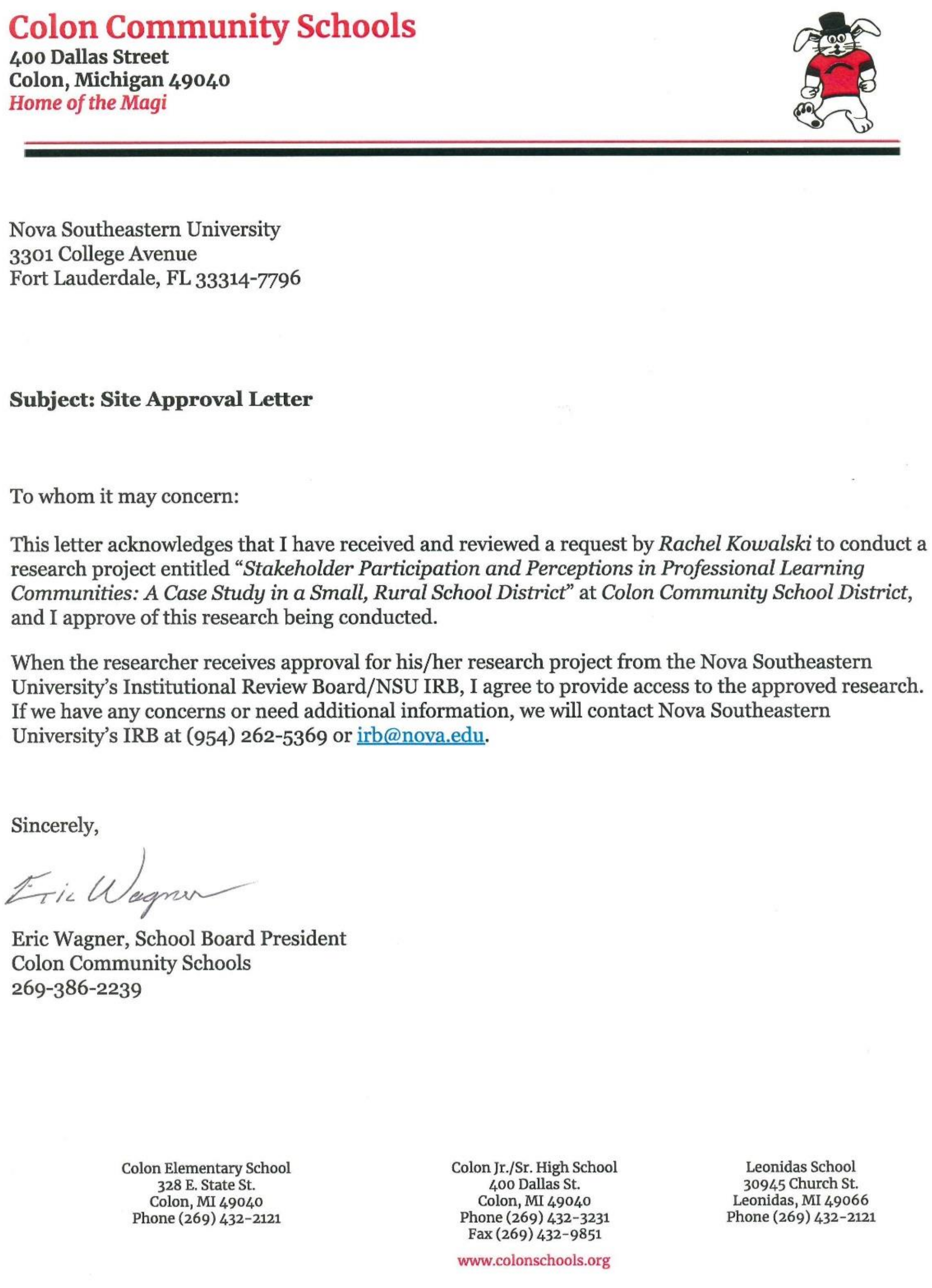
Participant Expectations/Payment:
Participants will be expected to participate in just one 40-55 minute interview at their chosen time. Later on, participants will have the opportunity to review their data to ensure accuracy and provide valuable insights for refining the research findings. There is no financial compensation, but your participation in this research provides you with a rewarding opportunity to share experiences and perspectives.

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to obtain and describe data that informs stakeholders about the implementation and outcomes of PLCs, delving into how the participation of stakeholders influences educator perceptions.

Principal Investigator:
Rachel Kowalski
a doctoral candidate at
Nova Southeastern University

Appendix E

Site Approval Letter



Colon Community Schools
400 Dallas Street
Colon, Michigan 49040
Home of the Magi

Nova Southeastern University
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33314-7796

Subject: Site Approval Letter

To whom it may concern:

This letter acknowledges that I have received and reviewed a request by *Rachel Kowalski* to conduct a research project entitled "*Stakeholder Participation and Perceptions in Professional Learning Communities: A Case Study in a Small, Rural School District*" at *Colon Community School District*, and I approve of this research being conducted.

When the researcher receives approval for his/her research project from the Nova Southeastern University's Institutional Review Board/NSU IRB, I agree to provide access to the approved research. If we have any concerns or need additional information, we will contact Nova Southeastern University's IRB at (954) 262-5369 or irb@nova.edu.

Sincerely,

Eric Wagner

Eric Wagner, School Board President
Colon Community Schools
269-386-2239

Colon Elementary School
328 E. State St.
Colon, MI 49040
Phone (269) 432-2121

Colon Jr./Sr. High School
400 Dallas St.
Colon, MI 49040
Phone (269) 432-3231
Fax (269) 432-9851

Leonidas School
30945 Church St.
Leonidas, MI 49066
Phone (269) 432-2121

www.colonschools.org

Appendix F

Institutional Review Board Approval

NSU
Florida
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796
PHONE: (954) 262-5369

MEMORANDUM

To: Rachel Kowalski
Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice

From: Jennifer G Reeves
College Representative, Abraham S. Fischler College of Education and School of Criminal Justice

Date: February 2, 2024

Subject: IRB Exempt Initial Approval Memo

TITLE: Stakeholder Participation and Perceptions in Professional Learning Communities: A Case Study in a Small, Rural School District– NSU IRB Protocol Number 2024-50

Dear Principal Investigator,

Your submission has been reviewed and Exempted by your IRB College Representative or their Alternate on **February 2, 2024**. You may proceed with your study.

NOTE: Exempt studies do not require approval stamped documents. If your study site *requires* *stamped copies of consent forms, recruiting materials, etc., contact the IRB Office.*

Level of Review: Exempt

Type of Approval: Initial Approval

Exempt Review Category: Exempt 2: Interviews, surveys, focus groups, observations of public behavior, and other similar methodologies
Exempt 4: Use of previously-collected records, data, specimens, tissues, etc.

Annual Status of Research Update: You are required to notify the IRB Office annually if your research study is still ongoing via the *Exempt Research Status Update xForm.*

NSU Florida
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
3301 College Avenue
Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314-7796
PHONE: (954) 262-5369

Changes: Any changes in the study (e.g., procedures, consent forms, investigators, etc.) must be approved by the IRB prior to implementation using the *Amendment xForm*.

Post-Approval Monitoring: The IRB Office conducts post-approval review and monitoring of all studies involving human participants under the purview of the NSU IRB. The Post-Approval Monitor may randomly select any active study for a Not-for-Cause Evaluation.

Final Report: You are required to notify the IRB Office within 30 days of the conclusion of the research that the study has ended using the *Exempt Research Status Update xForm*.

Translated Documents: No

Retain this document in your IRB correspondence file.

CC: Jennifer G Reeves

Barbara Packer-Muti, Ed.D.