Differences in the implementation of learning communities:

An examination of the elements of collaborative work groups in two districts

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine professional community in two school districts through examination of the elements of collaborative work groups. Principal and teacher perceptions of collaborative work groups, teacher leadership, and the core of what is important were explored, specifically shared leadership, shared goals, and shared expertise. Findings revealed that although geographically close, the districts were philosophically miles apart in approach to learning communities. Findings provide a view into how successful and unsuccessful shared leadership, expertise, and goals are enacted.
Principals play a key role in the success or failure of professional learning communities (PLC) and “matter in the creation and long-term maintenance of professional learning communities” (Sparks, 2005, p. 157). Lack of administrative support is a stumbling block to the successful development of learning communities (Wells & Feun, 2007). Collaborative work requires a paradigm shift from viewing principals as the “leaders” of schools and teachers as the “implementers” to a practice of principals serving as “leaders of leaders” (Hipp & Huffman, 2007, p. 22). The new work of leaders in sharing leadership involves becoming designers, stewards, and teachers (Senge, 1990). Principals, as essential players in PLC success, provide direction for shared values (Huffman, 2003), develop the school community culture (Fleming & Leo, 1999), and serve as role models in the process, motivating teacher learning and providing supportive structural conditions (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Ontario Principal’s Council, 2009; Payne & Wolfson, 2000).

Traditional leaders view leadership as a top down process. Senge, Kleiner, Roberts, Ross, and Smith (1994) posited, “At its heart, this traditional view of leadership is based on assumptions of people’s powerlessness, their lack of personal vision and inability to master the forces of change, deficits which can be remedied only by a few great leaders” (p. 34). A basic PLC concept is the idea of developing shared leadership that moves beyond the need for principals to carry leadership alone (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008). Shared leadership requires a new culture of collective and collaborative processes rather than the traditional view of charismatic heroes.

The purpose of this qualitative two site case study research was to examine the differences in implementation of professional community, as voiced by principals and teachers who work in two small school districts and the ensuing implications of this implementation.
Perceptions of collaborative work groups, teacher leadership, and the core of what is important to the stakeholders was examined. Research questions included: (1) How do principals perceive the critical attributes of collaborative work groups? (2) How do teachers perceive the critical attributes of collaborative work groups? (3) What are the differences in how the principal supports the critical attributes of collaborative work groups as practiced in two small school districts?

We argue that whether the work groups are called professional learning communities, collaborative work groups, communities of practice, or critical friends groups, the practices are what define the success and extent of their impact on the school organization. Thus, the schools in the study will be analyzed not by the name to which they refer to the collaborative grouping but by the components of the group. For purposes of this study, that analysis will be framed in the work of Hord (1997, 1998, 2008) as discussed in the following review of literature.

**Review of Literature**

With the enactment of No Child Left Behind legislation, the call for accountability was met with implications for funding tied to the success or failure in meeting Adequate Yearly Progress (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001). NCLB has “compelled educators to examine what they do, how they do it and the effects it has on students” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p. 58). In 2010, the Common Core Standards Initiative (2010) moved to the educational forefront as states work toward developing core standards in math and in English language arts and reading (ELAR) that would better prepare American students for college and/or career. Porter, McMaken, Hwang, and Yang (2011) asserted, “The Common Core standards represent considerable change from what states currently call for in their standards and in what they assess” (p114). With this initiative, educators were faced with the ongoing push for increase
student achievement (NCLB) and the new call for curriculum realignment. Hipp and Huffman (2010) summarized the impact of the current demands on schools as follows:

With increased expectations for accountability in schools, concerns about administrator and teacher morale and retention, and the continuing challenge to address the needs of diverse and marginalized learners, the urgency of school reform calls school leaders to seek alternative ways to address these issues. (p. 1)

The question of how to bring about reform in the standards movement continues to be a primary concern to school personnel.

School reform is more prone to occur if discussions about current practices include questioning what is worth continuing and the presence of shared purposes are created (Hipp & Huffman, 2007). The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement (2009) purposed that “in the context of school improvement, Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) shift the focus of school reform from restructuring to reculturing” (p.1). Reculturing does not happen through fragmented attempts at change, but needs to be embedded within the daily work of educators (Hipp & Huffman, 2007).

The idea of professional learning communities, more informally known as collaborative work groups, has surfaced as a means for bringing about desirable and sustainable change. This review will examine the foundational theory and research which supports PLCs as a valid means of reforming a school from within. Moreover, the elements of PLCs will be used as the lens through which we examine the practices of the teacher work groups in this study.

**The Roots of Professional Learning Communities**

In order to understand the concept of professional learning communities, one must look at both research and theory from within and outside the realm of education. The concept of
professional learning communities has roots that can be traced to literature that represents the
work of individuals such as Judith Little (1982), Peter Senge (1990), Susan Rosenholtz (1989a,
1989b), and Etienne Wenger (1998). From these bodies of literature, the foundational concepts
of professional learning communities were derived.

One branch of the literature that forms the roots of the PLC concept is found in research
on the relationship between school improvement efforts and the relationships among teachers in
the workplace (Little, 1982, 2006). In schools that are more successful and adaptable, Little
(1982) found that “interaction about teaching is consciously and steadily focused on practice, on
what teachers do, with what aims, in what situations, with what materials, and with what
apparent results” (p. 334). By-products of such interactions included respect and fewer barriers
to discussion among teachers. These findings represent foundational aspects of professional
learning communities.

From Little’s research, we also discover other characteristics that would later be linked to
PLCs. Little (1982) indicated that professional development that was relevant and integral to
teaching was evidenced in successful schools. An avoidance of talk centered on teaching was
found in less successful schools and appeared to be tied to lack of reciprocity among teachers in
matters as small as lending/borrowing supplies. Another aspect of successful schools was the
inclusive nature of the faculties in their collective work. In schools in which the staff
demonstrated a high degree of collegiality, the principals endorsed and participated in the
collegial work of the staff. Kagan (1990) described these effective schools as ones that “share a
common professional culture,” which is demonstrated by the interactions of teachers on a daily
basis (p. 46). One of the contributions of Little’s research was the revelation that teacher
isolation was not conducive to school improvement, but that successful schools were often
characterized by professional collaboration. Schmoker (2005) described this seminal research as the beginnings of making a case for learning communities. The influence of Little’s research continues to be found in literature on learning communities.

Another influential study, conducted by Rosenholtz (1989a, 1989b), provided foundational support for the development of collaborative structures in the school setting. Rosenholtz’s study demonstrated that achieving high levels of collaboration among teachers benefited schools (Rosenholtz, 1989a, 1989b). From the study of 78 elementary schools in Tennessee, Rosenholtz (1989a) identified schools as high consensus schools and low consensus schools. In high-consensus schools, there was evidence of shared purposes and goals as well as collaboration in the development of policies and criteria for performance (Kagan, 1990). Collaboration in problem solving was found to be a key element for developing what Rosenholtz (1989a) referred to as a common technical culture. Low-consensus schools, in contrast, lacked the elements of collaborative practice that develops a shared technical culture. The result in low-consensus schools was an isolation of teachers in their classroom that leads to developing “insulating barriers around their working lives” (Rosenholtz, 1989b, p. 430). Supportive working conditions, shared values and goals, collaboration among teachers and administrators, and a focus on student learning emerged as common characteristics of successful schools. The attributes of high-consensus schools found in Rosenholtz’s research mirror many of the aspects of what would eventually be known as professional learning communities.

Rosenholtz’s research provided other insights that impacted the work on PLCs. Motivation and commitment are impacted more by the design and organization of work related tasks than by the personalities and qualities of the workers. Principals were identified as playing a significant role in shaping the organization of the school. In most schools that were successful
academically, principal actions demonstrated a belief that teacher and student learning are closely related. Setting clear goals for student learning in successful schools was frequently found to be the result of “principals who enable and ensure frequent opportunities for discussion among colleagues about the school’s instructional priorities” (Rosenholtz, 1989b, p. 428). Rosenholtz’s data on the role of principals in shaping an organization have also been influential in the development of the professional learning community concept.

An examination of the roots of professional learning communities also leads to the work of Etienne Wenger (1998) on communities of practice at the Institute for Research on Learning. Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) defined communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p. 4). While they occur naturally in organizations, “leading knowledge organizations are increasingly likely to view communities of practice not merely as useful auxiliary structures, but as foundational structures on which to build organizations” (Wenger et al., 2002, p. 21). Through the work of communities of practice in driving strategies, solving problems, spreading best practices, and developing skills, value is added to the organization (Wenger et al., 2002). Wenger et al. observed that participants share ideas, experiences, and knowledge that lead to new approaches to solving problems. For the long haul, communities of practice have been linked to developing capabilities of the organization and fostering professional development for participants (Wenger et al., 2002).

The concept of communities of practice rings true with many aspects that are foundational in professional learning communities. Wenger et al. (2002) described “connecting the personal development and professional identities of practitioners to the strategy of the
organizations” as one of the most important aspects of communities of practice (p. 17). Growth experienced in communities of practice was tied to the development of value, both to the individuals and to the organization (Wenger et al., 2002). Other inherent elements of communities of practice that are also foundational to professional learning communities include shared practice and purpose, trust, and mutual respect. These essential elements have been found to build both relationships and interactions that can lead to learning (Wenger et al., 2002).

The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) conducted a significant study of the concept of professional learning communities from 1995-2000 (Cowan & Capers, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2003, 2010; Hord, 1997, 2008; Kruse & Louis, 1995; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Leo & Cowan, 2000). The study, Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement (CCCII), provided deeper understanding of the attributes of a professional learning community and also insight into their creation (Cowan & Capers, 2000; Hord, 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1995; Kruse et al., 1994, Leo & Cowan, 2000). In the initial stage of the federally funded project, Hord (1997) identified five dimensions of professional learning communities from her review of literature that provided a framework for research. The five dimensions are: (a) shared values and vision, (b) shared and supportive leadership, (c) collective learning, (d) shared personal practice, and (e) supportive conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008).

A summary of the critical attributes that were found to promote the development of professional learning communities is found in Table 1. From this study, a framework was developed to guide both the research and development of professional learning communities.
Table 1

Attributes of the Five Dimensions of Professional Learning Communities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Critical Attributes</th>
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| **Shared Values and Vision**  | ▪ Espoused values and norms  
                              | ▪ Focus on student learning  
                              | ▪ High expectations  
                              | ▪ Shared vision that guides teaching and learning |
| **Shared and Supportive Leadership** | ▪ Nurturing leadership  
                              | ▪ Shared power, authority, and responsibility  
                              | ▪ Broad-based decision-making that reflects commitment and responsibility |
| **Collective Learning and Application** | ▪ Sharing information  
                              | ▪ Seeking new knowledge, skills, and strategies  
                              | ▪ Working collaboratively to plan, solve problems, and improve learning opportunities |
| **Shared Personal Practice**   | ▪ Peer observations  
                              | ▪ Feedback to improve instructional practice  
                              | ▪ Sharing outcomes of instructional practice  
                              | ▪ Coaching and mentoring |
| **Supportive Conditions**      | Relationships |
|                               | ▪ Caring  
                              | ▪ Trust and respect  
                              | ▪ Recognition and celebration  
                              | ▪ Risk-taking  
                              | ▪ Unified effort to embed change  
                              | **Structures** |
|                               | ▪ Resources (time, money, materials, people)  
                              | ▪ Facilities  
                              | ▪ Communication systems |

Dimensions of Professional Learning Communities

The term professional learning community (PLC) has been widely used in educational circles to represent various groups that are assembled to work together for a variety of reasons. These groups often included departmental and grade level groups that work on managerial tasks such as ordering books, coordinating schedules, and other organizational tasks (Hord, 2008). Even when the groups met for training, the focus was primarily on the teacher’s learning and skill development rather than on student learning (Stoll & Louis, 2007; Vescio et al., 2007). A shift in the paradigm of learning communities has led to models of professional learning communities that move beyond professional development and managerial tasks to “opportunities for intentional learning, preparing them to enable students to reach high standards” (Hord, 2008, p. 12). As shown in Table 2, Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) indicated that changes abound in professional learning communities when compared to traditional approaches to school. Five components of true research-based professional learning communities have been found to include: (a) shared beliefs, values and vision; (b) shared and supportive leadership; (c) supportive conditions; (d) collective learning and application; and (e) shared personal practice (Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008).
Table 2

*Comparison of Traditional Schools and Professional Learning Communities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Schools</th>
<th>Professional Learning Communities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher isolation</td>
<td>Collaborative teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generic mission and belief statements</td>
<td>Mission statements clarify what students will learn, how it will be assessed, and how school will respond if not learned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vision statements, often developed by only a few, more like wish lists, and may be ignored</td>
<td>Research based vision statements developed through collaboration and provide blueprint for improvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal statements that are random, focused on means rather than ends, may be difficult to assess</td>
<td>Goals stated with measurable performance standards linked to vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture focused primarily on teaching</td>
<td>Culture focused primarily on learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum overload is common; teachers independently decide what to teach</td>
<td>Collaboration used to develop curriculum that is focused on student learning expectations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improvement decisions made by “averaging opinions”</td>
<td>Improvement decision made through collaboration and based on “best practices”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness of improvement strategies</td>
<td>Effectiveness of improvement strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>externally validated; an emphasis on teacher opinions of strategies</td>
<td>internally validated based on student learning outcomes</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Administrators—“leaders”</th>
<th>Administrators—“leaders of leaders”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teachers—“implementers”</td>
<td>Teachers—“transformational leaders”</td>
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<tr>
<th>School Improvement Plan focused on wide variety of issues; plan may be set aside after developed</th>
<th>School Improvement focused on fewer goals developed collaboratively and designed to affect student learning; plan is vehicle for change</th>
</tr>
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</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Improvement initiatives follow latest trends/fads</th>
<th>Improvement initiatives tied to vision statement</th>
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To gain greater understanding of this concept, an analysis of the research and literature on PLCs will be presented. Hord’s five dimensions of professional learning communities will be utilized as a means of organizing the data. The literature reviewed provided insight into the characteristics of schools that are immersed in the development, implementation, and sustaining of PLCs.

**Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision**

Shared beliefs, values, and vision imply more than a mission statement that is handed down to a learning group. A vision statement imposed upon a group by the school leader does not provide the impetus to move the group forward in meeting its goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004; Pankake & Moller, 2003; Senge, 1990). A vision “characterized by an undeviating focus on student learning” has been identified as a hallmark of a true professional learning community” (Pankake & Moller, 2003, p. 8). This focal point on student learning has been confirmed by research as central to the beliefs and vision of schools implementing professional learning communities. (Bezzina, 2008; Boyd-Dimock & Hord, 1994; Cawalti, 2003; Cowan, 2010; Eaker & Keating, 2008; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997; Huffman, 2003; Kruse & Louis, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006, 2010; McREL, 2003; Olivier & Hipp, 2010b; Pankake & Huffman, 2010; Roundtree & Hipp, 2010; Underwood, 2007). Barth (2005) suggested, “A most fundamental best practice in a professional learning community is to promote the qualities and dispositions of insatiable, lifelong learning in every member of the school community—young people and adults alike—so that when the school experience concludes, learning will not” (p. 119).

From Senge’s (1990) work, a vision leads to the collective courage to take risks, to new thinking, and serves as a rudder for direction. Shared beliefs and vision impact the ways in
which the teachers work individually and together toward common goals. From their review of literature on teacher professional learning, Oper and Pedder (2011) noted evidence of reciprocity between collective beliefs and school practices:

That is, school practices can and do enable collective beliefs, whereas collective beliefs can also result in more enabling school-level practices and structures. In this way, the collective capacity of the school affects collective goals and enabling structures for organizational growth that affect, and are affected by, collective norms and practices. (p. 393)

Researchers (Graham, 2007; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006) concluded that shared language and understandings arise from a common set of values and vision. The presence of this common language and understanding is noted in schools that demonstrated a greater measure of a professional learning community (Louis et al., 1996). Hord (2008) asserted that a shared vision guided the work of a learning organization as they considered changes and improvements that were essential for greater student learning.

The process of developing shared vision and beliefs does not happen automatically, but requires the intentional effort of the learning community members. Huffman (2003) reported that in professional learning communities that were considered more mature, educators “understand the deep need to develop a vision” and have the capacity to “connect it with important overarching concerns such as goals for student achievement, school improvement, and lifelong learning” (p. 28). In contrast, less mature PLCs often struggled with getting everyone involved in the process or were impeded by the “principal’s failure to recognize the importance of a vision to guide the school” (Huffman, p. 28). Wells and Feun (2007) reported that resistant and negative individuals (or groups), the lack of administrative direction, and inadequate time
allowances presented stumbling blocks to successful professional learning communities in the schools they studied. While professional learning communities produce valuable results in schools, they are not without hurdles that impede success.

In her research on professional learning organizations, Huffman (2003) found that while all of the five dimensions are foundational to the concept, shared vision was the most crucial. She stated, “It is critical, however, to understand that the emergence of a strong, shared vision based on collective values provides the foundation for informed leadership, staff member commitments, student success, and sustained school growth” (p. 32). Thus, the work of professional learning communities springs from this sense of shared vision and purpose.

**Shared and Supportive Leadership**

Schools immersed in the professional learning community concept have utilized shared leadership and decision-making to bring about school improvement positively impacted the learning of students (Cowan, 2003; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Huffman & Hipp 2003). Such leadership did not resemble that of the factory model found in the early part of the twentieth century. According to research (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, 2010; Hord, 1997; Richardson, 2003), administrators participated in nurturing relationships within the school that allowed for shared leadership, shared power, shared authority, and shared responsibility. O’Malley (2010) concluded that “a principal who was willing to initiate structure and share responsibilities” contributed to the development of a PLC. In their research, Hipp and Huffman (2007) reported, “Schools involved in sincere efforts to broaden the base of leadership to include teachers and administrators, to define shared vision based on student learning, and to provide a culture of continual support, are much more likely to make great strides in becoming learning organizations
and addressing critical student needs” (p. 130). Sharing leadership was a means of fostering successful PLCs.

Boyd-Dimock and Hord (1994) described leadership as essential, but found that it came from many leaders, not just one source in schools with strong professional learning communities. In their case study analysis, Fleming and Leo (1999) reported that principals were serving alongside their teachers and working “elbow to elbow to meet to identify and meet the needs of their students” (p. 4). PLCs, when functioning at their best, have been found to “embody the most positive features of distributed leadership, bringing the energy and ability of the whole community forward to serve the best interests of all students” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 128). The principal is not the authoritative manager in a PLC, but one who involves staff in the decision making process (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). A synthesis of five case studies conducted by Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) revealed that principals in schools that were effectively implementing professional learning communities positioned themselves in the center of their staff rather than on top of them. Incorporating leadership practices that utilize shared power has been found in research to create greater motivation, a sense of community, efficacy, trust, and even risk taking (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008). Shared leadership also implies that principals provide guidance and resources needed for teachers and other staff members to make critical decisions (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Supportive leadership has been found throughout the literature (Boyd-Domick & Hord, 1994; Graham, 2007; Hord, 1997; Louis et al., 1996) as necessary for the emergence of a professional learning community. Administrators have the critical opportunity to build the capacity of teachers and direct the focus of that capacity on student learning (Sergiovanni, 1990). Cowan (2010) identified three essential leadership responsibilities: communicating clear
expectations, building capacity, and monitoring and reviewing. Research in schools has demonstrated that capacity building included “empowerment—a deliberate effort on the part of the district to provide the direction, support, resources, training, and other means to enable teacher to use their discretion successfully for kids” (Sergiovanni, 1990, p. 141). Hord (1997) found that leaders in schools immersed in PLCs provided “attention to staff who would share broadly in making decisions for the school and who would be supported by continuous staff development to ensure wise decision making” (p. 31). Overall, research supported shared and supportive leadership as one of the pillars of successful professional learning communities.

**Collective Learning and Application**

As schools faced the challenge of meeting the needs of students in a diverse global society, change required learning in order for a transformation of attitude and practice to take place (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Increasing the capacity for collective learning and application of learning is one of the critical elements of professional learning communities. Hord (2009) described the learning within PLCs as “a habitual activity where the group learns how to learn together continually” (p. 40). Collective learning promotes seeking answers to questions about what students need to learn, how will we know it has been learned, and how will we act when students struggle (Cohen & Hill, 2001; DuFour, 2004; Lovett & Cameron, 2011). Fleming and Leo (1999) found that research, synthesis of data, and discussion of instructional and operational topics were visible in schools that were successfully implementing PLCs. Senge (1990) stated, “Team learning also involves learning how to deal creatively with the powerful forces opposing productive dialogue and discussion in working teams” (p. 237). In order to build strong professional learning communities that can impact student learning, collective learning was found to be essential (Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008).
In order to incorporate collective learning, the capacity for dialogue among the members must be fostered. The professional learning community is a democratic environment which “allows dissent and debate among its members, and this can result in increased understanding and learning of the members” (Hord, 1997, p. 37). Being open to innovation was vital to create an atmosphere that promotes risk-taking by the members (Louis et al., 1996). Studies (Graham, 2007; Wells & Feun, 2007) revealed that initial conversations in learning communities focused on sharing resources, but discussion of the critical issues of student learning were not found as often (if found at all) in the beginning stages of development of a PLC. In one middle school study, Graham (2007) discovered that as a sense of community developed, growth was seen in the substantive conversations and learning that took place in meetings. Collaboration among teachers and administrators, which focuses on identified student learning needs, has been found to be a key to bringing about effective change (DuFour, 2004; Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Louis et al., 1996).

**Shared Personal Practice**

Shared personal practice requires mutual respect and a development of trust (Cockrell et al., 1999; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). The work of professional learning communities has paved the way for teachers to implement more peer observations, sharing feedback and outcomes, and coaching or mentoring roles (Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Hord, 1997). Hord (2008) stated, “Research informs us about the significance of the coaching that educators use to support each other in deepening their learning and implementing new practices” (p. 13). In order for shared practice to be implemented, team members have to let go of mental models and build the capacity for change (Senge, 1990). DuFour (2004) posited that shared practice requires “team members to make public what has been traditionally been private-- goals, strategies, materials,
pacing, questions, concerns, and results‖ (p. 4). Collective learning leads to developing and testing new strategies that can be strengthened through shared reflection (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Sergiovanni (2000) reported, “Within communities of practice, individual practices of teachers are not abandoned but are connected to each other in such a way that a single shared practice of teachers emerges” (p. 140). Other studies (DuFour, 2003, 2004; Kanold et al., 2008; Kruse et al., 1994; McREL, 2003; Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008) also found the need for a deprivatization of personal practice in order to do the work of professional learning communities. According to research from McREL, “Shared practice and collective inquiry help sustain improvement by strengthening connections among teachers, stimulating discussion about personal practice, and helping teachers to build on one another’s expertise” (p. 2). In a national study, Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) noted that supportive teacher interactions in PLCs enabled the teachers to assume roles such as “mentor, mentee, coach, specialist, advisor, facilitator, and so on” (p. 463). In their study of teachers participating in PLC literature circles, Monroe-Baillargeon and Shema (2010) concluded that shared participation in a supportive environment fostered reflection on personal practice and the sharing of constructive ideas. True professional learning communities utilize shared practice to improve student learning.

Supportive Conditions

Huffman and Hipp (2003) concluded that supportive conditions are the “glue that is critical to hold the other dimensions together” (p. 146). Supportive conditions found in schools implementing a professional learning community included both supportive relational conditions and supportive structural conditions (Leo & Cowan, 2000; Hord, 1997, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Relational conditions found to nurture the development of PLCs

Supportive conditions or the lack thereof, impact the development of professional learning communities. In a study of five schools conducted by Louis, Marks and Kruse (1999) indicated that in schools that were less successful, leaders did not give adequate attention to the needs of teachers for improving classroom skills. The reduction of normal boundaries found between teachers and departments in schools resulted from efforts concentrated on reducing isolation of teachers, providing opportunities to develop the capacity of the staff, and building a caring, collaborative environment (Boyd-Domick, & Hord, 1994; Hord, 1997). In their study, Roundtree and Hipp (2010) discovered a “noticeable change in staff and student morale” when the staff was confident of needed support (p. 112). When supportive conditions are present, Leo and Cowan (2000) found that collegial relationships are fostered.

Structural conditions exhibited in mature professional learning communities included time and space for collaborative work (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Teachers often reported that time and the pressure to meet other demands of the job were stumbling blocks to PLC development (Hord & Sommers; Wells & Feun, 2007). Drawing from PLC literature and research, the Ontario Principal’s Council (2009), concluded, “Time for collaboration and teamwork is essential to establishing a school culture that supports a professional learning community” (p. 46). In order for schools to have successful learning communities, resources such as materials, finances, training, and people were found in research to be essential (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) found that time set aside to meet and talk, both
as teaching teams and as a staff, was critical for growth of PLCs. Proximity of people, consideration of the schedule, and common planning times were reported to be structural considerations that impacted PLC success (Hord, 1997; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Supportive conditions set the stage for the work of professional learning communities to happen.

The literature also revealed stumbling blocks that stood in the way of successful implementation and sustainability of professional learning communities. External and internal forces can undermine the greatest efforts at building conditions that are supportive for learning communities. District, state, or federal demands may stand in opposition or impede the work of learning communities. Giles and Hargreaves (2006) found that the greatest barrier discovered in the schools they studied was the standards movement. Internal forces such as negative individuals, scheduling complexities, and lack of resources are also hurdles. Implementation of PLCs impacted the building of capacity to “halt the evolutionary attrition of change by renewing their teacher cultures, distributing leadership, and planning for leadership succession” (Giles & Hargreaves, 2006, p. 152).

**Barriers to Developing and Sustaining Effective PLCs**

While the positive impacts of professional learning community practices are found throughout the literature on PLCs, the reality is that drawbacks exist as well. Developing and sustaining PLCs may appear to be the cure-all, but the development of PLC practices requires much significant change for traditional school staffs. Schools that are not as successful with PLCs may struggle most with the need to re-culture the organization (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001). Translating the work of PLCs into change in practice is both complex and essential. As noted by Cowan (2010), “change efforts that do little or nothing to affect what occurs in classrooms will have little or no effect on student achievement” (p. 67). Building PLCs that will
bring about change in the classroom and thus student achievement is challenging due to the amount of work, the time involved, and the culture changes that are necessary (Fullan, 2006; Wells & Feun, 2007; Wells & Keane, 2008).

Beyond the development of PLCs, one of the great challenges faced by schools involved in the implementation of the PLC process is sustainability (Olivier & Hipp, 2010b; Richmond & Manokore, 2010; Roundtree & Hipp, 2010; Wells & Keane, 2008). Fullan (2006) noted, “Professional learning communities will not be sustained unless the district and other levels of the system actively foster and maintain their development” (p. 88). In one study, Maloney and Konza (2011) found that the sense of shared vision initially waned as the group faced challenges. The researchers noted, “When differences in philosophical perspectives arose, some teachers did not appear to have the confidence to voice their opinions or challenge the more dominant views” (p. 83).

While school leaders may build a collaborative culture and provide supportive conditions (e.g., time, scheduling, communication structures, proximity), the success of PLCs is not automatic. Huggins, Scheurich, and Morgan (2011) concluded, “Specifically when teachers are not being successful, situations may arise where, without the inclusion of outside assistance, collaboration simply cannot occur due to the lack of sufficient pedagogical and content knowledge within the community” (p. 85). Thus, principals may need to be more actively “engaged in the instructional process and practices of teachers to ensure that teacher learning about student learning is indeed occurring” (Huggins et al, 2011, p. 85). Levine (2011) noted the need to include both experienced and newer educators as valued members of PLCs. In a case study of two schools in the midst of reform, Levine (2011) found more positive impacts of PLCs in the high school in which the collaborative work of PLCs evolved over time. This school
developed resources such as “widely shared objectives; trust; some degree of continuity with the past; respect for experienced teachers; and traditions promoting morale” (Levine, 2011, p. 31). On the contrary, Levine noted, “When school leaders seek to engineer a ‘professional learning community’ too rapidly, however, schools may lack such resources, reducing experienced teachers’ willingness and ability to change” (p. 31).

As previously presented, barriers to the success of PLCs include external and internal forces that can undermine even the best efforts at building conditions that are supportive for learning communities. An example of an outside force that impacts the work of PLCs would be the Common Core Standards Initiative (2010). Bausmith and Barry (2011) asserted, “…although PLC structures are perhaps necessary for effective schools, they are likely insufficient for meeting the new expectations of the Common Core State Standards” (p. 175). The argument offered by Bausmith and Barry is that pedagogical content knowledge cannot be adequately developed in a way that will impact student achievement in school-based PLC structures.

Hiebert, Gallimore, and Seigler (2002) addressed similar concerns:

There is no guarantee that the knowledge generated at local sites is correct or even useful. Teachers working together or teachers working with his or her students might generate knowledge that turns out to undermine rather than improve teacher effectiveness. Local knowledge is immediate and concrete but almost always incomplete and sometimes blind and insular. (p. 8)

Bausmith and Barry (2011) concluded that “externally developed, research-based, and standards-aligned examples of instructions would be beneficial…” (p. 176).
Methods and Data Sources

This multi-site qualitative study examined perceptions of principals and teachers regarding professional community and collaboration in their school. This study took place in two school districts in a southeastern US state. Both school districts are similar in demographics with each located approximately 15 miles from the state land grant university, one to the southwest and one to the southeast. Both school districts are small city systems with 7 schools in District A and 3 schools in District B. After receiving permission from the district director, three schools in each district (elementary, middle or intermediate, and high school) volunteered to participate in the study. Three administrators and 7 teachers were interviewed in District A while 3 administrators and 9 teachers were interviewed in District B. Interview protocols were standardized and each interview lasted approximately 30-40 minutes, though principal interviews were sometimes lengthier. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using two software programs, conducted independently by two researchers. Referred to as the “interpretive zone” (Wasser & Bresler, 1996), dual analysis of data can enrich and increase the thoughtfulness of the evaluative process. One researcher coded the interview data using QDA Miner 3.2.3 while the other researcher used Atlas ti 5.6.3. After several systemic iterations, the final analysis combined each researcher’s findings from which themes regarding professional communities in the two districts were contrasted.

Site and Participants

The school districts that agreed to participate in the study are located in close proximity to one another and to the third largest city in a southern U.S. state. District A is a small suburban district located 15 miles from the major city noted previously. There are four elementary schools, one intermediate school, one middle school, and one high school in District A. District
B is a small suburban school district located five miles outside the major city with one elementary, one middle school, and one high school. The lack of ethnic diversity in this geographical area is evidenced in the districts with white students representing the majority of the student population (90.7% in District A and 81.5% in District B). With the exception of 16% Hispanic students in District B, less than 5% of students are classified as African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Native American/Alaskan. Complete student population demographics can be found in Table 3.¹

A comparison of academic achievement data for the school districts revealed differences in both grades 4-8 and at the high school level. The state in which the study took place does not conduct mandatory testing in grades K-2 in public schools. While testing begins in third grade, value added data reflect one year’s growth and thus is not reported until fourth grade. To compare test data in mathematics and reading for grades 4-8, the mean NCE gain relative to the state growth standard of zero was used. In this state’s value added system, a mean of zero indicates that a year’s academic growth was evidenced. As seen in Table 4, District A’s performance was greater than the other district in both reading and mathematics for 2009 and over a three year span (2006-2009). The state also issued a grade for each school district based on the mean range gain for each core subject in grades 3-8. In 2009 District A received Bs in all core subjects; and District B received a C in math and reading/language arts and a B in social studies and science.

¹ All school demographic and student achievement data collected from state department of education website.
Table 3

*Student Demographic Data by School District*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District A</th>
<th>District B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Population</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>47.7%</td>
<td>47.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>52.3%</td>
<td>52.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>0.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American/ Alaskan</td>
<td>0.2%</td>
<td>0.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>90.7%</td>
<td>81.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poverty</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
<td>57.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Services Received</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title I</td>
<td>14.0%</td>
<td>27.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students with Disabilities</td>
<td>12.4%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limited English Proficiency</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attendance Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades K-8</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>95.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades 9-12</td>
<td>96.0%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grades K-8 Promotion Rate</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades K-8</td>
<td>99.2%</td>
<td>98.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Graduation Rate</strong></td>
<td>93.0%</td>
<td>88.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Student Discipline</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students Suspensions</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Expulsions</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

*Comparison of Value Added Data from State Testing Grades 3-8*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Area</th>
<th>District A</th>
<th>District B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading/ Language</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the high school level, a comparison of 2009 ACT composite scores revealed a mean of 24.1 in District A and 20.7 in District B compared to a state mean of 20.7 (See Table 5). End of course test data also revealed differences in the three school districts. In comparison to the state average, students in District A scored above the state average in Algebra I, Biology I, English I and U.S. History. District B students scored above the state average in Algebra I and English I but below the state average in Biology I.

Table 5

Comparison of Average ACT Composite Scores by School District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean Student Score</th>
<th>System Effect</th>
<th>System vs. State Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District A</td>
<td>24.17</td>
<td>24.02</td>
<td>1.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District B</td>
<td>20.96</td>
<td>20.76</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. *Progress is significantly above the average system in the state. ** Progress is not detectably different from the average system in the state.

When approached about participation in the research, four schools in District A agreed to participate (two elementary, one intermediate, and the high school) while all three schools in District B participated (one elementary, one middle, and one high school). All principals of participating schools agreed to be interviewed. After discussions with the school principals, all agreed that a subset of three teachers from each school would be interviewed, randomly selected through volunteering. A request for volunteers to agree to interviews was disseminated and the investigators scheduled interviews with the first three volunteers from each school. Once interviews began, two teachers decided to drop from the study. This resulted in 24 interviews (seven principals and 19 teachers). Table 6 outlines the participants and the corresponding school.
Table 6

*Study Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Elementary 1</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>AE1P</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Elementary 1</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AE1T1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Elementary 1</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AE1T2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Elementary 1</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AE1T3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Elementary 2</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>AE2AP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Elementary 2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AE2T1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Elementary 2</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AE2T2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>AIP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AIT1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AIT2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Intermediate</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AIT3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>AHP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AHT1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>High School</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>AHT2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>BEP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>BET1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>BET2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>BET3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>BMP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>BMT1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Data analysis resulted in three themes across all schools in both districts, encompassing principal and teacher perceptions of collaboration and teacher leadership in their schools. These themes are shared values, shared leadership, and shared expertise.

Shared Values

Interviewers, in seeking to understand what was valued by the teachers and administrators of the schools in this study, asked interviewees what they believed was most important to the stakeholders of their school. We were interested in whether we might hear like responses from those with whom we spoke. When asked what was most important in their schools, responses from District A principals and teachers focused on “doing right by the kids,” citing achievement, conducive to student success. Four out of ten interviewees described the commitment of their school to reach the “whole child.” One teacher commented, “What is best for the students is always at the forefront.” The high school principal spoke of the buy-in from teachers, “Our obligation is to our clients…period…and our clients are our students.” Thus, across the district, shared goals focused on students.
An intermediate school teacher from District A illustrated how the care of children was truly a group effort of all. She shared the story of one child who was struggling. Through interactions of the teachers and students you see the social and emotional part of it, as well as bringing in help whenever we are struggling with a student in their behavior or their own issues they bring with them when they come. We've had to work quite closely both with the guidance counselor and Beth as well because we have one student is really struggling. And, also with the school psychologist because he seems to be a child who is very depressed. So, we have had to work closely all of us together. It started as an academic issue, but from there we have found all of these other issues to be what was controlling the academic part of it (AIT1)

The importance of the child as the shared goal of all stakeholders throughout the district is so ingrained that the coordinator of the ninth grade program at the high school laughed when the interviewer asked what was most important to the stakeholders in the school. She replied,

The kids (Laugh) … The kids. You think: is that a trick question? The kids, and I think I can say this for all three of those groups-- teachers, administrators, parents–everybody here is working together to put out a product at the end of grade 12: a kid that is ready to do whatever it is they have chosen to do, whether that's post secondary education or straight to the work force, the military or whatever (AHT2).

There was little agreement either within or across schools in District B about what was important to the stakeholders. The elementary principal stated that his beliefs about what was most important.

For people who work at this school, I think they want, they want to be, to make sure that they have the materials and equipment to do what they need to do. As far as teaching, I
think most of them are very, very concerned about the materials and about the textbooks and things like that. The administrators….making sure those teachers [laughs] perform those duties (BEP).

Teachers at that same school noted that academics and standards were important. One teacher stated that parents’ primary goal was seeing their child move to the next grade. The middle school principal stated that academics were primary, with two teachers agreeing, though one teacher believed the most important goal was conveying information. The high school principal believed that a safe and caring school was most important and stated that “I can feel comfortable telling you that student academics are the most important thing here.” However, while one of the high school teachers agreed with this statement, other responses from teachers did not mention student learning. One teacher responded that student behavior was most important to the faculty by saying, “Teachers, I would say, behavior, how things are handled discipline-wise through the office, and, I guess, our input on things.” In addition to academic success, middle school teachers mentioned communication was an important goal. One teacher noted that the administration should make sure that teachers and faculty have the information they need, especially on student-specific issues, behavior issues, central office issues. There should be a clear process for administration to convey information of any sort. Sometimes we have a tendency as the teacher to be the last to find out things (BMT3).

All principals and teachers across grade levels believed that the primary concern of parents in their district was a safe school. So while student learning was mentioned by some as an important goal of the schools in District B, these respondents did not speak with the “same voice” that was heard from District A.
Shared Leadership

An essential component of learning communities is shared leadership. Interviewees were asked not only if shared leadership was a practice at their school but also how the authority was shared, what types of decisions were shared, and how teachers were nurtured to take on leadership roles. We discovered vastly different philosophies of leadership in the administrators in the two districts.

Both formal and informal leadership existed at all three schools in District A. Formal leadership included team leaders, department chairs, Critical Focus Group (CFG) leaders, and committee chairs. Each school utilized a leadership team that meets regularly to share decision making and serve as liaison between faculty and principal. Informal leadership was manifested through collaboration to align curriculum, analyze data, and address school issues. The intermediate school principal stated that she realized sharing leadership with teachers insured that tasks were completed and teachers benefitted from the collaboration.

I just think the outcome is that you get more done. You see more results. You know that old saying, “After all was said and done, there was more said than done.” At times in the past I have thought that, but when teachers get their hands on it and are collaborating on it then I rarely see anything fall through the cracks. If I were trying to manage all of it, I let things fall. But when something has been moved to a collaborative effort among teachers, its going to get done (AIP).

The assistant principal at one of the elementary schools in the study voiced agreement with this philosophy by responding that sharing leadership is

…essential, I think, because, you know, if (principal) and I are the only leaders in this building, we can't do it all. We're not in there, in that classroom, in the makeup of the
school. So I think it's essential. I think it empowers teachers who want to lead and change is easier (E2AP).

At the District A high school teachers were empowered to make decisions at many levels. One of the high school teachers explained that teachers might work with budget: “We’ve got this pool of money. Now what are our priorities? What are we going to do with it?” as well as curriculum: “The curriculum committee reviews any new course ideas and then passes that along to the school leadership team and the department chairs” (AHT2). Teachers in this district viewed themselves as professionals and articulated that these important decisions were a part of the work they do.

Participants from District A voiced an “expectation to be a leader” and to “lead whether or not they are the designated leader.” When asked how teachers were chosen to be leaders, one teacher expressed surprise, noting that teacher leaders were not chosen; sharing leadership with teachers was an expectation. A teacher from the intermediate school informed us that “all of our ideas are heard.” Structures were in place to support shared leadership and collaboration. As one of the high school teachers explained that shared leadership was a benefit to the entire school because

I think the overall school climate is more organized, more structured. Everyone is on the same page because you feel like you have a part in how things go like they are supposed to go (AHT1).

All three principals in District B indicated that the only opportunity for shared leadership was positional appointment to the advisory team. Any discussion of teachers as part of a professional learning community was absent. As the elementary school principal noted, the
advisory team teacher leaders served as disseminators of information, rather than decision makers.

. And they will meet with their grade levels. So, that's a kind of a leadership role I will give them information of things that we need to do or things that I need for their grade levels uh to do and they will take that back (BEP).

This same principal was pleased to report that next year members of the advisory team would be trained as teacher leaders. He stated, however, that “if we’re going to train them, I’m basically going to pick these teachers and they will stay on the advisory team…” He continued to explain that while the teachers would have positional authority, there would be little teacher voice in the selection of his advisory team.

I've already explained the process of what we're going to do next year. I have asked if anyone would be interested. In other words, I'm not going to make someone do it that really doesn't want to do it because some teachers just aren't teacher leaders, and that's okay. So, it'll be a process where they're going to write me, they're going to tell me why they want to do this and what's expected, and I will basically make the final choice… What they're doing is basically what the decisions that we have made or what I tell them to do. They're not really going back and making decisions for their grade level. (BEP).

The middle school principal agreed with this philosophy of shared leadership when he stated that “We have meetings that say, you go back and inform your group if there are any issues with that. You know, come back. They serve really more as a liaison than they do a team leader.” Middle school teachers noted that the principal had a select group of teachers he trusted for opinions on decision making. High school teachers agreed that department heads were the only opportunity for teachers to lead and were principal appointed. They did not change until the
department head retired. Thus, not only were opportunities for shared leadership limited but when opportunities did arise, principal selection determined who would next lead. As one of the high school teachers noted, the culture of the system was such that teacher collaboration and shared leadership was not a priority.

I just think that the environment that we're in makes it difficult to sort of emerge as a teacher leader, and, and to sort of be recognized as such. A lot of times teachers…teacher leadership qualities aren't necessarily recognized or aren't necessarily encouraged. And again, it's not on purpose, I just don't think…They haven't focused on that a lot. It's not an area of focus (BHT3).

Clearly, District B any attempts to move beyond the learning community which the schools term advisory teams, a need for re-culturing (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001) will be needed. The research which cites the essential nature of shared leadership, shared power, and shared authority to a learning community was obvious in District A (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, 2010; Hord, 1997; Richardson, 2003).

**Shared Expertise**

Collaboration, peer accountability, mentoring, and trusting relationships are all integral to the theme of shared expertise. Principals and teachers were asked to describe the collaborative nature of their teams and/or work groups, the expectations of each other in collaboration, the risk taking involved in sharing expertise, and the opportunities for teachers to share their expertise in the school. Once again, the responses from the stakeholders in each district varied greatly.

One way teachers at the District A high school collaborated was through their Critical Friends Group (CFG), a professional community of teacher practice. The informal PLC
discussions focus on both individual and school wide issues. Teacher 1 explains how the CFG works.

Those [the CFG] are, I think, one of the most effective methods–my own most effective outlets for collaboration we have because what comes to that group is driven by the people in the group. They have a leader and it’s usually a dilemma. And it’s usually a teacher that’s having an issue in her classroom, like, you know, it could be classroom management or it could be one particular student. The person would present to the group the dilemma and they would follow protocol to help them think about the dilemma and solve the dilemma. And also in our CFG group we have done a lot of school wide issues and dilemmas. For example, we did the issue of dancing at prom because it’s a little concern among administrators, teachers, and parents (AHT1).

The CFG also assists in the implementation of programs.

For example, the reading program that’s starting, the literacy, they formed a literacy committee to try to help figure out what those classes are going to look like and how they’re going to be set up and those kinds of things (AHT1).

The teachers at the intermediate school depend on each other for expertise, considering the sharing of knowledge a part of their accountability to each other.

Sometimes when we are doing technology things in our department we have a couple of people who know a lot more about that than the rest of us. It may be that they take on the role of actually leading that session to show us how to use some part of the technology or to introduce something to us. I guess it depends on our expertise. We are doing a lot right now with narratives. That is not a specialty of mine. We have a couple of other people in our department who are great at that, so they have taken it on. I guess we look
at each other's strengths. Also, just stepping up and volunteering when someone asks us to help on something, or coming up with activities. If that seems to be something we're capable of, then we kind of step up to the plate to help on stuff (AIT1).

This teacher goes on to explain that sharing their expertise and collaborating with each other is innately designed in the school culture.

Our teams are designed to be collective work groups. Our language arts group is much more than information sharing. We get together and share lessons. Our in-service design is to allow us to work together as professionals. I think that everyone brings something to the table- make a flip chart lesson they designed. The school commitment is not about someone taking and not giving (AIT1).

District A collaborative opportunities had principal support, providing means for teachers and administrators to share expertise and learn from colleagues. The intermediate school principal called collaboration a “total school program.” This principal and elementary school principal spoke of increased effectiveness resulting from collaboratively analyzing and utilizing data, standards, and teacher knowledge to address student needs. Participants reported collaborating on lesson planning, utilizing classroom technology, aligning curriculum horizontally and vertically, and planning long range projects. Providing resources such as time, paying for substitutes, scheduling, and training, principals demonstrated support for shared practice and collective learning found in District A.

Though District B elementary and middle school teachers have common planning time and high schools have department meetings, all teachers indicated there was little opportunity for collaboration and sharing expertise. Ironically, the reason given for lack of collaboration was lack of time. Activities during the common time included “kind of share ideas,” “touch base,”
and “who had some troubles in class.” The elementary school principal noted that time is given for the teachers to share ideas. However, the expectation is that all teachers’ instruction should be the same.

I think is the sharing of ideas, having to work together on what they’re going to be teaching next, because I am a firm believer in, for instance, all second grade I went them basically to almost be teaching the same thing every day (BEP).

In the words of one teacher, the collaboration was discovering what the principal’s advisory board had decided.

After advisory board meetings we’ll get together and collaborate on what's been said. So, everyone in the school will get a report on what the entire school's doing, so I mean, everyone in the grade level will get what the whole school has decided (BET1).

The common perception of collaboration was summarized by a teacher who stated it was ….harder to make time when you’re having to teach standards and trying to cover all the material that you’ve got to cover. There’s no room for extras. And typically when you collaborate with another teacher on something it ends up being something fun or something extra, and you don’t get a lot of those when you’re nose to the grind (BHT1).

Administrative support for collaboration was also perceived as less than enthusiastic. As a middle school teacher noted,

Our principal will put aside time to say, okay English teachers get together and talk. So he does do that when he can, but a lot of times they’re scheduled through central office so he doesn’t have a say in that. So it just depends. But he’s supportive, but we just don’t have the time (BMT1).
The lack of clarity about professional collaboration and the tepid support of administration for collaborative activities in District B fostered a climate of isolation.

**Discussion**

Although geographically close, District A and B are philosophically miles apart in their approach to professional learning communities. In District A, principals demonstrated support for PLCs through shared vision, supportive structures, shared leadership, and decision making, all essential components of collaborative work groups (Hord, 1997, 1998, 2008). Teachers and principals voiced similar perceptions of vital aspects of school culture. Speaking with one voice confirmed that the stakeholders of District A focused on the child in their daily practice. A vision that is “characterized by an undeviating focus on student learning” was cited by Pankake and Moller (2003, p. 8) as an indication of a learning community. This contrasts with the teachers and principals of District B who voiced a range of goals, from increased communication to classroom management. While some District B respondents mentioned student learning as an important goal, there was a marked difference from the solidity of the respondents in District A.

There was a lack of opportunity for District B teacher collaboration and shared leadership other than through a school leadership team. Teachers indicated that collaboration was an additional task and time for collaboration received only lukewarm support from their principals. The elementary school principal provided time but also set the agenda, mandated the discussions, collected notes on the outcomes, and expected teachers to “all teach the same thing every day.” Once again, principals and teachers in District A spoke with the “same voice,” defining through examples the same philosophies of collaboration, teacher leadership, and shared leadership. District B principals and teachers did not articulate a common characterization of what
collaboration looked like or what was important to the stakeholders in the community. Shared leadership was viewed through a very narrow lens.

The successful implementation of PLCs in District A dismantles the District B principal’s arguments that the barrier of district and school size diminished opportunities for sharing leadership and collaboration. Likewise, the demographics, attitudes, and culture of the area were not stumbling blocks as these districts are in close proximity. This strengthens the argument that leadership support is essential to a collaborative climate. District B principals did not have a clear understanding of the elements of collaboration and shared leadership, which begs the question of the extent of leadership support at the district level.

While a link cannot be made from this study between successful implementation of collaborative work groups and successful student outcomes, findings from this study, nonetheless, open the discussion to a distal link. ACT scores, value added scores, and test score gains were all higher in District A than in District B. We would, however, be remiss if we did not acknowledge the differences in student population, specifically, District B’s greater number of students living in poverty and the students whose first language is not English. We would argue that collaborative work groups, implemented with greater fidelity to the PLC constructs as put forth by Hord (1997, 1998, 2008) might mitigate the challenges of these subgroups.

The limitations of case study research are recognized. Yet, this research offers empirical evidence which may be useful to other districts and schools as collaborative work groups are mandated. Instructing teachers to “go collaborate”, then failing to provide professional development, time, support, and follow-up, along with an emphasis on shared goals, shared leadership, and a school culture open to sharing expertise, will not reap the rewards that PLCs which are implemented with fidelity can offer. Enacting a school culture where teachers can
practice the mission of student success through collaborative work will build a community of learning for all stakeholders.

References


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