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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

Utilizing Professional Learning Communities as a Vehicle for Equity:
Administrator Roles and Perceptions

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

Adriana Lepe-Ramirez

Committee in charge:

University of California San Diego

Amanda Datnow, Chair
Megan Hopkins

California State University, San Marcos

Erika Daniels

2018

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The Dissertation of Adriana Lepe-Ramirez, is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

Chair

University of California San Diego
California State University, San Marcos

2018

DEDICATION

To my parents Max and Josefina Lepe, thank you. I have crossed this finish line because of you and your example of hard work and dedication. Your unconditional love and unfaltering faith in me is beyond words and I love you both with all of my heart and soul. I am truly blessed to have been given such amazing parents. To my siblings Jorge and Angelica Lepe, I love you both.

To my amazing husband Enrique Ramirez, I want to give a special thanks. Thank you for supporting me throughout my journey. I know that through it all, it was you that took on the largest burden and you did it for me. I will never forget your love and the sacrifice you made to support me in reaching this goal. I dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful children, Matthew, Bella, Emma, Soffia, and Cristian. You are my driving force, my willpower, and my reason for pushing through. I love you all and for you, there is nothing I would not do.

EPIGRAPH

Leaders become great, not because of their power, but because of their ability to empower others.

John Maxwell

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VITA

Education

Ed.D. in Educational Leadership
University of California San Diego & California State University, San Marcos, 2018

M.A. Education in Educational Leadership
California State University, Sacramento, 2005

Administrative Credential
California State University, Sacramento, 2005

California Teaching Credential Single Subject/Social Science
California State University, Los Angeles, 2004

B.A. Social Science/Option: History
California State University, Los Angeles, 2001

Professional Experience

Principal, Escondido High School
Escondido Union High School District, 2017 - Present

Assistant Principal, Perris High School
Perris Union High School District, 2011 - 2017

Assistant Principal, Paloma Valley High School
Perris Union High School District, 2008 - 2011

Assistant Principal, College Ready Academy High School #7
Alliance for College Ready Public Schools, 2007 - 2008

Teacher, Various Sites (High School)
Soledad Enrichment Action, 2001 - 2007

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Utilizing Professional Learning Communities as a Vehicle for Equity:
Administrator Roles and Perceptions

by

Adriana Lepe-Ramirez

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2018
California State University, San Marcos, 2018

Professor Amanda Datnow, Chair

Numerous studies have found that students of color are often subject to teacher biases or negative preconceptions. These biases often result in barriers and limitations that negatively impact students' academic achievement and social and emotional development. Studies have also documented the impact of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) in transforming school culture and implementing school-wide change. However, few studies have looked at how bias and issues of equity are addressed via PLCs. Using qualitative methods, this study examined district and site level administrators' roles and perceptions of the use of PLCs as a vehicle for achieving school-wide goals of equity. Interview data gathered from 17 site and district level administrators in one district were analyzed for this

study. This study used Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) as a lens to examine administrator perceptions of how PLCs facilitated a change in the narrative from one that focuses on blaming students for underachievement to one that focuses on teacher practices and pedagogy that supports all students. All administrators in this study reported that moving a staff and shifting teacher belief systems was challenging. This was especially the case when staff did not fully understand the purpose of the work of the PLCs, how to effectively lead or engage in a PLC, and/or lacked trust and positive working relationships. At the same time, each site administrator was able to identify PLCs within their schools that were making steady progress toward achieving the goals of equity. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Overview of the Problem

With the persistence of the growing achievement gap between White and ethnic minority students, researchers continue to investigate where education is failing to address the needs of our most at-risk students including African-American, Latino/a(s), and students of lower socioeconomic status (Baker, 1999; Davis & Duper, 2004). Students of color living in families of lower socioeconomic status (SES) often begin their academic journey at a disadvantage. The lack of academic access during the pre-school years, limited exposure to vocabulary, and restricted experiences—which act as the foundation of learning—create academic deficits before formal education even begins for many of these students (Comer, 2001). By kindergarten, teachers are faced with classrooms comprised of students from different cultural backgrounds that already have very different lived experiences. As students progress through the prescribed curriculum, their varied levels of academic achievement become obvious, and teacher biases can emerge. As teachers assess their students' academic abilities, they take a deeper look and begin to make assumptions about who their students are, what their backgrounds consist of, and ultimately begin to set limits on what they believe their students can achieve.

Teacher biases are rooted in their students' socio-economic status, cultural composition, home language, and parent education level, and reveal what they believe their students cannot and will not do (Ready & Wright, 2011). Teacher bias often results in a vicious cycle consisting of lower expectations and underachievement for low SES students. Students that experience academic success are often encouraged by their teachers to reach higher expectations, which produces more challenging, caring and nurturing instruction,

resulting in higher academic achievement (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005). The opposite is true for the underachieving student who begins at a lower level: lower expectations lead to less responsive teaching and less rigor, which results in even lower academic achievement (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005). Additionally, this ongoing progression of underachievement has negative effects on the teacher-student relationship—a key aspect to success for this cohort of students. A number of studies document how lower SES and minority students are most impacted by the relationships they build with their teachers; yet it is this same group of students that is most often seen in a negative light by those same teachers (Blanchard & Muller, 2014; Hughes et al., 2005; Ready & Wright, 2011).

Studies have suggested that a cultural mismatch—consisting of cultural, ethnic, and/or racial differences between the teacher and the students they serve—may be a contributing factor to this disparity (Brown, 2002; Skiba & Horner, 2011). African-American and Latino students make up 40% of students enrolled in the K-12 school system, while White teachers make up 81% of the American teaching profession (NCES.edu.gov). This lopsided representation of White teachers to minority students may result in unrealistic academic and behavioral expectations of students consistent with White norms and values, and disregard minority students' cultural identities and lived experiences (Brown, 2002; Nichols, White, & Price, 2006; Ready & Wright, 2011). One proposed method to address the disproportions found in American classrooms is to use pedagogical practices based on equity; however, this method has been met with its own set of challenges, as Guerra (2004) describes:

Equity practices in classrooms appear to be mitigated by the following factors: (a) teachers' personal beliefs and values act as a filter through which they make decisions about their classroom practices, (b) educators' cultural awareness does not translate to practice

because of insufficient cultural knowledge from which they can develop alternate explanations for the behaviors and the value systems of their CLD (culturally/linguistically diverse) students and communities, and c) when teachers possess the requisite beliefs and knowledge of equity-oriented pedagogy there may be insufficient opportunities to develop the necessary skills to implement such practices. (p.157)

Studies that have focused on Transformative Adult Learning highlight the manner in which people abandon previous perceptions and biases while adapting and understanding their surroundings through a different perspective (Mezirow, 1990). Biases and skewed perspectives can hinder teachers' pedagogical practices, specifically when teaching students from a culture different than their own. However, the literature highlights the importance of cultural understanding and valuing one's lived experiences specifically in the world of education (Davis & Dupper, 2004; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers begin their transformational journey in gaining a new perspective and developing a new opinion of the students they serve, specifically those working in areas of high-poverty and with racial minority students. One way in which teachers' beliefs and understandings can be addressed is through the use and implementation of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), or structured, inquiry-based teacher collaboration.

Studies surrounding cultural responsiveness and equity have identified collegial collaboration as a key component to transforming school culture and making academic gains for all students (Galloway & Ishimaru, 2015). As a means to address the biases present in education and create an educational setting that embraces diversity and embodies equity, the leadership team within each school district and school site can support their teachers and

educational practitioners in transforming the manner in which students are viewed, supported, and how all students' success can be reinforced. Researchers have studied and identified key characteristics that administrative teams possess and practices they implement to transform their school culture and support their teachers as they transform their teaching practices and personal beliefs with regard to student ability and achievement. Trends in the literature identify: (a) collaboration, (b) clear goals and expectations, (c) encouraging and supporting self-awareness, (d) staff development opportunities and, (e) access to data (Datnow & Park, 2015; Davis, Gooden, & Khalifa, 2016; Martin, 2000; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1991) as key principles in transforming the way teachers address the needs of all students and areas of focus for administrative teams to support their teachers in their transformational journey.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine district and site level administrators' role and perception of the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a vehicle for achieving school wide goals of equity. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do administrators perceive the use of PLCs as a vehicle for achieving goals of equity?
 - a. How are PLCs utilized to address equity via instructional change?
 - b. Do PLCs provide an opportunity for dialogue to address personal biases and perceptions of student achievement?
 - c. How does school and community context play into the conversations during PLCs?
 - d. How does the administrative team help navigate conversations during PLCs?

Equity was examined through the lens of Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) to

gather administrators' perceptions of how the PLC process facilitates a change in the narrative from one that focuses on blaming students for underachievement to one that focuses on teacher practices and pedagogy that supports all students. This qualitative study focused on 17 administrators in one district. During in-depth interviews, administrators were asked about the strategies teachers used during PLCs to address student academic achievement and what their role as educational leaders was to support and help navigate the conversation toward one of equity for all students, specifically for their African-American and Latino students. The aim was to uncover where administrators feel they were in establishing educational equity on their campuses and/or district when working with teachers that service children of color, why they felt that way, how the context or current culture of the school supported or hindered their progress, as well as gain an understanding of what their next steps were their transformational journey.

Significance of Study

The truth is, there are indefensible inequities in our school system in terms of funding, teacher quality, access to rigorous curriculum and student outcomes. Half a century after Brown versus Board of Education, this is an epic injustice for our society (Arne Duncan, 2010).

In a 2010 speech, then U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, explained that the growing equity gap in the American education system—specifically between White students and their ethnic minority peers—is one that has deep roots and continues to infect schools and impede learning for students of color. These inequities are extensive, wide ranging and may be a contributing factor to both the achievement and opportunity gaps between ethnic minority students and their White peers (Hursch, 2007; Boykin & Noguera, 2011). However, there are other obstacles that impact student achievement such as poverty, family education level, limited access to healthcare, and housing, (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Heckman, 2011).

The biases and limitations that children of color are faced with and the limited opportunities they are offered also matter tremendously (Blanchard & Muller, 2014; Hughes et al., 2005). A number of studies indicate that students of color, specifically African-American and Latino students, are often the subject of teacher biases or teacher preconceptions which result in set barriers and limitations to what a student is exposed to, how they are challenged or not challenged academically, disciplined, and essentially cared for in the school setting (Blanchard & Muller, 2014). Therefore, conversations surrounding equity and student academic success are of the utmost importance.

Equally important is the manner in which these conversations are supported, established, and maintained on school campuses. Studies have identified the use of collegial collaboration or Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a means to engage in conversations surrounding student data, student success, student ability, and best practices (Datnow, Kennedy-Lewis, Park, 2013). Therefore, through the power of the PLC, teacher collaboration, and the support and guidance of the school and district leadership teachers can use this time to not only transform how they interact and educate students, but also as a means to transform their own biases and gain a new, more in-depth, understanding of the students they serve. This study illuminates district and site level administrators' role and perception of the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a vehicle for achieving school wide goals of equity.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

This review of literature will examine teacher bias and aid in demonstrating the effect these biases have on academic achievement for students of color. There is a direct focus on the biases that teachers may have toward Latino and African-American students and how these biases manifest themselves in lower academic expectations, assumed maladaptive behavior and ultimately severed teacher-student relationships (Bae, Holloway, Li, & Bempechat, 2008). The term “teacher bias” refers to teachers’ preconceived notions, mindsets, and perceived stereotypes that may impact their opinion of students’ academic ability and social adaptability (i.e., classroom behavior, academic apathy, and social interactions with peers and adults) (Wilson, 2003). The literature further identifies: (a) how biases and perceptions are established, and (b) the process of Transformative Adult Learning (TAL), which is the progression of creating a new understanding of a previous belief that has cultivated to guide successive understanding, appreciation and action (Mezirow, 1990).

The literature will also highlight how transitional change and adult learning can flourish in an educational setting utilizing a safe space such as a Professional Learning Community (PLC) to collaborate with colleagues and discuss student success via planned and purposeful data analysis and academic reinforcement revolving around the goal of achieving equity for all students. Finally, the literature will underscore the role of the leadership team in cultivating change by identifying strategies that support teachers in their transformational journey while impacting the cultures on their campus to promote productive, meaningful dialogue, and create effective learning environments pertaining to equity and student success.

Research consistently shows that students of color are consistently underperforming in

comparison to their white classmates (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005). A cultural mismatch between educator and student is seen as a contributing factor to this growing gap (Skiba & Horner, 2011). The inconsistencies can be seen in student academic achievement rooted in low expectations for students of color (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005), an over reliance on referring students of color for special education based on behaviors that are inconsistent with the referring teachers cultural norms (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003), and student conduct leading to an overrepresentation of students of color being issued exclusionary consequences for behaviors that are equivalent to those of their White classmates receiving lighter consequences—all of which contribute to a severed home-school relationship, which perpetuates the problem (McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2012).

Students of color thrive when relationships built on trust and respect, are established in a school setting. However, the issues previously presented impede the process of establishing such relationships and inhibit students' ability to reach their full potential. Therefore, it is imperative that the issue is addressed at its core, and the manner in which teachers perceive and relate to their students is not only challenged but is the foundation of collaborative conversations that inform their instruction. Through the process of guided collaboration, such as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), and informed decision-making, teachers can gain a better understanding of how their students learn in different settings and how they respond to various pedagogical practices.

Collaboration creates an environment where teachers are challenged and encouraged to address their biases and preconceptions of student ability leading to transformation in how they think about their students. Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) is the process that one goes through when a previous understanding is no longer relevant and a new understanding is

created (Mezirow, 1990). This transformation can be incited, encouraged, and supported through the PLC process when key components are in place to sustain and nurture this process. The components necessary are often rooted in the steps and supports provided by the leadership team that is encouraging and nurturing the process. As educational leaders, the administrative teams at both district and school levels have an important role to play in supporting their teachers to embrace collaborative practices that are rooted in equity and student success.

Teacher Bias. This section will cover teacher bias and how these biases affect students of color, specifically in the areas of: (a) academics, (b) perceived student ability, (c) student conduct, (d) disciplinary consequences, and (e) the disproportionate number of students of color referred for special education. Children of color have historically been treated less than equal in comparison to their White counterparts—from separate schools to sub-par facilities and inferior curriculum. Today, in education, one can say that this country has evolved in its social and political practices since segregation, Jim Crow laws, and separate-but-equal doctrines. Still, children of color continue to be impacted by teacher bias and often are treated in a manner that is inconsistent with the treatment of their White classmates. Some student populations are more likely to experience teacher bias; these include students of color, immigrant children and those living in a lower socioeconomic status. The terms bias refers to embracing beliefs, values, ideas, and practices that perpetuate issues of subjugation and marginalization (Holmes, 2011). As Lawrence (1987) explained an idea that still holds true today:

The theory of cognitive psychology states that the culture—including for example, the media and an individual’s parents, peers, and authority figures—transmits certain beliefs and

preferences. Because these beliefs are so much a part of the culture, they are not experienced as explicit lessons. Instead, they seem part of the individual's rational ordering of her perceptions of the world. The individual is unaware, for example, that the ubiquitous presence of a cultural stereotype has influenced her perception that blacks are lazy or unintelligent. Because racism is so deeply ingrained in our culture, it is likely to be transmitted by tacit understandings: Even if a child is not told that blacks are inferior, he learns that lesson by observing the behavior of others. These tacit understandings, because they have never been articulated, are less likely to be experienced at a conscious level. (p. 323)

Given the understanding of bias and the nature in which cultural stereotypes shape the subconscious, minority students are often particularly impacted by teachers' preconceived notions of underrepresented students—often without ever realizing that they feel or respond differently toward students who may be of a different race or culture than themselves.

Academics. Teacher bias impacts students of color in the area of academics. Several studies have identified inconsistencies in the treatment, rapport, grading practices, and the academic rigor given to students of color in comparison to their white classmates. White students are generally provided with more responsive instruction, critical feedback, and have benefited academically and socially from the relationships they establish with their teachers (Harber, Gorman, Gengaro, Butishingh, Tsang, & Ouellette, 2012). When looking at student achievement and teacher perception, the data show that teachers have higher expectations for white and Asian students, reinforcing the misconceptions and personal biases that negatively impact student achievement and academic outcome by limiting students' access to academic rigor, and creating an environment where cultural minority students are academically inferior to their non-minority counterparts (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Research suggests that teacher

expectations are more impactful at the lower grades. However, the outlook for students that are starting off their academic journey with a learning deficit due, in part, to lack of access during ‘preschool’ years (i.e., vocabulary, interaction, social experiences, imaginative play) can be exacerbated by teacher perception of a student lack of ability, resulting in denial of equitable and lasting effects of academic support and motivation. Those effects may be a contributing factor to the growing disparity in academic achievement between minority children and their white counterparts (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005).

Teacher Assumptions about Students’ Abilities. Teachers make assumptions about students’ abilities based on their perception of the students. Students are then categorized based on perceived work habits, ability, and effort. Hard-working students are often motivated by their teachers to take more challenging courses to prepare them for college enrollment (Blanchard & Muller, 2014). Non-immigrant, native English speaking children are most likely to be seen as fitting into the “hard-working” category. Immigrant children, on the other hand, do not generally fit in this classification and do not get the same type of attention and support. To this cohort of students, whose parents lack the understanding of the American school system, the gift of attention and guidance could be the determining factor of whether or not they continue to challenge themselves academically (Blanchard & Muller, 2014). Teachers also differ in the type and level of feedback they give to their students based on their perceptions of the students’ ability. The disparity in how constructive criticism is given to students perceived as “high expectancy” versus those seen as “low expectancy” is a pattern also identified as an inconsistent treatment between White and minority students. Students described as low performing are held to lower standards and provided minimal academic feedback. In sharp contrast, students perceived to be high achieving are given more

analytical academic feedback and are set to higher expectations resulting in higher achievement (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005; Blanchard & Muller, 2014). Consequently, these students are consistently challenged and encouraged to push their academics further leading to even higher teacher expectations, which results in more challenging, caring, and nurturing instruction (Harber et al., n.d.; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005). The same pattern emerges for the opposite set of students: the “low expectancy” cohort experience lower expectations, less responsive instruction and less challenge, which then leads to even lower achievement (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005).

Teacher bias toward minority students goes beyond instruction, instructional practices, and academic expectations. In a study investigating adolescents’ perceptions of the bridges that promote and the barriers that impede supportive relationships with teachers (McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2012; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005), minority students are identified as the most vulnerable. Racial minorities, specifically African-American, Latino and children of lower socioeconomic status, struggle most to establish caring and nurturing relationships with their teachers. The exact reason for this disconnection specifically between students of color and White teachers is unknown, but studies have shown that teacher perception and cultural irrelevance can explain such disconnection (Skiba & Horner, 2011; Murray & Zvoch, 2011).

Student Conduct. Teacher bias also manifests itself through teachers’ perceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior. For example, there are behaviors and social interactions that are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable within lower socioeconomic African-American communities, such as speech patterns and specific vernacular (i.e., using non-standardized English) (Majors & Mancini, 1992). These same

cultural norms are seen differently among White teachers. It has been reported that White teachers characterized these behaviors as being destructive, incongruous, adverse, insolent, and menacing (Majors & Mancini, 1992).

Teachers unfamiliar with an African-American students' cultural identity can impose unrealistic rules and expectations onto the student and simultaneously present a cultural mismatch or misunderstanding of the African-American student. In a study investigating teacher's perceptions of African-American movement style, students behaving in a culturally relevant manner were found more likely to be considered for interventions such as special education. This same study found that white students behaving in a comparable manner as their African-American peers were also perceived as having similar behavioral disorders and needing special education services (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). This implies culturally uninformed teachers are more likely to perceive such behaviors associated with African-American culture as abnormal and recommend them for special education services.

Culturally uninformed perceptions put African-American students at a disadvantage due to the relevance that this type of behavior has in their everyday surroundings at home or in their community. A cultural mismatch, in which white teachers misunderstand their student social interactions, communication style and other culturally relevant characteristics, results in a perception that these behaviors—different than their own cultural norms—are abnormal or unacceptable and therefore need special education services to address their needs.

Disciplinary Consequences. Another way in which students of color are impacted by teacher biases is in the manner in which and effects of how disciplinary consequences are given. One study revealed the effects of exclusionary discipline, a practice that physically

removes the student from the academic setting (Haight, Gibson, Kayama, Marshall, & Wilson, 2014). This study highlighted the impact these consequences have on the students and their families, including severing home-school relationships and breaking any level of trust that may have previously been established (Haight, Gibson, Kayama, Marshall, & Wilson, 2014). The researchers interviewed families, teachers, and students who had recently been issued an at-home suspension (a disciplinary practice that removes the student from school, for one or more days). The study focused on the impact the suspension had on each person: the teacher, student, and family. Students receiving such disciplinary consequences felt shame and mistrust toward their teachers and school personnel. They felt disconnected from school and acknowledged feeling isolated and marginalized from the rest of their peers. The families also felt a level of mistrust toward school personnel, sensing that the disciplinary actions were racially motivated rather than implemented in an effort to affect change (Haight et al., 2014). Students of color need and benefit most from positive, caring and nurturing adult-student relationships. Yet, schools, teachers, and administrators continue to create systems that actively deteriorate relationships instead of foster them.

Students of color are negatively affected by academic disparities, cultural differences, and perceived notions of inappropriate behavior. They are perceived negatively based on how maladaptively and inappropriately they speak, how they act, and how they walk, resulting in more susceptibility to discipline due to the culturally irrelevant, unenforceable rules and expectations imposed upon them (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). The result is frequent disciplinary infractions which, due to policies such as zero tolerance, manifest in exclusionary discipline practices—further alienating students and their families (making the possibility of building positive, caring and nurturing relationships with teachers a

near impossibility) and, in turn, rendering the student helpless, angry and feeling defeated (McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2012; Murray & Zvoch, 2011).

Special Education. One area in which student behavior and teacher bias is highly evident is in the disproportionate representation of students of color referred for special education. Students of color, specifically African-American students, continue to be over-identified as needing special education interventions, having behavioral issues (which coincide with the Special Education referrals), being less motivated, less capable, and lacking the value of education in comparison to their white peers (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003;). The National Center for Education Statistics (2015) reports that White students comprise percent of the total students enrolled in the K-12 educational system and comprise 13% of the students served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). African-American students, however, comprise 16% of the total students enrolled in the American public school system and they represent 15% of the students receiving Special Education services (NCES.ed.gov), an exacerbating statistic that reinforces the disparity in referrals made for African-American students in comparison to their White counterparts.

Student behavior has been identified as the most consistent characteristic associated with special education referrals for African-American students (Abidin & Robinson, 2002). In the last 20 years there has been a growing overrepresentation of African-American students placed in special education and the juvenile justice system for emotional disturbances, which research suggests is a result of teacher-reported behavioral concerns rather than student self-reported or parent-reported distresses (Lau et al., 2004). An example of this was highlighted in a study conducted to determine if African-American students' cultural style of movement

(i.e., a non-standard walking style described as bent posture, with head slightly tilted, one foot dragging, and an exaggerated knee bend): (a) affected teachers' perceptions of the student's achievement, (b) affected teachers' perceptions of their aggression, and (c) resulted in teacher recommendations for special education (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, 2003). This study established a positive correlation between student movement style (walk) and a teacher's perception of that student's aggressiveness, academic ability, and the need for special education services. Although this study did not find student race, gender, or SES to be significant indicators of students recommended for special education, it did find student behavior to be the strongest indicator for special education referrals. Students identified as having behavioral issues (based on their style of movement such as their walk, which is most consistently associated with African-American culture) may be more susceptible to special education referrals based on teachers perceived behaviors of what is proper or improper conduct, a subjective referral made by the teacher's individual culture (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003).

Conversely, a comprehensive review of literature showed no significant amount of literature to explicitly indicate a bias toward African-American students for special education referrals (Mason, Guernsey, & Ney, 2014). Instead, behaviors that were most identified as needing special education services were behaviors associated with ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder). However, white students who were demonstrating behaviors that would justify special education recommendations were not identified as needing the services, yet the African-American students that demonstrated that same type of behavior were most often referred. Consequently, this difference in special education referrals creates a disproportionate representation of African-American students and an underrepresentation of

white students. A different study also found no significant differences in referrals based specifically on students' ethnic background (Tenenbaum & Ruck (2007). However, it was determined that ethnic minority students were more likely to be referred than white children, more so in the primary grades. This was specifically true when study participants were identifying students within their own schools, versus studies where participants were using hypothetical children in vignettes or other staged settings. Nevertheless, in either scenario minority children were still more likely to be referred for special education than non-minority students (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). The erroneous placement of ethnic minorities in special education can have long lasting negative consequences.

Adult-Student Relationships

Despite the challenges that both teachers and students face in multicultural classrooms, interventions and teacher-student practices have been identified to help teachers see beyond biases, bridge relationships, and foster academic success. Student exposure to rigorous curriculum, in conjunction with the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, have not only resulted in positive academic growth, but have also helped change teacher perceptions of students' academic ability (Swanson, 2015).

Building teacher capacity and cultural understanding of the students they serve cultivates relationships that promote student resilience, respect, self-esteem, and most importantly, academic success (Baker, 1999; Davis, 2003; Davis & Duper, 2004; Krovetz, 1999; McMillan, 1994). Many minority students, particularly those who come from low-income and/or immigrant families, lack the educational guidance and mentorship in the home needed to effectively navigate through the educational system (Hayes, Blake, Darensbourg, & Castillo, 2015) which is why establishing a meaningful relationship with a caring adult within

the school setting is crucial to their academic success. Studies have shown that minority students living in poverty often lack a well-defined plan to achieve their personal academic goals (Yowell, 2002). This ambiguity often results in academic failure and perpetuates the cycle of poverty. A caring and nurturing relationship between students, their teachers, and guidance counselors can help change the trajectory of students' lives by assisting them in developing their plan and by supporting them throughout their journey, removing barriers and creating opportunities for success (Yowell, 2002).

Supporting student academic success depends on the genuine understanding that adult behavior and their daily interactions with students make a difference in their students' lives (Krovetz, 1999). Building nonjudgmental, open relationships with students and establishing a connection based on respect, trust, and acceptance is key for the resilient student (McMillan, 1994). Werner (1984) identified professional and competent teacher behaviors that academically successful and resilient students found important: (a) the aptitude to represent and further the objectives of the school; (b) an inclination to listen to the provocations behind inappropriate behavior before issuing disciplinary consequences; (c) objectivity in grading and instruction; (d) commendations and encouragement that they can succeed; (e) elevated expectations; and (f) an eagerness to get to know the students personally as well as academically (Werner, 1984).

There is a systematic approach to understanding resiliency and building academic success in students. A study conducted by Genevieve Marie Johnson (1997) identified human relationships, community factors, school factors, family factors and student characteristics as a model of influence for at-risk students' resiliency. In this study, Benard (1991) was cited to indicate that the center of the *model of influence* resonates in the ability to establish positive

and supportive human relationships, which then translates in opportunities to participate in community programs or extracurricular activities that strengthen the human relationship component. This also contributes to student academic achievement (school factor), which leads to improved self-esteem, motivation, self-control, and goal setting attitudes (student characteristics). It is a cycle of personal and academic success.

When addressing the needs of our most vulnerable students, teachers, and practitioners often fall victim to the *hospital model* (triage, assign degrees of urgency to address needs), which is a problem-focused approach (Krovetz, 1999). This is a reactive approach in response to students who have already fallen behind in credits, are currently “at-risk” of dropping out, are demonstrating maladaptive behaviors and have already been identified as being in trouble (Yoon, 2002). Teachers and other educational specialists need the capacity to take a proactive approach in building self-efficacy, motivation, self-esteem and ultimately resiliency in students before becoming disenfranchised emphasizes strengthening the environment, not fixing kids (Benard, 1991). This proactive approach is founded in the emotional connection that students establish with a caring adult—one who plays a critical role in helping the student adapt to their school environment, build capacity, reward competency, and promote self-esteem (Yoon, 2002).

Another aspect to consider in building capacity amongst teachers and practitioners is in the area of content, curricular exposure, and pedagogy. An understanding of how school engages and disengages students through pedagogical practices that teachers employ in the classroom is evident in student connectedness and personal relevance to what is being taught (Rosenbloom & Way, 2004). Franquiz (2004) describes the practice of humanizing pedagogy, “which values the students’ background knowledge, culture, and life experiences,

and creates learning contexts where power is shared by students and teachers” (p. 38), as a means of creating value and relevance to students’ culture. Franquiz found that cultural minority students need their teacher to do more than simply teach them content. They need the content and delivery to strengthen their cultural awareness and identities. Students thrive in an environment where their voices are heard, respected, and valued. The academic exchange between teachers and their students emphasizes the importance of making meaningful personal connections with the teacher as well as the content, which enables a student to “share the power and responsibility for their own learning” (Davis, 2003, p. 220)

Poor and minority students need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance through the establishment of positive relationships, which enriches a student’s motivation and confidence (Davis & Dupper, 2004). In an effort to create the type of classroom environment that promotes student inquiry, values cultural differences, respects students’ lived experiences, and promotes mutual responsibility in the learning process, a teacher must first establish a relationship with the students based on the attributes previously listed. Teachers often underestimate the power and responsibility they hold in determining student success, which is problematic when considering the biases many of them hold in believing that poor children of color cannot thrive academically or socially (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003).

An educational framework used in serving impoverished minority students must examine specific policies that alienate and further disenfranchise the students in their care. Stakeholders are required to make such changes through careful planning and unwavering commitment. To promote academic success, it is essential to (a) evaluate disciplinary policies which most negatively impact and sever students’ connection to positive school role models,

(b) support classroom teachers in implementing pedagogical strategies that are culturally relevant, and (c) promote positive interactions that foster meaningful relationships (Davis & Dupper, 2004).

Transformative Adult Learning, Professional Learning Communities, and Collaboration

This study will utilize transformative adult learning as a theoretical framework in order to address concerns regarding biases and perceptions that negatively impact social and academic growth for students of color. In the early development of *transformative adult learning* Mezirow (1978) defined this action as “a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values, and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated” (p. 17). The term *transformative adult learning* was created in 1978 after Mezirow studied a female cohort of community college students continuing their education. He concluded that as the students expanded their understanding of communal, ethnic, and personal histories, their capacity to reshape their initial presumptions and personal expectations of learning did as well (Mezirow, 1991). Mezirow (1991) contended, and Craton (1992) concurred, that a significant setback or disorienting dilemma can initiate the transformative adult learning process. It is important to note that critical self-evaluation was central to the transformative learning process. However, Craton adds that engaging in challenging interactions with others can also trigger transformative learning. As the theory of *transformative adult learning* emerged, Mezirow (1990) defined learning as “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience which has tended to guide subsequent understanding, appreciation and action” (p. 1). He identified a 10-step process in which transformative learning manifests. Those steps include: (1) a

disorienting dilemma; (2) self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame; (3) a critical assessment of one's epistemic, socio-cultural, or psychic assumptions; and (4) recognition of one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. Additional steps include: (5) exploration of options to form new roles, relationships, and actions; (6) planning a course of action; (7) acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans; (8) provisional trying of new roles; (9) building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships and lastly, (10) a reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective.

With time and application, the theory of transformative learning has grown in both its meaning and definition. Craton (1992) described transformative learning theory as "a process of critical self-reflection, or a process of questioning the assumptions and values that form the basis for the way we see the world" (p. 146). The values and beliefs of those experiencing transformational learning had not changed as a result of their new learning; they were, however, examined and their source identified. The aim of identifying the source was to determine if the value or belief required justification, alteration, dismissal, or acceptance. Many researchers influenced Mezirow's (2000) work on transformational learning including Thomas Kuhn (1970), Paulo Freire (1970), Roger Gould (1978) and Jurgen Habermas (1984).

The development of transformative learning relied on the belief that the process begins following a disorienting dilemma or a paradigm shift. Kuhn (1970) argued that "science has not tended to progress via a linear accumulation of new knowledge, but underwent periodic revolutions, in which the nature of scientific inquiry within a particular field was abruptly transformed" (p. 42). Parallel to Mezirow's notion of disorienting dilemmas, which ignites change, Kuhn's explanation of a paradigm or structure was key to the social and individual

circumstances that created change in social institutions. The influence of the notion on structure has impacted transformative learning in that it represents the shifts and transformations that eventually shaped ideas and institutions, which include institutions of self and education.

The work of Roger Gould (1978) also influenced Mezirow in his development of this transformation theory. Gould hypothesized that people gradually surrender their childhood beliefs and are inclined to evolve to being capable of confronting their own reality to a greater degree as new beliefs arise. As people move through the process of evolving into adulthood they eventually succeed in raising their levels of consciousness (Gould, 1978). The connection that this process has to Mezirow's (2000) transformative learning is the notion of investigating and scrutinizing previously held beliefs and re-evaluating, rejecting, or accepting these beliefs based on new levels of understanding.

The work of Paulo Freire (1970), on conscientization, was also influential in the development of Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory. Freire (1970) describes conscientization as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and in doing so, developing a critical awareness so that individuals can take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p.31). Freire's idea that conscientization is the process of stripping oneself of the control of the dominant conscience-- the process of unearthing one's own values and thoughts while discarding oppressive beliefs and ideas-- is transformational learning.

Mezirow (2000) was also influenced by Habermas' development of concepts pertaining to communicative competence and instrumental learning as the dominant realms of learning--identifying the key role of communication in validating beliefs. An individual's

discernment serves as pathway to self-awareness and frees them of preexisting biases. The process sets the foundation transformative learning theory (Habermas, 1984).

Mezirow's (1978) transformative adult learning theory has itself transformed over the past 20 years. At the onset of the theory's development Mezirow mapped out a 10-step process (Cranton, 2006; Mezirow, 2000). It has since become "a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience" (Cranton, 1994, p. 22). The process of *perspective transformation* is also a key concept in transformative learning. Clark and Wilson (1991) highlighted three core elements of perspective transformation: (a) psychological (self-understanding), (b) convictional (reevaluation of personal belief system), and (c) behavioral (adjusting one's lifestyle). Mezirow (1978, 1991, 1996) maintained adult development was intended to enhance one's self-capabilities and self-awareness, which was done through the practice of critical reflection. In order for transformative learning to take place their "meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions)" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167), the learner had to evaluate and reflect on their experiences, which lead to perspective transformation, which he defined as:

... the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings. (p. 176)

As new knowledge is established, and new experiences are had, perspective transformation helps in understanding the paradigms that have been shifted over time and the points of reference that influenced the individual's behavior and perspectives and how they interpreted events (Taylor, 2000).

Brookfield (1987) identified four progressive steps that preclude transformative learning: (a) identifying assumptions; (b) checking their accuracy and validity; (c) making alternative assumptions; and (d) taking informed actions. He also believed that when people think analytically they arrive at judgments, choices, and decisions for themselves, instead of letting others do this on their behalf. Educational practices that include critical self-reflection have aided adults in recognizing oppressive structures and practices, resulting in the development of a plan to bring about change for the good of the collective (Mezirow, 2000). Collins (1991) argued that as people become more self-aware, understand their own histories made up of their own beliefs, values, emotions, and experiences, only then can they become more free and empowered.

However, as people learn to value their self-awareness, they are better able to see themselves as a necessary and important member of the transformation process. The process of self-awareness is an ongoing process that has to be nurtured and supported through transformative learning in order to continue to self-reflect, engage in meaningful conversations with others and the world. The use of discourse, meaningful conversation, and discernment were seen as central aspects of transformative education (Boyd & Myers, 1988). Three activities describe the discernment process according to Boyd and Meyers (1988) they are: receptivity, recognition, and grieving. They argued that a person must to be open to receiving “alternative expressions of meaning,” and then accept that the message was genuine (p. 277). The most important of the three activities, which lead to discernment, according to Boyd and Myers, was grieving. Through the process of grieving an individual realizes that their old perceptions or views are no longer relevant, this leads to adopting and establishing new patterns of behavior and or thought.

Transformational Adult Learning (TAL) materializes when old opinions or preconceptions are no longer applicable which allows the learner to adopt new viewpoints and patterns of thought, which become new practices. When addressing biases or preconceived notions of student ability on a school campus, the process of TAL is a fundamental aspect rooted in those conversations. Therefore, when school leaders implement change geared toward equity for all students, it is imperative that they allow room, support, and guidance for the TAL process to materialize organically and holistically.

Role of Administration in Supporting/Implementing Change

As a means to address the biases present in education and create an educational setting that embraces diversity and embodies equity, the leadership team within each school district and school site must support their teachers and educational practitioners in transforming the manner in which students are viewed, supported, and how all students' success is reinforced. Researchers have studied and identified key characteristics that administrative teams possess and practices that they implement to transform their school culture, and support their teachers as they transform their teaching practices and personal beliefs with regard to student ability and achievement. Trends in the literature identify: (a) collaboration, (b) clear goals and expectations, (c) encouraging and supporting self-awareness, (d) staff development opportunities and, (e) access to data (Martin, 2000; Davis, Gooden, & Khalifa, 2016; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1991; Datnow & Park, 2015) as key principles in transforming the way teachers address the needs of all students and as areas of focus for administrative teams to support their teachers in their transformational journey.

In order to create collaborative cultures, administrative teams need to create an environment where teachers have uninterrupted time to exchange ideas with colleagues, and

other professionals who may be facing the similar challenges within their own organizations (Angelides & Hajisoteriou, 2014). Leithwood and Jantzi (1990) identified specific changes that administrators made within their organizations to facilitate the collaboration process. These changes included: (a) reallocation of money to support teachers' efforts and practices, (b) time provided during the workday to collaborate, while keeping the school goals at the forefront of the agenda, (c) pairing teachers for planning, (d) considering willingness to collaborate as priority when hiring new staff members, and (e) supervising improvement efforts in individual classrooms.

Once the collaborative teams have been established, all efforts must be aimed toward a common goal. The goal itself needs to be established by the collective and at the forefront of all conversations. Rosenholtz (1985) says that one of the most important contributions a principal can make to a school, specifically one that serves low-income minority students, is to ensure that their teachers are confident about their school goals and their ability to reach them. Studies have shown schools in which teachers alongside their administrators collaborated in establishing the goals were more successful than schools that initiated changes with predetermined outcomes. When goals were set prior to the school improvement efforts, the staff showed less enthusiasm and demonstrated less growth than those who established the school's norms together (Leithwood & Jantzi, 1990). Leithwood and Steinbach (1991) also provide evidence that highly effective principals galvanize their teachers and staff by creating a shared set of goals with respect to the implementation of school improvement efforts.

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are described as "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (Stoll, Bolam, McMathon, Wallace, &

Thomas, 2006, p. 223). Through the use of PLCs, teachers can share data, discuss pedagogical practices, and engage in difficult conversations specific to student achievement, their teaching practices and its effectiveness, which is the foundation of encouraging and supporting self-awareness (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). Therefore, it is crucial that these collaborative settings or PLCs are based on trust and progress, rather than reproach and blame (Datnow & Park, 2015). In order to support safe collaborative environments, school leaders must take the lead in fostering teachers through the process having courageous conversations where they interrogate their preconceptions about race, culture and their impact on the classroom (Singleton, 2012).

At the start of collaboration and the implementation of change, a key component to success is professional development. As teachers collaborate and exchange ideas, practices, and engage in courageous conversations, professional development is a component that is necessary to ensure that teachers are supported and met where they are individually in their own professional journeys, specifically for teachers working in areas of high need (Mette & Scribner, 2014). Change takes time and can cause frustration and resistance for teachers; therefore, it is imperative that site administrators recognize the need to move slow and steady while providing the support, via professional development, teachers need to establish confidence and competence in implementing the expected change (Dematthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) concur that professional development and mentorship is a key component for moving schools and teachers toward cultural proficiency, specifically in areas where teachers work with low-income, minoritized students. Teachers are at different levels. Some may be more comfortable with the expected change, while other may be more resistant and exclusionary. Therefore, it is imperative that the

administrative teams understand where their teachers are and provide the necessary assistance and guidance to work through their discomfort in a manner that promotes competence and efficacy.

Finally, the use of data in implementing educational change and practice is essential. In order to engage in reflective conversations during collaboration, teachers need to be able to analyze and act on multiple forms of data in an effort to build relationships and arrange learning environments to improve student outcomes (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). In an effort to begin conversations regarding equity, the use of data and the patterns and trends that emerge become the foundation and basis for analyzing problematic situations and promoting discussions on how to equalize opportunities for all groups (McKenzie, 2004). Identifying discrepancies and inequities in data encourage teachers to think beyond the normal social and physical boundaries of their normal lives, it is intended to make them aware and take notice of patterns that they may not have previously considered (Callopy, Bowman, & Taylor, 2012). However, Datnow and Park (2015) remind school leaders of the importance of establishing clear expectations for teacher discussions, which can either be stifled by stringent expectations or can be unproductive in some circumstances. Therefore, it is recommended that administrators recognize the needs of each collaborative group and provide discussion protocols that assist teams in focusing conversations to those that need it, and allow those that do not the freedom to continue their discussions using the format that best meets their needs. It is the responsibility of the school leaders to create an environment that encourages inquiry and allows teachers to engage in authentic dialog throughout each step of the data use process.

Conclusion

This review of the literature shows that students of color are consistently underperforming in comparison to their white classmates and cultural mismatch between educator and student resulting in biases and or negative preconceptions of student ability may be a factor in this growing gap (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007; McKown, & Weinstein, 2008). The literature also suggests that when teachers are given the time, space, guidance, and support to create collaborative teams as a means to address student achievement and effectively assess student data, they can reflect on non-productive teaching practices and begin to engage in conversations that are based on solutions rather than those rooted in blame (Singleton, 2012). This study is based on the assumption that through collaboration and Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), teachers can address equity issues impacting students' achievement on campus. Through the PLC process, teachers can analyze various forms of data, reflect on practices that hinder and support student learning, while addressing their own biases and preconceptions. This process also could contribute to the transformational adult learning development, which may lead to a shift in practice based on their new understanding of the students they serve. This study will also focus on the role of the administration in facilitating this practice as well as the supports provided to teachers throughout this process. Most prior studies on PLCs have not fully tackled how PLCs address equity issues or the role that administration plays in helping them address these issues; this study aims to fill this gap.

Chapter 3: Methods

Overview and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how administrative teams at several school sites navigate teacher Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and encourage teacher teams to engage in difficult conversations pertaining to perceptions of student ability and effort. I looked to discover, describe and understand how each school's leadership team utilized their PLC time to promote and create opportunities for equity for all students, specifically for their underperforming students of color.

To review, the research questions guiding this study include:

1. How do administrators perceive the use of PLCs as a vehicle for achieving goals of equity?
 - a. How are PLCs utilized to address equity via instructional change?
 - b. Do PLCs provide an opportunity for dialogue to address personal biases and perceptions of student achievement?
 - c. How does school and community context play into the conversations during PLCs?
 - d. How does the administrative team help navigate conversations during PLCs?

This chapter will explain the methods that were used to conduct this study, site selection and sampling, the procedures that were used to collect data, and the manner in which it was analyzed.

Qualitative Methods

This study utilized qualitative research methods. Qualitative research relies on the stories and lived experiences of those participating in the study. Creswell (2008) explains that qualitative research participants provide the researcher with most of the data. It is through questioning, inquiry, and observation that a researcher can begin to understand a culture or group of people. Qualitative researchers seek to understand how people interpret situations in which they are involved. They want to understand the meaning of an instance (Merriam, 2009). I used qualitative methods because I wanted to understand the lived experiences of those working within the setting and better understand the culture of the institutions. Qualitative research should be used when a researcher wishes to gain understanding of a phenomenon or a detailed understanding of the factors in a situation (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009).

In a qualitative study, interviews are a common data gathering practice. Creswell (2008) explains that the process of conducting interviews consists of the researcher asking the participant a series of questions and recording their responses. As the interview proceeds, the researcher can ask a variety of questions ranging from open-ended to close-ended, depending on the information the researcher would like to gather and the information the participant is willing to share. The interviews are then transcribed, and the researcher begins the process of identifying trends and overarching themes that will be used to inform the study and the body of knowledge about the topic (Esterberg, 2002). Interviews were utilized in this study to determine how site administrators perceived the PLC process, via the district-wide training that district leadership participated in during the summer, as a vehicle for creating equity at each of their school sites. Also, interviews were used to understand if through this process

teachers and administrators identified and/or addressed their personal beliefs and biases toward the children of color they serve.

Sampling

Administrators were selected from the three comprehensive high schools, and one middle school within Academy Union High School District. For confidentiality purposes the pseudonym Academy Union High School will be used to represent the participating district. This district was purposefully chosen as all department chairs (PLC leads) and administrators participated in a 4-day PLC training in the summer of 2016. Educators in Academy Union are engaged in a district-wide initiative to move PLC conversations toward one of equity where all students are given a quality education and every student is expected to reach a level of proficiency. The administrators who were solicited for interviews were participants in the 4-day training, with the exception of one who was ill at the time of the first training. At the site level, all site administrators, from the comprehensive high schools and middle school, were invited to participate in the study. All administrators were initially spoken to and all verbally agreed to be a part of the study. They were then asked formally via an “Invitation to Participate in Study” document (Appendix A). This was my formal introduction as a researcher and clearly identified the goals and procedures of the study.

Due to the nature of the study and the focus on the district’s leadership team as a whole, the selected administrators were those that have a significant role in educational leadership as it pertains to curriculum and instruction and pupil services. The district-level administrators identified to participate in the study included the Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent of Educational Services, and the Director of Curriculum and Instruction. Site administration at the three comprehensive sites and the one middle school consisted of three

assistant principals and one principal. At the middle school, two of the assistant principals opted out of the study; the principal and one assistant principal participated. In total, I aimed to interview three district administrators, four site principals, and twelve assistant principals. Every individual consented to participation, with the exception of two assistant principals who opted out. The administrative staff interviewed included a mix of veteran and novice administrators. There was a wide variety of administrators who had years of experience but were new to the district, as well as administrators that were celebrating over a decade of service with the district. The administrators who were solicited for participation included administrators whose experience ranged from 1-30 years. Their ages ranged from early 30s to mid-60s. More information about the participants and the schools is provided in Chapter 4.

Description of Data Collection Procedures and Activities

To collect the data for this study, I invited the administrators to participate in up to two interviews. The intent was to have one interview and a follow-up in case clarification was needed. However, only one interview was needed. Administrators were contacted via email and/or telephone and the interview was scheduled at the most beneficial time for the administrator. The general length of each interview was approximately 1 hour. Interviews were semi-structured and followed the protocols for school and district administrators, which are included in Appendices C and D. As the interview began, I let the participants know that I was conducting my interviews in the capacity of a doctoral student at UCSD/CSUSM and not in the capacity of a district employee or school administrator. The consent forms were available for participants' review before scheduling an interview. At the start of the interview, I put the participants at ease by reminding them that they were free to stop the interview, go off record, take a break, or pause at any time. I also reminded them that their

identities and responses would remain confidential. Each interview was held at the preferred location identified by the participant during the final months of the school year.

Each interview provided detailed information with regard to administrators' perspectives on the success of their PLCs, as they pertain to equity. I inquired about the collaborative nature of their PLCs and if the teachers placed emphasis on strategies and interventions to address the needs of all students, specifically those that were underperforming. I wanted to discover through the interviews if the initial PLC training, which the leadership team attended, helped reshape and restructure the PLC process. I wanted to understand if and how the conversation in the PLCs shifted after examining the data and if those conversations were reflected in teacher practices, resulting in transformative adult learning. Finally, I wanted to investigate the role of the administrative team throughout this process and determine if equity, specifically for racial minority students, was an integral and embedded part of the instructional practice. Were administrators speaking of the practices that teachers have implemented to ensure that all of their students are reaching higher standards? If so, what did that look like and how did they know they were being equitable? Were teachers analyzing data in their PLCs and identifying the students that were achieving, those that were nearly achieving, and those that were not there yet? If so, how was each group addressed? Were best practices shared amongst subject groups? Were interventions and opportunities for re-teaching embedded in the lesson to ensure that all students were achieving? If so, what did those opportunities look like? Was there a change in how teachers grade, or how teachers interacted with or disciplined their students? If not, why not and what steps were needed to address the areas where they fell short?

Data Analysis

All interviews were audio recorded using the Rev Voice Recorder application and professionally transcribed verbatim. Each participant was given the opportunity to read their transcript before I began my analysis. None of the participants asked to change or remove information from the original transcript. I read and reviewed each transcript a minimum of three times for clarity and understanding. The first review was intended to grasp an overview of the essence of the interviews and also serve as an initial assessment of how the interviews connected with the research questions. The second review of all transcripts was intended to gain understanding and identify important quotes. By the third reading, I began making notes in the margins as I read. I began to identify commonalities and I noted them on the transcript. Data was then sorted into categories which became codes, and clustered under common topics that surfaced (Creswell, 2013). For example, I noted that all participants identified challenges that they were experiencing with their teachers. I also began to identify when blame was used in reference to student's lack of academic achievement. This process continued until I was able to code all transcripts. Some of the codes I used were open codes and others were codes that I developed ahead of time based on my interview protocol and research questions. During this phase I began placing data segments into the initial categories I had formed. This coding was done using the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA. There were 1,354 pieces of coded data after I went through the process of coding each interview. In Appendix E, I have included data from my interviews that highlights an example of when data was coded with a particular code. Appendix F lists the frequency of each code.

After coding my data, I created a matrix with each segment and code identified. This helped me identify patterns and themes across all participants, schools, and the district as a

whole. The matrix highlighted similarities and differences across the district. It highlighted the similarities that each school site shared in moving their PLCs forward. It also showed the differences in student demographics, teaching staff, and how both impact the culture on each campus. After identifying the differences and similarities, I began the process of selective coding (Merriam, 2009), in which I began to determine the meaning of all the codes within a category. During this process, I identified themes that more accurately described what was happening in a particular instance. For instance, as I reviewed the responses for teacher talk, where administrators referenced different types of conversations they have heard in PLCs. The data show three different challenges which eventually became the overarching themes. The three themes that emerged were: (a) understanding why PLCs were important or useful; (b) understanding how to do the tasks needed to effectively run a PLC; and (c) the trust and relationships needed to effectively run PLCs. Most coded segments were able to be identified and sorted into any one of those three themes. It was during this process that themes became more concrete and my hypothesis began to develop. I began to color code the segments under the newly formed themes which helped in developing the story that the data showed. A narrative of findings that resulted from the data analysis are presented in Chapter 4.

Ethical Considerations

The UCSD Institutional Review Board approved this study, as did the district that was involved. Consent forms were provided to all participants after IRB approval, and before each interview. All participants were notified and made aware that their participation was optional and they were allowed to opt out of the study at any time. As with any study, there is a potential for risk of a loss of confidentiality, but every effort was made in order to minimize these risks and to explain the full scope of the study. All data collected was stored securely

on a password-protected computer to protect participants from possible breaches of confidentiality.

Positionality

As a former employee of the district, I was aware that my positionality may have affected this study in unique ways such as personal biases and preconceived notions regarding specific schools, teachers, and the leadership team. However, I took great precautions to ensure that my personal understanding of each school site did not affect my ability to conduct and report a neutral and accurate study. When I was an assistant principal in the district, my role within the school included evaluating classified and certificated staff, placement of students, and working as an instructional leader. Participants in this study were either coequals or held higher positions, and thus were not in subordinate positions, which may otherwise have adversely affected this study. The benefit of my positionality was that it allowed for more candid and open conversations pertaining to their perceptions and lived experiences throughout the initial stages of implementation.

As a former member of the administrative team in this district, I was able to engage my former colleagues in conversations regarding their role and influence in the PLC process. My professional relationship with the district administrators, I believe, facilitated honest and authentic conversations that informed this study. To address personal biases, I remained neutral throughout my study and recorded responses as they were given. I was mindful that every school is different; they have different cultures and different clientele. As I conducted my research, I was gaining information and learning about the culture of each school and its administrative team. This allowed me to move forward in a more unbiased manner, since I had minimal understanding of the manner in which the leadership team functioned on other

campuses within the district. However, to reduce the effect of any biases, I triangulated the data across the interviews and invited participants to review, co-analyze the data and cross-check interview responses with participants through member checking.

Generalizability

There is a tremendous need for research that informs schools and districts on effective practices to achieve equity, specifically for African-American and Latino students. However, this investigation is limited in scope and context as it examines in detail the role and perceptions of a small sample of participants gathered from one school district. The intended outcome of this research study was not to generalize to the larger population, but rather to develop an in-depth exploration and understanding of administrator's role and perceptions of the use of PLCs to achieve goals of equity. The knowledge gained is unique to those administrators, their corresponding schools, their district, and my investigation. Therefore, the results from this study are not intended to be generalizable to all schools or students but rather served to provide insight into the role of the administrator in supporting PLC work to achieve goals of equity. While each school is unique, there were commonalities across experiences that will be useful to other administrators and educational leaders. There were connections found between administrator practices at each campus and at each level that provide insight into structural and cultural aspects that contribute to or hinder the process of establishing equity for all students within their specific institutions. Finally, each leadership team's attempt to achieve equity on their campus provides valuable insight into the challenges and successes they experienced throughout their journey.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the findings of a qualitative study in which 17 administrators were interviewed and asked to share their lived experiences in implementing and supporting teachers through their work in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) an effort to achieve equity goals. Each administrator offered an insight to their perception of the progress of the PLCs at their school. They gave a very raw and detailed account of where they believed they were personally and professionally in guiding and supporting their teachers in achieving goals of equity. They were asked to consider their current practices and the level of support offered to teachers in an effort to encourage professional growth and honest dialogue.

The findings from the analysis are presented in this chapter. I will begin by describing each school, based on an overview as detailed by each site administrative team. I will then recount administrators ideal PLC within this district, referencing the Transformative Adult Learning framework. I will then explain the current reality of PLCs and what they perceive happens within them. I will then discuss how the school and community context played a role in the PLCs, followed by the three dominant characteristics that administrators identified as barriers to effective and efficient PLCs. The three barriers were identified as: (a) difficulty understanding why PLCs are valuable, (b) not knowing how to run effective PLCs, and (c) the absence of trust and relationships both in and out of PLCs.

Context for The Study

Each school in this study has a unique demographic makeup of both students and staff. As noted in Table 1, the population size for the different participating schools range from 1,185 at the smallest campus to over 3,000 at the largest comprehensive high school.

Table 1: Student demographics of participating schools (2016-2017).

School	Hispanic/ Latino	Asian	Black or African- American	White	Other	Total Enrollment
School 1	2,125	15	163	63	42	2,408
School 2	969	13	65	28	110	1,185
School 3	1,846	92	164	507	159	2,768
School 4	1,557	209	186	1,003	234	3,189
District Total	6,669	331	586	1,619	550	9,757

Administrators in this study were identified by pseudonyms, as identified in Table 2 and their corresponding schools were identified as Schools 1-4 or the district office. Table 2 also provides information on the participating administrators age range and experience in educational and in administration.

Table 2: Interview Participants

Pseudonym	Site	Gender	Years in Education	Years in Administration
Mike	1	M	15-20	5 -10
Olivia	1	F	10-15	0 - 5
Ava	1	F	5-10	0 - 5
Andrea	1	F	20-25	5 -10
Kathy	2	F	20-25	10-15
Jacob	2	M	10-15	5 -10
Ruben	3	M	15-20	5 -10
Cindy	3	F	10-15	0 - 5
Erik	3	M	15-20	0 - 5
Mary	3	F	25-30	10-15
Daniel	4	M	20-25	10-15
Lisa	4	F	15-20	0 - 5
Luke	4	M	5 -10	0 - 5
Mason	4	M	15-20	0 - 5
Ella	Dist	F	15-20	10-15
Anna	Dist	F	25-30	15-20
Noah	Dist	M	25-30	15-20

Below I briefly provide additional background information of each school as described by the administrative teams.

School One. School 1 is considered the flagship school of the district. According to Andrea it is now seen as one of the tougher, more challenging comprehensive high schools in the area, despite its 100+ year history and the number of successful alumni that have graduated from there. The majority of students were Latino, and School 1 is reported to have the largest number of language learners and students of lower socioeconomic status in the district. Enrollment was declining as local families were choosing to enroll their students in charter schools or apply for inter/intra district transfers. Several of the teachers and one of the administrators are alumni from School 1. According to Mike, the “teaching staff exhibit the

usual discrepancy between students and staff where they are primarily white in terms of ethnic background.” With respect to experience level of the teachers, Mike claims:

the years in teaching run the gamut; some have been here for many years, 20 to 30 plus years, and others are fairly new to teaching. Given that, usual turnover in the staff I would say that the average experience tends to shift toward the newer end of teaching where a good portion of the staff has been teaching for 10 years or less.

School Two. School 2 is the only middle school in the district. The majority of the students were Latino and lower socioeconomic status. This school had the second largest English Language Learner population in the district. This middle school fed directly to School 1, therefore their student demographics mirror one another. The make-up of their teachers, however, was quite different. According to Kathy,

there's been, the past several years, a high turnover rate. We have 19 probationary teachers this last school year, and either in their first year or second year. Currently I have two veteran teachers in my language arts department. Everyone else is probationary.

Moreover, as Jacob said, “What I can say for sure is that the ethnic makeup of the staff does not match the ethnic makeup of the community or the school.” Both Jacob and Kathy indicated that having a newer teaching staff has shifted the feeling on campus. In the last two years, four site principals have come and gone, which has left the school without vision or leadership and in a state of uncertainty and “shell shock.” As Jacob describes it:

on one campus you might have a real history of antagonism between a staff and administrative team and even if that whole administrative team has changed over the years that relationship might still be in place because of just a real sour taste left in the mouths of the teachers.

Compared to other schools in the district, however, School 2 is described as having less animosity between their administrative team and their teachers which is credited to the large shift in their teaching staff, and opportunity to start fresh.

School Three. School 3 is the newest school in the district and is located between the two comprehensive high schools. The majority of students were Latino, and a large proportion received free and reduced-price lunch. However, the surrounding community can be considered middle class or lower middle class. The staff were described as somewhat diverse and seasoned. They had not seen a lot of retirements in the past few years, and since the student population was not growing there have been minimal opportunities to hire. Ruben explained the teaching staff as:

pretty diversified group as far as experience level because we have some veteran, old school teachers, we have some in the middle, but we have quite a few newer, kind of new generation, high on technology and direct student engagement and all that type of teachers.

School Four. School 4 is the largest and most diverse school in the district. However, they have a much larger white student population than any of the other schools and the lowest number of students in the free lunch program. The team shared that there were a lot of new housing developments in the area, which promised to bring in more middle-class families. The teaching staff at School 4, like the other schools, is predominantly white. Lisa described the experience of the teaching staff as:

inverse bell curve, because I have a lot of very veteran, seasoned, ‘we have been here a long time’ teachers. Then, I have a lot of newer, younger, ‘been there less than 10 years., excited, energetic, and not a whole lot in between.

Many of the newer teachers, according to Luke, are enthusiastic and want to get involved with student organizations and sports, which he thinks is a move in a positive direction. Despite the number of new hires, Mason said that there is still “an imbalance between our community and our faculty.

In the next section I will provide an overview of site and district administrators' conception of the ideal PLC. There were many common themes in the responses of administrators; differences are noted as well.

Site and District PLC Goals: Pie in the Sky

All participants in this study had a similar goal for PLCs both site- and district-wide: to provide equitable opportunities for students to succeed. At the district level administrators planned and executed district-wide professional learning around equity. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were a key component. Anna, a district administrator, shared that “all of the education services administrators were invited and attended. In addition to that, we had all of cabinet attending. We also had all of our instructional and tech (technology) coaches attend.” Each site administrative team was present, with the exception of one at School 3, and each school brought their department chairs, which lead their PLCs.

The purpose of having all district and site leadership attend was to ensure that all participants were hearing the same message and to ensure that appropriate supports were given to do the work that was expected. Anna said:

we have to be able to support what's happening in the classroom. Everything affects what happens in the classroom. The business department needs to be there. The assistant superintendent of business services needs to understand how the resources that she helps with a lot and set aside how that's going to affect everything that happens for student learning.

It was an “all hands on deck” approach to ensure that the work was done and that everyone was at the table to talk about the plan and to help make it happen. The district planned on two, multi-day training sessions. The first professional learning session took place in the summer prior to the start of the 2016-17 school year, and the second took place prior to the start of the second semester in January, 2017. Anna, who was instrumental in planning the

professional learning, indicated that there were plans to include all teachers in the district in the next professional learning session. This was expected to roll out prior to the start of the 2017-18 school year.

Ella, a district administrator put her goal for PLC's simply: "We should be making sure that the kids are leaving better than they came to us." Teachers should be engaging in conversations about student academic success and interventions. The conversations should stem from data analysis, reflection on teaching strategies, and determining next steps. A large number of students in the district are low SES and have significant challenges outside of the school day, indicated Noah. He also added:

We don't hold that as excuses. We say that's an understanding that we have. We have the expectations for them as far as what they're going to learn and how were going to help them get there. That's all the work that we need to do as a school site and a school district.

At the site level, the goals for PLCs were not much different than those set out by district administrators. Daniel said that his hope was that teachers, "would look at their data, they would look at their grades, find out what kids are doing well, in what classes with what teachers. Then share their strategies as to how they're getting kids there." Erik concurred with Daniel but also added that he hoped that:

There was more open communication and honest communication between each other, that there's inquiry that's going on within whatever the agenda items are, whether that's looking through assessment or crunching data or trying to find different methods of stuff that worked or didn't work, different strategies of pedagogy that they're trying to look at.

This was a general theme throughout the sites: the desire to have teachers have open and honest conversations with one another as they respond to student data. Administrators hoped that teachers would come to PLCs open, humble, honest, and ready to reflect on data,

best practices, and plan for maximum results. Mike included that his hope for PLCs was for teachers to engage in conversations by:

...clearly defining what it is that we want students to learn and with that also make sure that their grading systems and their assessment systems are aligned with that. So, once we've identified in a very clear way what we want students to learn then the next step of course is how are we going to assess it, how are we going to determine what that looks like?

All administrators indicated that at the heart of PLCs is equity for students. Prior research has shown that identifying discrepancies and inequities in data encourage teachers to think beyond the normal social and physical boundaries of their normal lives; it is intended to make them aware and take notice of patterns that they may not have previously considered (Callopy, Bowman, & Taylor, 2012). Administrators in this study believed that if teachers belonged to and participated in healthy and nurturing PLCs, equitable opportunities will emerge, which is why most site administrators focused their PLC goals on teacher actions and teacher participation in the process.

Olivia hoped that teachers would not only build good relationships with one another but also with students as well. She hoped that a collaborative relationship would exist between teachers and their students "as well as with their colleagues in an effort to truly understand students' needs and create a mutually beneficial plan where students get the interventions and supports they need to succeed academically." As Davis (2003) noted, the academic exchange between teachers and their students emphasizes the importance of making meaningful personal connections with the teacher as well as the content, which enables a student to "share the power and responsibility for their own learning" (p. 220). Ella indicated that she wanted all students to experience success within and across all content areas. The

intention of the PLC process was to create a plan to ensure that every student's need is provided in manner in which the student needs it. She added:

The support is not always given the same way. It's identifying what support specific kids need and specific subgroups need, and how to make sure that we're providing that support that's going to allow kids to have the same success as a student that might not need the extra supports in place.

For Jacob at School 2, "a PLC is to create a more positive and more equitable educational experience for students. Only a piece of that is demonstrated by their test scores." The data collected and analyzed in PLCs was intended to go beyond test results. The aim was to also use formative assessments to show teachers if their students were learning along the way, and to make adjustments to their lessons. The alternative would be to plow through their lessons only to discover that they lost students several lessons back.

Andrea added that achieving goals of equity through the PLC process involves not only identifying student successes and best practices, "it is also a time when teachers should be planning their interventions." It is a process of looking at the data and identifying where, why and how students were successful and others were not. "Conversations should be had and plans should be made to provide opportunities for students that lacked in one area to be taught and engage with teachers that were most successful in teaching that particular concept" she added. It was the hope of many of the administrators that all students would benefit from the dialogue and ongoing, reflective, collaboration that is an inevitable result of an effective PLC.

In theory, Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) can occur via the PLC process. However, certain components need to occur in order for that to happen. First, there is the psychological element, understanding self and checking one's assumptions. Once that element is in place then the convictional component, the evaluation of personal belief systems can

occur. This leads to behavioral shifts, adjusting one's lifestyle and making alternative assumptions. In this study the participating administrators indicated that most of the PLCs within their district or respective schools were not able to reach the three elements of TAL. The following sections will describe the challenges that existed which kept TAL from occurring, and in the concluding chapter the findings will be interpreted in light of TAL.

Driving a Car with Square Wheels: The PLC Reality

The overarching research question for this study sought to determine how administrators perceived the use of PLCs as a vehicle for achieving goals of equity. This section will highlight the perceptions of PLCs and the overall challenges they have experienced in achieving goals of equity. Site and district administrators' vision for the ideal PLC was previously discussed. However, the reality of what they observed will be addressed in this section. Three dominant themes emerged: (a) teacher actions, which included what teachers did and said both in and out of PLCs; (b) staff culture/context, which included a general culture of the schools and within PLCs, and (c) trust and relationships.

Teacher Actions/Teacher Talk in PLCs

Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) are described as "a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way" (Stoll, Bolam, McMathon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006, p. 223). One of the research questions that guided this study sought to determine if Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) provide opportunities for dialogue to address personal biases and perceptions of student achievement. An analysis of the data reveals that several PLCs throughout this district were stuck in a more superficial department meeting approach and struggled to engage in meaningful, data-driven conversations and

courageous conversations about student ability and the effectiveness of their teaching practices. However, each school was able to identify PLCs on their campus that were engaging in more equity-focused conversations and reported making considerable academic gains. Unfortunately, those groups were few and some were faced with additional challenges that will be addressed in this section.

Most of the administrators noted that many, not all, of their PLCs resembled informational meetings or department meetings. Lisa shared that she has seen two very different sides of PLCs at her site. She shared that at one extreme she hears teachers talking about how they are going to assess students, they agree on the essential standard, and create an assessment and bring back their data and analyze it. The other extreme involved a focus on department concerns, such as ordering scantrons and other supplies that were needed. This was true for Jacob as well: “Departments talk about supplies they need to order and student behavioral issues, important topics but not topics that are really student achievement, data-driven that determine instructional practices.” However, he added that there were PLCs using data collected from common formative assessments. He said that the data was introduced and discussed, which was a step in the right direction, but had yet to spark conversations about instructional practices nor next steps for student achievement or intervention.

Other site administrators saw teachers working independently during PLCs. As groups gathered and shared where they were in specific units or what they planned on teaching next, some teachers were disengaged and demonstrated “a lot of passive stuff ... the use of technology, limiting the sharing to the collective body ... a lot of segmentation and box checking.” said Erik. Ava said, “some teams, I see just kind of working on their own computers, not really having conversations with each other... they’re working independently,

just together.” Like at Ava’s school, Luke also shared that, “... there wasn’t a lot of PLC groups and activities going on ... a lot of it was grouping together with buddies ...” He indicated that some of the newer teachers found speaking up and getting involved more challenging, due to the structure of their PLC and some of the more dominant personalities hindering their motivation to share. He went on to say that “one of the biggest challenges” he witnessed was:

the buy-in from some of those strong-willed teachers, the ones that are still kind of sitting in the back, the ones that have a lot of influence to be able to say why this is a waste of time. I think that they’re waiting for us to walk in this year, and it’s going to be something completely new and say, “see, last year was just a waste of time, and they change every year, so why even try?”

However, administrators also shared some of the teacher actions that were more aligned to their PLC goals and those which demonstrated a step in the right direction. Kathy indicated that this year “... PLC’s ... are so much better than they were in the past.” She said that, in the past, PLCs were planning sessions, and this year she saw several groups talk about specific practices taking place in the classroom that may or may not be yielding positive results. Jacob said that he heard data being referenced in many PLCs which is a shift from previous years. In the past, he said PLCs would agree “you test your kids on this skill, and I will also test my kids on this skill, and we’ll talk about how they did after” while not using common assessments to measure data against another teacher; it was simply two tests given to assess the same skill. Luke also noted that he saw teachers in one department talking about rotating students to address a specific need, reteach a specific skill, or provide retesting opportunities. “I had a couple of groups, small groups, that were supporting each other in that way,” he said. There were variations at different sites with respect to their “teacher culture”

and the context of such within PLCs. This culture that existed at the sites also proved to hinder the PLC process and stunt movement in the expected direction.

The Influence of School and Community Context on PLCs

In the first section, I briefly described the context of each school. In this section, I will bridge that information into a discussion of the influence of the context on the work of the PLCs. Through the use of PLCs, teachers can share data, discuss pedagogical practices, and engage in difficult conversations specific to student achievement, their teaching practices and its effectiveness, which is the foundation of encouraging and supporting self-awareness (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016). However, when the staff culture, the context of the PLC, or collaborative groups include placing blame and maintaining resistance to change, the description above can be a lofty goal to reach. This next section addresses the research question pertaining to how school and community context play into the conversations during PLCs.

Table 3: School and Community Context

School # 1 & School # 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Pobretrato Syndrome• Lowering the bar• Sympathy rather than Empathy
School #3	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supports are available• Students cannot rise to the challenge• Don't push students, for fear of failure
School #4	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• High standards• All students need to meet the bar• Teachers teach, Students learn

Every administrator reported that the majority of their teachers believed in their students and their ability to succeed. However, when conversations focused on specific students, blame for academic failure was commonly placed on the students. Mike said:

when you start talking about specific students... that's going to start to shift those answers ... yeah we believe all students can learn but that one isn't interested in it or doesn't want to ... I start to see that effect bleed into the conversation.

This led to conversations in PLCs that were based on teachers' personal opinions about student ability, motivation, and/or desire to be successful rather than looking at the data, addressing best practices, creating interventions, and re-teaching opportunities. Although each site administrator gave a general overview with regard to their school context, or the culture of their staff, the information identified below is not reflective of all teachers; however, it does negatively affect the progress that could be made within PLCs.

Anna, a district administrator, shared the different staff cultures she saw at the four sites in the district. She highlighted the challenges that two of sites had with feeling of sympathy rather than empathy. She calls this the "pobrecito syndrome," meaning that school staff feel sorry for their students, they care about their kids and are saddened by the challenges they face on a daily basis. She added: "What we forget is caring means pushing because you have strong relationships and you know what's best." She added, "it's ... how do you balance caring, providing support with not lowering a bar. And equity means, you raise the bar, but you add supports, not lower the bar ... you don't maintain status quo." In another school site, she added, "it's about, yeah we have supports, but we don't push them because we're worried they won't be able to do it", therefore it was more about the adults' belief in the students being able to rise to the challenge. At the last school site, the bar was set high and the belief was that all students need to reach that bar ... "we believe every kid can do it if they just show motivation, if they just do their work, if they just come prepared, if their parents prepared them."

The site administrators gave a detailed account of what they saw as challenges that existed in their school culture that impeded the work in PLCs. Site administrators shared that the culture that exists on their campuses makes it difficult to shift the mindset and implement change via the PLC process. Most indicated that this mindset surrounds the idea of blame and sympathy. According to the administrators, many teachers tended to look outside of themselves to pinpoint or identify a reason why a student was not making academic progress rather than utilizing self-reflection to identify key attributes that exist in their classroom and their own teaching practices that kept students from succeeding. They identified aspects of a student's current situation to justify why a student could not or would not do the work that needs to be done in order for them to be successful. Jacob from School 2 explained:

The challenge ... like many schools working with lower income students, traditionally, disadvantaged communities, the experiences ... of the staff don't match that of the community ... that leads to a deficit understanding of the community. Sometimes ... in more productive conversations ... we address that discrepancy, we address perceived needs of community in a way to try to move forward.

Addressing the perceived needs of a community, he added, led to sympathy despite all good intentions. Lisa, on the other hand, explained:

... teachers grew up in a very different environment than a lot of our students. So ... they come at things from a very different frame of reference ... you hear teachers say things like 'Well, I would never let my kids talk to a teacher that way.' ... again, you're looking at this situation from your own lens.

At her school she said, there was also, "this culture of, well that kid's been labeled as a troublemaker, as a low performer, as lazy, before he even ... Then, next year, he steps into somebody else's Econ class, then that person has a frame of reference, already, of, 'oh, you're that kid.'" Cultural disconnect and bias between teachers and minority students goes beyond instruction, instructional practices, and academic expectations (McHugh, Horner, Colditz, &

Wallace, 2012; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005). Racial minorities, specifically African-American, Latino and children of lower socioeconomic status, struggle most to establish caring and nurturing relationships with their teachers. Teacher perceptions and a cultural disconnect between teachers and their students may help to explain this disconnect (Skiba & Horner, 2011; Murray & Zvoch, 2011).

How, Why, and Trust/Relationships

Moving a staff and shifting beliefs is challenging, specifically when the staff are trying to steer in a different direction and do not fully understand: (a) why the work needs to be done, (b) how do to it, or (c) lack the trust and relationships needed to share and be transparent. The findings in this section speak to the challenges that administrators face in supporting teachers in PLCs.

Change is hard. Many teachers teach how they were taught, as Erik from School 2 explained:

They assume that role of interest to it, they attach their motivating structure of how they approached high school, and how they were a success, which is what you want to try to do when you teach, you just teach your experience ... “well, it worked for me, so obviously this should work for you.

For others, change is difficult because they don’t understand the “how.” Teachers may want to do the work and know why it is important; however, they may lack the skills required to get the work done. Department chairs and site administrators attended four days of training than asked their PLC leads (department chairs) to “go off and PLC” as Andrea shared:

We ask them to take on a leadership position which requires them to be data analysts, settle disputes amongst peers, and take a lead role in moving the school’s academic agenda. All this, without providing them with the tools they need to do it. There are administrators who lack the skills themselves and for most of us it is a constant work in progress.

Finally, the ability to change the “culture” of a school, or initiate change specifically in PLCs, rests in the lack of trust. The idea of trust was the number one deterrent for progress made in PLCs as reported by all administrators. In order to engage in true reflective conversations based on teacher practices and teacher effectiveness a level of trust, humility, and respect needs to be present and nurtured. At all of the sites, this piece was most lacking. The lack of trust and/or respect was present in all factions, between teachers and administration, as well as amongst teacher groups making reflection on student data not only difficult but unrealistic.

The Rationale for PLCs: Help Me Understand the ValueIn an effort to begin conversations regarding equity, the use of data and the patterns and trends that emerge become the foundation and basis for analyzing problematic situations and promoting discussions on how to equalize opportunities for all groups (McKenzie, 2004). One of the guiding questions in this study asks how PLCs address equity via instructional change. The following sections highlight administrative perceptions of the challenges teachers have in: (a) believing in PLC as a process for supporting underrepresented, minority students, and (b) seeing PLCs as a platform to inform best practices and instructional change.

Many of the administrators indicated that several teachers at their site resisted PLCs because they did not recognize the value of them. It was shared that many teachers and teacher groups held a belief that students were limited by their circumstances. As noted above, if students came from a poor community, a broken home, an uneducated family, or from a family that does not speak English and does not understand American culture, they are perceived to be limited in what they can do. Meanwhile, Noah noted that students all over the district are reaching higher levels of understanding and are demonstrating great successes.

Students of color within the district were getting accepted to Ivy League colleges, and they were rising above the stereotypes of what students of color were capable of doing. They received support from their teachers and oftentimes their family and friends. Noah explained that that, “It’s breaking down that apathetic barrier that, ‘well, these kids can’t do that.’ Well they can do it. There’s tons of examples ... of kids that are going way above the bar.” He went on to say, “other kids are falling below because we’re not expecting that of them, not expecting them to be up there. ‘Well they’re a poor kid. They’re a blank kid.’ Whatever you want to call, whatever issues you’re gonna have. ‘They’re special ed.’ We can still have high expectations for those kids and get them to those levels of learning,” Ella concurred. She reflected on conversations she had with several teachers who resorted to blaming students for not achieving academic success. She shared that often times “we get wrapped up too much in ... blaming kids ... ‘they’re lazy’ or ‘they don’t understand’ or ‘they came to us unprepared.’ We can’t change ... those things. We can only change what we’re doing right now.” In order to reach goals of equity via professional collaboration, she believed that teachers need to get past the perceptions and biases they have toward students that do not respond to their teaching.

At School 3, Erik shared that the blame sounds different depending on the perception the teacher has about the students. He gives the following example “... the can’ts, ... the blame comes ... in terms of ... the preparation and ... the subject matter where the won’ts, it will generally be ...the student and or the home life ...” Jacob at School 2 shared his experience in talking to teachers that were frustrated with students’ lack of interest, where they give up and say, “there’s nothing I can do for this kid because he’s not interested and the parents are not interested. I’m going to come try to teach them every day but it’s on them ...”

Kathy shared that she did not “... believe that ... teachers feel they’re responsible for the students not being successful.” If teachers do not feel responsible for ensuring student success and find reasons outside of their classroom for student’s underperformance, then it is clear that the “why” of PLCs is not understood. Andrea believed that these deficit perceptions of students kept the conversations in PLCs at a superficial level. According to Andrea, if teachers do not see that their instructional strategies are failing to engage students and they are unable or unwilling to build relationships with students to encourage and support students academically, socially and emotionally:

... then PLCs are a waste of time. If teachers believe that they come in and teach, the way they’ve always taught, and students fail to learn then it’s the student’s problem. As administrators, we need to find the space and way to help them see why we need to address this from a different perspective.

Kathy shared that in her experience it “was hard for some of the more veteran teachers to understand the importance of bringing in those collaborative pieces for students, those engaging pieces for students.” Olivia also found that the more veteran teachers appeared to be more resistant to having conversations about pedagogical practices. Based on her conversations with these particular teachers, she determined that they were comfortable with the status quo and did not want administrative input on their teaching practices. Jacob also shared, “the more veteran staff ... are more susceptible to frustration and say things like, ‘I’ve been doing this forever. I know what I’m doing, this kid is just not responding, this kid is lazy and I can’t help lazy.’” When teachers do not understand why the work needs to be done, then placing blame and taking on a negative perspective becomes more prevalent. Lisa shared that one third of the students at her school live outside of the school’s boundaries and are attending her school on a transfer. This led some teachers to make assumptions about students and say things like “they don’t even belong here. Oh, those kids transferred from

some other school” or they blame the school counselors for misplacing students and say things like “they were placed wrong ... they’re not ready for my class. Send them back.” In some cases, students may be placed in classes where they do not have the prerequisites to enroll, however those students are few and far between. However, many times the determination that students should be moved out of courses and placed in lower level classes are made prior to implementing any strategic interventions or intentional supports.

In Luke’s experience, teachers often push back on the idea of PLCs because they believe that it does not work and stated, “there was a lot of negativity as to, well that doesn’t work, or, we’ve done that in the past ... a lot of negativity in the training in general like, oh they throw us in there and we’re just supposed to switch all of it right away ... It’s just a waste of time.” Mike indicated that PLCs were introduced to the district over 10 years ago and that there was a large emphasis on the implementation; however, over time the process lost its emphasis from both site and district administration. Teachers were then left to figure it out on their own which left the now veteran teachers with a figurative sour taste in their mouth. The remnants of this were still seen and felt and several of the school sites amongst some of the teachers.

How Do We Lead PLC? Creating Teacher LeadersChange takes time and can cause frustration and resistance for teachers; therefore, it is imperative that site administrators recognize the need to move slowly and steadily while providing the support, via professional development, teachers need to establish confidence and competence in implementing the expected change (Dematthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) concur that professional development and mentorship is a key component for moving schools and teachers toward cultural proficiency, specifically in areas where teachers work with low-

income, minoritized students. In this district, PLCs are run by department chairs. The next two sections will address the final research question with respect to how administrators help navigate conversations during PLCs.

In this district, teachers in each department volunteer to serve as a chair and each department votes on who they want to represent them. There is no prerequisite or skill that these teachers need to possess to serve as a chair. The principal, however, has the right to veto a nomination and select a teacher for the position. The caveat is that the selected teacher must agree to serve in that capacity, which is “a recipe for awkwardness and backlash,” Andrea at School 1 explained. Therefore, in most cases principals will not go against the will of the department and their chosen chair will serve for the two-year term until the process begins again. The department chair then joins the ranks of the leadership team and he/she takes the reins of leading their departments in PLCs.

In the summer before the start of the school year, the department chairs at each school were invited to participate in a two-day training on participating in PLCs. Anna shared that the shortfall of this type of training was the follow up and frequent check-ins to clarify any confusion or help PLCs through their points of confusion. She said:

The problem with ... a conference alone is that it becomes like a church revival in that everybody goes and it's a rah-rah and everybody comes out... and we go yeah, yeah, yeah, that's so true and then it drops off.

Due to the falter of excitement and lack of follow-up, Anna planned on bringing the PLC trainings to each school so that all teachers would hear that same message and begin to build a common understanding. However, Noah felt like it was not enough. He indicated that more follow up was needed with both teachers and administrators. Administrators were expected to toe the line, hold teachers accountable for how teachers responded in PLCs, and initiate the

courageous conversations that are an essential piece in beginning to address equity. However, according to Noah, administrators had not been formally trained or taught how to conduct courageous conversations. Department chairs, on the other hand, had the responsibility of leading teachers to reflect on their instruction, supporting teachers as they analyze data, assisting in the creation of targeted interventions and, to a certain extent, holding teachers accountable for their participation in the PLC process, all without the tools necessary to do so.

Ruben shared some of his experiences with department chairs that lacked the leadership skills necessary to lead a team. He said, “teacher leaders, are so critical to the PLC process in that a department chair is not equivalent to a teacher leader. Sometimes you’re lucky and hey, they elect just that person who’s got the right fit, right personality.” However, he added that teachers often do not have any training in leadership. If a teacher does not have skill to lead, it is the responsibility of the site and district leadership to provide that support.

Ella added:

We tend to give a lot of information, give a lot of training. Then ... we just expect it to go and happen without baby steps and having those ... check ins and supports ... we need to provide additional support for the departments that are struggling a ... bit and might need a little ... extra help.

At the site level, Mike added his thoughts on the matter:

I would be remiss if I ever said that teachers know how to teach better, they’re just choosing not to. I would say ... the lion's share of teachers ... are doing the best job that they know how and if there was something that they thought, you know what this is gonna work so much better for my students, I really can’t see the teachers of our school saying “nah, I’m not gonna do that even though I know it's gonna work for students.

Lisa agreed and added:

One of the roadblocks in PLCs ... is teachers aren’t ... statisticians, they’re not researchers ... they’re not trained in analyzing data. We can’t just put people in a room and say, ‘go forth and PLC’. We need to train and coach our teacher leaders and provide ongoing support, training, and coaching.

Ruben, Lisa, and Mike indicated that a focus for them at their site was to embed data analysis in their staff meeting and conversations with teachers as a means to get teachers comfortable with not only analyzing data but understanding what the data show and how to make decisions and/or create a plan based on those findings. At the district level, Ella agreed that ongoing training and support was essential if the district wanted to see effective change. She added that the district needed to provide continuous support to principals to ensure that they too are confident in supporting their teachers as they navigate this work.

Relationships and Trust: If You Ask Me to Be Vulnerable, Give Me Safe Space It is crucial that PLCs involve a climate of trust, rather than reproach and blame (Datnow & Park, 2015). “The wall to break ... is, one, the need for teachers to become vulnerable in their teaching process and not take it so personally. The ability for people to receive feedback and utilize that feedback in a positive way without feeling they're going to be damaged or fired by it,” Erik shared. All administrators indicated that relationships and trust was the dominant factor for the stagnation of PLCs, between teachers and administration, as well as within teacher groups. Ella said, “If we (administration) expect teachers to share their data they need a safe space to do that, a space to share best practices first.” She elaborated and indicated that as teachers build trust they “can be a little more vulnerable and get into the nitty gritty because, after all, no one is a perfect educator.”

Admin. versus Teacher versus Admin. Kathy discussed the inconsistency in leadership at her school. She indicated that her particular school was faced with several challenges with their administration which resulted in the removal of several principals, leaving teachers feeling vulnerable, unsupported, and left to figure things out for themselves. At other schools, the history was a bit different; however, relationship issues between

administrators and teachers were prevalent, either presently or in the past. Mason at School 4 indicated that “administration has been unstable here for a long time... it’s tough... you can’t get to know people and build trust and reach goals with people who are in and out fast.” This is even more true if the people that are in and out, leave after severing relationships with teachers. This type of an exit leaves an “us vs. them” culture, meaning administration versus teachers, or teachers vs. administration, depending on how teachers were treated and/or valued determined how well they accepted the preceding administrative team and the changes expected of them. Jacob said that he thought the role of the administrator and the leadership team was to “set a climate where it’s perfectly acceptable for an individual or for a whole department to say ‘I completely screwed this up and I need to rework it ... so that I do better next time.’ That’s done in a really safe environment where people feel safe being that honest ...” In his opinion, this was the biggest challenge administrators had “... ensuring teachers that PLCs are a safe space.” He added that “teachers have to believe that the role of the administrator ... is to support teacher growth, not in writing them up when they screw up.” Andrea indicated that in her experience it was far more difficult to fix broken relationships than it was to build strong trusting ones from the beginning. She shared that it took her “years to realize the value of building trust with the teachers ... and to truly understand the importance of being humble and vulnerable every once in a while.” The absence of both trust and humility can exasperate a contentious situation and make it more difficult to establish oneself as honest and trustworthy, Andrea added. She then explained:

When an administrator is trying to function as a leader within a culture of ‘us versus them’ everything you do or say is scrutinized, analyzed, and there is always that group of teachers that are going to punch holes in everything to make it seem as though we are leading them into a trap or a gotcha.

Andrea adds that this type of scrutiny is exacerbated when teachers are being held accountable and administration needs to sit down in a disciplinary meeting with them. In a healthy, more trusting environment, a teacher can sit with administration and have a conversation about their conduct and both parties can reach an agreement and leave the meeting feeling heard, valued, and respected. When trust and relationships are absent, the same conversation can look far different, more volatile, and leave teachers feeling validated for not trusting the administrators sitting at the opposite side of the table.

Mason noted, “when you have a good relationship with the department you oversee and the department chairs ... they are more open to express frustration within the department...” This allows the administrator to support them in navigating those conversations, he explained: “Let’s role play how we’d handle this kind of conversation. Let me help ... guide how to ... frame it to get people to move in a better direction. You kind of practice with them.” However, this type of an exchange can only happen in a situation where trust has been established between both parties. Luke admitted that he was a bit discouraged when he was “watching a few teachers... within a department that were not willing to participate in a collaborative problem-solving session... learning later that some of that behavior came with pre-existing relationships, trust issues, and things like that” which were in place before he started his tenure at that school. All of the administrators indicated that they wanted to continue to build relationships and establish trust with their teachers and staff. This was a major area of focus for all of them. Kathy said that she is working with her staff to:

Make sure that ... everyone’s opinion was being valued ... and that everyone felt like it was a safe environment for them ... that it wasn’t being evaluative ... PLCs are a safe place to have conversations and ask questions regardless of which administrator is in the room ... creating a safe space, like what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas ... creating the understanding that what happens in PLCs stays in PLCs.

In order to support safe collaborative environments, school leaders must take the lead in fostering teachers through the process of having courageous conversations where they interrogate their preconceptions about race, culture and their impact on the classroom (Singleton, 2012).

Teacher versus Teacher versus Department: The Challenges Within. Mary identified some of the concerns she witnessed within different PLCs on her campus. She indicated that some departments were open books, they were comfortable with each other and with themselves to share “yeah, there’s my good, my bad, my ugly right here.” However, she also said:

Other departments aren’t there; they haven’t established quite that much trust with each other ... whether it’s they don’t know each other that well ... there’s a lot of new members in the department ... or they just ... aren’t comfortable enough with each other to share.

The latter seems to be most prominent amongst struggling PLCs at all of the sites. Teachers are asked to go to the collaborative table and present their data, their most vulnerable piece of information that may determine how and who they are as teachers. This in and of itself is a very personal request. “Now, add to that discomfort-- contention, mistrust, and lack of respect. Not many people would be open and willing to take part in such a masochistic practice, yet administrators ask teachers to do it on a weekly basis,” Andrea added. This type of collaborative environment appeared to be prevalent in many of the PLCs in the district. In Ava’s experience:

Some of the PLCs are still stuck on ... finding norms... that ... takes a lot of time because ... there are so many personalities in the room and just trying to get them moving forward takes reminding the group ... how we conduct ourselves during PLC.

Erik described a group of teachers as being extremely difficult, due to the personalities within the department and the lack of mutual respect. His efforts to build relationships and trust within that department had been an ongoing project for nearly a year. In Mason's experience, some groups of teachers can "kind of go, okay, if you want to let it out, let it out, then move on. While other departments are like, let's find a way to just stew and ruin this process." All of the site administrators had examples of groups of teachers that had yet to become a professional learning community. In Mike's experience, larger departments or groups tended to be more challenging "...because you have that many more personalities that come into play." He added that as an administrator "... you're trying to build a team where it has to be to a great extent a safe place ... when you have that many personalities and that many interactions your odds of having conflict are that much greater." Olivia gave some insight on her observations in PLCs:

Part of the PLC process is to be transparent and not everyone wants to be transparent ... we create narratives about what student learning looks like in the classroom ... I think the PLC process can interrupt that narrative and it can hold up a mirror ... they have to look at their reflection and not all teachers are ready to do that, and not all collaborative groups are ready to support each other in that process.

A person that is going to be that exposed in front of their peers first has to trust those peers. "You have to trust that the people around you have your best interest at heart, that you all commonly have the kids best interest at heart," explained Jacob. Without a safe space to share successes and failures, teachers will not be able to engage in the necessary conversations around student access or success.

Conclusion

This research study was specifically designed to take an in-depth look at the lived experiences of the 17 administrators and how they supported and perceived the PLC process

on their campuses in achieving goals of equity. Furthermore, this study was constructed to determine challenges that both teachers and administrators face in moving a school site, changing culture, addressing equity and allowing for Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) to take place.

Through the lens of Transformative Adult Learning (TAL), in order to begin to initiate change, one must first identify their own assumptions (Brookfield, 1987). A recurring theme that emerged from the data was that most PLC groups did not use their time to reflect on data nor personal teaching practices that may negatively affect student academic success. In an effort to reach a convictional state, one must understand themselves and their personal belief system. This process also includes the process of checking one's accuracy and validity as it pertains to their belief system. Many of the administrators shared that a good number of their PLC groups/teachers blamed the students, their community, culture, and/or parents for academic underperformance. Teacher groups were checking the validity of their assumptions, not by reexamining their personal practices but by looking at reasons why their underperforming students were not meeting expectations and placing blame on circumstances outside of the teacher and the students control. The final step or phase in TAL is behavioral, which refers to adjusting one's "lifestyle" and making alternative assumptions when taking informed actions. The PLC cycle includes the analysis of data, and adjusting instruction based on the needs of the learners. This includes shifting practices to address the needs of students that have met the standard, as well as reaching the students that have not yet met mastery. All administrators reported having pockets of this at each school site with teacher groups and PLCs that have worked past some of the concerns that often halt progress.

All participants in this study had a similar goal for PLCs both site- and district-wide. The overarching goal was to provide equitable opportunities for students to succeed. Teachers were expected to be engaging in conversations about student academic success and interventions. The conversations were intended to stem from data analysis, reflection on teaching strategies, and determining next steps. All administrators indicated that at the heart of PLCs is equity for students. They believed that if teachers belonged to and participate in healthy and nurturing PLC's, equitable opportunities would emerge for students, which is why most site administrators focused their PLC goals on teacher actions and teacher participation in the process. Moving a staff and shifting beliefs is challenging, specifically when the staff: (a) does not fully understand "why" the work needs to be done, (b) does not understand "how" to do the work within a PLC, and (c) lacks trust, either within their PLCs or their administrative team. Trust was the number one deterrent for progress made in PLCs as reported by all administrators.

Many of the administrators indicated that several teachers at their site resisted the implementation and use of PLCs because they did not recognize the value of them. It was shared that many teachers and teacher groups had a belief that students were limited by their circumstances, such family background or socioeconomic status. Therefore, it was the administrators' role and responsibility to provide these teachers with the understanding the overall benefit of PLCs, provide them with the tools and supports necessary to carry out the demands of a PLC, and to create a safe space for teachers to be self-reflective and vulnerable.

Change takes time and can cause frustration and resistance for teachers. Teachers are asked to serve as leaders for instructional change within the role of PLC Lead and Department Chair. Each PLC lead is asked to be a leader, a data analyst, and have the ability to impact

change by helping in the development of targeted interventions. Department chairs (who were also PLC leads) are given a tremendous amount of responsibility; at times, many may lack the skills to implement the change that is being asked of them. It is the duty of the site administrative team to ensure they are providing PLCs with the support and training needed to do the job requested—in other words, providing teachers with the *how*.

Finally, all administrators at one point or another in their interview indicated that trust and/or relationships was the dominant factors for the stagnation of PLCs—the friction that exists or is perceived to exist between teacher and administration, as well as in teacher-to-teacher groups. The history that exists at each of the schools represented in this study may be a bit different, yet relationship issues between administrators and teachers was prevalent either presently or in the past. The lack of trust between teachers and administrators proved to be a true splinter in side of progress. All administrators indicated that mending relationships and moving forward in a trusting and transparent manner was at the top of their lists for the upcoming year. However, it is not only the relationships between teacher and administration that thwart progress. Teacher-to-teacher relationships are often just as harmful and can be more toxic to a department’s growth.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Study Goals and Design

This chapter provides a summary of the data analysis, the findings, and the implications for educational leaders. Additionally, this chapter presents a discussion of the findings in relation to existing research as well as suggestions for future research and professional practice. The purpose of this study was to examine district and site level administrators' role and perception of the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a vehicle for achieving school wide goals of equity. This study investigated administrators' perceptions of how the PLC process facilitated change in the narrative, from one that focuses on blaming students for underachievement to one that focuses on teacher practices and pedagogy that supports all students. The study focused on 17 administrators in one district. In interviews, administrators were asked about the strategies teachers used during PLCs to address student academic achievement and what their role as educational leaders was to support and help navigate the conversation toward one of equity for all students, specifically for their African-American and Latino students. Data were examined through a lens of Transformative Adult Learning. The aim was to uncover administrators' perceptions about the role of PLCs in establishing educational equity on their campuses and/or districts, what the context or current culture was of the school that supports or hinders their progress, as well as gain an understanding of what their next steps were in their transformative journey.

Findings Examined in Relation to Transformative Adult Learning

Below, I will briefly re-iterate each element of Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) and point out the appearance or lack of, from the lived experience of each administrator as found from a thorough analysis of interview data with each participant. However, it is

important to note that the information listed and identified in this section is based on administrators' observations of teachers' actions or conversations in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and does not reflect an in depth investigation into teachers' own individual beliefs. The overall findings of this study will then be highlighted by addressing the research questions.

Psychological: Understanding Self and Checking One's Assumptions.

Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) materializes when old opinions or preconceptions are no longer applicable, allowing the learner to adopt new viewpoints and patterns of thought, which become new practices. The first step in this transition is understanding self and checking one's assumptions. In order to begin to initiate change, one must first identify their own assumptions (Brookfield, 1987). As mentioned earlier in the data analysis, most PLC groups do not use their time to reflect on or discuss data, personal teaching practices, or the implication that either has on student academic success. Instead PLCs were often conducted in a manner that involved less reflection on self and personal practices, and more focused on departmental concerns. This poses a challenge for teachers to reach a point of understanding oneself and their: (a) beliefs about their instruction; (b) their opinions, perceptions, and biases they may have toward their student; and (c) their beliefs about their students' ability to learn. An overwhelming majority of administrators indicated that their experience in visiting some, not all, PLCs was that teachers generally spent their PLC time functioning as department meeting. The lack of focus on self-understanding and self-reflection, which is essential in TAL, can also negatively impact the work that needs to be done in PLCs. If teachers cannot reflect on their own practices and beliefs about student learning, then change cannot be accomplished in either realm, TAL or PLCs. **Convictional: Reevaluation of Personal Belief**

System. The second component of Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) is convictional, which refers to the reevaluation of one's personal belief system. In an effort to reach a convictional state, one must understand themselves and their personal belief system. This process also includes the process of checking one's accuracy and validity as it pertains to their belief system. Many of the administrators shared that a good number of their PLC groups/teachers blamed the students, their community, culture, and/or parents for academic underperformance. Teacher groups were checking the validity of their assumptions, not by reexamining their personal practices but by looking at reasons why their underperforming students were not meeting expectations and placing blame on circumstances outside of the teacher and the students control. There was minimal self-understanding and reflection in the PLC work as reported by all of the administrators. However, many indicated that there were pockets of teams on their sites that were administering common assessments, collaborating in looking at student data, and having conversations about instructional strategies used in the classroom.

It was shared that often times, after looking at student data, many of the conversations revert to student behavior and lack of motivation to address incomplete assigned tasks, versus looking at instructional practices and pedagogy to determine effectiveness and measure student learning. Blaming students for their academic deficiencies seems to be a less threatening or judgmental way to explain away academic failure.

Many teachers sought punitive and exclusionary consequences that disenfranchised students from the classroom community and sever relationships between the teacher and student. This is a common occurrence that administrators observed in PLCs. Some administrators shared that teachers used PLC time and attention to voice their concerns or

frustrations with specific students' behavior, and/or discipline policies with respect to “disruptive” or “unmotivated” students. However, one administrator believed that the work done outside of the PLC was more aligned with teacher reflection. Teachers at School 2 participated in subject specific PLCs as well as collaborative grade level team meetings, which serves as opportunities for teachers to discuss common students and possible academic and social emotional interventions. In these meeting teachers shared information about specific students that they are concerned about and deliberated on specific interventions (i.e. additional social emotional supports, differentiated instruction, parent involvement). Therefore, in this instance it is assumed that teachers were able to share and reflect on specific student interventions, rather than focus on larger academic groups that may not be demonstrating mastery of a specific content. This instance may be considered a step toward TAL because teachers were able to be more reflective on their personal practices. They identified personal struggles with not reaching specific students, socio-emotionally and academically. They were open to suggestions from other teachers that may have experienced success. They were reportedly willing to go back to their classrooms and implement the strategies other teachers used that yielded success.

Behavioral: Adjusting One’s Lifestyle and Making Alternative Assumptions. The final step or phase in TAL is behavioral, which refers to adjusting one’s ‘lifestyle’ and making alternative assumptions when taking informed actions. The PLC cycle includes the analysis of data and adjusting instruction based on the needs of the learners. This includes addressing the needs of students that have met the standard, as well as reaching the students that have not yet met mastery. Aspects of this process can be seen at each school site with teacher groups and PLCs that have worked past some of the concerns that often halt progress.

Courageous Conversations about Pedagogy. There were teachers or sets of teachers at each site that are willing and ready to have the courageous conversations about their pedagogy and how it affects student success or lack thereof. At each school, there was a presence of teachers that were excited, willing, and ready to do the work, talk about equity and adjust their practice to fit the academic needs of the students. However, this work was challenging within a less open and willing PLC setting, according to many administrators, because of the group dynamics that existed within and amongst teachers. If a teacher is open to analyzing data and reflecting on their professional practices, collaborating with a group of teachers that struggle to get along on a professional level may limit their willingness to openly share their thoughts and opinions. In a PLC where trust, respect, humility, and vulnerability are absent or lacking, TAL cannot occur.

Overview of Findings Addressing the Research Questions

In the following section I will summarize the overall findings of this study. I will do this by first addressing the overarching research question, then summarize the findings for all of the sub-questions.

How do administrators perceive the use of PLCs as a vehicle for achieving goals of equity? In this district, all site and district administrators perceived the use of PLCs as a vehicle for achieving goals of equity in a very similar manner. They all indicated that pockets of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) were well on their way to reaching a level where student learning was at the forefront of their conversations and the collaborative conversations were self-reflective and student focused. However, they all agreed that the majority of their collaborative teams or PLCs were not yet at the point where they could reflect on professional practices, engage in self-reflection, focus their conversations on

student learning, or equity. Several challenges were identified which kept PLCs from moving beyond the point of a department meeting or simply working independently but together. The three main challenges were identified as why, how, and relationships. Firstly, teachers either did not understand why PLCs were valuable or why engaging in collaborative conversations around student achievement was necessary. Secondly, many of the teacher leaders responsible for their PLCs did not know how to do the functions necessary to navigate the types of conversations necessary to effectively run a PLC. Lastly, there was an absence of trust and/or relationships between teachers within PLCs or between teachers and their administrators. All three challenges will be addressed as I answer each of the sub-questions in this study.

How are PLCs utilized to address equity via instructional change? In this district, PLCs are held every Monday morning for 80 minutes. Teachers meet in course alike teams. Administrators indicated that most departments have difficulty leaving the initial stages of a department meeting. Several groups stay together to discuss overarching concerns such as ordering materials, discussing current discipline policies and/or practices, or gathering around with colleagues that are friendly with one another to discuss issues that may not necessarily tie to professional learning. PLCs had yet to be utilized as a way to address instructional change or equity. Several administrators also indicated that many of their teachers did not see the value of professional collaboration or engaging in conversations around instruction or best practices. According to the administrators, many teachers felt that they have been teaching long enough and that they already possessed the skills necessary to educate the students, the students just needed to complete the work. The latter was not seen as their responsibility. They believed that students' responsibility was to learn, by doing the work, and their

responsibility was to teach, by giving the lesson and assigning the work. According to administrators, teachers believed since they were teaching, it was clear that the students were not doing their job, learning.

Do PLCs provide an opportunity for dialogue to address personal biases and perceptions of student achievement? Most of the administrators in this study indicated that PLC conversations rarely addressed teachers' personal biases with respect to student achievement. Many of the teachers used blame to address students' lack of academic achievement. Students who were not achieving were labeled as not belonging in certain classes, or described as transfer students, meaning that those students lived out of the school's boundaries and were attending that school on a transfer. Across the district teachers described students who were either unable or unwilling to achieve academically or behaviorally as belonging to a culture that does not value education or they blamed the student's lower socioeconomic status as the culprit to their inability or unwillingness to achieve. According to administrators, teachers in this district rarely engaged in self-reflection within a PLC setting, as a means to determine if there was something that they could be doing differently to support student learning. Teachers rarely engaged in conversations around the results of common formative assessments to determine best practices or to identify the areas where students struggled to grasp what was being taught. However, administrators indicated the absence of these conversations was not in lieu of teachers not caring about their students' success or feelings of reproach for their circumstances. Instead, all of the administrators identified a lack of understanding as their reason for the lack of progress made in their PLCs. The three factors are later identified when addressing the final research sub-question pertaining to how administrators support their teachers in engaging in these crucial conversations.

How does school and community context play into the conversations during PLCs? When the culture of the staff is one of blame and maintaining status quo, conversations in PLCs are less effective or fail to impact change. All administrators thought that most of their teachers believed in their students and wanted their students to be successful. However, when discussions focused on one particular student or group of students, the conversations often turned to blame. Teachers began blaming the students for their lack of academic success. This type of conversation often bled into conversations in PLCs that were based on teachers' personal opinions about student ability, motivation, and/or desire to be successful. This then became the premise of the students' ability or inability rather than focusing on data and addressing best practices, creating interventions, and re-teaching opportunities. The schools in the district were defined as fitting into one of the following three categories: a) the "pobrecito schools"; b) schools with high standards, but low expectations; and c) schools where there is a guiding belief that all kids can achieve, if they really want it and put in the work to get there. The term "pobrecito" was used in reference to two schools in the district and refers to staff feeling sympathy toward their students rather than empathy. Feeling sorry for students results in lowering standards to help students feel success, rather than maintaining high expectations and providing the appropriate supports to ensure that students are able to reach the standards set. The school that has high standards, but low expectations refers to a culture on campus that wants all students to achieve but do not want to push students because they do not believe that students are capable of achieving. In this school, the culture is around the belief of students being able to rise to the challenge. At the last school site, the bar was set high and the belief was that all students need to reach that bar.

Each site administrator gave a detailed account of what they saw as challenges that existed in their school culture that impeded the work that needs to be done when teachers meet as PLCs. Site administrators shared that the culture that exists on their campus makes it difficult to shift mindset and implement change via the PLC process. Most indicated that this mindset surrounds the idea of blame, sympathy, and lack of appropriate supports and interventions. According to the administrators, many teachers blamed their students and looked outside of themselves to find a reason why students were not successful. Most teachers chose blame over self-reflection to identify the elements that exist in their classroom and their pedagogy that keep students from achieving academically. The school and community context can lead PLC conversations in a direction that is counterproductive, especially if the context is one of sympathy, blame, and misinterpretation.

How does the administrative team help navigate conversations during PLCs?

Every site administrator shared their vision for Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). They all shared their goals of meeting students where they are and supporting them in achieving at high levels. They discussed the conversations they wanted to hear in PLCs around common formative assessments, data analysis, and determining the best instructional practices and interventions to ensure that all students achieve. They also identified the barriers holding PLCs back from their ideal. The barriers consisted of their inability to help teachers understand why PLCs were necessary in addressing the academic needs of their students, how to effectively do the functions required to engage in PLCs, and finally they lacked the trust and relationships necessary to engage their teachers in self-reflective dialog around student data, pedagogy, and student learning. They all agreed that implementing and navigating change is hard. Moving a staff and shifting beliefs is challenging, specifically when the

administrators are trying to steer their staff in a different direction and the staff do not fully understand: (a) why the work needs to be done, (b) how do to it, or (c) lack the trust and relationships needed to share and be transparent.

Understanding Why. Many administrators expressed teachers' reluctance to change status quo, and alternatively blamed students, their communities, culture, parents, and lack of motivation, ability, and compliance for their academic deficiencies. Administrators shared that teachers often dismissed students as being unable or ill-prepared to be successful in their courses. Many blamed counselors for inaccurate placement of students, while others assumed that the students that were not successful were from other, less affluent, areas within the district and were attending their school on a transfer. Teachers were heard blaming students' parents and their culture for not placing more of an emphasis on their student's education. Despite the examples of similar students "beating the odds" and excelling far beyond expectations, several teachers still placed blame on students who could not or would not meet their expectations given the current supports in place (tutoring, before school, during lunch, or afterschool). It was reported by at least one administrator at each site that many of the veteran teachers believed that their years of service and personal practices were enough to ensure student success. The teacher taught the lesson; it was the student's responsibility to learn, the onus was on them.

Learning How. Asking teachers to take on a leadership role that is responsible for ensuring all students within a department are successful, by analyzing data, structuring conversations, mediating disagreements, and identifying targeted interventions is a challenging undertaking. Asking them to do so with little to no formal and or ongoing training is nearly impossible. All administrators identified the "how" as constraint to

achieving effective and ongoing collaboration. Teachers were asked to become leaders of their peers and asked to serve as guides and spokespersons for their department. However, most of these teacher leaders had little to no formal training on how to lead. Within this district, the position of PLC Lead is an additional responsibility placed on department chairs, which are elected positions. Oftentimes, teachers are voted in because of tenure and seniority, others are voted in based on willingness to take on the role—not because of their ability to support the work that needs to take place within a PLC. This lack of skill to do the required work leads to a stalemate found within PLC's. All administrators described some PLCs on their campus that replicated department meetings where conversations with respect to ordering supplies or ensuring that paper and scantrons were available for their upcoming finals or midterms. While others were described as groups of teachers working independently as they sit together. The district provided all leadership teams district wide with two, two-day training on PLCs; however, both site and district administrators recognized that this was not enough. ***Building Trust and Establishing Relationships.*** The third and final challenge that administrators identified in their work with PLCs was a lack of trust and absence of relationships, between both teachers and administrators as well as amongst teachers within PLCs. The work done within PLCs is very humbling and requires teachers to be vulnerable with one another. Asking teachers to take that leap of faith can be farfetched if the teachers believe that administrators will use the process to evaluate the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom and possibly result in a negative evaluation. The mistrust that existed on all the campuses was often residual of the school's previous administrators, or a result of a current administrator or administrative team, despite who was responsible or why the mistrust existed. It was a true barrier in moving PLCs. One school reported that the frequent changes

in leadership created a sense of uncertainty, instability, and lack of direction. Another site explained that the mistrust was simply present and the teachers (in general) took a solidified “us vs. them” mentality, regardless of who was sitting in the administrative seat. This approach required any and all administrators to work even harder to send out a unifying message of support and shared responsibility. All school administrators also shared their frustration with turmoil that existed amongst teachers within PLCs. This left the administrator responsible for trying to build and often repair relationships between teachers and helping them find a common ground, a skill in which many administrators were not yet efficient or proficient. However, the lack of trust amongst teachers made sharing data, best practices, and sheer collaboration a near impossibility. Some administrators indicated that certain departments had very strong personalities within them, which lead to either one teacher dominating the conversation and telling others what they need to do, or it resulted in an outright clash and power struggle. This type of contention was an extreme of what was seen. However, the average personality clash resulted in several teachers refusing to listen to anyone else's ideas and doing what they thought was best despite what was “agreed” upon in their PLC.

Although the majority of PLCs struggled to meet the goals, administrators were able to identify groups of teachers and PLCs that were able to start engaging in courageous conversations revolving around student data, best practices, and collaborative teaching experiences. Teachers took time to analyze the results of common formative assessments, have dialogue about pedagogy, and engage in self-reflection. However, in each of these PLCs, according to the site administrators, the teachers demonstrated an understanding of their students’ reality and understood that they needed to approach their teaching differently if

they wanted all students to be successful. These groups of teachers also had an understanding of how to create common formative assessments, were able to analyze their data, and were willing to implement alternative pedagogical practices to affect change. And finally, all of these PLCs had a relationship with one another and their administrative team. They respected each other as professionals, trusted each other as teachers, and reached out to their administrators for support, clarification, and guidance.

Theoretical Analysis

This study utilized Transformative Adult Learning (TAL) as the theoretical framework in order to address concerns regarding biases and perceptions that negatively impact social and academic growth for students of color. It is important to consider the aforementioned findings in light of this theory to examine the ways in which the PLCs resulted in or failed to result in transformative adult learning. As the theory of *transformative adult learning* emerged, Mezirow (1990) defined learning as “the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience which has tended to guide subsequent understanding, appreciation and action” (p. 1). With time and application, the theory of transformative learning has grown in both its meaning and definition. It has become “a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience” (Cranton, 1994, p. 22). The process of *perspective transformation* is also a key concept in transformative learning. Clark and Wilson (1991) highlighted three core elements of perspective transformation: (a) psychological (self-understanding), (b) convictional (reevaluation of personal belief system), and (c) behavioral (adjusting one’s lifestyle). Mezirow (1978, 1991, 1996) maintained adult development was intended to enhance one’s self-capabilities and self-awareness, which was done through the

practice of critical reflection. In order for transformative learning to take place their “meaning schemes (specific beliefs, attitudes, and emotional reactions)” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 167), the learner had to evaluate and reflect on their experiences, which lead to perspective transformation, which he defined as:

... the process of becoming critically aware of how and why our assumptions come to constrain the way we perceive, understand, and feel about our world; changing these structures of habitual expectation to make possible a more inclusive, discriminating, and integrating perspective; and, finally, making choices or otherwise acting upon these new understandings (p. 176).

As new knowledge is established and new experiences are had, perspective transformation helps in understanding the paradigms that have shifted over time and the points of reference that influenced the individual's behavior and perspectives and how they interpreted events (Taylor, 2000).

Brookfield (1987) identified four progressive steps that preclude transformative learning: (a) identifying assumptions, (b) checking their accuracy and validity, (c) making alternative assumptions, and (d) taking informed actions. He also believed that when people think analytically they arrive at judgments, choices, and decisions for themselves, instead of letting others do this on their behalf. Educational practices that include critical self-reflection have aided adults in recognizing oppressive structures and practices, resulting in the development of a plan to bring about change for the good of the collective (Mezirow, 2000). When addressing biases or preconceived notions of student ability on a school campus, the process of TAL is a fundamental aspect rooted in those conversations. Therefore, when school leaders implement change geared toward equity for all students, it is imperative that they allow room, support, and guidance for the TAL process to materialize organically and holistically.

Contributions to Research and Theory

This study significantly builds on the existing literature on Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Because not many studies have looked at the administrators' role and perceptions surrounding PLCs, this study contributes to the current research by providing an additional perspective. This framing lens contributes additional ideas and implications for teacher and administrator education programs, and administrators implementing PLCs on their campuses. Additionally, this study adds a new perspective to previous research on PLCs which examines the challenges and barriers that administrators face in shifting practices and supporting teachers as they engage in PLCs. Details of the connections between the findings of this study and prior research are discussed below.

Research Connections: teacher assumptions about student ability. Studies have identified inconsistencies in the treatment, rapport, grading practices, and the academic rigor given to students of color in comparison to their white classmates (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). White students are generally provided with more responsive instruction, critical feedback, and have benefited academically and socially from the relationships they establish with their teachers (Harber, Gorman, Gengaro, Butishingh, Tsang, & Ouellette, 2012). The data show that teachers have higher expectations for white and Asian students, reinforcing the misconceptions and personal biases that negatively impact student achievement and academic outcome by limiting students' access to academic rigor, and creating an environment where cultural minority students are academically inferior to their non-minority counterparts (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). The use of PLCs may impact the manner in which teachers deliver instruction, provide targeted feedback, and engage in meaningful conversations with students regarding academic and social needs (Khalifa, Gooden, & Davis, 2016).

Studies have found that students described as low performing are held to lower standards and provided minimal academic feedback (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005; Blanchard & Muller, 2014). In sharp contrast, students perceived to be high achieving are given more analytical academic feedback and are set to higher expectations resulting in higher achievement (Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005; Blanchard & Muller, 2014). Consequently, these students are consistently challenged and encouraged to push their academics further leading to even higher teacher expectations, which results in more challenging, caring, and nurturing instruction (Harber et al., Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang 2005). This was seen throughout the study. This was especially true in the description of the two schools seen as “pobrecito schools” where teachers felt sorry for students’ circumstances and lowered their standards for achievement, rather than maintaining high expectations and increasing the level of targeted support provided.

In a study investigating adolescents’ perceptions of the bridges that promote and the barriers that impede supportive relationships with teachers (McHugh, Horner, Colditz, & Wallace, 2012; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005), minority students are identified as the most vulnerable. Racial minorities, specifically African-American, Latino and children of lower socioeconomic status, struggle most to establish caring and nurturing relationships with their teachers. This study connects to the biases and blame that teachers often place on students for their lack of academic success. It was seen throughout the study that teachers often place blame on student motivation, culture, parents, or economic circumstances for lack of academic performance, rather than taking the time to build relationships with students and identify their academic deficiencies via data analysis and targeted interventions.

Research connections: student conduct. Teacher bias manifests itself through teachers' perceptions of what constitutes appropriate behavior. There are behaviors and social interactions that are culturally appropriate and socially acceptable within lower socioeconomic African-American communities, such as speech patterns and specific vernacular (i.e., using non-standardized English) (Majors & Mancini, 1992). These same cultural norms are seen differently among White teachers. It has been reported that White teachers characterized these behaviors as being destructive, incongruous, adverse, insolent, and menacing (Majors & Mancini, 1992). Teachers generalizing student behavior based on their personal upbringing and cultural norms can lead to misconceptions about student motivation and ability. Throughout the study administrators indicated that teachers often made assumptions about students based on their own perceptions. Two administrators indicated that most of their teachers were raised in different environments than their students and often referred to students based on their own cultural understandings, leading to a disconnect between the teacher and the students they served. Similarly, the findings of McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest's (2001) study show that students of color are negatively affected by academic disparities, cultural differences, and perceived notions of inappropriate behavior. They are perceived negatively based on how maladaptive and inappropriately they speak, how they act, and how they walk, resulting in more susceptibility to discipline due to the culturally irrelevant, unenforceable rules and expectations imposed upon them.

Research connections: adult-student relationships. Supporting student academic success depends on the genuine understanding that adult behavior and their daily interactions with students make a difference in their students' lives (Krovetz, 1999). Building

nonjudgmental, open relationships with students and establishing a connection based on respect, trust, and acceptance is key for building student resilience (McMillan, 1994). As mentioned in the study, all administrators identified the ability to establish relationships with students and creating an academic plan that supports all students as the ideal result of PLCs. Poor and minority students need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance through the establishment of positive relationships, which enriches a student's motivation and confidence (Davis & Dupper, 2004). Many of the administrators reported that teachers felt that students lacked motivation and an interest in school, however most teachers chose to identify exterior reasons for this lack of interest rather than engage in self-reflective conversations with their PLCs in an effort to address their own instructional practices as a possible reason for the students' lack of interest. Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson, and Bridgest (2003) suggest that in an effort to create the type of classroom environment that promotes student inquiry, values cultural differences, respects students' lived experiences, and promotes mutual responsibility in the learning process, a teacher must first establish a relationship with the students based on the attributes previously listed. Teachers often underestimate the power and responsibility they hold in determining student success, which is problematic when considering the biases many of them hold in believing that poor children of color cannot thrive academically or socially.

Research connections: role of administration in supporting/implementing change.

Researchers have studied and identified key characteristics that administrative teams possess and practices that they implement to transform their school culture and support their teachers as they transform their teaching practices and personal beliefs with regard to student ability and achievement: (a) collaboration, (b) clear goals and expectations, (c) encouraging and

supporting self-awareness, (d) staff development opportunities, and (e) access to data (Datnow & Park, 2015; Davis, Gooden, & Khalifa, 2016; Leithwood & Steinbach, 1991; Martin, 2000) as key principles in transforming the way teachers address the needs of all students and as areas of focus for administrative teams to support their teachers in their transformative journey. Datnow and Parks' (2015) study refers to one of the overarching barriers found in effective PLCs: staff development. Ensuring that teachers know how to do the work that is asked of them was one of the essential elements identified in the study. The literature provides less information on helping teachers understand why. Before collaboration can exist and self-reflection can happen, teachers need to know why it is necessary, who will benefit, and why. However, before that can happen, teachers need to make sure that: (a) they trust and have a relationship those who they are collaborating with, and (b) trust those who are asking them to do this (administration). Datnow & Park (2015) indicate that collaborative settings or PLCs are based on trust and progress, rather than reproach and blame. This study adds to the literature as it specifies that the trust and relationship needs to be from all angles, collaborative partners as well as administrators. In an effort to begin conversations regarding equity, the use of data and the patterns and trends that emerge become the foundation and basis for analyzing problematic situations and promoting discussions on how to equalize opportunities for all groups (McKenzie, 2004). Identifying discrepancies and inequities in data encourage teachers to think beyond the normal social and physical boundaries of their normal lives, it is intended to make them aware and take notice of patterns that they may not have previously considered (Callopy, Bowman, & Taylor, 2012). However, in this study most PLC teams were not yet at a point where: (a) relationships were such that teachers can speak freely about their data or any emerging trends, (b) teachers had the skills necessary to

identify trends in data, or (c) teachers saw the value of looking at the data to determine the needs of the students they served.

This study fills a void in the literature by explaining how administrators perceive the work of teachers in PLCs. Whereas most studies focus on teacher experiences within their PLC, this study focuses on approaching the work from the angle of leadership. This study is also the first to explore PLCs under the scope of TAL, based on the review of the literature. It would be beneficial to conduct a longitudinal study to see if over time transformative learning actually occurs.

Implications for Future Research

The results of this study can provide a means for other school administrators to begin to understand the challenges and barriers to professional collaboration and to support their teachers in working collaboratively to provide equitable practices and supports to all students, specifically their underserved and underrepresented students of color.

This research study was an initial exploration into the lived experiences of administrators in their work with PLCs on their campuses. Given the results from this initial, yet limited study, future studies should delve more deeply into this topic to see if the results are the same in other sites with similar students and within larger school districts. The results reported in this study were based on the lived experiences of 17 site and district administrators within this small high school district only and may not be generalizable to larger school districts in different geographic locations, serving different demographics. Future studies should seek to broaden the lessons learned from a small school district located in a large suburban area to a larger district in an urban area, serving underserved and underrepresented students of color. The differences may be in how teachers perceive the students they serve or

in the context of the school and community. Teachers serving students in an urban area traditionally serving lower income students of color may have a different understanding of the students they serve, resulting in varying conversations in PLCs.

In this study, the majority of participants were white teachers working with predominantly Latino and Black students in a large suburban area of lower socio-economic status (SES). The majority of the teachers in this district were veteran teachers serving for several years within this district and in this area. Many of the district administrators had a wide variety of leadership experiences within the district, the county, throughout the state, and in some cases, throughout the country. However, some only had experience within this district as a teacher and administrator. Given the importance of school context, teacher perception of student ability or bias, and the limited amount of research in the area of the administrator's role in supporting TAL and achieving goals of equity via the PLC process, future research in this area may be needed. Further research may be needed to explore the supports necessary in shifting the work that needs to be done in PLCs and the role of the administrator in supporting that work. It would also be very important to include teachers, in an effort to get a sense of their perceptions on how administration is supporting the work and to learn directly from teachers about whether they feel the PLC work is transformative for them.

Future research may want to explore best practices in supporting teachers in understanding the lived realities of their current students and how that reality mediates additional supports both in and out of the classroom. Based on the results of this study, it remains unknown as to why some teachers struggle to look beyond their established teaching strategies to teach students, despite the data which show that students continue to fall behind

academically. It can be assumed that a lack of understanding how the PLC process can impact the way teachers see and help students; however, more in-depth research needs to be done to establish the validity of this claim.

Likewise, additional research in the area of administrators' efficacy and leadership needs to be explored. Most administrators reported moving slowly and steadily to try to move teachers and shift conversations in PLCs. However, it is unknown if the administrator themselves felt comfortable in leading the work of the PLC. Many administrators indicated that their involvement in the PLC process was that of an observer and partial participator. They all shared the importance of providing additional hands on support and professional development. However, when the questions about their role in supporting teachers in the PLC process was presented, most gave minimal examples of direct assistance in supporting the work that is expected to be done. Most indicated that several factors came in to play, such as a desire for a hands-off approach and allowing for a more grassroots, organic process to emerge. Others indicated that they were trying to focus on building trust and establishing relationships before moving into a coaching position. Others were straightforward and said that there were not enough hours in the day to follow-up with the different PLCs and provide additional one-on-one coaching and or modeling of next steps. Therefore, looking deeper into the supports and training that administrators need to be able to guide their teachers and inform their practice is essential.

Implications for Teacher and Administrator Professional Learning

This research study was designed to learn about administrators' perception and role in supporting teachers in achieving goals of equity via the PLC process. The positive findings

from this study highlight several critical aspects pertaining to the challenges administrators face in changing teacher practices. They are referred to as positive, because it gives a starting point to address change. The three overarching themes that emerged from the findings were: (a) helping teachers understand why PLCs were valuable in meeting the needs of underserved and underrepresented students of color; (b) helping address the need to teach teachers how to implement the strategies required in establishing a productive PLC; and (c) establishing relationships built on trust and transparency between teachers and administrators, as well as between teacher teams.

Administrators are tasked with implementing change on school campuses. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that administrators are aware of the challenges they may face, and that they are equipped with the tools necessary to effectively impact change. Based on the finding of this study, administrators need to understand how to strategically help teachers understand the importance of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) and how they benefit the most at-risk students. They need to assist them in learning how to effectively and efficiently do all of the functions within a PLC, such as analyze data, identify best practices, and create targeted interventions for any student that does not demonstrate learning at high levels, and teach teacher leaders how to lead. Finally, administrators need to know how to establish and maintain relationships with teachers based on trust, respect, and transparency, as well as how to help teachers work through dysfunctional relationships amongst their own teams and build trusting relationships within PLCs.

Administrators must identify a means to help teachers understand the importance of participating in collaborative practices with their colleagues. It is imperative that teachers be given the opportunity to experience the benefits and build an understanding of working in a

team; allowing for discourse on student data, teacher grading policies and practices, best first instruction, and targeted interventions. Additional supports need to be allocated to ensure that all teachers are exposed to the research-based practices that promote student success, which I believe is and should be the school leadership team's first and most important action.

Providing teachers with the tools they need to efficiently, effectively, and confidently lead their teams in implementing productive PLCs is essential. The results of this study highlighted the need to ensure that: (a) teachers have the tools they need to implement what is being asked of them, and (b) administrators have the skill and ability to provide that support to their teachers, or they have a means and a plan to bring in the support necessary to the PLC teams that need it.

It is also important that PLC process is free of administrative scrutiny and reprieve. Teachers are asked to share their most vulnerable information in a semi-public forum. The data shared can lead to assumptions about teacher's effectiveness as an educator. Therefore, it is the administrative team's responsibility to help guide and support conversations in PLCs for existing toxic groups, construct a master schedule that allows sufficient time for PLCs, and provide teachers with a safe place to be vulnerable.

Final Thoughts

Given persistent achievement gaps, it is critical that teachers engage in ongoing collaboration where data is analyzed to determine student learning, identify best practices, and establish targeted interventions to ensure academic success. Many teacher preparation programs attempt to ensure that novice teachers are familiar with collaborative models, pedagogical and content knowledge. Administrative credential programs may also cover information on impacting change on school campuses to address the concerns over the

growing discrepancy in academic achievement. However, as findings from this study suggest, it is just as important for these teachers and administrators to continue to engage in professional learning surrounding the need for professional collaboration with regard to student achievement.

School administrators must keep this conversation at the forefront and continue to provide all stakeholders with the most appropriate tools to address the needs of all students. Teacher burnout with “the next best thing” in education has made several veteran teachers skeptical of trends to address student achievement. Therefore, it is the administration’s responsibility to ensure teachers that understand that PLCs are not a trend, but a movement—a movement to change the way we look at teaching—from a focus on teaching, to a focus on student learning. Teachers working in silos needs to be a thing of the past, and teachers—especially the more veteran ones—need to know that this is not a fad, but a new approach in which it is the work of the collaborative to ensure that learning is taking place and that students become everyone's responsibility.

Therefore, it is most important that administrators are equipped with the tools necessary to support the work that needs to be done. Administrators must be ready, willing, and able to put in the time and effort necessary to create an environment on their campus where teachers know why they are engaging in collaborative settings. The environment must ensure that teachers are confident in their skills to effectively implement the changes that are being asked of them. Most importantly, administrators must be able to create an environment where teachers feel safe with one another to do the work that is being asked of them.

Appendix A: Invitation to Participate in Study

Dear Fellow Educator,

My name is Adriana Lepe-Ramirez and I am a doctoral student in the UCSD/CSUSM joint doctoral program. I am conducting a research study around the use of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a vehicle for equity. I am currently looking for educators who are willing to participate in my study. Administrators who choose to participate in this study will be asked to take part in up to two interviews focusing their role and perceptions of the PLC process.

The contents of the interview will remain private. This process is voluntary, anonymous and confidential.

I do hope that you take some time to consider being a part of this important work. Please call me at 323-533-4947 with any questions you may have regarding the process. I will return on _____ to collect the Consent to Participate forms.

Again, thank you for your time. I look forward to hearing from you,

Sincerely,

Adriana Lepe-Ramirez

Appendix B: Consent to Participate

University of California, San Diego Consent to Act as a Research Participant

Utilizing Professional Learning Communities as a Vehicle for Equity: Administrator Role and Perceptions

Adriana Lepe-Ramirez, a doctoral student in the Joint Doctorate in Educational Leadership at UCSD and CSUSM, under the direction of Professor Amanda Datnow, is conducting a research study to identify the role and perceptions of site and district level administration in the utilization of professional learning communities as a vehicle for achieving educational equity. Specifically, this project seeks to understand how professional learning communities evaluate various forms of data, engage in courageous conversations with regard to the students they serve, how this process impacts their instruction and finally, the role and perceptions of site and district administration in facilitating this process.

You have been asked to participate in this study because:

- you are a site level administrator who is working with one of the schools within the Academy Union High School District where the project will take place.
- you are a district level administrator who is working with one or more of the schools within the Academy Union High School District where the project will take place.

The purpose of this study is to learn more about the role and perceptions of site/district level administrators on the teachers use professional learning communities to evaluate data, collaborate on best practices, and to inform classroom instruction. The researcher aims to learn from you and your experiences. You have an opportunity to be part of a research study that could inform district and site level leadership teams, teacher-training, policies in education, and practices in schools. The goal is that the data collected in this study will lead to a greater understanding of how site/district administration support teachers' in Professional Learning Communities to utilize data to inform their instructional practices, engage in courageous conversation pertaining to their underserved and underrepresented students, as well as gain a better understanding of the supports required to enable teachers to improve classroom practice to achieve educational equity.

Participation in the study is voluntary. Up to 23 administrators will be asked to enroll for participation in the study.

If you agree to be in this study, the following will happen to you:

You will be asked to participate in one or two interviews about your school's/district's organizational policies and supports provided for Professional Learning Communities. Each interview is expected to last approximately 1 hour and will be audio-recorded to improve the accuracy of the researcher's notes. Interviews will take place at your school/work site or another local location of your choosing. Participating in the interviews is voluntary. You can choose not to answer any question at any time for any reason. You may decide not to answer some or any questions, and can stop the interview at any time or erase any portion of the taped recording. You can withdraw from the study by telling the researcher.

At the completion of the study the researcher will write a report with the results of the study, which will be shared with the district. The researcher will report the results in her final dissertation. The results will present information in summary form so you will not be identified by name. Quotes may be used in reports and presentations, but they will not be connected with specific individuals. Any information that could identify you such as your name, position held, or school name will not be used in any reports. Pseudonyms will be used to refer to individuals and schools. The researcher will use confidential study ID numbers rather than names to record information. Only the researcher will know which ID number refers to each participant, and only the researcher, her doctoral supervisor, and a typist will hear the interviews or see written summaries of the interviews.

Risks: Participation in this study may involve some added risks or discomforts. These include:

1. A potential for the loss of confidentiality. However, all possible care will be taken to protect the confidentiality of your records including but not limited to keeping data on a password protected server and following standard UCSD security protocols to maintain confidentiality. Research records will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law. In addition to the researcher listed, the UCSD Institutional Review Board may review research records.
2. A potential risk of emotional discomfort. You may be asked personal questions about your professional goals and beliefs. There is the possibility that this may lead some participants to feel some mild emotional discomfort or embarrassment. Please be advised that you are under no obligation to discuss any topic that makes you feel uncomfortable, and you may choose not to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable and still remain in the study.
3. A potential risk for feelings of frustration, stress, discomfort, fatigue, and boredom. You are under no obligation to participate in or complete the interviews. Please be advised that you may stop the interview at any time for any reason.

Under California law, we must report information about known or reasonably suspected incidents of abuse or neglect of a child, dependent adult or elder including physical, sexual,

emotional, and financial abuse or neglect. If the researcher has or is given such information, he or she may be required to report such information to the appropriate authorities.

Because this is a research study, there may also be some unknown risks that are currently unforeseeable.

Benefits: There will not be any direct benefit to you from participating this study. The investigators, however, may identify district and/or site level practices that will assist in addressing the issue of achieving equity via Professional Learning Communities, and society may benefit from this knowledge. You will be informed of any significant new findings. There will be no cost to you for participating in this study.

Participation in research is entirely voluntary. The alternatives to participation in this study are no participation or limited participation (e.g., a subject might choose to complete some of the initial interviews but then decline to participate in further interviews or observations).

You may refuse to participate or withdraw or refuse to answer specific questions in an interview at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled. If you decide that you no longer wish to continue in this study, you may notify the Principal Investigators, Adriana Lepe-Ramirez in writing via U.S. mail or e-mail to the address listed below:

Adriana Lepe-Ramirez, Doctoral Student
39830 Barcelona Ter.
Murrieta, Ca. 92562
ALRamirez960311@gmail.com

The researcher may remove you from the study without your consent if the researcher feels it is in your best interest or the best interest of the study. For example, participation in the study will be terminated by the PIs in cases in which administrators leave the district or change school sites during the data collection period for that school/district.

You will be told if any important new information is found during the course of this study that may affect your wanting to continue.

It is not anticipated that any of the participants will incur any travel or other expenses as a result of their participation.

Agreement to be in the Study: The researcher has explained this study to you and answered your questions. If you have other questions or research-related problems, you may reach researcher Adriana Lepe-Ramirez at (323) 533-4947. You may call the UCSD Human

Research Protections Program Office at (858) 657-5100 to inquire about your rights as a research subject or to report research-related problems

You have received a copy of this consent document.

You agree to participate.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE NAME OF PARTICIPANT DATE

SIGNATURE OF PERSON WHO EXPLAINED THIS FORM DATE

Audio recordings will be used during the interviews only to improve the accuracy of the researchers interview notes. If you give your permission to be audio recorded during an interview, please sign below. By signing below you are giving permission only for the use of the audio recordings as described above. No other use of the recordings is permitted. You have the right to request that the recording be stopped or erased during the recording. Participation is voluntary.

____ Yes ____ No

Your Signature _____

Your name (please print) _____

Appendix C: Principal/Assistant Principal Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in education?
2. How long have you been an administrator?
3. What did you do prior to becoming an administrator?
4. Tell me about the students in your school/district. What is the makeup?
5. Tell me about your teaching staff. What is the makeup? (experience level, racial makeup, turnover)
6. How often do your teachers participate in PLC's? In what types of groupings?
7. As an administrator, what do you hope your teachers will accomplish during PLC's?
8. Did you attend the PLC training this summer? Did you take a team with you? Who?
9. Do you ever observe or participate in their PLC's? If not you, then who?
 - a. If you participate, how do you participate?
 - b. If you observe, what have you seen during your observations? What are they doing/saying?
 - c. Do you see different challenges within and across content areas?
 - d. Has your team implemented any of the strategies they learned at the training?
If so which ones? How did your teachers respond to the activities?
 - e. As an administrator do you help guide conversations in PLC's, if so how?
10. As an administrator, do you require anything from your PLC groups for accountability purposes? If so what?
11. What steps do you take to help your teachers reach said goal?
12. As you know our district goal is to achieve equity, what does that look like in your PLC's? What is your role in supporting these conversations?

13. How do your teachers address students that are not progressing academically?
- a. How do your teachers talk about students that are struggling?
 - i. Do they speak in general terms with regard these students?
 - ii. Do they place “blame”? (Themselves, students, parents, environment?)
 - iii. Do the demographics/school culture of staff and students shape these conversations in any way?
14. Are the conversations during PLC’s shifting teachers’ perceptions with regard to student ability?
- a. Can you give me an example/can you think of a time where you saw this happen?
15. In your opinion, what work still needs to be done to address equity within the PLC?
- Any special challenges for your school in particular?
16. Is there anything I have not asked about that you think I should know?

Appendix D: District Administration Interview Questions

1. How long have you been in education?
2. How long have you been an administrator?
3. What did you do prior to becoming an administrator?
4. Tell me about the students in your district. What is the makeup?
5. Tell me about your teaching staff. What is the makeup? (experience level, racial makeup, turnover)
6. How often do teachers in this district participate in PLC's?
7. As an administrator, what do you hope your teachers will accomplish during PLC's?
8. Did you attend the PLC training this summer?
9. What is your expectation for how site administration will participate in their PLC's?
Does this happen at all sites?
10. As a district administrator, do you require anything from your sites with regard to PLC groups for accountability purposes? If so what?
11. As you know our district goal is to achieve equity, what does that look like in your PLC's
 - a. What steps do you take to help your site administrators reach said goal?
12. How do you guide your site administrators to navigate conversations with teachers to address students that are not progressing academically?
13. Different schools have different demographics/cultures of staff and students, is it your sense that these factors shape these conversations in any way?
14. Is it your sense that the conversations during PLC's are shifting teachers' perceptions with regard to student ability?

- a. Can you give me an example/can you think of a time where you saw this happen?
15. In your opinion, what work still needs to be done in the district to address equity within the PLC's?
16. Is there anything I have not asked about that you think I should know?

Appendix E: Examples of Coding

Code	Example
Addressing Bias	And then you have other teachers that just go after those won'ts and pummel them to death with, I won't say they ... They unintentionally talk about how the kids aren't worthy. They continue to disenfranchise, that's how I want to say it they continue to just disenfranchise the student through sending the kids out or their unconscious biases or their desire for punishment rather than intervention. So, yeah.
Admin Challenges	I think given how busy we are as administrators, too, when you ask this question, I wonder how can I help English and world languages get more kids to pass the class, or can I get them to perform better on formative assessments. It's something that I'm embarrassed to kind of say I don't do as much as I should. Because I can't, I literally can't.
Admin Support	I think one of the roadblocks there is teachers aren't, they're not statisticians, they're not researchers, they don't ... They're not trained in, "How do we analyze data?" So, some of the things I'm looking forward to doing is coaching our teachers on how to analyze data and doing that through, really, non-threatening content.
Blame	So I don't want to necessarily paint every teacher with a broad stroke, but I think that's the one thing that pops out the most, is the blaming of the students, the blaming of the families, the blaming the shortcomings rather than taking personal responsibility.
District Expectations	I think that they'll really have a good understanding of how what they do in their classrooms every single day effects the level of learning that students experience and I think that the other thing is that they're able to have really honest conversations about their effectiveness and not of them as people, but of the strategies they're implementing in their Classroom

Equity Focus in PLC/or not	I don't know of a team who is to that point of, "Let's look at, not just how did the collective group do, but let's look at how did our special needs students do, how did our students of color do, how did our socioeconomic students do?" They're not there yet. I think they can get there, but that's a process.
Goals for PLC	the key aspects of PLC that I'm always looking for or the ones that I hope is that there's more open communication and honest communication between each other, that there's inquiry that's going on within whatever the agenda items are, whether that's looking through assessment or crunching data or trying to find different methods of stuff that work or didn't work, different strategies of pedagogy that they're trying to look at. It's my hope that they're honestly sharing and taking notes and collaborating, truly collaborating together for the best of teaching. That's hope.
Group Dynamics	I think that the bigger the department the harder it is, because you have that many more personalities that come into play and when you're trying to build a team where it has to be to a great extent a safe place, you know when you have that many personalities and that many interactions your odds of having conflict are that much greater.
Perceptions of student achievement	I think a lot of times the perception on the teacher's part is that students are not successful either due to work ethic, perhaps familial support in helping them in things they don't understand, or really focusing on things that are outside the teacher's control; you know, they don't want to work. I think that's one of the pitfalls for us as well.
PLC Accountability	each content are groups are submitting an agenda with their minutes on it, with their goals for the group, that they submit on Google Classroom, and the expectation is that this is updated every week so that we can check not for detailed-ness of their minutes or anything like that, but just to see what they're working on ... if we don't have an opportunity to observe their particular group during PLC Time.

PLC Frequency	In our school we have two days a week where time has been set aside for collaboration activities. There's an hour and a half that's a late start on Monday and another hour and a half that's a late start on Friday where teachers have that time to collaborate.
PLC PD	Especially in a difficult PLC group, they need that ongoing training, support, monitoring, redirection sometimes, that I think that's where we're not seeing as big of a shift as we want to see because there's ... people are pulled in so many different directions.
Recommendations	We must train and coach our teacher-leaders-to-be. We can't just put people in a room and say, "Go forth in PLC." So, really having some hands-on, usable training ... And then, ongoing coaching pieces
School Context: Culture of staff	I have observed, I'm going to be very honest, some Culture of resistance. I think the people who are fundamentally attached to the way things are, because it serves them in whatever way, they are getting loud and they're getting large, and for lack of a better term, throwing a little temper tantrum, because this is changing status quo. It's changing the way things have been done. Obviously I haven't been here. I don't know how things have been done, but I've seen department heads trying to figure out what their roles are in the PLC process, and how are they going to navigate the challenges and the different departments, and how those all intertwine and intermingle.
School Context: Demographics	Yeah, overwhelmingly white. So I think there's an imbalance between our community and our faculty.
Teacher Actions in PLC	Some teams, I see just kind of working on their own computers, not really having a conversation with each other. I'm not sure what stage they're working on, but they're working independently, just together.

Teacher support for
Students

Then you have the other end of the spectrum of the teachers that are not willing. They're going to keep moving forward with what they're lesson plans are, those that are falling behind. They haven't taken any time to figure out what's going on with the students so when they have those challenges or anything like that, they're easy to dismiss them. They want them moved out of the class.

Teacher Talk

I would say, definitely, in a negative tone. It's like this underground, cultural reference of, "Those kids don't belong here." "Well, why are they here?" "Oh, those kids transferred from some other school."

Teaching Staff

I've got some Latino teachers. I had to stop and think about my Spanish department. Yes, we've got a handful of Latino teachers, probably six of them as well.

Appendix F: Code Frequency

Code	Number of coded segments
Addressing Bias	110
Admin Challenges	112
Admin Support	101
Blame	106
District Expectations	21
Equity focus in PLC/or not	68
Goals for PLC	41
Group Dynamics	103
Perceptions of student Achievement	78
PLC Accountability	32
PLC Frequency	27
PLC PD	113
Recommendations	91
School Context: Culture of Staff	49
School Context: Demographics	32
Teacher Actions in PLC	68
Teacher support for students	77
Teacher Talk	103
Teaching Staff	22

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