Camaraderie, Collaboration, and Capacity Building: A Qualitative Examination of School Social Workers in a Year Long Professional Learning Community

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Abstract

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become commonplace in K-12 schools for helping teachers collaborate to build their professional capacities and address school-based problems. However, rigorous research on the key components, mechanisms, and impact of PLCs has been limited overall, with virtually no research conducted on PLCs with school social workers (SSW). This article examines the first-year experiences of school mental health professionals (SMHP) in a two-year PLC made up largely of SSW from an array of schools and districts throughout metropolitan Chicago. Drawing on qualitative data gathered from three rounds of in-depth interviews with participants during the first year of the PLC, we find that the PLC drew participants who sought specific opportunities through the PLC to improve their knowledge and skills to lead their schools in advancing social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) services and supports in their schools. Through the professional camaraderie they quickly found among their PLC colleagues, participants engaged collaboratively to develop an array of interventions for their schools, strengthened their professional capacities, and enhanced their sense of professional self-efficacy. By the end of the first year, participants overwhelmingly cited their PLC experiences as beneficial to reducing SMHP professional isolation, creating a supportive, resource-rich group of SMHP colleagues, and rejuvenating their commitment to the profession and their ability to lead their schools in advancing SEMH services and supports. Implications for further research on PLCs and advancing the professional development of SSW are discussed.

Keywords

School Social Work, Professional Learning Communities, School Mental Health Practice, Professional Development, Generic Qualitative Research

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Acknowledgements

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Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become commonplace in K-12 schools for helping teachers collaborate to build their professional capacities and address school-based problems. However, rigorous research on the key components, mechanisms, and impact of PLCs has been limited overall, with virtually no research conducted on PLCs with school social workers (SSW). This article examines the first-year experiences of school mental health professionals (SMHP) in a two-year PLC made up largely of SSW from an array of schools and districts throughout metropolitan Chicago. Drawing on qualitative data gathered from three rounds of in-depth interviews with participants during the first year of the PLC, we find that the PLC drew participants who sought specific opportunities through the PLC to improve their knowledge and skills to lead their schools in advancing social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) services and supports in their schools. Through the professional camaraderie they quickly found among their PLC colleagues, participants engaged collaboratively to develop an array of interventions for their schools, strengthened their professional capacities, and enhanced their sense of professional self-efficacy. By the end of the first year, participants overwhelmingly cited their PLC experiences as beneficial to reducing SMHP professional isolation, creating a supportive, resource-rich group of SMHP colleagues, and rejuvenating their commitment to the profession and their ability to lead their schools in advancing SEMH services and supports. Implications for further research on PLCs and advancing the professional development of SSW are discussed. Keywords: School Social Work, Professional Learning Communities, School Mental Health Practice, Professional Development, Generic Qualitative Research

In public schools across the United States, school social workers (SSW) are among the educators on staff with training that explicitly aims to enhance the social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) of students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011; Kelly, 2008; Stephan, Weist, Kataoka, Adelsheim, & Mills, 2007). However, with schools under pressure for their students to achieve high standards of academic performance, enhancing the SEMH of students may not always be at the top of many schools' priority lists. This calls for SSW to be able to simultaneously advocate for enhancing the SEMH of students while also positioning themselves as leaders in their buildings for doing so, and making it a priority by linking it to the academic mission of the school context (Gherardi, 2017; Massat, Kelly, & Constable, 2016; Stone & Morgane-Patterson, 2016; Teasley, 2018). Further, for SSW often tasked with essential, yet unfamiliar leadership roles in the provision of their school's SEMH services, the limited guidance and collegial expertise often available

leaves many searching for effective ways to build this professional capacity (Kelly, Bluestone-Miller, Mervis, & Fuerst, 2012; Phillippo, Kelly, Shayman, & Frey, 2017).

Add to this the challenge of balancing large student caseloads and crisis-response responsibilities, and the prospect of taking on school-wide SEMH leadership roles may also be perceived by many SSW as uncharted, untenable professional territory (Elswick et al., 2018; Massat et al., 2016). Thus, despite significant national calls to strengthen the capacities of SSW to lead SEMH efforts across all levels of their schools' multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS; Avant & Lindsey, 2015; Frey, et al., 2012), many continue to report limited efficacy in their capacity to do so, as well as a sense of being a marginalized professional within the school context (Kelly et al., 2015; Sherman, 2016). In light of these challenges, for schools to improve the SEMH of their students, it is essential to build the professional capacity of SSW to serve in a variety of leadership and consultative roles (Avant & Lindsey, 2015; Gherardi & Whittlesey-Jerome, 2017).

The challenge of building the professional capacity of SSW to lead SEMH services in schools begins with understanding the day-to-day demands and expectations of the job. In 2014, Kelly and colleagues' (2015) national survey of SSW found that the majority reported that they were largely not promoting universal, school-wide (Tier 1) or group level (Tier 2) interventions focused on prevention or coordination of services in their schools. Instead, they found that much of their days were dedicated to delivering targeted, intensive (Tier 3) interventions focused on directly addressing individual student behavioral or mental health crises. Additionally, many expressed a lack of self-efficacy in being evidence-informed or data-driven in their daily practice (Kelly et al., 2015).

The relative lack of confidence SSW report having in delivering school-wide and classroom-level prevention programs can be compounded by the fact that classroom teachers themselves express varied knowledge, skills, and self-efficacy in addressing their students' SEMH needs without proper training and support (Freedenthal & Breslin, 2010; Han & Weiss, 2005; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011). Thus many districts and schools find themselves facing significant challenges in adequately addressing the SEMH needs of their students and developing the capacity of their staff to do so (Capella, Frazier, Atkins, Schoenwald, & Glisson, 2008; Massey, Armstrong, Boroughs, Henson, & McCash, 2005; Reinke et al., 2011). In recent decades, professional learning communities (PLCs), largely used to build the professional capacities of teachers in schools (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005), have emerged as a potential strategy for building the capacity of educators and most recently for improving SSW practice (Carpenter-Aeby, Aeby, & Mozingo, 2011). However, little rigorous research on PLCs has been conducted with either teachers or SSW, leaving little understanding of how PLCs shape professional practices or influence the student and school outcomes they aim to improve over time (Hairon, Goh, Chua, & Wang, 2017). This study examines the first-year experiences of participants in The School Social Work Professional Learning Community Project (hereafter The PLC Project), an innovative two-year PLC conducted with SMHPs in metropolitan Chicago. Using analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with PLC Project participants throughout the 2015-16 academic year, we aimed to understand the unique experiences of Project participants with regard to the PLC, the varying school contexts they serve, and their efforts to improve their professional capacities to lead their schools in enhancing their provision of SEMH services and supports.

Professional Learning Communities in Schools

Educators in 21st century U.S. schools, including teachers and SMHP, have many high expectations placed on them in order to be effective. They are expected to assess and enhance the knowledge and learning skills of students, to regularly communicate and work with their families, and to flexibly respond to students' SEMH needs as they develop over time. PLCs have emerged as one approach for supporting and facilitating educators' continuous professional development to meet these expectations (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour 2005). Broadly defined, PLCs are comprised of small groups of educators who meet regularly with the aim of assessing and identifying specific student and school problems and to develop strategies and enhance their professional capacity for addressing these problems in schools. According to Zheng and colleagues (2016), most PLCs in schools share common characteristics of a shared sense of purpose, collaborative activity, collective focus on student learning, de-centralized practice, and reflective dialogue. Among those focused on building teacher capacities Vescio and colleagues (2008) note that PLCs developed during the last half of the century having primarily sought to address the evolving demands placed upon teachers to increase accountability for effective practice, improve student academic outcomes, enhance teacher professional development, and alleviate teacher stress related to these demands. Many PLCs, however, vary widely in their goals, in how they are implemented, and in the district and school conditions under which they operate (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Moreover, while little rigorous research on PLCs has been conducted, studies assessing their impact appear to show positive proximal effects on educator problem-solving, collegial trust, and professional self-efficacy (Mintzes, Marcum, Messerschmidt-Yates, & Mark, 2012; Zheng, Yin, Liu, & Ke, 2016), as well as on more distal effects on students' school engagement, learning, and achievement (Gray, Kruse, & Tarter, 2016).

Studies of teacher PLCs specifically have largely been conceptual in nature, and have primarily utilized qualitative methodologies including case studies, teacher and administrator observations and interviews, and descriptive surveys. Together this research has helped identify key components of PLCs as well as to develop frameworks that give insight into the factors that shape teachers' professional development through PLC participation. A number have identified effective strategies and important considerations for enhancing collaboration. Establishing collaborative norms, as well as using structured dialogue and co-structured inquiry all appear to be effective in organizing meetings, setting goals, and facilitating conversations that can build community, create challenging debate, and enhance the professional growth of participants in PLCs (Graham, 2007; Nelson, Slavit, Perkins, & Hathorn, 2008; Owen, 2014).

However, as Riveros, Newton, and Burgess (2012) highlight, for PLCs to effectively operate, close examination of the situated school and district contexts that shape teacher agency in collaboration is also essential. Specifically, because personal agency is shaped by teacher dispositions or attitudes, including their common values, shared understandings, and often competing political notions of what are accepted and agreed upon best practices in schools, those schools and districts that don't consider how these factors shape teacher agency will struggle to negotiate the political fault lines and inevitable tensions of various teacher philosophies and practices that can negatively impact PLC effectiveness (Riveros et al., 2012; Owen 2014). By way of example, recent debates about school discipline best practices, have highlighted how efforts to implement restorative justice approaches (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Pavelka, 2013) have been met with an array of educator responses rooted in varying attitudes, values, and political notions about the goals and implications of different forms of school discipline, each of which are critically important for school leaders to address if they are to effectively reform their school's discipline cultures and practices (Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005). Moreover, as Kwakman (2003) notes, teacher

appraisals of the feasibility and meaningfulness of personal, task, and work environment factors are also critical to consider when determining the extent to which teachers will participate in professional learning activities. Lastly, qualitative studies examining the role of PLC leaders have highlighted that district and school administrators are critical in shaping whether PLCs are effective in enhancing teacher practices, improving student learning, or driving school reform (Harris & Jones, 2010; Hord & Sommers 2008; Hord & Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2004; Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004).

Studies that have focused on measuring the effectiveness of PLCs in facilitating improvements in educator professional capacity, student learning, and SEMH have also been limited and mixed. One study of teacher PLCs in Germany found little effect of PLCs in improving teacher self-efficacy (Weißenrieder, Roesken-Winter, Schueler, Binner, & Blömeke, 2015), while another in the U.S. found that PLC participants engaged in direct practice and problem-solving activities and had higher self-efficacy than those not in PLCs (Mintzes et al., 2012). As well, in a study of teachers in China, specific PLC factors, including teachers' collective learning and faculty trust in colleagues were both found to be significant in predicting faculty collective efficacy in their instructional strategies and student discipline in schools (Lee, Zhang, & Yin, 2011). Despite the variation in what is known about PLC effectiveness, however, Gray and colleagues (2016) suggest that educators' ability to be adaptive to how PLCs are used for building professional capacity, as well as how school contexts and structures facilitate continuous professional development, are important indicators of the potential of PLCs for improving school-based practices. Additionally, as recent calls for more in-depth studies of PLCs have highlighted the need to identify the added value of PLCs with varying goals, designs, and capacity-building mechanisms, (Stoll & Louis, 2007) continued examination of PLCs can add to what is known about their effectiveness as well as their potential for enhancing effective practices in schools (Hairon et al., 2017; Weißenrieder et al., 2015). Lastly, particularly with SSW, where only one study of PLCs has been conducted and appears to suggest their effectiveness for enhancing SSW professional practice (Carpenter-Aeby, Aeby, & Mozingo, 2011), in-depth examinations of SSW PLCs can better understand their unique features, examine how they shape professional development over time, and assess their potential for positively impacting students' SEMH in schools.

Research Questions

With only one study on SSW PLCs (Carpenter-Aeby, Aeby, & Mozingo, 2011) having been conducted at the time of this study, our examination of PLC Project participants' experiences was largely exploratory. In designing this study, we hoped to better understand the experiences of PLC participants and to explore the potential of PLCs to enhance the professional capacity building efforts of SSW to lead schools in the provision of their SEMH services and supports. In light of this, our primary aim was to rigorously describe the perspectives and experiences of participants during the PLC Project's first year by identifying extant themes that we hoped would stimulate and guide future research on PLCs with school mental health professionals (SMHP), such as SSW. In so doing, we used a generic qualitative approach with inductive thematic analysis to identify key themes and subthemes that highlighted the experiences of PLC Project participants as well as their interpretations of how the PLC shaped their capacity building efforts during the Project's first year. As a method typically used to describe the subjective opinions, attitudes, beliefs, or reflections of their experiences, particularly in common professional settings such as schools (Percy, Kostere, & Kostere, 2015), a generic qualitative approach enabled us the analytic flexibility to respond to the unpredictable and fast-moving changes typical in school settings. These changes are ones

which SMHP must be responsive to as both service providers and professionals seeking to continuously improve their practice. Moreover, given the longitudinal design of our study and the limited research on SSW PLCs, we intended to develop a "ground up" qualitative description (Kahlke, 2014) of how the unique experiences of SMHP in a PLC evolved over time. In doing so, we sought to accurately account for how participants' specific experiences as SMHPs helped reframe and implement new possibilities for improved practices through their participation in the yearlong PLC. To that end, three research questions guided this study:

1. How do SMHP view their primary professional roles, responsibilities, and capacities in schools?
2. What individual, school, and district factors condition their day-to-day practices and efforts to enhance their professional capacity?
3. How does participation in a yearlong PLC for SMHP shape the professional capacity-building efforts of SMHP?

As this study's first author, I (Andrew Brake) have over fifteen years of experience as a social worker, educator, and researcher. I am particularly interested in qualitative methods and examining how the relational processes that unfold between and among school professionals, and their student, parent, and community partner constituencies, shape the development of school policies and practices and, ultimately, the wellbeing and academic outcomes of students. As this study's second author, I (Michael Kelly) am a leading researcher in the areas of school mental health, evidence-based practice, and workforce development. My work aims to improve policies and practices that can advance SMHP leadership in enhancing schools' provision of SEMH services and supports. As scholars we are both deeply committed to understanding the unique experiences of SMHP, particularly SSW, in their host settings of schools. We believe that these professionals occupy an important, albeit often misunderstood and underutilized, role for leading improvements in the quality of schools' SEMH services. Further, because education research, particularly in the United States, is often limited in highlighting the everyday practices and impact of SMHP, especially qualitative studies which can highlight their ongoing professional experiences, capacity building-efforts and leadership possibilities, we intend for this study to shed light on how PLCs have potential for strengthening the skills and impact of SMHPs in schools.

Methods

The School Social Work Professional Learning Community Project (The PLC Project)

Building on research which highlighted the potential of PLCs to improve SSW and teacher professional capacities, in this study we examined the experiences of participants in the PLC Project, a PLC developed in 2015 by a team of five school mental health (SMH) research and practice experts from two universities and one SMH promotion center at a children's hospital in Chicago. The PLC Project ran continuously from the beginning of the 2015-16 school year through the end of the 2016-17 school year. Over its two years, the PLC Project had three goals: (1) to build the professional capacity of participants in their use of evidence-informed practice and data-driven decision-making, (2) to enhance the sense of professional efficacy of participants, and (3) to create a community of SMHP designed to continuously support their professional goals and reduce the risk of professional burnout. This study examines the experiences of PLC Project participants and highlights how their professional capacity building efforts were shaped by their participation during its first year.

Each month, members of the PLC Project leadership team, led by me (Michael Kelly) and three other SMHP experts in Chicago, facilitated 90-minute skills workshops for all SMHP participants via an online videoconference meeting. Workshops focused on evidence-informed practices in SEMH, data-driven decision-making, and creating a sustained community of SMHP who shared the aim of supporting one another in enhancing SEMH initiatives in their respective schools. In addition, as Project leaders we divided the participants into smaller "mentor groups" of 3-4 SMHP based on a similar area of SEMH policy or practice they hoped to lead in their schools during the academic year. Mentor groups met monthly and meetings were coordinated and facilitated by a member of the PLC Project leadership team. All mentor groups were charged with collaborating with one another to support their colleagues in strengthening the SEMH interventions they were developing during that year. And while each group focused on supporting their members in leading different types of SEMH initiatives in their schools, each member also worked independently toward this goal. During the first year, mentor groups identified SEMH school-based problems and focused on enhancing one of the following areas of SEMH policy and practice in their respective schools: 1) strengthening SEMH referral systems, 2) enhancing school-wide (Tier 1) restorative practices and social and emotional learning (SEL) initiatives, 3) promoting data-driven decision-making for SEMH services, and 4) strengthening student executive functioning skills. Participants also presented findings and lessons-learned from their SEMH projects at an annual summer professional development conference for SMHP hosted by the Project's lead host university.

Generic Qualitative Descriptive Inquiry

For this study we used a generic qualitative descriptive approach (Kahlke, 2014) with a longitudinal design for all data gathering and analysis. Generic qualitative approaches are particularly useful in studies where limited empirical literature is available about a phenomenon and when the goal is to carefully provide in-depth description of the experiences and opinions of participants in a study, rather than make broad analytic inferences or develop an elaborated theory of individuals' inner processing of a particular phenomenon (Kahlke, 2014; Percy et al., 2015). Thus, because we aimed to describe the unique roles, responsibilities, and capacities of PLC Project participants, the array of factors that conditioned their work, as well as how participation in the PLC shaped their professional capacity building efforts throughout the year-long PLC, a generic qualitative approach enabled us to closely identify key themes and subthemes that emerged across the three semi-structured interviews we conducted with participants throughout the PLC Project's first year.

Participant Recruitment and Professional Demographic Characteristics

Before we began the PLC Project, we obtained full approval for this study from the lead university's institutional review board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects, which mandates protection of study participants through the IRB review and their informed consent. After receiving IRB approval, we began data gathering for the PLC Project in June 2015 and continued to August 2017. Analysis for this portion of the study focuses on the interviews we conducted with PLC Project participants during the 2015-16 school year.

We first recruited PLC Project participants through the lead university's network of SMHP, the large majority of whom were SSW who worked in public schools throughout Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. When recruitment began, many potential participants had previously taken part in a two-day summer professional development conference for a post-master's certification program for SSW held annually at the lead host university's school

of social work. We invited previous participants of the summer conference to take part in the PLC Project via email, word of mouth, or through an alumni mailing list. In late summer 2015, we invited all SMH professionals interested in learning more about the PLC Project to attend an information session about the Project where they could ask questions about the Project and determine whether or not they wanted to participate. Those interested in participating provided consent after the session. Participants were also free to withdraw from the study at any point with no questions asked. In all, sixteen (16) SMHP consented to participate in the yearlong PLC Project and twelve (12) actively participated (attended six or more of the nine skills workshops offered in the first year).

Participants in the PLC Project had a wide range of professional experience in SEMH services and supports and were from elementary, middle, and high schools throughout Chicago and the surrounding suburbs. Eleven participants were school social workers and one was a school counselor. Participants ranged from two to twenty-two years of professional experience, with a mean average of over nine years. Six participants worked in kindergarten-through-fifth grade elementary schools, three worked in sixth through eighth grade middle schools, two worked in a high school, and one worked in three different school, one of each, during the 2015-16 school year. Demographic characteristics varied in the group; all participants identified as female, nine identified as White / Caucasian, two identified as African American, and one as Asian American. These gender and racial and ethnic characteristics closely mirror those found in recent national surveys of SSW in the U.S., where 91.2 percent of participants identified as female and 82 percent identified as European American (Kelly, et al., 2015).

Data Collection Procedures

To describe and analyze the experiences of SMHP in the PLC Project, we developed semi-structured interview guides and used semi-structured interviews with participants as the primary data collection source for this study (Mason, 2002; Padgett, 2017). In following a generic qualitative approach, we used these guides to focus our interviews on gathering real-world descriptions from Project participants about the array of roles and responsibilities they played as SMHP, to detail what factors impacted their daily work, and to identify how their PLC participation shaped their efforts to build their professional capacity over time.

Interviews and procedures. During the Project's first year, we completed one round of interviews with participants: once in the fall of 2015, once in winter of 2016, and once in summer of 2016. In total, we conducted 34 interviews during the Project's first year–12 in the fall, 10 in the winter, and 12 in the spring and summer. Following the resignation of one of our interviewers from the Project leadership team, two interviews were not completed during winter 2016, leaving interviews for two participants incomplete. We completed interviews with all twelve of the remaining participants in spring and summer 2016.

Drawing on the expertise of the PLC Project's leadership team, as well as the research literature on teacher PLCs, we developed interview guides for each round of interviews. I (Andrew Brake) drafted the initial interview guides then consulted with members of the Project leadership team for feedback and final revision. We focused interview questions for each round on how participants described their professional roles and responsibilities throughout the year, the district, school, and individual factors they believed played an important role in conditioning their daily work, and the ways in which their participation in the yearlong PLC Project shaped their professional capacity building efforts in the face of these conditions. Sample interview questions for each round of interviews are provided in Table 1.

Table 1: Year 1 Sample Interview Questions: Times 1, 2, & 3

Time 1: Fall 2015
- How would you describe your job? Walk me through a typical day or a typical week.   *- How does your work relate to those you work with (including students, teachers, parents and administrators)?*   *- What are some of the challenges and successes you experience as a social worker in your school?*   *- Now that the year has begun, how effective have you been feeling at work? Please explain.*   *- Talk about your knowledge, skills, and experience with evidence based practice on your job.*   *- How stressful would you describe your job at this point in the year? Please explain.*   *- What goals and opportunities do you have to improve your practice this year? Please explain.*   *- What goals do you have for the PLC Project this year? What are your hopes for this experience?*
Time 2: Winter 2016
- Now that we are halfway through the school year, how effective have you been feeling at work? Please explain.   *- How stressful would you describe your job at this point in the year? Please explain.*   *- What are some challenges and successes you have been experiencing as a social worker so far this year? Please explain.*   *- How has your knowledge, skills, and experience with EBP changed, if at all? Please explain.*   *- Talk about the PLC Project you are developing this year. What are you trying to accomplish?*   *- How helpful have the online PLC workshops been so far this year? Please explain.*   *- How helpful has your PLC mentor group been so far this year? Please explain.*
Time 3: Summer 2016
- Now that the school year is over, how effective did you feel at work this year? Please explain.   *- How stressful would you describe your job overall this year? Please explain.*   *- What were some of the most significant challenges and successes you had this this year? Please explain.*   *- Has your knowledge, skills, and experience with EBP changed, since our last interview? Please explain.*   *- What stands out as your most important lessons from the PLC Project this year? Please explain.*   *- How helpful have the online PLC workshops been so far this year? Please explain.*   *- How helpful has your PLC mentor group been this year? Please explain.*

As the lead qualitative researcher for the study, and this paper's first author, I (Andrew Brake) conducted 18 of the 34 interviews for this study. I (Michael Kelly), conducted nine of the interviews, with the remaining seven interviews conducted by the three additional members of the Project's leadership team. Each interview took between 30 and 60 minutes to complete, allowing for sufficient time for rapport building and follow-up questions between interviewers and participants. All interviews were audio-recorded. Audio files were given a unique study identification number and transcribed verbatim by graduate and undergraduate student research assistants. Having received full approval by the lead university's ethics

review board, all members of the Project's leadership team, as well as student research assistants, completed thorough trainings on research ethics as required for approval by the lead university's IRB.

I (Andrew Brake) also led the development of this study's qualitative design, data gathering strategies, and analysis. With over a decade of experience in qualitative research I trained all four of the members of the PLC Project leadership team in effective interviewing techniques prior to and after each round of interviews. Trainings focused on techniques including: 1) maintaining confidentiality and protect participant anonymity; 2) interview probing to seek clarification and reach saturation; 3) knowing how to identify social desirability response bias to help respondents avoid this tendency during interviews; and 4) using field notes to a) identify initial patterns in participant responses, b) document inconsistencies or concerns during data gathering, and c) reflect on and identify patterns in participant responses for follow-up when developing interview guides for subsequent interviews (Padgett, 2017). In an effort to increase trustworthiness by reducing potential researcher reactivity and respondent social desirability bias (Padgett, 2017), I also took careful efforts in how I matched Project interviewers and participants. Specifically, I ensured that no leadership team members interviewed participants in the same mentor groups that they helped facilitate throughout the first year of the PLC Project. This enabled participants to openly discuss their experiences with the Project and their PLC mentor groups with interviewers; interviewers who had little to no knowledge of the professional and interpersonal dynamics that unfolded within each PLC mentor group throughout the year, dynamics that may have had the potential to reveal important insights that may have shaped participants' experiences in the PLC. Additionally, I took further efforts to minimize bias and increase rigor and trustworthiness during the data analysis phase of this study, outlined below.

Data Analysis

Following a generic qualitative approach (Kahlke, 2014), I (Andrew Brake) led the analysis of this study using an inductive thematic analysis (Costa, Breda, Pinho, Bakas, & Durão, 2016; Percy et al., 2015). Through this approach I identified themes and subthemes to describe PLC Project participants' roles and responsibilities as SMHP, the array of factors that conditioned their practice, and how the PLC shaped their professional capacity building efforts over time. I first began analysis during the data collection process, using a combination of field notes and peer debriefing strategies with interviewers after each round of interviews (Padgett, 2017). During monthly leadership team meetings, I asked Project interviewers to reflect on their interviews and identify patterns related to the study's research questions as well as to identify novel observations that emerged throughout the process of data gathering. This process was repeated after each round of interviews. Doing so enabled us to iteratively develop interview guides in preparation for each round of interviews with interview questions that were closely tied to the study's research questions, previous research conducted on PLCs, and the extant patterns in responses that we began to observe throughout the year-long data gathering process.

After data collection was complete, I followed a step-by-step inductive analysis procedure similar to that outlined by Percy et al. (2015). To begin, I first loaded all transcribed interviews into the qualitative analysis software package NVivo10. I then read all interviews from start to finish and began to identify meaningful phrases, sentences, and paragraphs from each round of interviews. After this initial read, I then read through the transcripts again and highlighted the meaningful data most relevant to the research questions and began to code it according to relevant patterns. Initially using Project participants'

language to define each code, once these items of data began to cluster into specific patterns through my second read, I began to assemble these patterns into second and, in certain cases, third level codes. Each time I assembled these second and third level codes, I redefined the initial codes using more field-specific language commonly used by school mental health researchers, policy makers, and practice experts, such as district leaders and principals, who are typically charged with leading educator professional development trainings. Ultimately, overarching themes were developed with corresponding subthemes that revealed important insights about how SMHP participants experienced the PLC Project throughout its first year.

To illustrate an example of the generic qualitative inductive thematic analysis process that I used, during first round interviews we asked Project participants the following question: "*How would you describe your job? Walk me through a typical day or a typical week*." In analyzing participant responses to this question, I first read through all transcripts. I then began to note the concrete examples that participants used to highlight specific tasks or activities related to how they described the primary purpose of their jobs, the major tasks and responsibilities in which they were charged, and how supported they perceived their school and district to be in their efforts to enhance students' SEMH at the start of the school year. Identifying direct quotes relevant to this initial code, clear patterns about the purpose, activities, and support that PLC participants broadly experienced as SMHP at the start of the PLC Project began to emerge from my analysis of the first round interviews. Identifying broad patterns from these data I then began to cluster these patterns to form more abstract descriptors across these patterns.

From these I then identified "patterns of patterns" to identify an overarching theme coded as Professional Roles and Responsibilities, with corresponding subthemes, identified at the start of the PLC. This overarching theme was defined along three subthemes: (1) Professional Vision—defined as the professional vision that Project SMHP saw as their most important professional role, (2) Professional Positioning—defined as the ways in which their school positioned SMH as a priority in school policy and practice, and (3) Professional Responsibilities—defined as the major committees, activities, and tasks that SMHP PLC participants engaged in at their jobs. Together, this overarching theme and corresponding subthemes had specific participant quotes that I identified which elucidated the definition and helped to reveal the scope and substance of each theme and subtheme (Percy et al., 2015).

This analytic process was repeated for each of the three rounds of transcribed interviews. After, thematic analysis of all three rounds of interviews were complete, I then conducted an additional thematic read of patterns across all three times points to identify and describe broad themes related to participant experiences over time during the first year of the PLC. Additionally, in an effort to limit interpretive bias, I discussed preliminary findings with the Project leadership team during quarterly leadership team meetings. Finally, as an expert check, these findings were also presented by the authors and discussed at national and local SEMH research and practice conferences.

Results

As the PLC Project began, we identified three specific themes in analyzing the first round interviews related to the first research question (How do SMHP view their primary professional roles, responsibilities, and capacities in schools?). Specifically, at the start of the Project, all participants described: (1) the central role they played as one of the key SMHP in their respective schools, (2) the autonomy they typically experienced in their professional responsibilities, and (3) how (often infrequently) they viewed themselves as school leaders despite their important roles and responsibilities. Next, our analysis revealed three themes related to the second research question (What individual, school, and district factors condition

their day-to-day practices and efforts to enhance their professional capacity?) Specifically, participants described their experiences as SMHP related to: (1) their limited individual self-efficacy in leading school-wide Evidence Based Practice (EBP), (2) the low priority that their school administrators placed on SEMH services and supports in their schools, and (3) the lack of SEMH professional development opportunities that were available to them in their school districts. Lastly, we identified three themes from the final round of interviews related to the last research question (How does participation in a yearlong PLC for SMHP shape the professional capacity-building efforts of SMHP?). Specifically, participants described how their experiences of collaborating with PLC colleagues shaped (1) their understanding and use of EBP; (2) their professional resilience; and (3) their connection to reliable, resourced colleagues who helped rejuvenate their continuous reflective practice. Together, by the end of the Project's first year, participants revealed important insights about the school contexts and conditioning factors that impacted them, the capacity building opportunities they sought, the ways in which the PLC Project enabled them to collaborate with colleagues who shared similar professional development goals.

PLC Participant Roles and Responsibilities: Essential, Trusted, and Underutilized

As the PLC Project began our analysis revealed three themes from first round interviews related to the professional roles and responsibilities that participants played in their respective schools. Specifically, participants described their roles and responsibilities as essential, trusted, and underutilized in their schools. First, all participants identified their role as essential to the delivery of important SEMH services in their schools, describing themselves as one of the key staff members in their school responsible for delivering and coordinating an array of services and supports. One participant, a SSW in a large suburban middle school that serves over 2,500 students, the large majority of whom are low-income first generation immigrant families, explained the extensive and multi-faceted roles and responsibilities of her job.

> I start off my day checking in with various students…I also have our [grade level] Problem Solving Team...once a month, we're now doing a Building Problem Solving Team…the Emotional Supports Program…the Structured Classroom, it's for students with autism that have needs…and then there's a couple of cognitively delayed classrooms…There's six social workers [at this school] …I also am a member of the TASC team…that's trying to improve our school climate…next week I'm joining our School Improvement Committee…I also have twenty-some IEP kids on my caseload…three students with 504's…I do groups...that are in the co-taught classroom mostly…and we have a social skills group, anger coping, we have CBITS…I have twelve regular groups…I also have the alternative [discipline] classroom…in addition to handling the crisis and scheduling.

Thus as one of only six SSW on staff serving a large student population, this SSW highlighted her essential role in delivering and coordinating a wide array of responsibilities she led in delivering and coordinating SEMH services to best meet her students' needs.

Second, project participants described a theme related to being a highly trusted staff member in the school, particularly in the high degree of trust that their administrators had in their many roles and responsibilities at their schools. This trust was especially expressed through the extensive professional autonomy given to them by their administrators, autonomy which conveyed confidence in their clinical expertise, effective decision-making and

professional responsiveness with addressing students' SEMH needs. During her first round interview, for example, one SSW at a suburban elementary school described the autonomy of her role as well as the trust her administrator expressed by encouraging her to be a visible, active presence in all aspects of the school community and in the range of SEMH issues and services that the school addressed.

> [I'm] definitely a systems social worker. I like to be everywhere. In previous administrations when it was less "systems" I think I'd have more difficulty because I think their approach was more to stay in your room and just work. But now…I'm encouraged to go be in the classroom, to be at recess, be in the lunchroom, be a part of everything and not be seen as the, you know, as a separate entity, but as part of the school…some administrators will let me define my role…[but] I like to be in the front because I know where to go with the other kids and then I can travel on my own…being there when the family is there, talking when the principal is there, the secretary is there… with the issues that are going on with kids now, with the bullying, with the safety, those kind of things, I feel like I like to have to be a part of things.

Thus, specifically comparing her previous administrator's approach to that of her current administrator, this Project participant described how her current administrator's trust in her was expressed through the autonomy she encouraged in her to be a visible, integrated, and skilled clinician whose expertise and leadership roles and responsibilities were essential to addressing many student SEMH issues at the top of their school's priority lists.

Lastly, despite the essential and trusted roles and responsibilities they played in their schools, we also identified a third theme related to how participants perceived themselves as leaders in their schools. Specifically, during first round interviews few PLC Project participants described themselves as key leaders in their school and rarely believed they were being utilized in their schools as such. The effect of this self-perception meant that most Project participants, despite being essential and trusted by administrators, described their roles and responsibilities as far outside the central mission, goals, and tasks prioritized by their administrators and schools. In fact, when asked what specific leadership roles they believed they played in their schools, only three participants used the term "leader" to describe their roles. Moreover, only four gave examples of school-wide (Tier 1) initiatives they described as indicative of the responsibilities they had in their school. One elementary SSW in Chicago bluntly described her own experience as being underutilized in her school, and the subsequent negative effect this had on her self-perception. "In my school, there is no leadership possibility at all…it's all reactivity, in the moment, without follow through…that's my biggest challenge right now." Thus, for many Project participants, because they viewed their roles and responsibilities as an underutilized in their schools, they often believed that they played a largely passive role in their schools, one that was positioned largely to respond to urgent SEMH needs as they emerged, rather than taking on proactive roles in SEMH prevention initiatives. Moreover, in perceiving themselves as underutilized, our analysis revealed a range of district, school, and individual factors that further conditioned their daily practice experiences; conditioning factors that amplified the difficulties Project participants often experienced in trying to build their professional capacity throughout the year.

Factors Conditioning Daily Practice and Capacity Building Efforts

In analyzing first round interviews we also identified important themes related to how participants described a range of individual, school, and district factors they saw as most important in conditioning their professional capacity building efforts to lead SEMH initiatives in their schools. Specifically, three themes emerged related to: (1) participants' individual sense of self-efficacy in leading EBP initiatives, (2) their school administrator's prioritization of SEMH services in their schools, and (3) the availability of district professional development opportunities to improve their practice. Together, these three themes highlighted serious implications for participants' abilities to build their professional capacities and signaled important motivations for why they sought out the PLC Project to help in their capacity building efforts.

Individual self-efficacy leading EBP initiatives. At the individual level, participants most cited their limited sense of self-efficacy in leading EBP initiatives in their schools as the leading individual factor that conditioned their capacity-building efforts. Specifically, many described the lack of knowledge or skills they had with EBP, or a lack of confidence they had in being able to effectively lead SEMH EBP in schools. This lack of knowledge, skills, and confidence was particularly pronounced when they also perceived limited commitment to SEMH EBP among their teacher and administrator colleagues. One PLC Project participant, for example, a SSW whose weekly responsibilities were split between multiple schools in Chicago, gave one example.

> I feel like what my role is being pushed to do is evidence-based…[but] I feel like I don't know what I'm doing…I have mixed feelings about evidence-based practice…every client, every person, is different. And it may not specifically work for that individual...my lessons have become very structured, very regimented…[but] I guess there is no *process*…I am going to change it to meet the needs of my students, which means I need to translate lessons, or break it down.

Thus lacking both a clear understanding and a sense of self-efficacy with EBP, this SSW believed that even though EBP approaches helped structure her practices she seemed unclear about their utility and was skeptical that EBP could meet the unique individual challenges that her students faced. Additionally, in schools where participants perceived a lack of commitment for SEMH EBP among their teacher and administrator colleagues, many participants described facing significant challenges in effectively leading such initiatives in their schools. Describing her experience trying to gather assessment and evaluation data for a school-wide EBP classroom behavior management system, one elementary SSW in Chicago, gave an example of the challenges she faced in trying to lead this effort in her school.

> It's hard to collect data when everywhere you go in the building there is different rules and different consequences…you know, someone is giving fake French fries [incentives], someone else is giving forty dollars [a different incentive], and then taking it away…someone might be rewarding [positive behaviors], and some people might be *causing* [negative] responses…I think that's a barrier, because the school is on a hundred pages instead of on the same page.

Thus even for SMHP trusted by her principal to lead her school in training and supporting staff in this school-wide classroom evidence-based behavioral management system, because of a lack of commitment expressed by her teacher colleagues to properly implement this initiative in her school this SSW faced significant challenges in effectively leading this

initiative. In turn, she was left feeling largely unsupported and deeply discouraged in her capacity to take on such an important leadership role in her school.

Administrator priorities with SEMH. In addition to their individual self-efficacy, at the school level, all twelve participants described a clear theme related to the central role of their administrator as a critical factor in shaping their capacity building efforts. Specifically, Project participants explained that the more administrators articulated that SEMH services were a top priority in their school's mission and goals, the more often they described feeling supported in leading SEMH services in their schools. Conversely, the more participants described perceiving their administrator as making the delivery of effective SEMH services a low school priority, the less likely they described seeking out new ways to build their capacity to lead SEMH initiatives in their schools. One elementary school SSW explained the benefits of working with an administrator who supported her SEMH expertise and efforts.

> [My assistant principal says…] "my social worker is my right hand" … at my school, administration doesn't really have a lot of time to go in the classrooms…[but] I really get to see different views and different perspectives…like, social and emotional perspectives of the students and, also, of that perspective of what happens in the classroom and with teachers…she is really good about coming to me and be[ing] like, "look, this is what is going on with the student..." and then sends me to figure out how we can support…what is the root cause of what is happening.

On the other hand, in schools where Project participants believed that their administrator did not make advancing SEMH services a top priority in the school, they often perceived little support and encouragement to build these professional capacities. One SSW participant summarized her experiences in stark contrast to many of her PLC Project colleagues. "I feel like there's so many things that we can do differently [in my school]…we have *so* many bodies in this building…staff, like, ESPs, which is security, at least five of them, whose role is to be on the floor at all times…with 575 kids…we do *not* have to be as reactive as we are...we are definitely *able* to be proactive." Perceiving her school and administration as overwhelmingly more invested in having sufficient security staff, rather than investing in advancing SEMH services and personnel, this SSW saw her work as a low priority among her administrators and thus she had little professional incentive to work proactively or preventively in her school.

Limited district professional development opportunities. Lastly, at the district level, participants also described a key factor in conditioning their capacity building efforts to lead SEMH initiatives in their schools. Specifically, they identified the limited professional development opportunities provided by their district as a major theme in constraining their ability to do so. One SSW, for example, who worked in a suburban high school serving largely low-income families explained,

> On the district level they're doing some school climate stuff…and the person who's facilitating the Student Assistance Team meeting is kind of in charge…They're doing it from like, "well, we need to have a district wide [model]," which I agree, each school needs something, but, if you look at the student population [at my school], it's so different, like the needs at East are a lot higher than they are at West…if you come up with *one* plan for the entire district, I don't think it's a one size fits all type of thing.

Unable to meet the unique professional development needs of social workers across the district, such as those of SSW serving higher concentrations of low-income families, many participants reported finding little support and few opportunities to build their professional capacity through professional development initiatives offered by their district. Instead, frustrated with limited district professional development opportunities, many participants looked to the PLC Project to help fill the gap.

Hope for the PLC: Advanced Skills, Effective Advocacy, and Compatible Colleagues

Faced with a range of individual, school, and district factor that often served as barriers to their effective practice our analysis also revealed an important theme related the hopes the Project participants had for the PLC despite these. Specifically, during their first round interviews, participants identified hopes rooted in the individual, school, and district barriers they described regularly facing. Additionally, they were also motivated by three subthemes that we identified related to their ongoing search to develop advanced skills, to find new ways to advocate for enhanced SEMH services in schools, and to surround themselves with colleagues who shared an understanding of the importance of their efforts.

Advanced skills. At the top of their list of hopes PLC participants frequently described one subtheme related to their desire for the PLC to help them advance their skills to more effectively lead SEMH initiatives in their respective schools. One elementary SSW explained, "my goal is on the Tier 2 supports, and how to track those interventions." Another sought to develop skills that would be beneficial school-wide. "My PLC goal would be creating systematic Tier 1 services…really support teachers on those classroom behaviors and making sure that we're building the right classroom culture and climate…to give them tools and resources so that they can manage a bunch of behaviors on their own." Another SSW in a Chicago high school, explained, "a lot of the training that I do with the teachers [at my school], is around being trauma-informed and I love all the resources [offered in the PLC]…I can then say, 'how could I incorporate this, or, have I done it in a way with teachers, have I reached them?' Just, kind of like trying to push myself." Many participants also hoped the PLC would help them strengthen their Tier 3 interventions targeted for specific students with more complex needs. As a one elementary SMHP explained, her goals at her school for the year focused on, "solution focused therapy…doing more of the clinical Tier 3 stuff." Together, the array of opportunities to build advanced skills that participants sought in the PLC underscored the many areas SMHPs in the Project were already engaged in at their schools as well as those they hoped would help them make a greater impact in their work.

Effective advocacy. Participants also described a second subtheme related to their PLC hopes. Specifically, they described their hope that the PLC would help them learn how to more effectively advocate for SEMH services in their schools by enabling them to become more knowledgeable of effective practices and their potential impact. One SSW, for example, explained that she hoped to learn from the PLC how to better advocate with her teacher and administrator colleagues to become more trauma-informed in their practice to more effectively identify student needs, manage student behaviors, and improve their discipline practices in their classrooms.

> While we do a lot of things really well [at my school]. I think where they're behind is in acknowledging all the research around ACE [Adverse Childhood Experiences] scores…trauma informed interventions, how that affects

learning…The network does not prioritize, nor does it even sometimes acknowledge, the way that this affects students…If we look at all of our data, right? It's *always* that the Black campuses that have the higher detentions, the lower retention, the lower promotion, higher expulsion, always. And when the question is always raised…Why? What is being done differently within this group of schools to acknowledge that our students are different and that we need to meet them where they are … [my school network] really brushes that question aside.

Faced with the challenge of trying to educate skeptical colleagues on the emotional and behavioral responses that students often exhibit in their classrooms as a result of trauma, this SSW hoped that working with PLC colleagues would help her be more able to effectively advocate for improvements in staff knowledge and skills that could enhance students' coping related to trauma as well as enable her teacher colleagues to better avoid exacerbating many of the social inequalities that specific groups of students are more likely to experience in school.

Compatible colleagues. Lastly, in becoming a part of the PLC many participants described a third subtheme related to their hopes for joining. Specifically, they described a strong desire to join with a community of compatible, like-minded colleagues who they believed would share professional resources, help them manage work-related stressors, and regularly re-invigorate their professional capacity building efforts. One SSW explained, "I've been doing this a long time and…it gets a little stagnant and, this is a way to talk with other professionals, and just sort of, like, re-fresh." Another echoed this hope and looked forward to the shared community of colleagues who understood her job and the professional challenges they all faced. "I want to kind of expand my palette," she said, "to see how other social workers are feeling, what kind of issues they're facing," and emphasized, "you know, the *camaraderie*." As the first year of the PLC Project began, in addition to setting out to advance their skills and become stronger advocates, this third subtheme highlighted how important joining a community of colleagues in the PLC would be in rejuvenating their passion for their practice and for affirming their professional goals despite the many barriers they often faced on the job.

Unanticipated Turns Mid-Year: Embracing Camaraderie, Re-Envisioning Collaboration

As the Project progressed through it first year, participants met four times monthly for PLC online workshops and twice for monthly PLC mentor groups by midyear. Halfway through the school year, we conducted a second round of interviews with participants. By this round of interviews participants were well under-way in planning the SEMH initiatives they sought to develop at their schools through the support they experienced in the PLC. In analyzing these interviews, a clear theme related to the strong sense of professional camaraderie were quickly discovering with fellow Project participants; camaraderie they embraced almost immediately and which they often found to be an unexpected positive turn from their previous professional development experiences and capacity building efforts. Unlike the district trainings or professional development conferences they described attending in the past, participants spoke often and enthusiastically about finding in the PLC a group of professional colleagues who authentically understood their daily work. They also valued how these colleagues provided useful resources to one another, helped regularly recalibrate their professional priorities, and mutually encouraged and affirmed their common

capacity-building efforts. One elementary SSW highlighted the positive benefits of joining the PLC, particularly becoming a part of a group of SMH colleagues who sought to teach, learn, and share their knowledge and skills, who authentically understood the unique daily dimensions of her job, and who stimulated her thinking about how to more effectively support her students.

> It's been great, because we're *taught*…that's how I see the [monthly skills] workshops…it's information and it's constantly somebody talking about our field, because especially in elementary level, we don't get to have that conversation, steady social work time. So that's why I like it, because it's like, "oh my gosh, you are speaking my language," and hearing about events and things that are going on in the field, and to me that is *so* valuable. And hearing about what somebody tried, and didn't try, or wants to do…it's just very thought provoking because I'm taking my kids, and in my head I'm going, "Mmhmm that would work for this one."

Another participant shared this appreciation of the PLC and added how its regular meetings and structured format helped her frequently recalibrate her professional priorities amidst her busy day-to-day job. "I'm often just like going, going, going," she said, "and I do this PLC…I find that it helps me refocus on, 'okay, *here* is what I need to do'…just being caught up in the day-to-day of this [work] I lose sight of those bigger picture things that *this* is what I'm trying to accomplish." Another participant agreed and described how the dedicated time in the PLC helped her feel positive and optimistic about her career, even if her daily work did not. "I'm in that space and think having these conversations and meeting with these guys makes me realize how much more of a priority this needs to be. Because this makes me happy and being here [at this school] does not, so let me make this more of a priority because this makes me happy and I only want to do those things that make me happy." Thus, building off the newfound camaraderie they discovered in the PLC, participants revealed how their PLC experience helped them find a valuable group of colleagues and experiences that they often did not find on a daily basis in their jobs. As well, the experience of the PLC also enabled many participants to envision new potential for professional collaboration. In particular, participants described two additional subthemes related to the impact of the camaraderie and collaboration they were experiencing in the PLC. Highlighting how their experiences in the PLC helped them to (1) continuously engage in self-reflective practice with fellow SMHP, as well as (2) reconsider their understanding of EBP in ways they had previously not thought possible, together, these experiences with PLC collaboration boosted their sense of professional self-efficacy and began to help participants re-envision new possibilities for enhancing their capacity building efforts.

Collaboration and continuous reflective practice. In describing how they often navigate the stressful daily demands of their work, during second round interviews participants also described an important theme—how collaboration in the PLC provided them critical time, dedicated space, and committed professional colleagues that helped them continuously reflect on new ways to improve. One SSW explained, "that is something you don't have time for as a sort of day-to-day practice; but having set aside time to think things through in a more theoretical way and really consider, for example, the information about trauma…where you can [say], what we need help to do [as a school] is really to be trauma informed." Another SSW in a suburban elementary school, echoed the value of having rare, dedicated time to become more reflective in the PLC. "Just setting aside that time to be reflective and stop and think, I think that's a piece that a lot of social workers don't have."

Lastly, another SSW in a Chicago elementary school explained how having reflective space in the PLC with her colleagues helped reaffirm and recalibrate her professional priorities, especially when the frustrations of her current job helped her realize that she needed to seek new professional opportunities. "I really enjoy talking to both [my PLC colleagues and my PLC leader]," she said:

> Because they help me. One: they care. Right? And they become grounding for me, they help me put things in perspective, you know? When we talk, they both were like... 'congratulations that you're at a space that you're able to recognize that' and I'm like, 'oh, okay, so it's not as bad as I think it is.'

Not only did collaboration in the PLC enable participants to share and gain valuable knowledge and skills, participants also highlighted that the PLC enabled them to carve out a consistent time in their busy schedules to pause and reflect on ways to improve their practice, to recalibrate their professional priorities, and at times identify when particular workplace experiences were no longer fulfilling their professional expectations.

Collaboration and reconsidering EBP. In addition to having time, space, and colleagues to help them become more reflective, a second subtheme of collaboration was highlighted by participants. Specifically, they described how collaborating with PLC colleagues helped them reconsider their understanding of EBP as well as develop improved self-efficacy in the use of data and evidence-informed decision-making. Moreover, they explicitly described how working with the group of colleagues that they found in the PLC, colleagues, who shared similar goals was essential to this process. One SSW described how she came to embrace the concept of becoming more, "evidence informed," rather than feeling confined by the often-unrealistic and regimented fidelity expectations typical of previous evidence-based interventions she had tried to implement before. Highlighting one valuable lesson from a PLC monthly skills workshop she explained, "I think the book and the lesson on evidence-based practice was *so* valuable. The message is: "take your own data…you have a lot of data at your fingertips, and it's *how you use it*, how comfortably you get using it, instead of you thinking you have to pull out the most fidelity off the shelf." Another agreed and described how she reevaluated her previous understanding of the standards of EBP as a result of her PLC experience.

> That's kind of a frustration that I find over and over again. I have a specific question that I'm trying to answer and…I end up finding really vague information or…I can't find the program, I can't buy it if I want to, it's not published…or that it's very expensive or it's designed to be two days after school. Well…I think sometimes I try to be use better more evidence-based informed things and *now* I keep coming back to the *middle ground*. "Oh I can't do that, but maybe I can take something from this."

Another high school SSW reiterated this frustration and echoed how collaborating in the PLC helped her become more self-confident in how data-driven decision-making could improve the work of her district and school.

> With my experience [in the district] … what's been in place for the last like four-five years…referrals…some years is great, some years is not so great, it just really depends on who's facilitating those referrals. So, my idea is having

the referrals for Think First[1] and CBITS[2] go through the Student System Team. Because then we can track it and there will be a little more control over like who gets referred, not just random, like a Dean of Discipline, [who] thinks they're going to refer [anyone].

Just halfway through the year, many of the initial hopes and goals expressed by PLC participants at the start of the school year were beginning to take hold, through a mutually reinforcing process of camaraderie and collaboration. As participants found a group of professional colleagues with whom they shared similar hopes and goals, they soon began to collaboratively use the dedicated space, time, and resources of the PLC to collaborate, reflect, clarify understanding, share resources, and re-envision new possibilities for their professional practice, steadily gaining confidence in their own skills and effectiveness along the way.

Year-End Professional Capacities: Resilient, Resourced, and Reflective

As the first year of the PLC ended, analysis of their round interviews revealed three final themes related to how the PLC's mutually reinforcing process of camaraderie and collaboration helped participants to build their professional capacities over time. Specifically, participants noted how, as the year unfolded, the PLC: (1) strengthened participants' professional resilience in coping with workplace isolation and stress; (2) provided them reliable, resource-rich colleagues who openly shared and drew upon on one another's SEMH expertise; and (3) deepened their rejuvenating practice of regular professional reflection. Together, by the end of the Project's first year, these formative experiences expanded participants' professional capacities and underscored a range of professional benefits from their participation in the PLC.

Strengthening professional resilience. As the lead SMHP in their schools, many participants at the start of the year detailed a variety of work-related challenges and stressors including professional isolation, limited school and district support and prioritization of SEMH services in schools, and varying senses of self-efficacy in their professional capacities, all of which were conditioned by a combination of individual, school, and district factors. However, by the end of the first year of the Project, participants described how the PLC provided a community of colleagues that helped guide one another in how to protect against these daily challenges and stressors. One SSW described how the PLC facilitated this process. "I think [the PLC Project] stresses that…[as] school-based mental health professionals we can't do it in isolation...there's a lot of time for discussion. It's a very non-intimidating atmosphere." Another agreed and added how the support she received from PLC colleagues was essential for her own emotional wellbeing on the job.

It's been awesome…there are other people struggling with things and wanting to see data and improvement around the practice and the work itself…there are some things in my internship, or my graduate level work, that really didn't prepare me for what I'm doing now…I'm looking at the PLC like a support group, for social workers. But, I feel like social workers have to be here for parents…have to be here for teachers, we have to be here for students, and then we have to be here for the administration…At the end of the day, who is

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[1] An evidence-based school-wide anger management curriculum for middle and high school students.
[2] An evidence-based school-based cognitive behavioral intervention for trauma-exposed children.

there for the social worker, who takes on everybody else's stuff?…So when I need to bounce back, I'm doing *this* group.

Furthering the value of the support she gained from PLC colleagues, another SSW echoed the impact the PLC had in making her more resilient to the challenges and stressors of the job. "The PLC provides this like, glimmer hope for me…just super supportive…I think there's a level of support and then you feel like you're not in this alone…figuring out how to continue to be strong in spite of, you know, *everything* that you do." In both reducing the professional isolation they experienced over time and creating a dedicated space for SMHP reflection and self-care, by the end of the first year participants described their experience in the PLC as essential for helping to create a community of SMH colleagues who shared in the important work of creating a protective space to enhance participant's individual and collective resilience to the daily stressors of their jobs.

Reliable resources. The range of knowledge, skills, and resources that participants openly and reliably brought and shared with one another during the PLC was a second theme related to the benefits of PLC described by Project participants. One SSW explained how being part of the network of SMHPs in the PLC had become a resource for new ways to do her work. "Overall the process has been really helpful…being connected to other school social workers…just having the professional network…to bounce ideas off people who are in this specific role in the schools…it's been very helpful to have this group and this has shown me a way that it can be done." Another high SSW in Chicago added that the small size of the PLC, as well as the generosity of PLC colleagues in sharing resources, were an aspect of the PLC that she highly valued. "I did like having the additional check-in and just working in a smaller group so you can get a lot more questions answered, and the PLC leaders and my PLC colleagues were great at sharing resources. So *that* was definitely, really helpful." As well, another SSW noted the knowledgeable, non-intimidating, and open approach that her colleagues in the PLC took with one another.

> [My PLC colleague and my PLC mentor] are both so knowledgeable…[My colleague] is a, just an expert. I think the world of her, and she never makes me feel demeaning in the way she talks to you, she just knows everything, but she's not a know-it-all…and [my PLC mentor] with wanting to help with resources and knowing that she has access to all the stuff that we might not have access to, and being willing to share that.

Finally, a SSW in an elementary school with over two decades of experience highlighted that the PLC had become a regular, central place that she could count on to re-energize her drive to bring new approaches back to her school. "That's why I love PLC," she said:

> Because we have that connection…because it is important to get together…it creates this epicenter of social work, and I love that…it's energizing…I find it very inspiring, then I go in the next day…and it's like you're filled with all these ideas.

Rejuvenating reflection. In addition to the resilience and resources generated in the PLC, by year's end participants looked back on their experiences in the PLC and highlighted a final key theme related to how the practice of regular self-reflection helped rejuvenate participants' commitment to their professional practice and to the motivating factors that initially brought them to the profession of school social work. During mid-year interviews participants revealed that the practice of regular reflection helped spark new ways to improve

their practice and reaffirmed and recalibrated their professional priorities. By year's end, however, participants also described how the PLC help encourage participants to regularly listen to and reflect on their daily practice. In so doing, by year's end this continuous practice helped them rejuvenate their investment in the core practices and values that initially motivated their commitment to SSW. One SSW explained, "I think there's been a lot of opportunities [in the PLC] … I liked being able to hear…what people are actually doing…nobody wants to be forced to do anything…it makes you really kind of show what you're doing and really reflect on it." Another participant echoed this benefit and drew a connection to how the PLC increased her motivation for having a greater impact in her work. "Yeah, I definitely think it's made me more reflective…and that might take us to being more…doing bigger things, for all students." Lastly, a third SSW emphasized,

> We did a lot of stuff in the PLC that made me more cognizant of the interactions I'm having with students…because when you're in a school and you're alone sometimes you lose the clinical piece of it…I think being part of the PLC helped get me more back into that mindset, which was great…brings all the islands together…it makes you feel connected to other social workers and helps you think about your work in schools. I mean, it was "cool" for a lack of a better word…I think it reconnects you with the mission.

Taken together in one year, through the collegial connections they had found and developed with fellow participants, the PLC not only helped professionals feel less alone in their pursuit to build their professional capacity, it drew together many, often disconnected dimensions of their work and surrounded them with colleagues who supported one another in helping them cope with the challenges of their work, acted as resources for gaining valuable knowledge and skills, and routinely engaged them in reflective practices that rejuvenated their motivation to improve their practice and reconnect with the mission of the profession.

Discussion

This paper examines the experiences of SMHP in a yearlong PLC designed specifically for SSW. It highlights the ways in which participants' experiences in the PLC enhanced their sense of professional camaraderie with fellow SMHP and enabled them to collaborate in ways that helped them build their professional capacity and realize a greater sense of professional self-efficacy for leading their schools to improve SEMH services and supports in their schools. Together these findings are critical in light of what we know about contemporary SSW practice and the challenges of creating sustainable and effective professional development for SSW, using the PLC model as a potential framework to build on.

SSW survey research reveals that SSW consistently articulate feeling overburdened and marginalized within their schools, as they strive to meet numerous demands (Kelly et al., 2015; Sherman, 2016). This study highlights how PLC participation enabled the SSW involved in the Project to see these daily challenges as shared struggles with others, and to begin to notice how responses to these barriers evolved over time. The implementation of a project where the SSW in the PLC worked to change a school-wide problem also afforded them a chance to act on their sense of marginalization, and to instead view their work as part of a larger process of advocacy and capacity-building. Along the way, the SSW in the PLC articulated how this project continuously helped them find camaraderie with fellow SSW enabling them to collaborate to acquire new knowledge and skills and strengthen their sense of professional resilience and self-efficacy.

For many participants, interviews also revealed a sense of camaraderie that extended beyond sharing the foibles of their schools, or simply finding a space to vent about the day-to-day challenges of the job. This process of coming together was in itself significant in breaking down their sense of professional isolation and a chance to reconsider the value and impact of applying EBP to their daily practice and to learn new ways to advance SEMH across all three tiers of their schools MTSS. By drawing on SSW research and facilitating the very collaboration that research on PLC have identified as an essential mechanism for helping participants reach their PLC project goals (Graham, 2007; Nelson et al., 2008; Owen, 2014; Riveros et al., 2012), SSW in the PLCs appeared to endorse the value of becoming reflective practitioners who were able to enlarge their profile in their buildings by becoming more intentional about the work they did and why. These findings also indicate the strong possibility that sustainable and meaningful PLCs are feasible to implement with school mental health professionals, despite all the attendant logistical challenges that come with setting up PLCs in schools, as well as the open question about what specific mechanisms make PLCs "work" for educators and the need for further research to identify their impact (Hairon et al., 2017; Stoll & Louis, 2007; Vescio et al., 2008).

While there are many important findings highlighted by this study of SMHP PLCs, there are also limitations that readers should consider. First, we recognize that the participants who chose to join this PLC were a uniquely motivated group of SMHPs. While the added benefit of improving one's SMH practice may motivate some professionals to join a PLC, there were no added incentives for participation beyond this benefit. Participants did not receive compensation or continuing education credits for this study; in most cases they joined the PLC in search of other colleagues who shared similar frustrations with the profession and a deep desire to improve their professional experiences in skills. Indeed, not all SMHP or educators are so motivated. Thus, the promising findings from this study may be skewed toward the motivations expressed by the professionals in this study who were actively seeking opportunities they hoped to find in the PLC. Second, while we made concerted efforts to limit social desirability response bias, we recognize that some participants in the PLC Project may have not felt comfortable articulating areas of their PLC experience which could have been improved, or which were not beneficial to improving their practice. Lastly, while we recognize that findings from this study should not be generalized to other PLCs for SMHP they do point to important consistencies in the SSW professional development literature, as well as to larger theoretical explanations for why PLCs for SMHP may hold promise for enhancing their capacity building efforts.

Keeping this study's limitations in mind, our findings offer some explanations for why participants described such largely positive experience in the PLC. One explanation can be found in the burgeoning fields of social and adult learning theory (Bandura, 2001; Merriam, 2001; 2008; Mezirow, 1981). Research on social learning and adult learning may point to why participants in this PLC highlighted the broad array of positive effects of the PLC in building their professional capacity. Concerned with the agency and capacity of adults to exert control over the quality of their lives, Bandura's theory of adult learning (2001) suggests that adults use personal agency, proxy agency (by relying on others to act on ones' behalf), and collective agency (through socially coordinative and interdependent efforts) to exert control over their quality of their lives. Moreover, they do so with intentionality and forethought, self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness about their own capabilities, quality of functioning, and the meaning and purpose of their life pursuits (Bandura, 2001; Merriam, 2001; 2008; Mezirow, 1981). Thus, social and adult learning scholarship suggests that the experiences that participants in this Project described having in the PLC may have been because of its effectiveness at structuring and regularly bringing together a professional community for colleagues who relied on one another to collectively,

intentionally, and through a combination of focused and routine best-practices, help one another find ways to manage the professional challenges endemic to their professional roles and responsibilities, as well as to identify new opportunities for professional support and growth. Moreover, in light of the array of expectations, and the historic and contemporary individual, school, and district limitations often placed on SMHP to build their professional capacity and lead their schools in advancing SEMH services, the experiences that participants in this PLC described suggests that PLCs may be a particularly valuable and viable approach for building the professional capacity of SMHP.

Together, findings from this study highlight the experiences of SMHP in a PLC and underscore their potential for building the professional capacity of SSW in a time when leadership in advancing the SEMH wellbeing of children and youth in U.S. schools is in short supply. School administrators and district leaders play a key role in leading this effort as well. They are essential for supporting SSW professional development and advocating for greater attention and investment in school- and district-wide efforts to enhance the SEMH of students. Pre-service and post-service SSW training programs must also look closely at their philosophies of practice in working with adult learners to deepen their agency in the collaborative process of co-creating engaging professional development that authentically challenges SSW to improve their knowledge, skills, and impact in the real world of schools. Educators who acknowledge the need to reform SMHP professional development will likely find PLCs a valuable approach and will have greater success in improving the SEMH of students.

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