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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

Acquisition and Articulation of Technical  
Knowledge in Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

by

Patricio I. Vargas

December 2011

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Natalie Becker, Chairperson

Dr. John Levin

Dr. Robert K. Ream

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2011

The Dissertation of Patricio I. Vargas is approved:

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Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

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## DEDICATION

To Linda, the love of my life;  
Alexa and Patrick, my children;  
and my loved ones in Ecuador.

## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Acquisition and Articulation of Technical Knowledge  
in Professional Learning Communities (PLC)

by

Patricio I. Vargas

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Education  
University of California, Riverside, December 2011  
Dr. Natalie Becker, Chairperson

One of the recurring themes in K-12 public education in the United States is the long-standing debate about teachers' professional competency. Many of the restructuring models of the last two decades have stressed the need to increase teacher professional expertise as a means of fostering student achievement. One of these models, professional learning communities, proposes a redefinition of the role of teachers through collaborative practices. This research highlights the most salient characteristics of professional learning communities (PLCs) as practiced in a newly restructured public elementary school and considers its impact on the creation of shared technical expertise. It explores how two teams of teachers involved in PLCs acquire and articulate technical knowledge together and



the nature of this knowledge. This study used an interpretative approach concerned with the specifics of meaning and action in the interaction of teachers in PLCs. This research defines the specific structure of teacher collaboration and the meaning-perspectives of the participants as they developed this shared learning system of interaction. The investigation highlights the central importance of the allocation and use of non-instructional time for the purpose of collaboration as a precursor to the production of both teacher technical expertise and organic teacher accountability systems. Two main themes developed: first, the highly local nature of the technical knowledge about teaching and learning that is produced through effective teacher collaboration; and, second, the evolving state of accountability within PLC within which formal and informal systems develop that hold members accountable to the group and students. Last, this study discusses the fundamental role that relationships play in fostering dialectic practices about student learning and strengthening collective agreements within collaborative endeavors in the teaching profession. The findings offer insights into the evolving state of teachers as professionals and how PLCs are affecting the way schools view teaching and learning.

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## Chapter 1

Professional learning communities are one model [of school improvement] that recognizes that school capacities must be grounded in the culture of the school and the normative behaviors of its staff (Hord et al., 2000, p. 1).

Efforts to increase teachers' capacity in ways that boost student academic achievement have become a significant component of the contemporary era of standards and accountability in U.S. public education. While standards and accountability have become the buzzwords to denote the contemporary era of K-12 educational reform, questions regarding teacher competency are at the center of the debate. The absence of a systematic approach to teacher learning has prompted a wide range of reforms intended to ensure that teachers have the professional skill set and capacity to meet the educational needs of all children. The following dissertation presents the results of my study of one of these reforms intended to build the capacity of teachers through the implementation of collaborative practices, professional learning communities (PLC).

This ethnographic research was designed to shed light on a much-debated area, teacher professionalism. The 1983 report of the National Commission of Excellence in Education commonly referred to as A Nation at Risk initiated a national movement to improve U.S. schools. As a result of this pronouncement on the mediocre state of schools in the United States, state and federal governments worked to establish a set of shared curricular

standards and to hold teachers and students accountable for meeting these standards. However, research indicated that the academic success of students did not depend solely on higher curricular standards, but ultimately on the quality of teacher instruction in the classroom (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989). This scholarship stressed that without addressing how to increase teaching expertise, individually and collectively, reforms were doomed to fail.

The question is: how did schools approach the accountability challenge? And how did they deal with the call to increasing teacher expertise? This was not an easy task for schools to accomplish, and yearly progress reports began to highlight the existence of an achievement gap between schools, especially those affected by variables such as low socioeconomic groups, minorities, and English learners. Those schools failing to meet accountability measurements were labeled as low achieving, prompting school administrators to look for viable alternatives to equip their classroom teachers with the tools necessary to meet federal and state annual measurable objectives and target goals (Wilson & Daviss, 1994). One of the proposed solutions to struggling schools was the reorganization of the school for the purpose of intentional teacher collaboration, highlighting the importance of collegiality as precursor to increasing student academic achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lasiter, 1996; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Little, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994).



Although theoretically sound, creating the conditions to foster collaboration in an institution characterized by teacher isolation represented a challenging undertaking. Evidence suggests that the concept of collaborative teams composed of interdependent teachers who systematically address student learning was not new to education (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989). However, collaboration happened in isolated schools that failed to provide a systematic approach to teacher learning. It is not until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that an organized and sustained effort to implement programs of professional collaboration throughout the US was seen. One of these organizational models stressed the need to increase the professional learning of teachers in a setting defined as a professional learning community (PLC) (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

My interest in this organizational approach increased over the course of my professional practice. As a teacher, I found myself immersed in the isolated universe of my classroom where my professional expertise developed by trial and error. Collaboration with colleagues was initiated often times informally during my first years as an educator. Although my fellow teachers and I shared ideas and practices, there was nothing in place to systematically address professional needs. Furthermore, professional development happened sporadically and the technical application of strategies and methodologies in the classroom was individually decided rather than negotiated with other

colleagues. I continued with my graduate education and eventually became an administrator. As such, I attended several staff development trainings, workshops, and conferences related to PLC. The work of teachers within the institution captivated my attention and led me to review the research available on teacher professional collaborative practices and to question the process and outcomes proposed by PLC. I was intrigued by the collaborative approach proposed by the PLC initiative, which was dissonant with the traditional approach to teaching and learning. As an administrator, I have worked in two counties, three different districts, and in different capacities at the elementary, secondary, and district level. In each of the districts where I was employed, the PLC initiative was provided to schools as a way of increasing student academic achievement. I was intrigued by the initial reaction teachers had when presented with the PLC concept; while some teams seemed to fully embrace it, others rejected it and perceived it as an institutional control mechanism. Thus, I questioned the process, took a closer look, and examined the proposed premise behind PLC. My review of the extent literature on PLC led me to formulate a set of questions that guided this dissertation study. What follows is a product of my working with participating grade level teams in schools attempting to become PLCs.

The PLC model advocates for teacher interdependence, collegiality, and collaboration in schools. It proposes a culture defined by an ethos in

which empowerment and shared decision-making affect sustained professional development and knowledge acquisition, articulation, and codification. However, in order to improve the quality of teacher instruction in the classroom through collaborative means, it is necessary to define how this process must take place, so that teachers' technical expertise, individually and collectively, could become precursor to higher student academic achievement (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989). The following ethnographic analysis of two particular grade level collaborative teams contributes to the understanding of these fundamental processes. The intention of this dissertation is not to produce a traditional evaluation of professional learning communities, but rather to explore teacher collaborative practices within the context of a particular school organization and to define how these practices are related to the production of expert technical knowledge.

The questions guiding this research were:

1. How do teachers in teams organized as professional learning communities acquire and articulate knowledge about teaching and learning?
2. What is the nature of the knowledge produced?
3. What elements influence the establishment of a systematic way to acquire and articulate professional knowledge among teachers?

## **Background of the Problem**

A series of efforts to systematically restructure schools in the United States for the purpose of boosting student achievement was fueled by a seemingly national consensus that schools were failing their communities. However, educational researchers such as Judy Warren Little (1982) and Susan Rosenholtz (1989), who examined these restructuring efforts, raised the important criticism that the academic success of students did not solely depend on higher curricular standards or accountability pressure but ultimately on the quality of teacher instruction in the classroom. Their contribution highlighted the need to increase teachers' capacity as a precursor to producing higher student academic achievement. Furthermore, the findings published by Rosenholtz (1989) stressed that systematic teacher learning increased professional knowledge and this was a common denominator in successful schools defined as learning-enriched schools.

In addition to the evidence provided by educational researchers, advances in social theory related to organizational learning and systems thinking (Senge, 1990) contributed to the redefinition of the school as a learning institution and the teacher as a learner. This view conceptualized organizational learning as "the product of social interaction [that] results in organizational knowledge only when it becomes part of the collective wisdom of the school" (Hanson, 2003, p. 276). Senge (1990) stated that "organizations

learn only through individuals who learn” and emphasized the role of the organization in providing the means to increase “people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels” (p. 4). This idea, promoted in the private sector, was also applied to education where teachers, the ones closer to the application of knowledge, lacked the mechanisms by which to acquire and articulate knowledge together. The goal was to de-privatize teachers’ practices and to ameliorate the existing isolation in teachers’ professional practice.

According to DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) PLC model, teachers in schools functioning as PLCs are called upon:

to build a collaborative culture, engage in collective inquiry regarding matters that impact student learning, participate in action research, create continuous improvement processes, and help each other monitor and improve upon results" (DuFour et al., 2004, p. 37).

DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) research supports the positive influence PLC can have on student achievement, highlighting a collaborative effort to increase teacher competency and skills with the purpose of meeting the academic needs of students. The authors define six characteristics of professional learning communities that include: (a) shared mission, vision, and values; (b) collective inquiry; (c) collaborative teams; (d) action orientation and experimentation; (e) continuous improvement; and (f) results

orientation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Their theoretical analysis summarizes these components as essential to transform a school into a learning community.

This collaborative process proposes a mechanism by which teachers engage in dialogue and where such interactions can lead teams to better meet the needs of students. However, collaboration (in the form of PLCs) has to be critically analyzed to find out whether or not it is contributing to the evolving state of teachers' shared knowledge for the purpose of meeting the academic expectancies of all students, and how this collegial interaction is contextualized to serve the needs of particular settings. My study questions, through empirical research, the claims of the literature supportive of collaborative practices by examining both the processes and sociocultural outcomes of structured and purposeful teacher collegiality as exhibited by two grade level teams of teachers in an elementary school in Southern California.

I began my field analyses attempting to understand how PLCs produce, for the teaching profession, technical knowledge that parallels other professions in content and process. What immediately stood out during my participative observations of the collaborative meetings at the site was the evident professional expertise of teachers, which was inconsistent with the sociological literature regarding teaching as a profession. Scholars have

traditionally characterized teachers as lacking the mastery of an identifiable and legitimate type of expert technical knowledge (Elliot, 1972; Freidson, 1986). As my field work progressed, I began to uncover evidence suggesting that the expert knowledge held and employed by teachers may be produced through a process different than that of the canons established in the long standing professions (medicine, law, and divinity). When given ample time, the teachers in my study built upon established efficacious personal relationships to establish collegial interactions with one another, which allowed them to produce technical expert knowledge that effectively addressed the teaching and learning needs of their local school community.

### **Significance of the Study**

Numerous studies have portrayed the relevance of establishing collaborative teams of teachers in schools as a way to increase their technical expertise and the achievement of students. However, little is known about the sociocultural process needed to hold professional learning communities in place. Scholars have voiced concern regarding the increasing role of standardization and accountability; yet, little attention has been paid to finding out what exactly teachers are doing within the context of their collaboration and how those actions may be sensible to them within this framework.

There is considerable need to specify the behaviors and meaning-making of teachers involved in PLCs. To some, establishing PLCs as an institutional mechanism validates their quest for school improvement. However, little is known about the kind of technical knowledge that would enable teachers to increase their professional expertise and learn how to effectively work with students with different needs. Many schools, especially those serving the urban poor, are under increasing pressures to ensure students in every subgroup make annual yearly progress (AYP). Thus, research that illuminates how this process is institutionalized and best achieved is needed.

Many scholars have suggested that professional learning communities hold promise (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Little, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). Although the literature supports this kind of setting as one that would enable teachers to share responsibility for the academic achievement of students and through systematic collaboration promote student learning (Lasiter, 1996; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1994), little is known about the impact PLC can have on teachers' professionalism as it relates to their mastery of technical knowledge (Darling-Hammond, 2007). Specifically, there is empirical research that indicates that when schools are organized as PLC, student achievement improves. However, less is known about the nature of the knowledge being generated during collaborative meetings and the socio-



cultural conditions that enable professional development for the group and by extension successful academic interventions for students. Thus, research that illuminates this process is needed.

In Chapter 2, I will describe the available scholarship on professional learning communities of practice that is relevant to this study. Chapter 3 will provide a description of the methods used to study the way in which teachers acquire and articulate knowledge together. In Chapter 4, I will describe the events that led a school to reorganize its day for the purpose of collaboration. Chapter 5 will provide an analysis of the conceptualization of knowledge and accountability in teams organized as PLC. In chapter 6, I will provide an overview of the ways in which dialogue is increasingly affecting the culture of the school, the way teachers relate to each other. Finally, in Chapter 7, I will summarize the findings of this research and discuss their implications for the professional development of teachers.

### **Definition of Terms**

Academic Performance Index (API): “The API is a single number, ranging from a low of 200 to a high of 1000, that reflects a school’s, an LEA’s (Local Educational Agency), or a subgroup’s performance level, based on the results of statewide testing. Its purpose is to measure the academic performance and growth of schools” (California Department of Education, 2010).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): “Each state is required to develop and implement a statewide accountability system that will ensure that all schools and districts make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as defined by NCLB.”

“The AYP targets increase until 2013–14 when all schools and LEAs must have 100 percent of their students performing at the proficient level or above on statewide tests” (California Department of Education, 2010).

Leadership Team Members: Leadership team members include the principal, the assistant principal, one teacher per grade level, any teacher who has a special assignment outside the classroom, and one teacher representing special education.

Other Professional Educators: Other professional educators include the school psychologist, the resource specialist, and occasional staff members holding a long-term assignment.

Professional Learning Communities (PLC): Organizational practice that institutionalizes non-instructional time for teachers to meet regularly and to collaborate toward continued improvement with a shared focus on student academic achievement and common learning goals and objectives.

(A): School Administrator

(DA): District Administrator

(2L): Second Grade Lead Teacher

(4L): Fourth Grade Lead Teacher

(2T): Second Grade Teacher

(4T): Fourth Grade Teacher

## Chapter 2

### Professional Learning Communities: Lessons from the Literature

School learning that produces desirable outcomes is a function of several in-school variables (school leadership, vision, culture, structure, strategy, and policy resources) interacting with supportive out-of-school variables (district, community, and government) (Fullan, 2001, p. 74).

#### Reforms in the United States and PLC

Over the last two decades, a growing body of literature has substantially affected the way teacher learning is understood and approached<sup>1</sup>. From the conception of the common school to the contemporary debates over public schooling, multiple reform movements have attempted to affect what teachers learn, how they acquire and articulate their learning, and how this learning is applied within the context of their classrooms. At the core of all of these reform efforts is the fundamental concern with the relationship between teacher expertise and student academic achievement. Those who share this interest have highlighted the need to improve the working conditions of teachers and to upgrade their professional status as a

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<sup>1</sup> Teachers come to the classroom with varied experiences and knowledge bases (Lortie, 1975). How teachers learn and develop as professionals is a fundamental question that has motivated educational researchers and teacher educators for years (Darling-Hammond, 1995, 1999; Little, 1990, 1999; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1994; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Research suggests that the knowledge generated from dialectic practices among teams of teachers about their teaching episodes leads to the implicit and explicit know-how of teaching, which ultimately guides teachers' pedagogical choices (Berliner, 1988).

way to improve teacher performance and, by causal extension, student performance (Darling-Hammond, 1995, 1999; Fullan, 2001, 2003; Lasiter, 1996; Liberman, 1988; Little, 1990, 1999; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1979; Riley et al., 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1994; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). However, longstanding attempts to define a professional model for teachers has proven difficult as the technological elements of teaching as a profession cover a wide range of organizational functions such as administration of time, behavior management, and institutional expectations. This investigation will consider the characterization of teaching as a profession and how it has been affected by the participation and involvement of teachers in the context of one contemporary attempt to define and redefine the profession of teaching—professional learning community (PLC) reforms.

Historically, such initiatives have focused on a wide range of aspects regarding the professionalization of teachers. Some have targeted the knowledge and skills of classroom teachers. Others are more concerned with improving teachers' collegial relationships. Still others are designed to affect the attitudes and behaviors exhibited by teachers as professionals as well as their status. Finally, there are reforms that have attempted to affect and define teacher professional behavior through formal bureaucratic mechanisms such as standardization, accountability, and certification requirements (Riley et al., 1995). In all, although it has never been entirely

clear how teachers learn and how exactly the school as an institution shapes this learning, researchers and reformers have seemingly reached the same conclusion—if teachers are provided with meaningful opportunities to increase their technical capacity, their learning will directly impact the quality of their teaching and will, in turn, increase student academic achievement (Darling-Hammond, 1995).

The contemporary manifestation of this ongoing debate was fueled in the 1980s by the publication of the *A Nation at Risk* report (U.S. Department of Education, National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). The 1980s saw a fundamental shift in the way the U.S. deliberated about education. From the effective school reform movements of the 1970s and 1980s, the educational agenda shifted to a standards-based reform movement predicated on the widespread and highly publicized indictment of the quality of public education in the U.S. The National Commission on Educational Excellence appointed by the Reagan administration claimed that the United States was “at risk in international economic competition because of education regress” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 33). This pronouncement of undifferentiated mediocrity in schools across the US fueled political agendas and change efforts. It served as a national catalyst for educational reform attempts intended to improve the academic achievement of students. *A Nation at Risk* (1983) shifted schools’ priorities to focus on providing a

standardized curricular experience for students across the US and to holding schools, teachers, parents, and students responsible for demonstrable learning outcomes. As a result, state and federal governments set in motion several organizational mechanisms designed to boost student learning and carefully monitor academic achievement: increasing instructional time and the length of the academic year; defining academic benchmarks and grade level expectancies; and enforcing the use of standardized testing and requirements related to teacher training and expertise (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). In other words, the assumption was that by imposing external accountability measurements, such as increased requirements for licensing, time spent in the classroom, days in school, testing, and professional prerequisites, the quality of teaching and student learning would be directly correlated. Although the reform movement had the implied assumption of providing consistency and direction, it was nothing new. And despite all of the effort exerted and the millions of dollars invested in what became known as the Excellence Movement, it brought about little change in either the academic achievement of students or the overall quality of education in schools (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

By 1990, the seeming inefficacy of the Excellence Movement prompted another report, *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* (1994), which stipulated that by the year 2000 six national goals would be achieved. These goals

included: (a) preparing all children to start school; (b) increasing the national high school graduation rate to 90%; (c) measuring student academic competency at specific grade levels; (d) raising the rank of students in the United States in international comparisons, particularly in math and science; (e) ensuring that all U.S. adults are literate, knowledgeable, and skillful; (f) and maintaining public school systems that are free of drugs and violence (United States Department of Education, 1994).

Congress amended this list and added two more goals: continued professional development for the teaching work force and increased parental partnership and involvement (Wilson & Daviss, 1994). Two common themes began to surface in this new generation of reform efforts in what came to be known as the Restructuring Movement (DuFour and Eaker, 1998). The first theme was addressing student needs, specifically, measuring and ranking their academic competency through standardized tests as a means to ensure a better-educated and economically competitive society (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). The second theme was intended to increase the professionalization of teachers by making a call for educators to assimilate new practices into an “existing system of ideas about pedagogy and subject-matter knowledge” (Nelson & Hammerman, 1996, p. 4). These two themes fostered several types of school restructuring efforts including: site-based management, shared



decision-making, staff teams with shared planning time and shared responsibility, advisory groups, and heterogeneous grouping of students.

For the purpose of this investigation, I will not focus on initiatives related to the measurement of student academic progress. I will, however, devote attention to the proposals intended to improve the teaching force. Although the broad political directive to improve the quality of teaching resulted in many different policies implemented at many different times, the degree to which these policies resulted in demonstrable educational improvements was inconsistent throughout the United States. DuFour and Eaker (1998) state that, although the Restructuring Movement was rapidly embraced by educators, the idea of increasing autonomy and authority for educators to affect the decision making in matters of instruction, pedagogy, and professional collaboration “have yet to be realized” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 8). Thus, its failure could, in part, be attributed to the lack of the machinery needed to institute radical changes in what constitutes one of the most complex and traditional institutions in society—the public school system.

Historically, educators and educational researchers alike have paid scant attention to the mechanisms in the school organization that support or inhibit teacher learning (Little, 1990; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Metz, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). Furthermore, scholars have documented that

notwithstanding teacher professional learning as proposed in legislative agendas, school districts have provided very little support for systematic professional growth or learning (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2002; Rosenholtz, 1989).

Concerns have been raised about the quality of our public school teachers. Educational scholars and practicing educators have given voice to the lack of formal approaches to teacher learning and reached the common conclusion that teachers have traditionally lacked a shared technical culture (Lortie, 1975; Little, 1982, 1990; Rosenholtz, 1989). This assertion regarding teachers' expertise and collective knowledge implies the absence of a systematic approach to teacher learning. It has placed teachers at the center of the debate and fueled several attempts to increase teacher capacity, stressing the need for a focused approach to teachers' professional learning: its role, its process, and its quality (Little, 1982; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993).

The debate continues. In the current era of standardization and accountability, the stakes are high for professional educators. The purpose of this study is to better understand one of the reform efforts intended to affect the way teachers acquire and articulate professional knowledge together; and to determine how this proposed structure is affecting the professional identity of teachers. This investigation begins by situating teaching within a

sociological framework that offers a systematic definition for what constitutes a profession. Then, it provides an overview of the scholarship that explores the challenges teachers have historically faced in obtaining and maintaining a professional identity. Finally, this investigation reviews the existing literature that focuses more specifically on contemporary attempts to professionalize teachers through the PLC reform model.

### **The Sociology of Professions**

Sociologists have long endeavored to define professions, professionalism, and professionalization and have yet to come to an agreement (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972; Freidson, 1986; Kelly, 1995; Larson, 1977). Their characterization of professionalism varies widely in matters that include prestige, power, income, authority, compliance, and competence, to mention a few. Thus, the existing confusion about the status of teachers as professionals is in part produced by the lack of a precise understanding of and definition for what constitutes professionalism.

The origin of the word profession dates back to the sixteenth century. The term was first used to denote an occupation of high status requiring some learned expertise, such as medicine, law, and divinity (Kelly, 1995). However, sociologists argue that if linguistics are considered, the term profession takes different connotation depending on its form, whether is semantic, syntactic, or morphological. As a noun, the term profession is often

used as innate to those carrying some type of formal knowledge. Knowledge, however, has a broad connotation that does not necessarily include formal occupation or schooling. For instance, the term can be used in reference to the conceptualization of any occupation by which a living is made ranging from the long standing elite professions to any occupation at all, even prostitution (i.e., the oldest profession) (Kelly, 1995).

As an adjective, the term professional carries a connotation of expertise (Freidson, 1986). Thus, Olympic athletes, NASCAR drivers, and Miss America contestants all became qualified professionals—professional athletes, professional drivers, and professional beauties. As a verb, to professionalize, or more specifically professionalizing, is the process by which society historically defines the status and prestige of an occupation. It involves a complex process of acculturation in which those participating gain technical skills, a common identity, shared norms, and values associated with becoming part of a professional group. It refers to the structural attributes and characteristics exhibited by those involved in specific occupations (Kelly, 1995).

It is also relevant to this unfolding discussion to consider the term in its active form, professionalism, which denotes the qualities or attitudinal attributes of those who are recognized as practicing a particular occupation (Riley et al., 1997). In the sociological literature, professionalism is not

defined historically but rather as a process constructed collectively through commonalities among the professions. To put in different terms, “professionalism is the way society institutionalizes expertise” (Abbot, 1988, p. 323).

Larson’s (1977) scholarship asserts that distinct dimensions of cognitive, normative, and evaluative qualities characterize the behavior of professionals. Other scholars have concurred with this characterization and maintain that professionals are carriers of formal knowledge, hold autonomy and prestige, and have a commitment based on their service ethic (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972; Freidson, 1986; Kelly, 1995; Larson, 1977).

Concurring with Larson and adding to the discussion related to the cognitive dimension of what constitutes professionals, Freidson (1986) defines them as carriers of formal knowledge; those who are involved in activities that have a broad intellectual context. This characterization is generally accepted by other sociologists, who also view the social and occupational status of the professions as regulated by an arcane body of substantive or technical knowledge (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972; Etzioni, 1969; Freidson, 1986; Larson, 1977). Furthermore, Freidson (1986) states that professionals are those who “create, disseminate, and employ knowledge” (p. 13) ensuring a systematic process of production and application of knowledge. He argued that professionals are “subject only to the constraints of competent knowledge

and skill related to their tasks” (Freidson, 1986, p. 159). Other scholars agree in regard to the relationship between professionalism and mastery of some form of expert knowledge (Elliot, 1972; Freidson, 1986). Thus, the norm established is that those who are part of the professional group must control a body of knowledge particular to their field, which concurs with Larson’s qualifying constituent of a profession: its cognitive element.

This sociological conceptualization is critical as I attempt to explain teaching as a profession. Although teaching qualifies as a profession based on the expertise and knowledge base held by teachers, teachers’ professionalism has been questioned by sociologists when compared to the long standing professions (medicine, law, and divinity) because of the apparent lack of a socially identifiable and systematically codified body of shared technical expertise.

I closely examined the cognitive dimension of teacher professional behavior (knowledge). More specifically, I explored how the cognitive dimension manifests itself in the substantive and technical practices of two teams of teachers as they acquire and articulate knowledge together.

For the purpose of this investigation, I did not consider the normative dimension (service ethics) or the evaluative dimension (autonomy and prestige) attributed to professionals. Further research is needed to look at how these dimensions relate to one another within the context of education as

exemplified in districts, schools, and classrooms, and how these elements shape and reshape teachers as professionals.

### **The Sociology of Teaching as a Profession**

Thus far, I have established a general conceptualization of what constitutes the terms profession, professional, and professionalization. To develop a working definition, I reviewed the sociological literature on professions. What I discovered is that, although, sociologists do not necessarily agree on a precise definition of what constitutes a profession, there is general consensus around a cluster of associated traits: particularly in the areas of authority, the organization of knowledge, and the service ideal (Goode, 1969). For the purpose of this investigation, I was particularly interested in the first two elements that characterize a profession: authority and the organization of knowledge.

#### **Authority in the Teaching Profession**

Dan Lortie, in his discussion of control and autonomy in elementary teaching, states that the allocation of authority in a school setting “is monolithic, hierarchical, and concentrated” (Etzioni, 1969, p. 4). Charles Bidwell et al. (1997) discuss the organization of the school and define it from a segmentalist perspective. Specifically, they assert that division of labor directly shapes teachers’ use, a social perspective based on relational structures that define the organization of the school. For instance, although

teacher authority has been traditionally bound to the formalized bureaucratic hierarchy of the school organization, it is arguable that this bureaucratic authority is affected by the size of the school. For instance, in small schools, teachers have better opportunities to exercise their authority in the decision-making process of the school as opposed to large schools where bureaucratic hierarchies are larger, stronger, and there is little opportunity for input (Bidwell et al., 1997).

A further aspect considered in relational structures is client power, which defines how clients (parents) interact and influence the decision-making process of the school. Based on these two factors, size and relative client power, Bidwell et al. (1997) characterize four types of authority exercised in schools: autocracy, bureaucracy, collegiums, and market (p. 288).

The types of organizations proposed by Bidwell et al. (1997) have distinct forms of authority exercised by teachers. Sociologists argue that most schools function in the realm of autocracy and bureaucracy (Etzioni, 1969; Lortie, 1975). Traditionally, school organizations evolved from the one-room schoolhouse to institutions organized in complex hierarchies intended to meet the increasing numbers of students. Teachers' roles, however, have remained relatively unchanged. The evolving state of compulsory schooling required the creation of the cellular classroom where one teacher could manage an increasing number of students. Hence, the organizational structure of the



school has perpetuated divided, isolated spaces where teachers are generally regulated by layers of bureaucratic control.

Etzioni (1969) asserts in his sociological analysis of teaching that authority's powers are concentrated at the top of the structure. What this implies is that teachers have minimal say in the decision-making of the school and their performance is subject to the scrutiny of their immediate supervisor, the principal. Nonetheless, the teacher is recognized as the authority figure within the confines of his/her classroom. It is this perception of instructional autonomy, scholars argue (Etzioni, 1969; Freidson, 1986; Larson, 1977), that gives a sense of professionalism to teaching; yet, scholars also recognize the fact that teachers are bound to the hierarchical bureaucratic mechanisms that place them in a subordinate organizational position, subject to the authority of the building administrator.

This form of authority becomes a mechanism of social control in which the norms and values of other teachers or professional peers are overshadowed by hierarchical authority structures of a bureaucratic organization. In other professions, such as medicine, law, or architecture, the professional autonomy exercised by the professional is subject to evaluation by the professional group, the licensing board, and, ultimately, the client. Traditionally in teaching, the idea of professional autonomy has been

problematized by the ultimate authority of building and district administrators.

### **Organization of Knowledge in the Teaching Profession**

The mastery of some form of esoteric knowledge unique to the profession is directly correlated to the idea of authority, not in the form of administrative positions or hierarchies, but by the codified agreements that encapsulate a technical culture that is common to the professional group and, in turn, governs the behavior (e.g., exercise authority) of those who belong to the profession. In an attempt to streamline the often unwieldy definition of professionals, sociologists have described them as “experts who applied esoteric knowledge to particular cases” (Abbott, 1988, p. 4). For the purpose of this investigation, I will refer to professionals as those who “create, disseminate, and employ formal knowledge” (Freidson, 1986, p. 13).

Etzioni (1969) asserts in his seminal sociological investigation of the professional status of teachers that teachers should be characterized as “semi” professionals because the occupation “cannot point to an arcane body of substantive or technical knowledge” (p. 24). A relatively large body of empirical research has supported this assertion and characterized teacher learning as developed through trial and error (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972; Etzioni, 1969; Freidson, 1986; Larson, 1977; Lortie, 1975). The question is whether teachers have any control as a group over the professional

knowledge they acquire, articulate, and codify, or whether this knowledge is individually mastered by those who show an innate ability to teach. If teaching is indeed an individual endeavor, then those who demonstrate expertise in teaching do it not because of its norms, but because of its artistic qualities—teaching as an art form—where there is no formal production, application, and preservation of knowledge.

The lack of a unique and codified body of esoteric knowledge in the teaching profession has been attributed to myriad factors that include, but are not limited to, teachers socialization into and within the profession, the function of the institution as mediator between knowledge and power, and also, historical aspects that have, from the conception of the one-room school house, denigrated the role of teachers in status, autonomy, prestige, and earnings (Etzioni, 1969; Freidson, 1986; Larson, 1977; Lortie, 1975).

### **Socialization into and within the Profession**

Phillip Elliot (1972) helped to develop a comparison of teaching and the longstanding professions, which he distinguished as “occupational professions” as opposed to “status professions” (pp. 14, 32). When considering the status professions, he examines and develops the specific processes through which neophytes come into the profession. Furthermore, he delineates the way in which socialization occurs within the professional group. Descriptions of these processes are highlighted by tones of rigor and

exclusivity. For instance, in medicine, entrance requirements for schooling are coded with tones of rigor, competitiveness, and high academic achievement. Furthermore, new graduates are expected to work under someone else's supervision for a lengthy period of time until they have demonstrated competency and chosen a field of specialization. A similar case can be made for those entering in law, divinity, or university teaching.

Such is not the case for teachers. Entrance requirements for education programs are neither as competitive nor as demanding as those found in the status professions. Also, after completion of such programs, entering into teaching does not require specialization through a graduate education. Thus, when entering into teaching profession, neophytes to the school are often given full responsibility for their own class with minimal prior exposure to teaching pedagogy and/or the opportunity to have shadow an expert in the field. Squires (1999) states that the lack of a strong socialization process in teaching could be attributed to the assumption that everyone who comes into teaching has had multiple years of exposure to and practice in some form of teaching through their own schooling. Thus, the assumption is that teaching is an everyday activity requiring no formal training (Squires, 1999).

Lortie (1975) asserts that for teachers "one's own personal predispositions were not only relevant, but in fact, stood at the core of becoming a teacher" (p. 79). His often cited sociological analysis of teachers as

professionals characterizes the socialization of teaching as an individual endeavor that grows in isolation, undermining “the capacity for teacher learning and sustained professional commitment” (Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994, p. 124). In fact, several reform movements such as Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) and No Child Left Behind (2001) have attempted to change the entrance requirements and qualification of teachers with the idea that increasing these regulations would result in a better equipped teaching force. Yet, these models have failed to provide a systematic approach to professional development, perhaps due to the high demand for teachers at different times

When we compare this practice of recruiting new teachers into the profession with that of recruiting medical doctors or lawyers, we see a fundamental discrepancy that intensifies the preconceived notion of teachers lacking a shared technical culture.

### **Institutional Context of Teaching**

In addition to the sociological aspects affecting teaching as a profession, I also considered the historical context of the school as an institution and its influence on teaching practices. The setting of the classrooms, it is argued, has remained relatively unchanged since the conception of the common school. The traditional setting of the school has provided teachers with the structure needed to maintain control of the

classroom, maximize the use of instructional time, and to ensure the instruction of pupils in numbers that would accommodate the increasing demands of society (Cuban, 1993; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Scholars agree that the “cellular” pattern of the classrooms has pervaded both the organization of the school and the socialization of teachers (Cuban, 1993; Lortie, 1975; Tyack & Cuban, 1995).

Through the establishment of institutional boundaries, a teacher-centered approach to schooling has been the dominant approach in education, which has not only shaped the traditional mode of instruction but also the way teachers acquire and articulate professional knowledge. These structures have provided the arrangement of the school, and therefore, affected the organizational norms that govern teachers’ behavior (Cuban, 1993; Lortie, 1975). Thus, the mechanisms involved in creating the organizational arrangement of the school form “the inner context within which individual teacher beliefs and an occupational ethos worked their influences in shaping a durable practical pedagogy called teacher-centered instruction” (Cuban, 1993, p. 260).

The organizational structure of the school has also institutionalized arrangements that foster teacher isolation rather than teacher interdependence, (Lortie, 1975). In this kind of setting, the transactions

expected from colleagues are limited to those highlighted by Little (1990): (a) storytelling and scanning, (b) sharing, and (c) aid and assistance.

Thus, the way in which schools have been structured has created self-contained classrooms in which teaching has been shaped by individual ability rather than shared technical knowledge (Cuban, 1993; Lortie, 1975; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). This is why teachers' expertise varies widely across schools and much of their expertise is attributed to individual motives as opposed to structural systems or processes.

In traditional settings, the physical arrangements of schools bind teachers to their classrooms and establish socio-cultural relations that are not systemic, but rather isolated events under specific relations. The traditional approach to the acquisition of a body of substantive knowledge in teaching involves processes that deny teachers the opportunity to collectively acquire a shared culture, confining them to the isolation of their own classrooms. Thus, conservatism has permeated teacher learning and directly affected the way teachers acquire and articulate professional knowledge; it has subtracted opportunities that would ensure the collective growth of teachers as professionals.

This kind of setting further exacerbates the arguable distance between teachers' shared technical culture and their identity as professionals, which has been directly related to the prevalence of conservatism in the

occupational norms of teaching (Cuban, 1993). Teaching, as a profession, has remained relatively unchanged from its conception. Traditional, conservative practices and teaching styles are passed from generation to generation. Under this frame of reference, reforms in the institutional context of schooling have been attempted with various degrees of success and sustainability.

One of these attempts, the subject of this study, has intended to transform the isolation of teachers and privatization of practices. Professional learning communities are based on a conceptualization “that recognizes that school capacities must be grounded in the culture of the school and normative behaviors of its staff” (Hord & Westbrook, 2000, p. 1). From this perspective, the act of teaching radically evolves from a conservative practice that occurs in isolation to a practice developed by a community of professionals who interdependently acquire and articulate expert knowledge.

### **The Historical Status of the Teaching Profession**

Before turning to a closer consideration of the PLC reform model, I will take a moment to discuss the gendered nature of the teaching profession. Gender, scholars argue, has played a significant role in the professionalization of occupations, and it is noteworthy to consider that sociologists refer to many of the occupations generally held by women (e.g., teaching, nursing and social work) as semi-professions (Etzioni, 1969).



The argument for the designation of teaching as a semi-profession is rooted in the notion of professional authority. Etzioni (1969) argues that in a school setting, men have traditionally been more likely to assume an administrative role and women more amenable to accept a submissive one. Furthermore, women were perceived as less inclined to pursue organizational status as opposed to men. Last, the perception has been that women generally have fewer years of higher education, on average, than men.

As noted in historical records, from the industrial revolution to the beginning of the 20th century, the United States saw the need to accommodate an increasing number of students, affecting the way schooling took place (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). More students required the expansion of public schools, which in turn required teachers. Large numbers of women were recruited into teaching through a comparison between teaching and motherhood. Furthermore, because the monetary compensation for teachers was far behind from other professions, teaching held little appeal to men as the head of the household. Teaching, then, was appealing to women who often lacked the technical expertise needed to enter the status professions. Rather, teaching became constructed as a calling associated with altruism and service. In all, the gendering of the role of teaching as female has affected the degree to which teaching has been recognized and organized as a profession in the United States.

## **Organizing Schools for Teacher Learning**

The conclusion is that the school, as an organization, has influenced the behaviors of teachers through goals, roles, policies, and processes that have enabled teachers to cope with multiple and, at times, conflicting demands. Furthermore, in terms of structures designed to support teacher learning, it has been established that the traditional model of the “egg crate school” (p. 14) as suggested by Lortie (1975) does not promote interdependence, but rather isolation and privatization of practices. Within this frame of reference, two particular studies (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989) looked at the impact that collaborative dialogue and teamwork had in building a knowledge base intended to address the particular academic needs of students. These studies suggested that if teachers work collaboratively and develop collegial relationships, the quality of teacher instruction in the classroom improves. Rosenholtz (1989) stressed the notion that systematic teacher learning and increased professional knowledge is a common denominator in successful schools (defined as learning-enriched schools).

Other scholars have argued the need to organize schools for teacher learning (Little, 1999). Judith Warren Little states that in schools with this kind of organizational setting, teachers are provided with multiple opportunities for interaction as well as conversation about each other’s work and about each other’s students’ academic achievement. This form of

interaction establishes mechanisms through which teachers develop a common, technical culture characterized by complex patterns of shared meaning. Learning in this kind of setting becomes purposeful and directly connected to the academic needs of the students within the locale. Thus, if schools provide a systematic and sustained effort to study student work coupled with a collective effort to determine how this work occurs given the immediacy of the locale, then, teacher learning will occur systematically and create the conditions for student academic achievement (Little, 1999).

Prominent scholars argue that promoting organizational arrangements that encourage teacher collaboration in ways that parallel the collegial behaviors commonly identified with the professions will promote learning for both teachers and, by extension, students (Darling-Hammond, 1999, 2010; DuFour et al. 2004; Fullan, 2001, 2003; Lasiter, 1996; Liberman, 1988; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Little, 1990, 1999; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1979; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1994; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Specifically, Little (1990, 1999) has defined teachers' collegiality and collaboration as joint work, which implies a deliberate support system that supplies favorable conditions for professional development. Darling-Hammond (1999) states that in schools where such joint work is practiced, the collaborative sessions become the agent that support new teachers. This is an important feature of collaborative meetings. Once they are established

in schools, they systematically evolve to a state in which teachers develop a collective sense of identity directly reconstructing their role within the institution. Under such circumstances, even novice teachers adjust more rapidly to the complexities of the profession and find in the group the support needed to meet the expectancies without feeling isolated. Thus, the structures found in collective learning could affect the socialization of teachers, and scholars argue that they increase teachers' technical capacity making this a vital process in the attempt to meet the needs of all students (DuFour et al. 2004).

In summary, educational research on how to reform education through attending to teacher collegiality and learning in conversation with sociological literature regarding teachers as professionals provides a frame in which to consider the professional dimensions of teaching and how they manifest themselves in the practice of teaching and learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 1998; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Practice, however, is subject to both the particularities of individual approaches and/or the institutional arrangements that either enable or inhibit its application.

### **Professional Learning Communities (PLCs)**

This investigation examines the practices of teachers involved in collaboration, and it questions whether these practices are actually translating into an increased professional identity in participating teachers.

The particular reform model used to explore the related issues of teacher collaboration and learning in this study is PLCs as articulated by Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (1998) with the publication of their book *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*.

According to the authors, the ability of a school to function as a PLC represents “the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement” (p. xi). The authors state that teachers should have some form of expertise in their specialized field, and not only pursue advanced training but also remain current in their evolving knowledge base. Their assertion views the knowledge base of teachers as dynamic, which paralleled empirical research (Lieberman, 1988; Little, 1982, 1990; Fullan, 2003; Lasiter, 1996; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1979; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1994; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994) that supports the need to increase the shared knowledge of teachers as a means of providing learning enriched settings (Rosenholtz, 1989) for all school constituencies. It must be noted that the underlying assumption of DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) adoption of sociological characteristics of the professions for the purpose of reforming educational practice is congruent with the idea that teachers have not historically controlled a body of formal esoteric knowledge or a set of related technical skills.

Moreover, DuFour et al. (2004) state that teachers participating in collaborative teams work together and become engaged in collective inquiry so that becomes the catalyst for action. According to the authors, action is negotiated as an informal process of accountability where the interrelatedness of teachers sustains continuous improvement in student academic achievement. In sum, PLC reforms exhort teachers to refine their existing practices and redefine their traditional organizational roles through interdependence and teamwork. This model urges teachers and administrators to engage in a collaborative effort of shared responsibility for the academic achievement of students (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lasiter, 1996; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Little, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994).

The aim of PLCs is to institutionalize collaboration in a systematic way in order to increase teacher professional capacity and meet the academic needs of all students. It calls for teachers to create a culture of interdependence in which the quality of their interaction mediates professional learning, increases teacher capacity, and improves instruction (Little, 1982; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). Scholars supporting this restructuring model advocate for a redefinition of the role of the teacher that runs contrary to the state of “presentism, individualism, and conservatism” in which teachers have traditionally operated (Lortie, 1975, p. 212).

## **Purpose of this Study**

Given the promise of increasing teacher technical expertise through the establishment of PLCs in schools, there is a need to explain how PLCs are affecting the way teachers acquire and articulate knowledge together and to demonstrate how the shared technical knowledge is evolving within the context of this reform effort. Consequently, through this study I sought to examine and better understand the complexity of the professional identity of teachers., Specifically, I closely examined two teams of teachers to determine the nature of the professional knowledge these teachers, participating in PLC, acquire and articulate together. Through the lenses of accountability and student academic achievement, this investigation attempts to explain how the shared technical culture teachers are acquiring has affected their professional identity.

In conclusion, the literature does support the implementation of PLCs as a means of increasing teacher capacity in ways that meet student academic needs. Moreover, research has documented that when teachers collaborate and engage in meaningful dialogue, their collective competence increases. What is missing is the understanding of how the widespread notion of PLCs is being applied in collaborative meetings and how it is affecting the professional identity of teachers as identified by a shared technical culture. The debate over the technical nature of teaching continues.

More empirical work is needed to understand fully the effect of the institutionalization of PLCs on the technical culture of teaching. It is this problem that will be the central concern of the following dissertation.



## Chapter 3

### Methodology and Theoretical Orientation

The impossibility of pure experiences implies that we cannot reduce beliefs and preferences to mere intervening variables (Bevir & Rhodes, 2000, p. 5).

The main focus of this dissertation study was to identify the functions of PLCs from the perspective of two participating teams of classroom teachers and to relate these associated behaviors to the production of professional knowledge. I sought to understand how the social arrangement proposed under PLCs was applied in collaborative meetings at one particular site and how the practices associated with teachers' collaboration shaped the production of shared technical knowledge. The underlying theoretical frame through which I produced an understanding of how these social arrangements shaped teacher technical knowledge was a sociological treatment of the school as an institutional organization shaping and being shaped by the behaviors of social actors. In this study, I assumed teachers to be social actors who engage in sociocultural behaviors represented by collaborative practices whose praxis shapes and is shaped by the structures of the school as an organization.

My intent was to explicate how teachers experience the contextual influences proposed PLCs; how teachers make sense of their individual and collective involvement with this reform effort; and how their involvement and

understanding informs their behavioral reactions in general and those behaviors more specifically that produce a shared corpus of technical knowledge.

## **Methodology**

The methodology I used in this research was grounded in interpretative theory. The intent of interpretative methodologies is not to determine the frequency of particular social phenomena or the probability of causation but to understand how and why they take place and, thus, to identify the sociocultural patterns and/or relationships that occur as a result. Becker (2005) states that interpretive approaches are intended to search for the processes that produce sociocultural patterns.

The main focus of this investigation was the interaction found in collaborative meetings within the context of PLCs. I chose an interpretative approach to this study because the analysis depended on insights into the symbolic structures teachers collectively achieve through collaboration (culture theory), and how these symbolic structures are shaped by and, in turn, shape teachers' professional behaviors (practice theory) (Bevir & Rhodes, 2000).

### **Erickson and Educational Interpretive Research**

For the purpose of this study, I choose a qualitative approach to research on teaching as proposed by Fred Erickson. Erickson's approach

involves the application of ethnographic methods within the epistemological framework of qualitative theory. Relying heavily on data generated through participant observation of a particular case, the researcher deconstructs the symbolic system and interaction of social actors in order to generate social scientific understandings of group-level behaviors.

The significance of interpretative approaches in educational research has been to generate systematic understandings of:

(a) the nature of classrooms as socially and culturally organized environments for learning, (b) the nature of teaching as one, but only one, aspect of the reflexive learning environment, and (c) the nature (and content) of the meaning-perspective of teacher and learner as intrinsic to the educational process. (Erickson, 1986, p. 10)

I found these methodological assumptions to be most appropriate during my research study as I sought to understand (a) the nature of PLCs as professionally and socially organized environments for learning, (b) the nature of the discussions taking place during PLC meetings as one, but only one, elicitor of technical knowledge, and (c) the content and nature of the meaning-perspective of those involved in PLCs. I selected Erickson's (1986) approach to interpretative research because of its suitability for a qualitative analysis, one that allowed me to participate and interact with teams of teachers in an attempt to understand the "specifics of meaning and action in

social life” (p. 156) that I witnessed during collaborative meetings. My task was to deconstruct group relations in teams defined as PLCs and to explain and explore how teachers became engaged in behaviors and practices intended to substantiate their technical knowledge.

I was interested in defining the specific structure of teacher collaboration and the meaning-perspectives of each participant as they became involved in this process. Specifically, I was interested in better understanding how teachers made sense of PLCs and how the implementation of this reform affected the acquisition, articulation, and reproduction of shared professional knowledge within the context of their collaboration. Professional learning communities served as a frame of reference, providing the social context in which the production of meaning affected and was affected by the shared learned system of interaction.

Considering Erickson’s (1986) analysis of interpretative theory, I focused on the action of social actors as the primary source of data collection. The social processes I explored constituted the experiences and of two teams of teachers interacting with one another within the context of PLC reform. I focused on the interpretations of meaning held by the teachers engaged in constructive dialogue during the collaborative process. The understanding of this process was crucial as I gathered and scrutinized data through analytical induction and reflection.

## **Research Methods and Design**

### **The Research Site**

The district chosen for the study was City Unified School District; a pseudonym was used for the district where the study took place for the purpose of confidentiality and to avoid pre-conceived ideas based on location, socio-economic factors, and ethnic groups represented. City Unified School District is the largest school district in its county and one of the ten largest districts in California. It has been recognized for the quality education it has provided area students over the last 120 years. At the time this study took place, the district was comprised of thirty-one elementary schools, seven intermediate/middle schools, five comprehensive high schools, a middle college high school, and three alternative schools with an enrollment of over 52,000 students. The district was selected because of its approach to the institutionalization of non-instructional minutes within the school day for the purpose of collaboration. Chapter Four will address in more detail the process by which this formal mechanism was instituted.

### **Getting Access to the School and Case Study Teams**

Prior to identifying the school, I met with district officials to delineate the purpose of the study and to acquire the standard permission to conduct the investigation. I carried out my fieldwork from February 1, 2009 through June 30, 2009. To select my research site, I relied on the suggestions of

district administrators. As explained by Bearman (2005), in working through gatekeeping institutions like the central administrative offices of a school district, I placed myself at risk of refusal. However, both the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction and the director of elementary education recommended a particular elementary school because of the length of time its administration and teachers had invested in implementing PLCs. District and school administrators, in conjunction with teachers, had spent countless hours and a multitude of resources to promote the idea of teacher professional collaboration time under the umbrella of PLCs.

To maintain confidentiality, I also assigned a pseudonym for the school in which I conducted my study, City Elementary. City Elementary, statistically representative of a vast majority of urban schools in Southern California, serves students in grades kindergarten through six following a single-track, year-round calendar (see [www.cde.ca.gov/ds](http://www.cde.ca.gov/ds)). During the 2007-08 school year, it had an enrollment of 836 students, including 12% in special education and 37% qualifying for English language development. At the time of the study, 47% of its student body qualified for free and reduced price lunch.

City Elementary School achieved a 2008 academic performance index (API) score of 788 and met all 2008 adequate yearly progress (AYP) criteria. California's accountability system rates schools based on their performance

and academic progress. The numeric index for the API ranges from 200 to 1000. Each school has specific target objectives that must be met yearly until they reach 800, which is considered proficient. On the other hand, AYP are federal accountability requirements that indicate if schools are meeting common standards of academic performance. It considers the academic growth of different student subgroups, as well as the school's increase on API. In 2009, although City Elementary's API increased 11 points to 799, the school only met 19 out of 21 categories of its AYP criteria in the subgroups that included English learners and Hispanic or Latino students. Therefore, it was placed under watch for program improvement (PI) status in 2009–2010. The schools that receive federal funds are identified for PI if they have not met AYP targets for two consecutive years. Thus, if the discrepancy recurs in the current academic year (2009–10), City Elementary will be placed under PI status.

This school was operating under the umbrella of PLCs; it had reorganized its school days to allocate instructional minutes for collaborative purposes. Teachers' need for interaction at this site came as a result of the academic needs of a changing student population. After the school was identified, I met directly with the principal to explain the purpose of the investigation. A pseudonym is also used to keep his identity confidential; thus Mr. Pal (A) will be used throughout the study. City Elementary was Mr.

Pal's first assignment; he had been leading the school for five years. He was delighted to have the school chosen for the study, and he asked to speak with his teachers first before allowing the investigation to take place. In subsequent meetings, he explained that he had presented to his leadership team, comprised of one lead teacher for every grade level, and his assistant principal the opportunity to participate in the research project. He had asked for two grade level teams to volunteer to be the subject of analysis in the investigation, one from lower grades (Kindergarten through third grade) and one from upper grades (fourth through sixth grades). Having only volunteers as subjects could have restricted the validity of the findings by providing only one point of view. However, to overcome the existence of possible bias from those who did not want to be part of the investigation, I chose to accept the principal's approach in selecting the grade levels. The two grade levels that volunteered to become part of the study were the second and fourth grade level teams.

The unit of analysis in this investigation was, thus, a group or team of teachers. I adopted Metz's approach to conducting qualitative organizational analyses of schools through choosing two comparative units of analysis within the same environmental frame (1986). My study compared two grade level teams at an elementary school (Table 1). The composition of the teams was: one team of seven second-grade teachers and another team of four



fourth-grade teachers. In both teams, teachers' individual experience ranged from three to twenty-four years in education.

Table 1  
Description of Participating Subjects

Grade Level	Teacher Pseudonym	Total Years Teaching at City Elementary	Total Years Teaching	Gender	Current Lead Teacher
Second	Lisa	6	6	F	Yes
	Carol	5	5	F	No
	Mary	12	23	F	No
	Jane	15	20	F	No
	Cynda	13	13	F	No
	Becky	3	7	F	No
	Liz	5	5	F	No
Fourth	Ron	7	15	M	Yes
	Phil	6	5	M	No
	Karen	24	24	F	No
	Correen	8	8	F	No

The teams represented two fundamental organizational perspectives found in most elementary schools, that of lower grade and that of upper grade teachers. The number of students per classroom and the number of participating teachers in each grade level provided me with insights into their respective differences. The particularities that made each team unique allowed me to establish patterns validating how teachers made sense of their

participation in PLCs and whether their participation gave any indication of common themes under the umbrella of technical knowledge. By studying two teams of teachers within the same school, I sought to capture and illuminate both similar and unique socio-cultural behaviors within teams of collaborative teaching professionals.

As noted in Table 1, in the second grade team, teachers' individual experience in the classroom ranged from five to twenty-four years. All second grade team members were female and some had served in a different organizational capacity, including one, Mary, who had served for two years as a teacher on special assignment and another one, Jane, who had served as literacy coordinator for a number of years before being reassigned to the classroom. Four of the second grade teachers had spent their entire educational careers at City Elementary. The other three had taught in other schools in the same district.

In the fourth grade team, the teachers' classroom experience ranged from five to twenty-three years. The team was composed of two female teachers and two male teachers. For one of the teachers, Phil, teaching was his second career, after a successful career in the business sector. One of the teachers, Ron, had moved from another district and joined City Elementary in 1999. The other two had taught at the same school, City Elementary, throughout their careers.

## **Data Collection and Field Analysis**

To gather data, I applied Glesne's approach to understanding data by being there through participant observation. My intent was to establish a trusting relationship with the participants, so that they could see me, not as threatening but as attempting to substantiate how their actions corresponded to their words and the body of literature supporting PLCs. Moreover, I chose not to fully immerse myself in their meetings, so that I could identify the meanings associated with their dialogue and highlight the patterns found in both teams. I particularly employed Glesne's approach to of participant observation in which interaction between researcher and participant is minimized to informal encounters and interviews and, thus, most of the data is gleaned from observations (Glesne, 1999). This approach dovetails with Erickson's (1986) description of an ethnographic study where the researcher attempts to capture the intricacies of relationships and behaviors in order to capture the associated meaning actors construct together.

To achieve triangulation, I used a combination of qualitative methods. First, the investigation employed participant observation in real time, in teachers' natural setting, and recorded in systematic field notes. Second, the study included formal interviews and casual conversations with participating teachers. Last, I collected data from artifacts that included written

documents from participating teachers, the school, and the district and analyzed them (Glesne, 1999).

As a researcher, I knew that my employment as a new administrator with the district could have influenced the interaction of subjects during my observations. Thus, when I introduced myself to the grade level teams, I made sure that all participating teachers understood my role as a researcher, not a district entity. Furthermore, I explained the purpose of my study, the importance of their contributions, and proceeded to acquire their permission to conduct the investigation and allow me to be part of their collaborative meetings. I also needed to define my role as a researcher. I knew I was going to be observing teachers' interaction; however, the question was whether I was in any way going to participate during their meetings or become an active member during collaboration. I knew I had definite options regarding my role as a researcher from complete participant to complete observer as proposed by Junker (1960). Nevertheless, I had a clear perspective of my role as a learner, which clarified my sense of self from the beginning (Glesne, 1999). Thus, I chose to position myself as an observer, I was interested primarily in learning about teachers' roles and interactive patterns within the context of collaborative meetings. I also knew that my role within the district could have produced opportunities for interaction with my subjects related to district's businesses, yet, I was committed to maintain the

objectivity of my role. Hence, I discussed in detail my role with my subjects and informed them of my intent. My aim was to ratify a marginal position “thereby providing access to participant perspectives but at the same time minimizing the dangers of over-rapport” (Hammersley & Atkinson, pp. 112, 1995).

As my fieldwork evolved, I became engaged in situations where pure social interaction took place. These instances, whether at the school setting during students’ lunch time or at the end of the day or if I happened to run into one of my participants at a district-sponsored event, provided me with an opportunity to build rapport and a trusting relationship with my participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). The rapport I established with the participants in the research setting was in no way threatening or adversarial, but rather that of a learner in search of answers.

From the perspective as an observer as participant, I spent time at the school when meetings related to PLC were held. There were two distinct meetings, one for each grade level on different days. I also observed the school in various locations—front office, playground, staff lounge, classrooms, and hallways—to contextualize the environment in which PLC meetings took place. While at the meetings, I used a digital recorder to capture all conversations taking place, which enabled me to take extensive notes regarding interaction, body language, and other related factors accessible

only by being present. I transcribed the notes each evening and during the weekend.

I conducted participant observations for a period of five months. The meetings scheduled for observation included: grade level collaborative meetings, meetings during early release days, professional development meetings, parent conferences, and open house meetings. Data collection included the following types of documents: meeting agendas, assessments, evaluations, teacher feedback, summaries, district documents, school communications, grade level communications, grade level and individual emails, notes, and other forms of written expression used within the context of the grade level. Participant observation and document analysis provided me with the insights I needed to analytically describe the collaborative practices of both teams.

I also conducted a series of interviews with staff members: team members, grade level leaders, principal, and assistant principal. I interviewed district entities including: the director of curriculum and instruction-elementary education, the deputy superintendent of instructional services, and the superintendent of education. Interviews lasted about 45–90 minutes. Interviews were conducted formally (previously arranged after school hours) and informally (on-the-spot as the situation emerged). They included open and unstructured dialogue as well as open ended questions

related specifically to their role, participation, and understanding of PLCs.

Table 2 provides an itemized representation of the number of interviewed participants and their organizational positions.

Table 2

Organizational Positions of Participants Interviewed

	City Elementary	District Office	Total
Principal	1		1
Teachers	11		11
Superintendent		1	1
Deputy Superintendent Of Instructional Services		1	1
<b>Total Number of Participants</b>	12	2	14

Table 3 provides an itemized representation of the number of interviews with each participating subject. The interviews provided me with background information. I ensured that all such information was considered before, during, and after the interview, as I tried to clarify discrepancies between conceptual knowledge and its application. Interviews also helped me to clarify the social structures that existed at the time of reorganizing the school as a PLC.

Table 3

Quantitative Representation of Interview Occurrences

	City Elementary	District Office	Number of Participants in this Category	Total
Principal	3		1	3
Teachers	2		11	22
Superintendent		1	1	1
Deputy Superintendent Of Instructional Services		2	1	2
<b>Total Number of Interviews District-wide</b>				<b>27</b>

As I searched for common themes, these qualitative interviews served as the foundation to construct meaning. They provided an overview of the formal and informal structures existent at the school from the eyes of the social actors. Furthermore, interviews allowed me to enter into the world of participants by delineating social structures, theoretical approaches, and political dynamics that are often implicitly understood. The sum of the observations, the interviews, and the document analyses allowed me to triangulate and infer how participating actors shared commonalities in their technical language and how the intended meaning and meaning-making translated into the application of this shared professional knowledge. I also



gained insight into how participants viewed their role within the context of the institution and how this perception affected the institution-at-large.

### **Data Analysis**

Interpretative analysis as developed by Erickson (1986) allows for the systematic production of a social scientific explanation to be constructed from qualitative data. I started data analysis by collecting and organizing all transcripts of the collaborative meetings that I observed as well as the semi-structured interviews I conducted with each team participant. As I did so, I endeavored to locate myself in the context of their collaboration. What was happening during this time was made understandable by directly watching teachers' interaction, attentively listening to what was said, and by asking questions. Thus, I attempted to articulate the perspective of teachers as local actors, to be sensitive to the meaning they have created together, and to make sense of their condition as it occurred in real time.

I then employed Miles and Huberman's (1984) approach to qualitative analysis in my systematic treatment of the data. In my first wave of data analysis, data collection, I generated field notes and interview transcripts as soon as possible after leaving the field. I made a conscious effort to maintain a self-awareness of what was learned, how it had been learned, and "the social transactions that inform the production of such knowledge" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1984, pp. 101). I tried to ensure the most accurate

description of events by encapsulating all ideas I had and making sure I kept an electronic journal with me to write down any thoughts about the process, the data itself, or the analysis.

One of the critical qualifiers of interpretative research is the ability of the researcher to encapsulate the transactions between social actors as well as their interpretation of reality (meaning-making), which becomes causal for action. It was my task to explicate the understanding that teachers share collectively as much as their individual characterization of PLCs at their site. Each participating teacher held a unique experience that, when contextualized, shed light on the institutionalization of collaborative practices at one school site. Thus, doing my observations, while I was recording the interaction among participant subjects, I was also writing down notes of insights generated from such things as the body language of participants, silent moments, location of meetings, arrangement and situational patterns, nonverbal communication, and other forms of interaction that is accessible only by being present.

Throughout my time in the field, I made a point of frequently reviewing the interview transcripts and my field notes. During this period of rereading and revision, I underlined those quotations that I felt were helping to establish a pattern of socio-cultural beliefs and behaviors. I created a file system of patterned themes that later would allow me to construct the

story. As I read the notes, I started to see the connection between the stories told by members of different teams as well as administrators and district personnel. I spent hours listening to the recording of the conversations that took place during collaboration meetings. This careful analysis of the data allowed me to create both a sequencing of events that led to the school's implementation of PLC reforms and an opportunity to establish common themes that recurred in teachers' interactions.

One of the final steps was the transferring of all field notes, transcriptions, and applicable passages from Microsoft Word documents into NVivo 9, a computer software program designed for qualitative research. Using NVivo 9 software as well as my own interpretation allowed me to frame the social actions. This process enabled me to conduct interpretative research and to critically analyze the meaning and behaviors intended to change the way in which teachers acquire and articulate professional knowledge.

In summary, I used continual narrative description to capture the phenomena observed during this study. Going back to examining the narrative of events allowed me to codify the data in such a way that the richness of teachers' interaction and their sense making process created different frames of interpretation before, during, and after their PLC meetings.

As the analysis progressed, I tried to clarify my guiding questions in light of the literature review. In particular, I tried to determine whether my findings were in line with the literature or if they challenged previous scholarship. This process enabled me to discover patterns, correlations, discrepancies, and common themes. Part of this process included time away from the data, discussions with my advisor, and then rereading the data to ensure validity. This systematic approach allowed me to categorize analytically patterned themes related to the acquisition, articulation, and transferring of professional knowledge.

I gradually integrated theoretical assumptions with my data, looking to develop patterns and/or discrepancies, making sure I accounted for the perspectives held by those directly affected by the institutionalization of PLCs. In doing so, my task as researcher was to determine how these assertions and/or analytic constructs were interconnected and what elements were considered significant to the production of technical knowledge for teachers. The assertions I arrived at varied in scope and level of inference. However, to ensure validity to this study, I considered closely each of these analytic constructs within the given setting and surveyed the evidence at hand, as well as considered my theoretical and personal assumptions as a researcher.

## **Conceptual Frame for Emergent Analysis**

Although I had specific categories of observations and conceptual issues of research interest prior to entering the field, once I started doing my fieldwork, induction and deduction were in constant dialogue. During my participant observations, I noticed specific patterns, themes, and social phenomena that were not clearly defined until I began to describe the specific structure of occurrences during my writing process. Even then, it was not until after transcribing and making sense of the meaning-perspectives held by participating teachers that common patterns began to take shape. By analytically identifying specific causal linkages through an ongoing iterative process between data and theory, I developed possible social scientific explanations for the patterns I was discerning.

My approach during observations, interviews, transcribing, writing, and organizing this study included an analytical description of how events have taken place during PLC meetings; how these meetings have been organized and become part of the social organization of the school; how the contextualization of PLCs fit in at other system levels; and how they have affected the way in which professional learning occurs for teachers involved in this process.

## **PLC as Applied Theory**

In order to understand the construction of learning taking place during collaborative meetings, I considered my empirical data within the frame of the reform effort proposed by DuFour and Eaker (1998), PLCs. I further organized my inquiry of professional learning by attending to the following issues: (a) how teachers function when organized in teams defined as PLCs; (b) how teachers acquire and articulate knowledge together; (c) how teachers construct meaning together and make sense of their togetherness; and (d) how the institution is transforming and affecting the collective identity of teachers.

### **Qualifying Elements of PLC**

To further my analysis, I explored the ways in which formal and informal processes of the school organization and environment influenced the activities of teachers I was observing, as they acquired and articulated knowledge together (Erickson, 1986). More specifically, I employed the four types of organizational features that Little (1990) identified as particularly influential in the co-production of technical knowledge in schools: (a) the level of joint responsibility held by teachers, (b) teachers' individual and collective participation in defining their curriculum, (c) the salience of teachers' grade level, and (d) the frequency of evaluation and other forms of feedback. I considered these features as elicitors of knowledge production and of the

collegiality existing in those teams associated with PLCs. Additionally, I used the organizational features that Cooper (1988) identified as key to the creation of professional knowledge and technical skills in the teaching profession to interpret knowledge acquisition and articulation. Cooper (1988) highlights these elements as qualifiers of a professional culture, which I analytically deconstructed in the interactions and collaborative meetings of teachers:

1. a code of ethics, implicit and explicit, practiced by all team members;
2. a set of standards defining teacher professionalism and knowledge acquisition and articulation;
3. an account of practices intended to meet student needs—accountability, assessments, common best practices, differentiated instruction;
4. communication among team members—commonalities and differences;
5. processes in place to acquire and articulate common shared technical knowledge;
6. collegiality conveyed among team members—interchange of ideas;
7. a focus on department and grade level meetings;
8. interdependence among team members;
9. professional development—individual and collective;
10. relationships to one another and to the group;

11. support provided by administration; and,

12. induction process in place, explicit or implicit, used by the department.

The use of a frame crafted by combining the work of both Little and Cooper provided me with a guide that highlighted the most salient features of professional knowledge production. However, the interpretative feature of this study allowed me to look beyond the specificity of any of the unfolding structures of the PLC reform and examine the meaning and meaning-making activities shared by team participants. By doing so, this study contributes to the discussion of knowledge acquisition and articulation in the teaching profession as it relates to and differs from that of other professions, and adds depth to the academic and public discussions about the technical competence of the teaching profession that is often couched solely in terms of test scores, performance standards, and professional accountability measures (Bryk et al., 1993).

Also, highly influential was Metz (1990), who performed an interpretive study of both the many similarities and the vast differences revealed when comparing the academic achievement of different ethnic groups in high schools in the United States. Metz (1990) concluded that, although high schools across the US might employ similar formal structures and technical procedures, the cultural assumptions and meaning-making that guide the behavior within these structures varies widely among schools.



Comparatively, although the structure proposed by the commercialized approach to teacher learning (PLC) makes overarching general assumptions, my study captured both the particularities and the patterned nature of events related to teachers' attempt to co-create knowledge and to the development of a specific set of technical skills by two teams of teachers organized as a PLC at a particular public elementary school.

As I considered these theoretical assumptions, I also examined Meyer and Rowan's (1977) application of an institutional perspective to the analysis of organizations. I turned to their work for the understanding of how the proposed reform, PLCs, become institutionalized at the district and school level. They define as rationalized myths those procedures and rules that become existent and provide the formal structure to the establishment of reform efforts, such in the case of PLCs. What PLCs propose is a change from teachers' isolated instruction controlling an arcane body of substantive or technical knowledge (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972; Etzioni, 1969; Freidson, 1986; Larson, 1977) to a team of professionals whose shared technical language and common practices become the norm of the group; from traditional practices within the boundaries of the egg crate classroom (Lortie, 1975) to creating a collective vision of trust and support; from the perpetuated idea of "my students" to the renewed belief in "our students" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998); from a school functioning within institutional

limitations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Riehl, 2000; Scott, 2001) to creating a master schedule based on the needs of students and the learning process of teachers; and, last, from the idea of isolated learning by individual teachers to becoming a PLC (Darling-Hammond et al., 1998; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lieberman, 1995; Little, 1982; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Rosenholtz, 1989; Senge, 1990).

The interaction found in collaborative meetings involves teachers as social actors, attempting primarily to make sense of their work environment, thus, the underpinning sociocultural theoretical framework I brought to this study combined culture theory (how teachers made sense of that they did) with organizational theory (how this sense making was influenced by institutionalized sociocultural structures).

### **A Cultural Perspective on the Applied Theory of PLC**

The cultural currency found in classrooms, as discussed by Varenne and McDermott (1998), served as a model to analytically reconstruct the cultural currency found in groups of teachers as they interacted with one another given the constraints of the traditional classroom. Varenne and McDermott (1998) provide a provocative criticism of the schooling process in the United States with a focus on the notion of success and failure for students in the US, not through the lens of individual characteristics, but from an analytical interpretation of culture as the means by which success

and failure are produced and reproduced in schools across the United States. Considering the culture of teaching trait as salient, pervasive, and characteristic to teachers as professionals (see Lortie, 1975) allowed me to focus not on individual behaviors, but on the culture that acquired them, the culture that arranged their collaboration (McDermott & Varenne, 2006).

As McDermott and Varenne (2006) stated, “Cultural analysis, like school reform, requires we take persons seriously while analytically looking through them—as much as possible in their own terms—to the world with which they are struggling” (p. 7). However, although human behavior is shaped and molded by cultural forces, such as in the case of teachers historically bound to the isolation of their classrooms, I will argue that they have, in turn, transformed the same institution that once constrained their acquisition and articulation of professional knowledge (Ortner, 2006). Put in other words, teachers who have been subject to the structural constraints of the schooling process find themselves involved in practices that restore “the actor to the social process without losing sight of the larger structures that constrain (but also enable) social action” (Ortner, 2006, p. 3).

This body of theory was crucial in enabling me to consider not only the interaction found in collaborative teams but also the structures in place that either elicited or inhibited the acquisition and articulation of technical knowledge. Yet Ortner (2006) stated, “A theory of practice is a theory of

history” (p. 9), which is why I had to look closely at the historical variables that have influenced the isolation and privatization of practices in teachers. Thus, in order to fully grasp the correspondence found between culture and practice theory, I framed this study within traditional sociological understandings of the school as an organization.

### **Institutional Perspective on the Applied Theory of PLC**

To better understand the organizational context shaping teachers’ learning, I relied on prominent sociologists of organizations—Richard Scott, Chester Bernard, and Charles Bidwell. Their understanding of organizations helped me to develop an overarching conceptual framework to guide my thinking, data collection, and data analysis. Scott provides an overview of the various sociological definitions of formal organizations grounded in three different theoretical traditions: rational system, natural system, and open system perspectives. Each provides a unique conceptual understanding of organizations, from collectivities that are highly formalized to the pursuit of specific goals (rational systems), to those seeking to survive (natural systems), and those viewed as “coalitions of interest groups highly influenced by their environments” (Scott, 1992, p. 26). Although conceptually distinct, all three perspectives share a set of underlying assumptions about the basic elements that constitute a formal organization—goals, structures,

participants, technology, and environment, which I carefully considered as I attempted to make sense of the data and identify existing patterns.

My thinking about the concept of desired objectives or goals in an organization was influenced by Barnard's view of organizations. Although Barnard was an executive, his conceptualization of organizations was one of the "first systematic attempts to outline a theory of organization" (Scott, 1992, p. 62) in the United States. Prior to introducing Weber's ideas, he stressed that a cooperative system must exist in organizations in order for the organization to survive. He asserts that although goals can be imposed from top-down (API and AYP), they depend directly on willing compliance from the bottom-up (student achievement).

Under this frame of reference, the organizational structures of the school govern teachers' behavior, and, thus, shape the way teachers acquire and articulate professional knowledge through goals, norms, policies, roles, and processes (Cuban, 1993; Lortie, 1975; Scott, 1992; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). In turn, teachers have been able to exercise their expertise and provide students with an opportunity to learn and achieve. The structural setting in which this process—teaching and learning—takes place has institutionalized a framework that traditionally has divided the school into self-contained classrooms in which teaching has been shaped by isolation and privatization of practices (Cuban, 1993; Lortie, 1975; Tyack & Cuban, 1995). Thus, to

better understand the context shaping the acquisition and articulation of technical knowledge in teachers, I reviewed the structures that have traditionally bound together a school, bureaucracies.

The German sociologist Max Weber was the first to identify and define bureaucracy as a type of social organization. His seminal definition of a bureaucracy was that of social groups, consisting of positions and activities, whose function was to service and maintain the organization itself—one that provided the means by which a specialized administrative staff directs the efforts of the organization (Scott, 2001). Charles Bidwell (1965) was one of the first to apply the model of the bureaucratic organization to the school setting where teachers are subject to the control of an administrative framework in which their autonomy is limited to their classroom. The establishment of bureaucratic layers in schools was designed to facilitate system requirements. They provided the means by which schools are organized and fulfill their functions in society. Bidwell argued that there is an inherent tension in the structure of the school, which binds teachers to general rules and a hierarchy, yet simultaneously provides them with individual choice in applying technical expertise to matters of instruction. This heteronomous professional organization provides the arrangements that allow schools to handle the complex and uncertain tasks of teaching and learning. Furthermore, my approach to looking at teachers' cooperative

practices borrows from the perspective found in neo-institutionalism's approach to thinking about organizational behavior. Hanson (2003) highlighted the different mechanisms by which institutions are able to accomplish their objectives, including the role of regulative, normative, and cognitive elements. I closely considered his theoretical discussion to understand the role of the institution in establishing collaboration as a means for teacher learning.

First, when discussing the regulative factor, Hanson (2003) argues that “[it] plays a stabilizing role by prescribing actions through formal and/or informal rules that establish, monitor, and sanction activities” (p. 281). Judy Warren Little (1982) provides an analysis of the formal and informal structures that influence collegial behaviors in groups of teachers. The formal mechanisms in place emphasize focus and concreteness, which Little defines as part of symbolic systems. Formal mechanisms are represented by the organizational structures in place, those that define the allocation of time and specific place where teachers meet to collaborate. They also specify the focus of such meetings as they relate to student outcomes. Formal mechanisms of control are also intended to regulate both teacher and student performance such as in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2001), which in Section 1119 described the qualifications for teachers and paraprofessionals. Furthermore, it called for an increase in both the number of highly qualified

teachers in the core subjects in every classroom and the percentage of teachers who are receiving high-quality professional development to enable them to become highly qualified and successful. It defined a highly qualified teacher as one who demonstrates mastery of subject-matter knowledge.

No Child Left Behind Act (2001) stemmed from the notion that student academic achievement will improve by increasing teacher skills. Skills, however, should not only be considered as a technical relation to a labor process. According to Apple (1988), gaining control of one's workplace has a social connotation, and it implies the application of skills as technique that translates into power. In schools, however, the standardization of curriculum delivery has diminished the definition of skills. Apple contended that this external specification of competencies obscures a struggle for power under the rhetoric of technique and accountability. This contention will be further addressed in Chapter Four, under the umbrella of professional accountability.

On the other hand, the informal structures that shape teacher collegial behaviors can be conceptualized in terms of relevance, reciprocity, and inclusivity. The underlying assumption is that the informal processes actually translate into meaningful and constructive collaborative relations (Little, 1982). Thus, Little (1982) argued that teachers who have established informal coalitions become interdependent in their pursuit of professional



competency. This assumption was highly influential in my close examination of the informal relationships that teachers have established to determine how relationships have impacted collaborative meetings within PLCs.

The next mechanism identified by Hanson (2003) is the normative element, which “emphasizes values and norms about how educators should pursue valued ends through legitimate means” (p. 281). Cooper (1988) highlights several normative elements of an institutionalized professional culture: a common shared knowledge base; authentic collegiality determined by the needs of the client; and a systematic codification of knowledge (pp. 48-49). However, the values and norms found in teaching traditionally have been subject to the expectations of the communities that they serve. Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) contend that teachers’ understanding of professional development varies across schools and districts, and has been generally bound to the culture of the institution and local teacher community. Thus, values and norms in teaching cannot be oversimplified to the distinct qualifiers found in other professions (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972; Etzioni, 1969; Freidson, 1986; Larson, 1977). The composition of the student body becomes hegemonic in shaping the response from teachers and the institution itself (Little, 1982; Ortner, 2006; Varenne & McDermott, 1998).

To further clarify the normative element, I drew from DuFour and Eaker (1998) who state that schools organized as PLCs have the clarity of a

collective vision. They explain , “What separates a learning community from an ordinary school is its collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 25). Once this process is developed, the school culture will be shaped by teachers’ joint action, shared planning, and collegial relationships (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lasiter, 1996; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Little, 1990; Senge, 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994). Teachers’ relationships become interdependent, and collaboration provides a space where new patterns of thinking are nurtured and where teachers continually acquire and articulate professional knowledge together (Senge, 1990).

The final mechanism regulating institutional change is the cognitive element. Cognition “shapes the filter through which people view reality and gives meaning to them as they interpret their world” (Hanson, 2003, p. 281). In the case of establishing collaborative teams, PLCs propose the construction and reenactment of the social reality of teachers by institutionalizing a collaborative environment where teachers establish and utilize individual and collective agency, articulating and acquiring technical knowledge for the purpose of meeting the academic expectancies of all students.

## Summary of Conceptual Framework

The particular case used in this study focused on the interactive patterns of two restructured teams of teachers that received professional development and participated in some form of collaborative practices related to PLCs. However, my interest moved beyond individual teachers and their interactions, it focused, as suggested by McDermott & Varenne (2006), “first, on the collective constructions all actors must deal with—whether they personally accept, understand, or even know much about these constructions—and, second, on what others will do, in the future, with what the original actors did” (p. 10). The complexity found in the interactive patterns of the specific sample I examined allowed me to arrive at concrete universals, and to contribute to the literature pertinent to teachers as professionals, in addition to the underlying theoretical framework of PLC as a reform effort.

Paradoxically, the interpretative analysis of my study was less about the success or failure of collaborative practices, but more about how collaboration was constructed given the constraints of institutional and professional identities. It considered how the institution directly and indirectly influenced and was influenced by teacher actions through formal and informal social systems of interaction.

My intent was to address a specific case at one school comprised of two grade level teams of teachers departing from the premise that this small sample would provide me with the sufficient detailed data based on the beliefs and preferences behind teachers' actions as they relate to each other and redefine their professional identity (Bevir & Rhodes, 2000).

I used culture theory to capture how teachers made sense of their practices during PLC meetings at one particular site. I also considered the principles supporting "new ethnography" (Agar, 1996) highlighting the power relations and professional interests of participating teachers, specifically, those influencing the context and meaning within which teachers enacted their role. I further considered Geertz's (1973) definition of culture in its broadest sense: an evolving web of significance socially constructed by social actors. Thus, meaning varies by context, and I was interested in its interpretation. I was careful to examine the mechanisms teachers, working under the umbrella of PLC, have created to regulate their behavior.

Finally, to frame analysis, I applied Milbrey W. McLaughlin and Joan E. Talbert's conceptual framework to the analysis of school-based teacher learning communities (2006). Their conceptualization considered different nested spheres of influence directly affecting the professional interaction among teams of teachers in a school site. As demonstrated in Figure 1, I was sensitive to the behaviors that individuals manifested during their

collaborative meetings as well as to the interactive patterns and the technical knowledge shared among participating teachers. However, I was also cognizant of the contextual environment formed by the institution, the locale, and the historical process that have permeated schools since their conception.

I went to the field and carefully considered those salient structures that directly and/or indirectly affect the production of professional knowledge. Within this conceptual framework, teachers were at the center of the study influencing and being influenced by the existing structures as perceived through internal and external mechanisms in place. My intent was to capture and interpret those behaviors enacted by teachers in their interaction during PLC meetings and to identify patterns and link them to the understanding of teachers as professionals.

The narrative structure presented in the following chapters will provide the reader with an insight into the logical progression of events that led the school to reorganize its day institutionalizing non-instructional minutes for the purpose of collaboration. From its conception, the aim of this investigation was to build through empiricism an interpretation explanation for how technical knowledge is, or is not, acquired and articulated through the creation of PLCs.

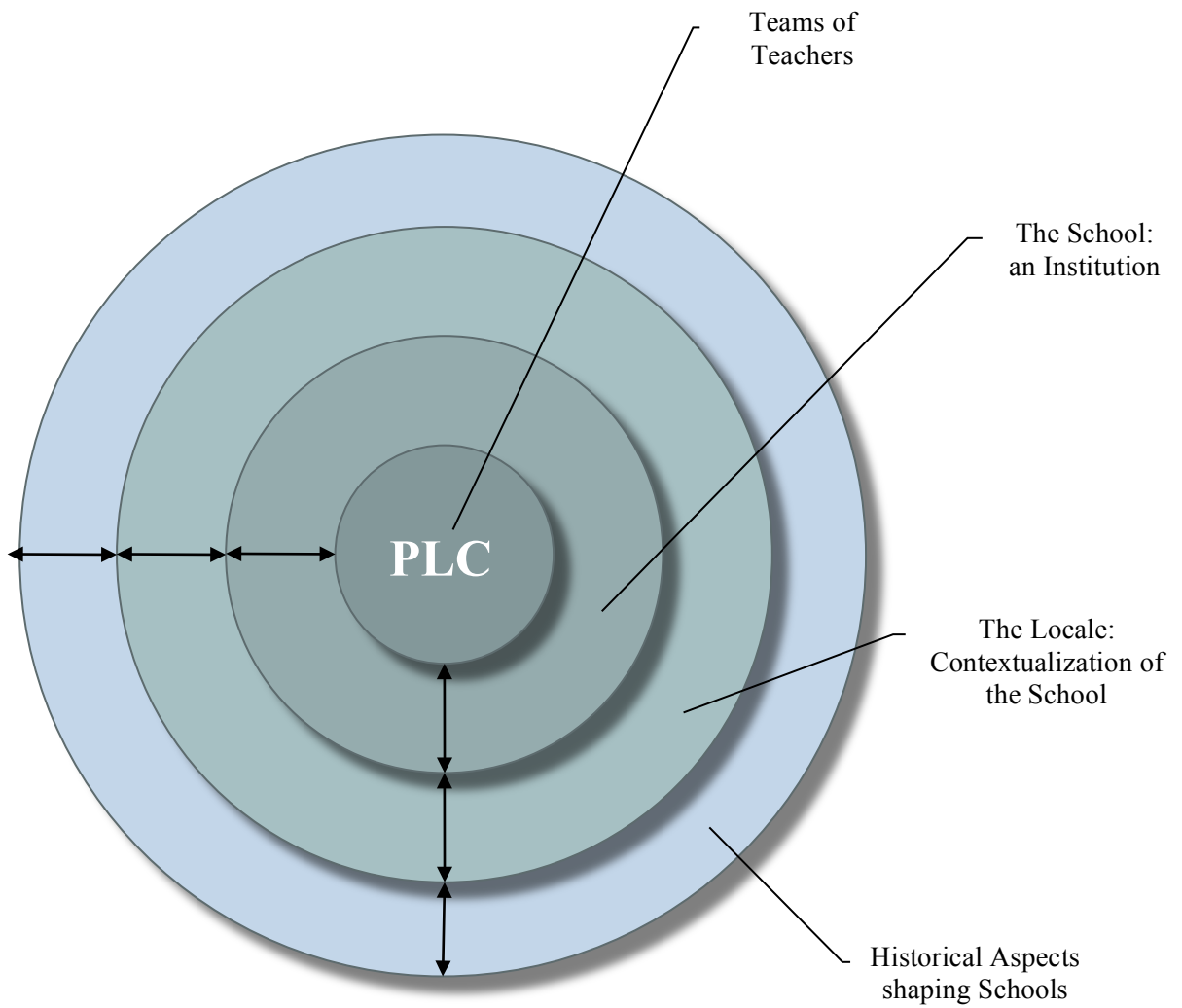


Figure 1. Graphic representation of conceptual framework

## Chapter 4

### **The Making of a Professional Learning Community**

The complexity that exists in identifying schools as PLCs offers a challenge for researchers, principals, staff, parents, and other stakeholders ... Schools that are operating as learning communities must foster a culture in which learning by all is valued, encouraged, and supported (Hipp et al., 2003, p. 10).

This is a study about the teachers within a school and their process of change, which has touched myriad facets of their professional lives. The description of the locale has changed through the years. City Elementary was a year round school that took pride in the academic accomplishments of its homogenous population of students. The majority came from an affluent part of the city, thus teachers did not have to deal with the challenges of second language learners or low socioeconomic factors. The school met its yearly target areas from federal and state accountability measures, and teachers generally operated in a state of individualism and conservatism as defined by Lortie (1975). In Table 4, I captured the transcription of an interview with Mary (2T), one of the teachers, who shared her perspective of their circumstances in 2004. The discourse feature in the statement above, “our own thing” in line 1, or the fact that teachers felt as if their work was “behind closed doors” (line 2), and even the idea of “doing our own thing” (lines 2-3), reflect a traditional view of schooling.

Table 4

Second Grade Teacher–First Interview–Mary

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 We were all basically doing our own thing; we had similar ways of doing  
2 things and we shared ideas, but we were all behind closed doors and we  
3 were all doing our own thing.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

Lortie's (1975) comprehensive interpretation of the sociology of teaching, supported by subsequent scholars, asserts that norms of privacy have traditionally been pervasive in the teaching profession and have served to reinforce professional isolation, which minimizes the opportunities teachers have to produce and/or account for shared expert technical knowledge (Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Lortie (1975) grounds his analysis of the isolated experience of teaching in the setting of the traditional classroom, which he argues does not provide much opportunity for interaction or interdependence. According to McLaughlin and Marsh (1979) and corroborated by Little (1982, 1990), teachers' privacy norms shield them from intrusions into each other's professional space, making it illegitimate to enforce collegial standards. Thus, the institutional arrangements of classrooms and the traditional role of teachers have made collaboration and collective learning a challenging task.



Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) state that there is ample evidence to suggest, “teachers do not experience their work as employing knowledge and standards for judgment widely shared in the profession” (p. 126). Rather, in the way school settings are organized, the role of teachers could be associated with technical competency based on standardized operating procedures (Devaney & Sykes, 1988).

City Elementary had a set of standardized operating procedures or, to use the terminology of institutionalism, consistent cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative elements that, when associated with activities and resources, provided a sense of stability and meaning to their daily routines (Scott, 2001). However, the institutional transformation imposed by the district disrupted the school’s functioning and the enduring stability of its past. First, City Elementary underwent a change in administration; a new principal and assistant principal were assigned to the school. Soon after that, the school went through a boundary change as a result of new housing developments and related overcrowding in Title I schools. These modifications directly affected the makeup of City Elementary’s student body and resulted in both an increase of approximately 200 English language learners at City Elementary and a decrease in City Elementary’s Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) program when high achieving students consequently moved to other schools. Teachers noted that, although the total

number of students remained consistent, the demographic composition of the 200 students that arrived was far from that of the 200 who left. The increase of English learners and students from poverty qualified City Elementary as a targeted Title I school for the first time in its long history. Teachers described this period as a “difficult one” even though, up to this point, City Elementary had maintained mechanisms that gave meaning and stability to the social behavior of teachers (Scott, 2001). The process required teachers to reexamine their practices, beliefs, and value systems as they attempted to adjust to these changes (i.e., a new administration, a Title I classification, and, most importantly, a new student body with a large percentage of students with challenging needs, including those classified as second language learners and those coming from a low socio-economic status).

The complexity of all of these simultaneous forces of change affected the teachers’ perception of the culture of the school. Hanson (2003) highlighted the significant role teachers play in adapting, in contrast to adopting, changes based on their perception of events, which are created and recreated by the institutional structures in which they work. When the staff at City Elementary encountered the boundary change, they were forced to deal with a wide variety of challenging new issues. In the second year, the school changed from a targeted Title I school to school-wide Title I status. A lack of increase in student academic achievement from 2003 to 2005, as shown in

Table 5, was associated with teachers’ inability to meet the academic needs of the students, which, as noted by one of the district administrators, was a “red flag” to the school and the district.

Table 5  
Longitudinal API for City Elementary School

Accountability Year	Academic Performance Index	Change in student body adding English learners as a significant subgroup
2003	732	No
2004	731	Yes
2005	732	Yes
2006	739	Yes
2007	755	Yes
2008	788	Yes
2009	795	Yes

The filter through which teachers interpreted and made sense of their world had to be altered; they had to give new meaning to their interpretation of a reality reconstructed by institutional mechanisms that regulated a change in the constituencies that composed their school community. Hence, the staff, along with the principal and the district office, started a dialogue about the particular needs of second language learners and students lacking economic means and support at home. Riehl (2000) asserts that schools are

perceived as institutionalized organizations embodying a complex set of understandings, beliefs, and values that find legitimization through their structures, cultures, and routines.

The staff at City Elementary had established a set of values and practices that were aligned to meet the needs of a homogenous population. Under this conceptualization, schools are viewed as “cognitive accomplishments and social constructions” (Riehl, 2000, p. 60) in which the environment either elicits or inhibits the practices at the site, which is why City Elementary’s previous instructional practices were unable to meet the needs of English learners and students of poverty.

In Table 6, the description the principal provided of the teachers as professionals in City Elementary back in 2004 reflects a traditional perspective of schooling, “living in isolated kingdoms” (line 2). The discourse featured in line 4 “working in isolation” and “learning by doing” reflects a long-established view of teachers, one characterized by isolation in which professional learning happens as a result of individual experience (Lortie, 1975). If sociological literature is considered, this description would not be unique to City Elementary, but rather could be considered the traditional state of teachers in schools across the United States. Over the last two decades, the role of teachers as professionals has been under close scrutiny, and although the schooling system has gone through many changes, some

argue that this role has been influenced very little (Elliot, 1972; Lortie, 1975; Tyack & Cuban, 1995) (see lines 3 & 4).

#### Table 6

#### Principal's Recollection of Events

#### Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 ... things didn't flow. There was no connectivity between classrooms;
- 2 teachers were really just living in their isolated kingdoms in what they
- 3 were doing... But there wasn't a lot instructionally going on for growing,
- 4 or learning, or doing anything... Every teacher was working in isolation,
- 5 learning by doing, as they attempted to meet the needs of English
- 6 learners.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

#### Leading Change in a School

At the end of his first year, the new principal, with support from the district officer started to articulate and create a new vision for City Elementary. Concurrently, two principals from neighboring schools started implementing PLCs at their sites, one at elementary and the other at the secondary level. During this period, schools and districts embraced the weighty student accountability system enacted by No Child Left Behind (2001). Part of this educational reform effort included a rapidly accelerating timeline for schools to meet target goals as part of its academic growth model.

Noteworthy is the effect that this educational measure, No Child Left Behind (2001), has had on the management of schools and districts across the nation. Districts, that up to a point had been academically successful, began to experience the challenges of meeting target goal measures for all student subgroups. The existing academic gap between demographically defined groups of students became highly noticeable. Thus, the idea of creating professional collaborative teams in schools as a mechanism for meeting academic achievement goals appealed to schools and districts across the United States.

Many educators have embraced the idea of PLCs as essential to effective school reform (Block, 1983; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2003; Lasiter, 1996; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Little, 1990; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1979; Sergiovanni, 1994; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Those who have taken a closer look at the concept of collaborative teams point to collective professional learning and application of learning as a fundamental attribute of teams of teachers who are interdependent (Childs-Bowen et al., 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2003). This process involves educators gaining the skills needed to move beyond their individual experiences, to attain a collaborative learning culture in which commonality of purpose and commitment binds them together. Talbert and McLaughlin (1994) state that, through collaborative practices, teachers affiliate within interactive

networks, which allows them to engage in discourse about the technology of teaching and to consider new conceptions of pedagogical dialogue with an understanding of the context that will most likely facilitate serious educational change.

The first step taken by the principal at City Elementary was to collaborate with the two principals of neighboring schools who were further along in the implementation process of PLCs. According to the principal, he knew that this reform effort had been successful in schools with demographics similar to City Elementary's new student body (see DuFour & Eaker, 2004). Mr. Pal (A) stated, "I considered PLC to be part of the solution to help my school improve." However, he further acknowledged that he was unsure as to how to effectively implement this new reform endeavor. The principal's response to the idea of PLC when he first heard it was: "I had no idea what it was."

His initial lack of knowledge draws attention to the parallel condition in which most novice administrators and teachers assigned to a school or a classroom find themselves. Novice teachers generally join the workforce with limited practice in the classroom. In fact, the socialization process into teaching has been critically defined as a sink-or-swim approach (Lortie, 1975). Induction processes vary from state to state and although some are more rigorous than others, traditionally they have provided both

administrators and teachers a rather limited professional socialization experience (Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1989). In the United States, teachers enter the profession with little or limited training, and oftentimes they learn only when fully immersed in the demands of the classroom. Consequently, many leave the profession within the first five years on the job (Wallis, 2008). This problem is compounded with the isolation in which teachers are placed where the egg-crate model of the traditional classroom directly affects the professional socialization of teachers (Lortie, 1975).

From a sociological perspective, Lortie (1975) explicates how the setting of the traditional classroom does not provide much opportunity for interaction or interdependence. His depiction of teachers' professional learning characterizes it as an individual endeavor that grows in isolation. Although Mr. Pal (A) did take the initiative to further his learning and reach out to other principals, it was indicative of the traditional approach to professional growth in teaching and administration. In the case of the principal, his own initiative, rather than the structures in place, led him to look for different options for organizing his school. The evolving state of learning conceptualized by Lortie (1975) happens as a result of the sum of experiences acquired through time by individuals who operate within the context of their own classrooms or schools.



## **The Making of a PLC**

Learning, as a collective enterprise, is what constitutes the heart of reforms related to the implementation of PLCs. However, opportunities for teacher learning take place within the context of particular organizational structures and environments. Institutional arrangements influence, through formal and informal rules, values, norms, and beliefs the nature of teacher professional interactions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Thus, both bureaucratic arrangements and institutional structures influence teacher organizational behaviors, including those related to the creation of a shared technical knowledge. It is important to understand, consequently, the impact that institutions have had on attempts to increase the production of knowledge.

The principal noted that not all teachers were ready and/or knowledgeable about the academic challenges associated with students from low socio-economic groups or students who lacked English language proficiency. This initial stage of implementation was a time of unrest for teachers. In City Unified School District, teachers who have seniority and are often considered experienced at their sites have priority in choosing a different school, often choosing a school with the least challenging student subgroups. Statements from the principal and other staff members indicated that the teachers who left “didn’t like the students” (Correen, 4T) or “they couldn’t make it work” (Cynda, 2T). As I considered these statements, I

assumed that the issue was not whether they liked the students or not, but the complexity of the challenges these students represented was perhaps too great. This group of teachers was either not ready or not willing to face these challenges. This was one of the limitations I had to face in doing this investigation; I did not interview the teachers that left the site, thus I could not, with certainty, conclude the reasoning behind their decision making.

One of the characteristics salient to the unfolding of events at City Elementary was the funding made available as a result of its Title I classification. As a Title I school, City Elementary, received additional funds to implement additional academic resources and professional development opportunities to support student learning. This is a unique feature pertaining to Title I schools, one that offers the possibility of employing additional resources, resources that other schools lacked, to build the capacity of staff members. At City Elementary, the newly formed leadership team (two of its members are still leaders for their grade levels, Lisa and Ron), along with the principal, considered mechanisms available to increase their technical capacity to promote higher student academic achievement, especially for those with specific needs. Thus, Mr. Pal (A) and other team members, Lisa (2L), Carol (2T), Ron (4L), and Karen (4T), stated that for the following year, the staff engaged in a conversation about PLCs, beginning with the introduction of the definition of PLCs and related concepts.

Proponents of collaborative interdependent teams assume that if teachers are organized in collaborative teams then learning could be promoted for both teachers and students (Darling-Hammond, 1999, 2010; DuFour et al. 1998, 2004; Fullan, 2001, 2003; Lasiter, 1996; Liberman, 1988; Lieberman & McLaughlin, 1992; Little, 1990, 1999; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1979; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1994; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). Thus, in 2006, City Elementary's school principal enlisted the leadership team to venture into the reorganization of the school as a PLC. Together, they attended a PLC conference, Professional Learning Communities at Work (see Solution-Tree.com) conducted by DuFour and Eaker in the summer of 2005.

### **The Complexity in Taking the First Steps**

At the end of the first year, Lisa (2L) and Ron (4L), members of the leadership team, stated that they agreed to obtain more information about PLCs and joined thousands of other educators in a five-day institute, Professional Learning Communities at Work (see Solution-Tree.com), held in Las Vegas, Nevada, with Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker (2005). At the end of those five days, the team decided to implement PLCs at City Elementary in the upcoming year (2005-06). However, after returning from the PLC conference, Lisa (2L) and Ron (4L) stated that, as a leadership group, they were ambivalent about the actual implementation process. Mr.

Pal (A) stated that he made an effort to include all grade level leaders in the decision making of the school. In Table 7, it is evident that, at City Elementary, the formalization of shared decision-making empowered individual grade level leaders to negotiate the projected outcome and the institutionalization of collaborative practices.

If the existing literature on collaborative practices is considered, the ideas associated with PLC are far different than those found in the traditional form of schooling where teachers are isolated and their socialization minimized to the phenomenological discrete forms of interaction as defined by Little (1990): (a) storytelling and scanning, (b) sharing, and (c) aid and assistance. Teachers' description of their understanding of professional collaboration lacked the technical language to make sense of a process intended to affect the way they related to one another. Those teachers who have attended the PLC institute after the first group have been able to grasp the concepts and get a more cohesive perspective about becoming a PLC (Table 7, line 7).

In Table 7, two attributes stand out from this recalling of events. First, the teacher repeatedly uses we statements encompassing both teachers and administrators efforts to promote a sense of joint responsibility for student learning (e.g., lines 11, 12, 16). Next, Lisa's description of the decision-making process denotes a sense of empowerment (lines, 10, 12, 15, 17).

Table 7

Second Grade Lead Teacher First Interview

Line Transcript Excerpt

1 I kind of feel like the whole PLC is my baby in a way, because I've been in  
2 leadership ... this is my third year, so I was part of the first group. For  
3 three years we have the same team together, so we've done a lot at this  
4 school that we've been able to really see blossoming and blooming. I think  
5 we started not really knowing what we were doing. I'd love to go to a  
6 conference now and say, "Hey, so that's what you meant when you said  
7 that." The people who've been going lately get a much better perspective.  
8 We were hearing all of that and we were thinking "what tha' heck are  
9 they talking about?" OK, let's try it. So we were on that first group that  
10 thought, "I don't know what they're saying, but let's try it."  
11 It's so cool to see, being in a leadership position and making decisions and  
12 see its effect in the school and watch everything grow. It's really cool. So,  
13 we were on the team that made the decision to start doing PLCs. We were  
14 the team that had to read all the books that go along with it, and read all  
15 the studies and findings and go to the first conference and then we had to  
16 bring it back to the school and talk about it and present it to our grade  
17 levels, see how they like it and then to the school. It's really neat for me to  
18 see how we started because I was on that original group that decided,  
19 "OK, let's do it!"

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) emphasize the term “community,” suggesting an environment where educators, linked by common interests, cooperate and provide support for one another in order to “achieve what they cannot achieve alone” (p. xii). Their focus on the effects of school community on student outcomes reflects a long-standing concern in educational research. To better understand this, I used Bryk et al. (1993) to conceptualize the culture of an effective school community. Their study highlighted the distinctiveness of Catholic schools regarding their communal approach to student academic achievement. They stress a distinctive ethos based on a culture of engagement, commitment, and caring—involving “a social context that significantly affects the nature of human interactions and the meanings conveyed through those interactions” (p. 276). The ethos shared by teachers at City Elementary before collaborative practices were put into place was one representative of traditional settings, where interactions are limited to individuals’ own initiative rather than the institutional norm.

In Table 8, Carol (2T) reflected back on teachers’ lack of consensus when she stated that they did not have “pacing guides” (line 1). Furthermore, she acknowledged the change that the school has gone through and wondered about the kind of impact this change will on the school 10 years from now (lines 3-4). The comments from Carol (2T) further validated this view:

Table 8

Second Grade Teacher Interview–Carol

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 I've seen the change. When I first started, there were no pacing guides,
- 2 none of what we have now. But for good, when I see how schools are not
- 3 doing so well in California, why are we doing all these things? Maybe go
- 4 back to where we were at, but it's interesting to see how is affecting...
- 5 maybe 10 years from now.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

The complexity found in maintaining structures based on shared decision-making and communal practices can be further exemplified by an additional challenge City Elementary faced during the 2006-07 school year. The school lost its Title I funding because the district shifted resources and eliminated several schools from Title I qualification. This lack of funding could have been detrimental to City Elementary's attempt to institutionalize change. However, teachers acknowledged that moving forward with a collaborative effort was in the best interest of meeting the school's academic goals. Although the school was no longer considered Title I, the student body did not change, thus, leaving the school accountable to move ahead in meeting the needs of all students. Furthermore, now faced with higher expectations regarding AYP, the principal noted that the collaborative effort "had taken on a life of its own." As a result, the leadership team adopted the

PLC model as the most viable option to establish the system that could foster the professional learning needed to meet the academic needs of their students. Both the principal and the participating teachers offered similar accounts of the first year of implementation. Although, teachers did not have a full grasp of what it meant to become a PLC, they decided to move forward as a team. Mr. Pal (A) and Ron (4L), fourth grade lead teacher, noted the following:

Table 9

Principal Interview

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 We did some really weird things that first year that people were flexible
- 2 with. I wouldn't tell you that everyone bought it and jumped on board.
- 3 But I say the majority did. And they realized quickly, this could make my
- 4 life better and this really could help kids.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

As noted in Table 9, the principal had the perception that teachers believed “this really could help our kids” (line 4), thus they decided to take on the new challenge (Table 10, line 2). The leadership team, on the advice of other staff members and principals at the institute in Las Vegas (2005), launched the implementation of PLC with a focus on math instruction.



Table 10

Fourth Grade Teacher Lead Interview

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 Once we left Vegas, we came back and for the most part it was very well
- 2 received as far as 'this is it' and where we're going.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

Table 11

Second Grade Teacher Interview–Jane

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 The first year we tried with math. I would say for any school that is
- 2 trying, first doing it with math. Math is so cut and dry. It's clear. You
- 3 know what the kids need to learn, and whether you need to scaffold... a
- 4 lot easier.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

The excerpt in Table 11 represents an example of how City Elementary created a structure that allowed teachers to implement collaborative practices. During the first year (2004-05), teachers were introduced to the concepts associated with PLC. During the summer of 2005, the principal and the leadership team attended the five-day PLC conference with DuFour and Eaker in Las Vegas. Upon their return, they started the implementation of PLC for the 2005-06 school year with a focus on math (Table 11, line 1). The focus on math is attributable to the fact that teachers felt comfortable

collaborating around its content material because of the methodical nature of the approach to teaching and learning in math (Table 11, line 2). Although teachers did not fully understand the notion of a PLC (see Table 7, lines 8-9), they chose a single content area that allowed them to center their attention and understand the process. Their common technical language in math (Table 11, line 2) facilitated the interaction needed to create the conditions associated with a PLC.

### **Stages of Implementation**

Up to that point, change took place in several stages within the context of the school. When the new principal arrived to the school, the structures in place at City Elementary resembled traditional mechanisms of teacher learning (see Table 4, lines 1-3). The principal stated that, initially, he sought to acquire a better understanding of PLC as a concept and its process of implementation. Mr. Pal (A), then, introduced PLC reform to the leadership team that, after becoming acquainted with the terminology and basic conceptualization, attended the institute in Las Vegas with the leading proponents of PLC (see Table 7, lines 12-14). Simultaneously, as their learning evolved regarding this new initiative, Mr. Pal (A) established professional relationships with Riverside County Office of Education to assist them with developing the capacity among team members needed to form effective PLCs. The final stage involved administrators and teachers reaching

a joint decision to transform City Elementary into a PLC (see Table 10, line 2). According to the principal and lead teachers, there were different mechanisms that helped solidify the implementation of PLC at City Elementary: the support from Riverside County Office of Education, a series of professional development sessions to all staff members, and a second group of teachers who attended the five-day PLC conference in the summer of 2006.

Mr. Pal (A) stated that he ensured the allocation of resources to support team decisions regarding the course of action. He allocated specific non-instructional time for teachers to meet, but that was the extent of his involvement. When teachers met, the principal made a commitment not to intervene or lead the direction of those meetings. The principal stated that if the expectation was to collaborate and teachers had been provided with the tools regarding how to select topics of collaboration, then teachers themselves needed to decide what to discuss and how to maximize their time together. At the same time, members of the leadership team received training on how to lead those conversations. The Riverside County Office of Education provided further training in how to set norms together and build consensus. All the time allocated for professional development for that school year was spent in conversations about PLCs.

Mr. Pal's decision to not interfere with teachers' collaboration was driven by the assumption that teachers participating in collaborative

practices work together in teams and engage in collective inquiry as a catalyst for action (DuFour et al., 2004). Thus, allowing this process to bring about learning about students and how to meet their needs is one of the goals of PLC. However, this approach fails to acknowledge the need to systematically provide the means by which learning occurs. Perhaps this is the reason the PLC literature minimizes the complexity of the learning process and defines it in terms of specific outcomes related to student academic achievement. A PLC's target goal is to help teachers define what students need to learn, the process to assess student learning, the intervention needed if students fail to master the concept, and, finally, the enrichment activities for those students that have mastered it (DuFour et al., 2004). In doing this, the proposed student learning is directly correlated to specific outcomes based on academic performance and mastery of specific standards, and it poses the challenge of providing interventions to those students who fail to achieve the learning objective. It could be argued that the mere discussion of student academic achievement does not change the isolation of teachers and privatization of practices (Lortie, 1975); however, this study demonstrates how the PLC movement becomes, in specific contexts, the precursor to altering the manner in which teachers articulate and acquire technical knowledge by fostering meaningful dialogue to institutionalize learning within the profession.

Table 12 provides evidence of the existing perception held by teachers at the time (2005). Becky (2T) referred to the leadership team as if “they” (line 1) had made the choice and added more things to do, as part of a process that seemed to be “super overwhelming” (line 2).

Table 12

Second Grade Teacher First Interview – Becky

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 When they (the leadership team) brought back the information, I found it
- 2 to be super overwhelming, and basically, what we were already doing but
- 3 more formal. So, now we had to write things out, have norms and
- 4 meetings and minutes. I just thought... ugh!

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

It was evident that the staff ventured into an unknown territory and agreed to carry out the PLC reform as articulated by their leaders (leadership team). However, as they increased their technical competence regarding the components aligned to PLCs, they seemed more confident in defining what it meant to be a PLC. Becky stated that their meetings “have norms” (line 3) and that they now “write things out” and have “minutes” (lines 3-4). This statement validates the notion of an increasing codification of the knowledge generated during PLC, formalizing teacher learning. In their recollection of the implementation process, the participants often recalled feeling confused by the process and resistant to change:

Table 13

Second Grade Teacher Interview–Cynda

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 I love the ability to collaborate, discuss, and share ideas because we tend  
2 to be pretty isolated when we're teaching in our own little world, and we  
3 do things in our own way, and when you sit down with four, five, or six  
4 other colleagues and they go, "Oh, I've done it this way", it's very  
5 refreshing.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

During the interviews and participant observations, teachers' used descriptive words that evidence a high degree of interconnectivity between participating members, as noted by Phil (4T), "these are our kids, not just my kids." The discourse features identified in Cynda's summarization of PLC (Table 13) indicate what they do now: "collaborate, discuss, share ideas" (line 1), as opposed to what they used to do before, "isolated", "our own little world", "our own way" (line 3). We statements were common when interviewees expressed their ideas about PLC; team decisions have become the norm; trust in each other as colleagues is perceived as "very refreshing" (lines 4-5); collective agreements sustained; and in the following chapter, it will be noted how accountability for one's own students and those of everyone else's is continually pursued.

## **Construction of the Schedule**

According to the literature on PLC implementation, one of the first changes that administrators and teachers must address in their attempt to establish a PLC on their campuses is the construction of a schedule that allocates the necessary non-instructional time for teachers to collaborate. Unless the institution creates the formal conditions for teachers to meet on a regular basis, the informality of teacher relationships would only foster the traditional approach to schooling in which teacher learning is an individual endeavor (Darling-Hammond, 1999, 2010; DuFour et al., 2004; Fullan, 2001; Liberman, 1988; Little, 1990, 1999; Rosenholtz, 1989). However, the effort to build into the school schedule non-instructional time for teacher collaboration often entails negotiation between the teachers' union and the district. This process can be one of the most difficult tasks in the initial stages of PLC reform initiatives. Contractual time and its correlation to the school day have traditionally been based on a system in which boundedness to one's own classroom and personal autonomy is the norm (Little, 1999; Lortie, 1975). Thus, changing this structure is not an inconsequential institutional feat; rather, it is a form of change that is at the core of the regulative factors of the institution, proposing changes that would eventually affect the normative behaviors and cognitive understandings of staff members (Rowan, 1990).

The principal, in statements validated by his teachers and administrators at the district office, stated that they were faced with the dilemma of scheduling non-instructional minutes when they attempted to reorganize their school campus to address teacher and student learning. As a leadership team, however, their approach was ultimately dictated by the availability of financial resources to support non-instructional time for collaborative practices. When they first started (2005-06), their primary source of funding came from their qualification as a Title I school, which made possible the hiring of support staff in the first year of implementation (2005-06), this staff member was rotated through the grade levels to provide student supervision and allow teachers to be released from their classrooms for the purpose of collaboration and planning.

When the school lost its qualifying status as a Title I school, administrators had to be more creative in finding other funding sources to support the implementation of PLC. Mr. Pal (A) stated that in subsequent years “a more sophisticated approach” had to be implemented. During the next two school years, 2007-09, the principal made use of After School Education Support (ASES) funds to continue providing time for collaboration. Led by the principal, several consultants were hired to support the after school program. Part of their contract included some hours during the school day, which allowed them to arrive early on campus, rotate through the



different grade levels, and work with the students in 50 minute blocks of time while teachers were released for the purpose of collaboration. Mr. Pal (A) stated that all of the changes in the schedule and the allocation of support staff to release teachers did not require much negotiation with either the district or the teachers' union. As long as the school secured an adequate funding source, Mr. Pal (A) stated, "the continuity of the structure was assured."

### **Bureaucratic Support and Its Effect on Collaboration**

As the administrators and teachers at City Elementary struggled to secure funding to maintain a school schedule for the purpose of teacher collaboration, district-level discussions emerged to ensure institutional support for such efforts. During the course of the 2008-09 school year, City Unified School District convened a panel composed of teachers, principals, and district office administrators to consider the allocation of a specific time on a weekly basis for the purpose of teacher collaboration. The assistant superintendent of instructional services (DA) stated that much evidence exists that supports the idea of collaboration as a necessary precondition to meeting the academic needs of students. Moreover, the superintendent (DA) supported this view and stated that providing time for teachers to collaborate as a way to increase their expertise is not a new concept in education. He had experienced successful relationships with collaborative teams as a teacher

and later as an administrator in the 1970s and 1980s. However, both the superintendent and assistant superintendent agreed that the process of institutionalizing district-wide teacher collaboration or PLCs was not going to be accepted in anything close to a straightforward manner.

The superintendent asserted that in education, schools are faced with an overwhelming number of labels placed on well-intended educational practices that often hinder the intended benefits. He made this statement in reference to the idea behind PLCs. He further affirmed that district-wide, several schools had already started implementing some form of teacher collaboration following the PLC model. However, he stated that some of the principals wanted to apply the proposed model not necessarily because they understood the concept, but because they felt the need to stay current with emerging trends in educational reform. With this in mind, the superintendent acknowledged that the district had to lead this effort by providing the structures, guidelines, and processes to support teacher collaboration, so that the entanglement of labels could be avoided.

To understand the undertaking of City Unified School District, Meyer and Rowan (1977) discuss the element of the process of institutionalization in which “organizations are driven to incorporate the practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts of organizational work and institutionalized in society” (p. 340). Thus, administrators at the district level

started a process designed to regulate the normative obligation and activities of teachers. Coordinating the structures needed to create and sustain the organizational parameters critical to teacher collaboration became an instrumental goal for the district's administrative team, as stated by the assistant superintendent. However, the adoption of a specific PLC structure could have hindered any effort from the district regarding the formalization of teacher collaboration.

The panel in charge deliberately stayed away from labeling the district's attempt to formalize the process as PLC. Even though the district's attempt to support teacher collaboration was grounded in the approach marketed by DuFour and Eaker (1998), the panel identified their endeavor as professional teacher time (PTT). The very intentional naming of this normative process was key to its survival. During negotiations, teachers were more agreeable to accept the institutionalization of professional time for teachers to collaborate than instituting PLC—the marketed approach to teacher collaboration which some perceived it as a top-down mandate from the district. The assistant superintendent stated that his purpose in promoting the idea of PTT was to first institutionalize the time needed for teachers to collaborate. Then, he stated, the evolving state of this reform would eventually result in higher student academic gains and an increase of professional expertise. He defined this process as “organic” in nature, stating

that it was intended to gradually evolve without the administration making demands or setting agendas. Burns and Stalker (1961) define an educational process as organic when complex school organizational problems are solved by frequent engagement of teachers in search of solutions (as cited in Rowan, 1990, p. 357). They argue that network structures replace hierarchical structures of management providing the means by which collegial patterns of interaction become the catalyst for instructional and academic improvement. Rowan (1990) argues that seeking to develop innovative working arrangements to support teacher learning, collaboration, and shared leadership “will unleash the energy and the expertise of committed teachers and thereby lead to improved student learning” (p. 354).

The negotiation of terms and regulatory language regarding PTT took most of the 2008-09 school year. Members of the panel had to discuss in detail the advantages and disadvantages associated with PTT with board members; they presented the proposal to teachers and provided forums for parents and community members to discuss proposed schedule changes. The proposed reform was so compelling that the majority of stakeholders agreed to institutionalize weekly non-instructional time, so that teachers would have one hour either before or after school to meet with their teams. The agreement also delineated the boundaries of administrative input reemphasizing the need to trust the process itself as a conduit for

professional learning. Finally, administration, at the district level, acknowledged that school sites were at different stages in their attempt to implement reform efforts. Thus, the PTT panel purposely circumvented qualifiers regarding the use of time in schools. The fact that the City Unified School District, one of the ten largest districts in California, institutionalized collaboration within their regular schedule is a remarkable accomplishment (Fullan, 2001, 2003). The complexity found in a district of more than 50,000 students could have been detrimental to the structuring of time for professional collaboration. Nevertheless, it was carefully planned and deliberately executed to ensure a prompt resolution. The fact that it was accomplished with minimal resistance testifies to the working conditions and amiable relationships between the school district and the teachers' association. This decision making process could be the subject of further studies.

### **Use of Professional Time**

The schedule at City Elementary included a specific time for both of the participating grade levels to meet on a weekly basis (see Table 14). The schedule represented in Table 14 shows the allocation of non-instructional minutes for the purpose of collaboration. Each grade level had one hour built into its weekly schedule in which consultants took all students from a particular grade level for outside activities.

Table 14

PLC Schedule for Second and Fourth Grades

Time	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
8:30 – 10:20	School Activities and Other Grade Levels Collaboration Time				
10:20 – 11:20				Fourth Grade	
11:20 – 1:20	School Activities and Other Grade Levels Collaboration Time				
1:20 – 2:30			Second Grade		

The location of the meeting for both grade levels was in one of the participating teacher’s classroom. The arrangement of the furniture varied for both grade levels. In second grade, teachers gathered around a bean-shaped table which allowed them to face each other in a semicircular shape. The teacher whose classroom hosted the meeting sat behind the table, facing all participants. As a participant observant, I sat behind most participants at a student’s desk, so that my presence would not interfere with their interaction. In second grade, the seating arrangement allowed all participants to interact with one another and to work with papers or other materials in a space common to all. In fourth grade, on the other hand, the seating arrangement was less formal. Participating teachers walked into the classroom and found a place to sit at student desks somewhere near one

another. The teacher who hosted the meeting changed his location from time to time, in some instances he sat at a student's desk, while other times he sat at his own desk. His seating fluctuated based on the needs of the group.

Every time he took notes or made changes to the schedule, he sat at his desk and took notes on his computer. In a few instances he used the LCD projector to show his computer screen on the board for everyone else to see.

During my observations, participating teams at City Elementary had a variety of approaches regarding the use of time. Teachers in both grade levels focused on a range of topics that included student learning, schedules, instructional materials, formative and summative assessments, teaching practices, and supportive relationships. Agendas were not necessarily the norm. Although the PLC literature stressed the importance of regulating the meetings by maintaining and following an agenda (DuFour et al., 2004), teams tended to prioritize their agenda items based on what seemed most pressing at the time. For example, in repeated occasions during my observations, an outside consultant new to the team interrupted the flow of collaborative discussion with specific instructions from the administration regarding student interventions. In each situation, interruptions deviated the focus of the dialogue to address the intervention offered. Team members discussed changes in schedule, the instructional focus for the intervention, and who the participating students would be. Furthermore, they expressed

their frustration with this new form of intervention proposed by the administration. The allocation of time to discuss new interventions was one of the first issues the group had to address; teachers found that the administration had failed to consider their existing structure and whether it was an appropriate intervention time for their grade level. Thus, they found themselves diverging from their discussion items to engage in a conversation about how to make the intervention work. Their professional dialogue was, thus, disrupted by their need to comply with a directive given by the administration.

The vignette in Table 15 shows how teachers responded to an interruption. Correen (4T) stated, “not an issue,” “Did we know?” (line 1), “it had to get done” (line 7), and Karen (4T) agreed to the task being “unexpected” (line 14). If schools are meant to drive professional conversations, they must create the conditions to foster this kind of dialogue without the micromanagement of teachers’ time (Darling-Hammond & McLaughling, 1999; Little, 1999). The fact that Ron attempted to rationalize the interruption by highlighting the need for “consistency” (lines 9-10) as if it happened “everywhere” (line 9), did not justify the paradoxical approach of administration to foster professional dialogue while at the same time interrupting the flow of teachers’ dialogue with administrative tasks.



Table 15

Response to Interruption in Fourth Grade

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 **Correen:** But, not an issue. Did we know she was coming in to our PLC  
2 time today? That just wasted like a half-an-hour of our PLC meeting.
- 3 **Ron:** It was like 10 minutes.
- 4 **Correen:** That was not 10 minutes.
- 5 **Phil:** We have 25 minutes left. Let's go.
- 6 **Ron:** I much rather her coming in right now and deal with it, than...
- 7 **Correen:** I know that it had to get done, but I don't think it needed to  
8 have...
- 9 **Ron:** The same argument is going to happen everywhere, if we're gonna be  
10 consistent, we got to be consistent.
- 11 **Correen:** I know, I agree with what she was saying, but...
- 12 **Phil:** I think we need to re-implement our duties, like time keeper and so  
13 on...
- 14 **Karen:** That was unexpected though...
- 15 **Phil:** I know... but if we have our jobs, we stick to our jobs.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

This issue is inconsistent with the literature found in PLCs. Little (1990) identifies the level of joint responsibility held by teachers as particularly influential in the production of technical knowledge. Cooper

(1988) supports this idea, highlighting the need for administrative support in the development of a collegial professional teaching culture. Thus, interruptions like the one summarized in Table 15, perhaps, are a norm in the relationship between school administrators and classroom teachers that must be reevaluated before PLCs can ever be fully implemented and effective. After the interaction highlighted in Table 15, the team realized that their collaboration digressed from what they intended to discuss. However, given the limited time of their schedule, they acknowledged that the task at hand was relevant enough to address during their limited time together. Thus, they discussed the scheduled times and the skills that needed to be taught. Soon after this, the administrator (assistant principal) walked in to the room to address questions the group had regarding the schedule. The teachers voiced their frustration with the times allocated for their grade level and the team goals during intervention. This discussion took about 20 minutes as they considered different options and attempted to negotiate a viable solution. The group discussed who did what, when, and the specific students serviced in each intervention group. The discussion further solidified the tension between traditional bureaucratic structures of authority in school organizations and the professional collaboration of classroom teachers.

As noted in Table 15, the problem the group encountered was beyond their control. It was part of an institutional arrangement embedded in a

system developed for a different purpose. “The basic grammar of schooling, like the shape of classrooms, has remained remarkably stable over the decades” (Tyack & Cuban, 1995, p. 85). The organization of the school evolved from a single-room classroom to the complex institutions with minimal changes to the self-contained classrooms. Tyack and Cuban (1995) assert that this process provided the “organizational framework that shapes how teachers do their work” (p. 86). Most importantly, they stress the fact that over the years, innovators have tried to break the mold of isolation and encourage teachers to work in teams (Tyack & Cuban, 1995) with minimal success. In the excerpt in Table 15, the participating teachers had to adjust their collaboration agenda to fit the demands of the organization and found themselves dealing with a decision-making process in an effort to negotiate control of their routines. Although frustrated and ambivalent about the task at hand, they found a way to make it part of the discussion. All participating teachers discussed the options available given the existing constraints, their time was invested in making their interest, and that of their students, work for the common good of the school. Little time was spent analyzing best practices or discussing standards-based instruction. Rather, the triviality of the schedule took most of their collaboration time, making this task the center of their discussion. Teachers seemed to be restricted in their ability to

make decisions regarding their agenda items, and they had to address the task at hand before they could move on.

Unexpected interruptions were not uncommon during my observations. On repeated occasions, I witnessed teachers struggle to balance the demands of a last minute task with the continuation of their scheduled agendas. However, although a disruption to the flow of events could have hindered the expected outcomes, collaboration seemed to continue. Furthermore, the transactions between team members happened with a sense of egalitarianism, in spite of seniority or experience, evidencing an implicit desire to make the system work.

### **The Establishing of Time Management**

During the 2008-09 school year, City Elementary allocated 30 minutes of instruction for English language (EL) learners that required teachers to move groups of students based on their language proficiency levels. This intervention time also affected English only (EO) students who received some form of instruction during this time. In Table 16, the fourth grade team discussed the proposed rotations during English language development (ELD). While discussing the schedule, one of the team members was assigned the duty of timekeeper to ensure that the group stayed focused during their collaborative process.

Table 16

Fourth Grade Planning Interaction

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 **Phil:** So, what happens, Karen, during ELD time, you will rotate weeks, so
- 2 one week with Ron and the next week with Correen.
- 3 **Karen:** So our EO session will take place from 1:30–2:00 PM.
- 4 **Correen:** Let's get back on PLC track.
- 5 **Ron:** Math schedule is good. ELD schedule is good.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

It is noticeable in Table 16 that teachers acknowledged the primacy of time by having someone keep track of the items in the agenda (line 4).

However, this was not necessarily the norm. For the fourth grade team, the timekeeper was instituted after the team had gone through other disruptions (see Table 15). Norms varied from team to team. Some teams assigned a member to maintain the flow of activities, while other teams seemed to expect team members to uphold implicit expectations. One of the teams deviated so much from the norms they had established at the beginning of the school year that one of the members had to call everyone's attention at the end of a meeting and ask them to go back to basics—preserving the protocol once agreed upon so that activities and tasks could be accomplished in the allocated time. This was not unique to one team. The other team observed had a similar situation in which someone acknowledged the need to

go back to basics and maintain the agreements of the group because reviewing the norms regularly or prior to each meeting did not generally occur (see Table 15: lines 12 and 15).

One of the salient features in PLC meetings was the time allocated at the beginning of each meeting to “check-in” with each other, a brief debriefing on what had taken place in teachers’ classrooms, the school, or individual events of importance to all members. This allocation of time played a significant role in establishing the ground rules, it allowed teachers to reinforce and foster the relationships they had established with each other, and it also provided them with an opportunity to detach themselves from their daily routines and find in their colleagues a listening ear. This process reinforced the trust level in the team, allowing personal sharing in a safe environment. The time varied in length at the beginning of each meeting from about five to seven minutes before they begun discussing any agenda items. Serving as a frame of reference, PLC provided the social context in which meaning-making and relationships were fostered. The relationships among the teachers observed at City Elementary showed signs of friendship, an easy going camaraderie that made the interaction flow smoothly. Occasionally, the lead teachers reminded the group that it must comply with the school requirements that had been discussed during their leadership team meeting, thus prompting the team to return to the task at hand.

City Elementary allocated time within the schedule for teachers to meet, not based on the professional needs of the team, but on the availability of resources. It was not an easy task, but rather a craft of complexity in which the principal, based on the availability of funds and resources, had to create the structure for the teachers to meet with their grade level team members. Once an agreement was reached on the frequency and length of collaborative meetings, then, the next factor that was determined jointly by the principal and leadership team was the area of focus, which they accomplished because external demands from accountability measures were not in place at the time.

This could be a source of disagreement and contention where professional arrangements between administrators and teachers could vary widely based on the school's accountability goals. If the school has met its AYP goals, there seems to be less pressure to define the specificities of collaboration. However, if the school is in PI status because of its inability to show sufficient academic growth, then the imposed federal pressure becomes the regulator of the internal structure and socialization arrangements taking place in the school. Although this study will not consider PLCs within the context of PI status, I will discuss in more detail the role of accountability within the framework of PLC. Further research will be needed to compare the collaborative practices found in schools based on their academic

achievement. I will, however, provide an insight into the use of time for a school currently meeting its target objectives.

Time can be one of the greatest constraints or enablers in making PLCs function in schools, and, regardless of its institutionalization, it must be stated that 30 to 60 minutes is not sufficient for the intended outcomes regarding student learning. Teacher collaborative practices at City Elementary, although structured, only affected a fraction of the instructional day. To make a difference that would substantially affect the entire instructional day, more time needs to be allocated for teachers to engender a higher degree of collaborative practice and interaction. This is one of the issues districts have to negotiate with teacher unions, for it is the limiting provisions found in contractual agreements negotiated by the union and the district that, ironically, diminish the professional status and learning they advocate. Little (1999) argues that schools should creatively and consistently create blocks of non-instructional time to foster teacher learning by “enabling teachers to examine ideas and practices and to contribute to one another’s teaching success” (p. 245) and, therefore, satisfying public demands for accountability.

The next two chapters will develop two specific findings related to City Elementary’s experience with PLCs. Chapter 5 will explore the nature of the professional learning that has evolved through the implementation of PLC.



In it I will explicate the nature of the knowledge produced in a specific locale and how this knowledge indirectly affects teacher professional accountability and instructional practices. Furthermore, I will examine the impact PLC has on student academic achievement. In Chapter 6 I will explore the primacy of the affective component in the effective implementation of PLC reform at City Elementary.

## Chapter 5

### Conceptualization of Knowledge and Accountability in PLCs

Perhaps one of the most powerful and least costly occasions of teacher learning is the systematic, sustained study of student work, coupled with individual and collective efforts to figure out how that work results from the practices and choices of teaching (Little, 1990, p. 235).

When considering the conceptualization of professional knowledge, PLCs propose a change from teachers' isolated instruction controlling an arcane body of substantive or technical knowledge (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972; Etzioni, 1969; Freidson, 1986; Larson, 1977) to a team of professionals whose shared technical language and common practices become the norm of the group. The reference to consistency is significant in setting the foundation for a common technical culture. The privacy norms existing in traditional approaches to schooling do not allow teachers to interact with one another, and they actually from subtract opportunities for teacher learning. DuFour et al. (2004) stated, "the teams of a PLC are organized to engage in collective inquiry into both best practice and the current reality regarding their students' existing levels of achievement" (p. 4). What the literature defines is a process by which teachers de-privatize their practice and collectively arrive at conclusions that affect their instructional practices, and, consequently, student learning.

One of the interactions of City Elementary's second grade teachers that I captured during my field work exemplified this process (see Table 17). The group discussed instructional plans for the upcoming school year that included possible ways to provide instruction in writing and ways to assess what students know and how that knowledge is related to testing expectations (CST).

In Table 17, teachers discussed their vision for the next school-year. They had a sense of empowerment that allowed them to define the parameters of curriculum organization and delivery methods. They presented ideas and exchanged possibilities based on their shared knowledge. Then, they briefly discussed writing expectations, rubrics, and options for curriculum focus. The dialogue, although unstructured, flowed back and forth smoothly with members who seemed to be willing to learn from each other.

Some of the features reflected in the participants' speech patterns evidence collegiality and team work as noted in line 1 when Mary stated, "we need to decide how we're planning," the inclusivity of the reference is further reinforced in line 2 when she stated "our kids." Jane made an attempt to summarize the challenge regarding how to teach writing stating, "that's how we teach our kids" (line 5). The continuous use of "we," "our kids" (e.g., lines 1, 2, 5, and 6) is indicative of team work that is engaged in collective inquiry (DuFour et al., 2004).

Table 17

Second Grade Planning Interaction

Line Transcript Excerpt

1 **Mary:** For next year I think we need to decide how we're planning to teach  
2 writing, because CSTs are not based on Step Up to Writing and our kids  
3 are so formatted in that structure of writing...

4 **Cynda:** But Step Up to Writing should not be on the CSTs.

5 **Jane:** But that's how we teach our kids. That's what I'm saying, when we  
6 gear away from that... that's why we have to exposed them to a greater  
7 variety of writing throughout the year.

8 **Mary:** If I would have my kids writing like this, 10 years ago, I would  
9 have been...

10 **Jane:** I understand, I know what you're saying, but...

11 **Becky:** The question that comes down to is: Are we teaching our kids to  
12 the test or providing the skills they need to write? I think the writing they  
13 produce is amazing.

14 **Mary:** I'm just saying it makes it really hard for them.

15 **Becky:** Is the purpose of the writing to help them understand setting,  
16 character, and sequence of events? Because, I think, it might be more  
17 effective to give them the actual stories and have them find those because  
18 that's kind of more what they're gonna be assessed on, versus writing  
19 whole thing, which is a big project...

20 **Mary:** That's perfect for leveled groups because the kiddos who are

21 struggling with it, yes give them this and have them find the characters

22 in there... but the higher groups...

23 **Becky:** So the assessment can't be an actual written product, because then

24 we're actually assessing their ability to write not find and understand

25 what those things are.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

The key markers of discourse associated with their community approach likewise evidenced the shared technical knowledge participating teachers had about “CSTs” and “Step Up to Writing” (lines 2 & 4). In addition to their shared knowledge about tests (CSTs) and instructional programs (Step Up to Writing), there was another key marker of their discourse that evidenced a degree of accountability. The question posed by Becky: “Are we teaching our kids to the test or providing the skills they need to write?” (lines 11-12), suggests that, although they are all aware of the expectations from standards, their dialogue informs their practices in light of these expectations. Action, then, was negotiated as an informal process of accountability where the interrelatedness of teachers became the foundation for meeting the shared goal of continual improvement in student academic achievement (DuFour et al., 2004).

Their questioning reflected an in-depth understanding of writing as a process and how that compared to their ability to assess students’ literary analysis skills (Table 17: lines 15-19). This was a discussion about the kind of

questions that could be taught during writing or writing under the umbrella of Step Up to Writing. The teachers seemed to realize that if students were asked to identify setting, character, et cetera on the test (lines 15-16), then, that was how they should teach it. When teachers referred to the CSTs (e.g., lines 2 and 4), their discussion implied a tacit knowledge of the expectations embedded in the test and whether their instructional practices provided students with the skills needed to achieve proficiency. They also seemed to be aware of the social and academic needs of their particular students. For this reason, they considered moving away from the established norm (Step Up to Writing) and instead contemplated the best method to teach an assessed skill on the CST. Moreover, they highlighted the existing divide between their method of assessing students and the expectations found in the CSTs (lines 23-25). This was not an easy task. It was one that required teachers to make their knowledge applicable to their circumstances and come to agreements that perhaps were not widely accepted, yet sensitive of their role within the context of the group and the community they represent.

This kind of interaction was not unique to this team. Additional observations and interviews validated the process by which shared technical language was generated and allowed teachers to exchange information about specific instructional elements or particular subgroups of students. This is

further exemplified in Table 18, where the fourth grade team members became engaged in a discussion about writing.

The discussion took place in the last month of instruction, when the team talked about the advantages and disadvantages of focusing on persuasive writing in preparation for the next grade level, even though they acknowledged that persuasive writing was not a fourth grade standard. They had questions and concerns about whether or not to introduce an upper grade standard with a fourth grade skills approach.

Notably, in Table 18 the technical language used by Ron (4L) evidences a trenchant understanding of writing content standards (lines 5-6). The reference to the groups that had not mastered the different genres of literature denoted a shared knowledge about all students (line 3). Furthermore, Correen (4T) made a statement regarding Phil's (4T) students and her knowledge of their readiness for "persuasive" (lines 8-9).

In order to have this kind of quality dialogue within a professional team, teachers must share a common language that, in both situations, Table 17 and Table 18, relates to a body of shared substantive and technical knowledge (Abbott, 1988; Elliot, 1972; Freidson, 1986; Larson, 1977; Lortie, 1975).

Table 18

Fourth Grade Planning Interaction

Line	Transcript Excerpt
1	<b>Correen:</b> The group I have is ready for persuasive. They'll focus on the
2	genre.
3	<b>Ron:</b> How do we <u>filter out</u> ?
4	<b>Karen:</b> I still think we <u>can level</u> it to all <u>five groups</u> .
5	<b>Ron:</b> We <u>still have groups</u> that have <u>not mastered</u> essay, still <u>haven't</u>
6	<u>mastered</u> response to lit, and we are gonna introduce persuasive?
7	<b>Correen:</b> I think we're gonna have those students who regardless of the
8	genre, they still don't have the writing conventions. <u>I think Phil has a</u>
9	<u>group</u> that's <u>ready</u> to grasp the concept.
10	<b>Phil:</b> So, how are we gonna <u>measure</u> that?
11	<b>Correen:</b> I think we <u>need to give</u> them a basic writing assessment.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

This collegial approach allowed teachers to participate in dialectic practices that were indicative of specialization and formal training of content and curricular standards, a qualifier of the profession. If teachers lacked the shared technical language needed to participate, they would not have understood the explicit and implicit communication patterns connected to individual and collective accountability.



## Shared Knowledge

City Elementary found itself coping with a changing population of students who posed new challenges regarding student learning and acculturation. The particularities of teachers' interactional patterns acquired a technicality that may be understood only within their particular context, validating the argument that redefines teacher learning as contextual, giving primacy to the locale in which it occurs. For example, the dialogue in Table 19 shows the interaction of one of the teams, referring to the expectations in writing based on two different genres. The vignette is from the second grade team, as they looked at their grade level expectations. Based on this information, they discussed different writing styles and addressed some of the confusion students are confronted with when testing. The discussion looked at the specific academic needs of students and, later, it addressed some of the ways in which teachers could meet those needs. The exchange of information related to writing happened as a result of the knowledge teachers had about content standards pertinent to the grade level (e.g., lines 5-7). Collaboration in the team described above showed a definite specificity about academic challenges that otherwise would have to be confronted within the boundaries of one's own classroom.

Table 19

Second Grade Literary Genre Discussion

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 **Cynda:** Personal narrative is sort of expository writing...
- 2 **Mary:** The problem has to be there for it, and that's the lesson for what's
- 3 the difference between expository and narrative. A narrative has to have
- 4 characters that have a problem or a need, something that's needed... so to
- 5 say... and that's the part they miss and then it goes into expository. But if
- 6 you prompt them with "tell about a problem you had and how you solved
- 7 it" sets them up in the right direction.
- 8 **Carol:** Oh yea, and I also remember in one of the trainings they say if you
- 9 give them the prompt, "Once upon a time" they get away from the topic
- 10 sentence.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

Furthermore, teachers supported one another with references pertaining to the knowledge they acquired individually (lines 8-9) and then articulated this knowledge for the benefit of the team.

**Parent Conferences**

During my observations, teachers were part of a school-wide effort that provided them the opportunity, through collaborate practices, to learn about each other and about their own students. The dialogical practices established through PLC were symbiotic in nature, where teachers developed an

interdependent and mutually beneficial relationship that led them to promote agreements based on a common technical culture. For instance, in one of the vignettes highlighted in Table 20, teachers discussed how they, as a grade level, decided to conduct parent-teacher conferences.

Table 20

Grade Level Approach to Parent Conferences

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 **Cynda:** Because if we're working all together and these are all of our kids,  
2 then the parents need to see all of the teachers, and then hear the  
3 material presented so it's consistent among all the teachers too.
- 4 **Liz:** So, this is what we expect for homework. This is how we expect  
5 behavior. You know, this is as a whole team, no matter what classroom  
6 they go into, it's gonna be consistent.
- 7 **Cynda:** Our next step is to talk about our grading so that we could be  
8 consistent even in that.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

Members of the team agreed to meet with all parents together in one room rather than individually, and to provide a consistent explanation about the role of teachers within the context of the team. The traditional expectations parents have for parent-teacher conferences is a one-to-one conference with a classroom teacher. The team approach, however, involved a team of professionals working together, discussing individual student

academic achievement, and relying on each other's strengths to benefit all students.

The key markers of the discourse in Table 20 were indicative of the mutual agreements the team achieved: "we're working all together," "all of our kids" (line 1), "whole team, no matter what classroom" (line 5). They expressed a joint effort in presenting consistent expectations to all parents (lines 4-6). Once again, teachers spoke of: "we," "our," "all" (e.g., lines 1 & 7), stating that their approach was one of a unified front-showing, connectedness, a conscious vision and purpose, and joint responsibility (Huffman, 2001).

### **Collaborative Meetings for the Purpose of Intervention**

The principal at City Elementary made a commitment not to intervene or to regulate the tasks to be accomplished during the collaborative meetings. Hence, the observed teams systematically developed informal mechanisms that gradually became the driving force behind PLC implementation. One of the indicators of the technical language teachers now share was the sophistication of their discourse patterns. The collaborative transactions among teachers are coded with references to accountability and different forms of intervention. The vignette in Table 21 is indicative of the dialogue I recorded during collaborative meetings.

The empowerment of teachers at City Elementary was evidenced by the choices they made about instructional matters. Teachers negotiated the terms of intervention and how their common formative assessments (CFAs) (Table 21: line 2) would help them focus their instruction to achieve their shared objectives. They also discussed essential standards, those that are grade-level specific and those that must be mastered before moving to the next grade level.

Table 21

Second Grade Level Approach to Intervention

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 **Lisa:** On the 26th, we'll start leveling again.
- 2 **Jane:** I would like to see some CFAs made, even if it is two groups made.
- 3 **Mary:** So we still remember what we need to do?
- 4 **Liz:** Yes, however, why couldn't we do a narrative Step-Up-to-Writing
- 5 with our kids?
- 6 **Lisa:** I like that a lot.
- 7 **Liz:** Maybe when we come back we can do a narrative Step-Up lesson. We
- 8 can assess Friday.
- 9 **Mary:** We can still do an assessment with just the story prompt.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

Teachers briefly talked about expectations and rubrics validating each other suggestions. Furthermore, they asked each other clarifying questions

concerning what to do and how to do it. Their questioning reflected an in depth understanding of content (line 4); however, because of the subjectivity of language arts, they encountered challenges such as deciding what forms of assessments would most accurately provide the best information to guide their instruction.

This process seemed to directly affect the way teachers acquired and articulated their learning within the framework of intervention, and this learning proliferated to influence teachers' daily instructional practices, as noted in the interaction about their students' mastering of skills and the application of specific instructional strategies.

It could be argued, however, that the shared technical knowledge is not necessarily an indicator of a shared technical approach to instruction. The fact that teachers are confined to the boundaries of their own classrooms adds validity to the argument regarding the privatization of practices. However, this investigation demonstrated that the increasing technical knowledge of teachers affected the culture at City Elementary. "In dealing with the world, human beings actively change certain parts of it, especially by producing cultural entities, such as technical and meaning systems" (Karpatschof, 2000). Teachers' interactive patterns directly affect the way they see their instruction, thus de-privatizing practices and becoming more technical about their teaching and learning.

In Table 22, it is evident that Liz’s participation in PLC affected the way she saw her daily instruction (line 1) and perhaps even her approach to meeting the needs of all students (line 6). Her inclusive statements (e.g., line 2) were parallel to prior comments from other teachers (e.g., Table 20: line 1) and were indicative of the specificity teachers were acquiring within specific areas (lines 6-7). In Table 22, Liz (2T) expressed this perception:

Table 22

Second Grade Teacher First Interview–Liz

Line Transcript Excerpt

1 I think PLC has changed a lot how I view instruction. The ability to be  
2 able to level *our* kids, and ... have a consolidated group of the same level  
3 makes is so much easier because you obviously focus your teaching. But,  
4 even out of PLC, I think I look at the levels of my kids a little differently  
5 as far as trying to, you know, within our regular instruction, trying to  
6 level a little bit more... And again, even with PLCs, *we’re focused on a*  
7 specific area, we still tend to take a lot of the PLCs philosophies into *our*  
8 grade level meeting and to talking about specific skills, you know, “Who’s  
9 got a great idea?” Before, *we* talked about it, but not to the depth that we  
10 do now. *We’re* coming up with more concrete ideas, ideas that are more  
11 level to meet the needs of our kids.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

In traditional settings, teachers' expertise increases with time, and there is no concreteness to the learning that is likely to happen within the context of their classroom. Professional learning community meetings allowed teachers to create formal systems of interaction, reinforcing teacher collaboration and agreements (line 9-11). The specific structure of teacher collaboration allowed teachers to negotiate agreements that significantly affected the academic achievement of their students in their classrooms, as demonstrated in City Elementary's API index (see Table 5). Furthermore, informally, interaction elicited meaningful conversations that created the means by which the professional expertise of teachers became more in line with that of their colleagues. According to interviewed teachers, the time invested informally maximized the time spent in the formal setting and enhanced its productivity as it allowed teachers to communicate with one another, vent their frustrations, and create a common culture that bound them together and to specific objectives.

### **What I Know Versus what we Know**

Lortie (1975) explained that for teachers, as colleagues, it is not what they know and share that is paramount, but rather what they have learned individually through their own experience. Although this argument may still be valid today in traditional settings. I found just the opposite to be true at City Elementary where supportive teams were organized as PLCs. Collective



learning and agreements became the norm , affecting both the way individuals related to one another and the role experience played within the context of the group. Teachers were more willing to rely on each other’s expertise as they attempted to meet the needs of their students. The excerpt in Table 23 denotes a detailed process of instruction. According to Becky (2T), teachers first brought to the table their individual ideas about what should be taught (lines 3-4). Then, collectively they agreed to use specific methods of instruction—“how we’re going to teach it” (line 4). After teaching the agreed skills or subject, teachers came back and evaluated what they did as a group and individually (lines 5 & 6) and then decided ways to improve the delivery of instruction—“how we can make that better” (line 6-7). The togetherness established in this kind of setting redefined the classrooms, from an isolated socio-cultural space to a spaces that are related through the organic agreements about curriculum planning and instructional strategies held by teachers (lines 4-7). Ultimately, it is in the classroom where the influence of the group is expected to affect individual teacher practices. I asked one of the teachers to define, in her own words, what she understood PLCs meant.

In Table 23, Becky (2T) acknowledged the increasing benefits of working together and highlighted the academic gains she noted in students (lines 11 & 14):

Table 23

Second grade teacher second interview–Becky

Line Transcript Excerpt

1 It's a way we make ourselves go crazy. It's a chance, it's a fabulous  
2 opportunity that lets teachers collaborate when we never got to do it.  
3 Before and during school time we get to sit down and bring our ideas  
4 together and decide what we're going to teach, how we're going to teach it.  
5 Then it gives us an opportunity to after we're done teaching it, come back  
6 and talk about what worked, what didn't work, how we've changed it, how  
7 we can make that better. Talk about first best instruction so the first time  
8 you teach it you do the best you can do, you know, and then from there  
9 the leveling part gives us an opportunity to level our kids and teach to  
10 them for half an hour a day. So, it's been an amazing opportunity for  
11 teachers, teams, and the kids. We were noticing huge gains. We did  
12 writing at the beginning of the school year because our administration  
13 just left it open to LA so we did writing for a little bit. Oh my god, they  
14 grew on their writing skills so much and that was pretty cool. In basic  
15 terms, it gives us time to collaborate with each other and it gives kids a  
16 chance to learn at their own level for a solid half hour a day with other  
17 kids at their level too.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

Implicitly, what Becky (2T) stated was that teachers looked more closely at student learning and the particularities of instruction as it became aligned to meet academic expectations. The supportive atmosphere found in successful PLCs disrupted the traditional role of teachers as isolated from one another and established a new paradigm regarding their role within the group, a role that is defined by the symbiosis found in their togetherness and the collective knowledge that evolved as a result of such interaction.

In further interviews, some of the teachers referred to the support of the collaborative group as essential to their success and key to their ability to address the specific needs of students.

### **The Negotiation of an Informal Mechanism of Accountability**

These findings demonstrate that, to a certain degree, privatization of practice still existed among teachers at City Elementary due to the institutional arrangements of the classroom, even among those participating in PLCs. However, although the physical arrangement of the classroom had not changed much, the redefinition of the collective ownership and responsibility of students dramatically changed the way teachers at City Elementary interacted with one another. Teachers were held accountable for meeting the needs of all students, which in itself created a disruption to the structures of the traditional classroom. Through a process of professional collaboration, teachers applied their existing knowledge to meet the needs of

all students. Table 24 and Table 25 highlight the comments from a fourth grade teacher and a second grade teacher regarding teachers' perception of accountability and student academic achievement.

Table 24

Fourth Grade Teacher First Interview–Correen

Line Transcript Excerpt

1 Because we're always discussing first best instruction when we get  
2 together, I feel like I have many more ideas on specifically how to teach  
3 certain subjects. We didn't really used to do that so much. We talked  
4 about things and ideas we can put in our lesson plans, but I actually felt  
5 like I had to go to teachers and say, "I feel I cannot teach this. What  
6 exactly are you doing?" "Why do your students have these scores and my  
7 students have these scores?" So, it's opened up, we've been able to talk  
8 about our teaching. And it kind of has made me see my weaknesses,  
9 because we change what we're teaching all the time. Things I thought I  
10 was good at teaching, I'm struggling a little bit and I need to get some  
11 more input.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

Both of these excerpts denote a high degree of accountability that came as a result of teachers working together (Table 24: line 1; Table 25: lines 6-7). Correen (4T) and Jane (2T) also stressed that teachers were more willing to

discuss their strengths and weaknesses, as directly correlated to their students' academic achievement (Table 24: lines 6-7; Table 25: lines 8).

Correen (4T) even made reference to the way she used to teach in isolation (Table 24: lines 3) and when any form of support was needed, she had to, by her own initiative, look for it. Their collaborative process allowed them to open up (Table 24: line 7), look at student scores, compare to each other (Table 25: line 1), and share best practices (Table 24: line 10-11; Table 25: line 6).

#### Table 25

##### Second Grade Teacher Second Interview—Jane

###### Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 Our first step was to really look at our scores and compare to other
- 2 teachers. With PLC you come to the table and realize that I'm not
- 3 providing all that I can use and I'm not providing a broad enough base,
- 4 that I'm hitting the lows, I'm hitting the highs. That perhaps, grammar is
- 5 not my strength. We come to the meeting with the mindset of being
- 6 prepared... being willing to share the good and the bad... working
- 7 together.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

Hence, PLCs at City Elementary disrupted teaching as traditionally characterized and created norms and expectancies that eventually led individual teachers to reexamine their practices as a dichotomy between

privatization and open classroom. Teachers had a sense of applying knowledge in a methodical way, substantiating their technical competency and ability to meet the needs of all students.

The transcript in Table 26 reflects Mary's (2T) perception about her team's collaborative practices:

Table 26

Second grade teacher second interview – Mary

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 The expectation during collaboration is that we provide each other
- 2 support, ideas, and techniques. That we work together as a team. The
- 3 learning is two-fold, the learning that occurs in each of our meetings. We
- 4 learn from each other ideas and a lot about ourselves, about our strengths
- 5 and weaknesses, so that we could provide a better environment for our
- 6 kids.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

In the excerpt in Table 26, Mary (2T), a veteran teacher, in light of her professional relationship with her colleagues, addressed the learning process as one in which expectations for those participating in the collaborative process (line 1) are developed. It was noticeable in her comment that, in working together, formal learning has taken place in the form of “support, ideas, and techniques” (lines 1-2). Mary (2T) further suggests that she believes this form of dialogue “provide[s] a better environment for our kids”

(line 5). This view was validated by other teachers; they discussed how their instruction has been affected in such a way that they now felt much more competent in differentiating their instruction to meet the needs of all students.

### **Meeting Student Academic Needs**

All interviewed PLC team members shared with me insights regarding how they became reciprocal contributors to the body of technical knowledge within their learning communities. A consistent theme that emerged from these interviews was that the teachers' main motivation and reward for involvement with one another was their ability to tailor their instruction to meet the specific needs of students. The participating teachers referred to this process as one that allowed them to meet individual needs for a specified amount of time, making sure that these students received targeted instruction at their level.

The excerpt in Table 27 denotes a sophisticated system of accountability that is nonexistent in traditional settings. As a result of their collective ownership of student learning (line 1), teachers had a sense of accountability to each other for the reason that, for a specific amount of time, they taught someone else's students (lines 2-3). The formal system of responsibility went beyond the expectancies of state or district accountability

measures to the specificity of agreed upon skills that teachers must teach during leveling time (lines 3, 5-6).

Table 27

Second Grade Lead Teacher Second Interview

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 Now we say, *'these are our kids, not just my kids'*. Ah... and in the same  
2 way you're totally held accountable, because for half an hour, you have  
3 somebody else's kids and they come back talking about what you have or  
4 have not been doing in that half hour block, you know... and not to punish  
5 any of the teachers, but if you have your kids not do anything, and they're  
6 not learning the skills that they're supposed to be learning, well, kids talk  
7 or we ask them, when they come back, 'What did you learn at leveling  
8 today?'... just in casual conversation...
- 9 "Oh, we watched a video." "Oh, really?!" "Was it on multiple meaning  
10 words or compound words?" "No, it was such and such." "Oh, it's  
11 interesting." You know. Yea, you're held accountable, because you're  
12 teaching everybody else's kids now....

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

Thus, at City Elementary, as teachers established systematic ways to formally assess student learning, they also created structures that facilitated the discussion of shared long-term outcome objectives so that their dialogical practices engaged with the production of lasting changes in the organization.



Furthermore, in Table 27, the implicit, informal systems of accountability teachers developed for student learning is evidenced (line 11), “What did you learn at leveling today?” (line 6-7). It is worth noticing the follow up statement made by Lisa (2L), ‘just in casual conversation’ (line 8), denotes a sense of relatedness with her colleagues that it did not seem to be intended to harm one another, but rather, to ensure that the professionalism was maintained by all (line 11-12). Thus, formally, teachers collaborated and planned to meet the academic needs of students. Informally, however, they ensured the agreements they reached were held consensually by the group (lines 8 & 11).

One of the most salient characteristics teachers described, which evolved over time, was their sophisticated approach to assess students’ learning as a means to tailor instruction based on students’ unique academic needs. At first, teachers did not have a shared form of formative assessment. They stated that their way of assessing students was limited to the summative tests done at the end of every trimester at the district level and once a year at the state level. Although the process of assessing student learning took place within the context of their individual classrooms, teachers acknowledged that in isolation, it was an unattainable task. In working together, however, their technical capacity increased enough to achieve this goal. Furthermore, in considering the expectancies of their daily routines,

teachers' time was mediated by organizational constraints, standardization, and accountability factors that could have inhibited their sense of self in their classrooms. Thus, consulting with others improved their capacity and augmented the quality of their response to meeting the academic needs of students through possible interventions, even though the work itself was still carried out within the context of their own classroom (Little, 1990).

The discourse features highlighted in Table 28 provide insight into the existing trust level among colleagues (line 4), where their vulnerability was not a sign of weakness but rather of competence and commitment which enabled teachers to establish collegial relationships that supported each other's learning (lines 4 & 6). Through their dialectic practices, teachers became more intuitive and self-reflective about their own practices. Rather than simply justifying the way they did what , teachers had to demonstrate through data that what they did supported measurable student learning (lines 1-2). Thus, PLC meetings served to open up the socio-cultural isolation of the self-contained classroom. Teachers at City Elementary no longer had absolute control over the teaching of the students in their classrooms. That individual sense of ownership seemed to have shifted to a unified view of their collective responsibility for student learning, particularly among grade level staff. Here is the excerpt from Correen (4T):

Table 28

Fourth Grade Teacher Second Interview–Correen

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 Teaching the kids at their level, you know, doing formal assessments, as
- 2 well as, informal assessments in class and watching them really gain the
- 3 knowledge they struggle with, in their own classes while their learning at
- 4 their own level... as far as teachers, sharing our practices, it's neat too,
- 5 because we do share... You know, you kind of make yourself more
- 6 vulnerable and open for new ideas.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

The plurality of approaches to instruction existing in traditional school settings changed to shared, common practices that were informally supported by peer accountability and agreements negotiated in open discussions among all team members in a PLC. Interviewed teachers made repeated references to their leveling process (Table 27: line 7), which was used as a term to explain their homogenous grouping of students based on academic competency. Once students were divided into groups, they moved between classrooms to receive specific instruction based on teachers' expertise. This system was dependent on the formal assessments teachers built into their schedule to ensure that all students mastered the content standards (Table 28: lines 1-2). This type of joint work relied on teachers' interconnectedness and sense of professionalism regarding collective agreements.

However, it could be argued that teachers organized as PLC in different settings may not share the same knowledge, technical language, interconnectedness, or sense of professional accountability. To a certain degree this should be expected, given the different degrees of PLC implementation experienced by collaborative teams. Both of the teams in this study voluntarily agreed to be participating subjects, which does not necessarily imply that the other collaborative teams at City Elementary achieved such degree of joint work (Little, 1990). However, the specific circumstances of each of these teams needs to be considered as a specific case study to further the discussion related to the evolving state of shared knowledge and technical language within the context of PLCs.

### **The Evolving State of Accountability and Professional Development in the Context of PLC Reform**

The most basic premise of PLC is teachers learning about each other's students' academic achievement. Historically, teachers have had individual control of their students' academic success (Lortie, 1975) and any form of accountability has been externally imposed through layers of bureaucratic control at the local, state, and national level and often delayed until standardized testing is given. When these results arrive, it is often too late to do anything, which results in widening achievement gaps.

Within their own “kingdom,” as quoted by the principal at City Elementary, teachers had the ability to exercise their expertise within the context of their classrooms, and their learning was either based on their individual experience or reflective of their own initiative, rather than the institutional norm. Thus, PLCs, in this particular context, disrupted the traditional approach to teaching one’s own students to teaching all students in a grade level, increasing the collective sense of ownership and accountability. When teachers agreed to open their grade books and discuss the academic achievement of their students and, thus, provide immediate interventions to those students who were failing to meet those expectations, they learned about the commonalities of teaching in a professional continuum. The learning that occurred within this context allowed teachers to openly discuss their students’ academic competency, and because it was specific to a number of identified skills, it allowed room for feedback into their own capacity (see Table 25: line 1).

Therefore, allowing for changes on teachers’ daily instruction provided a safe environment to enhance instructional practices. Each of the participating teams devised different options for an intervention system developed to provide re-teaching, support, extra practice, and enrichment by sharing students, re-grouping, or other options. It also underlined individual competency in teaching specific concepts and, based on their level of trust,

drew attention to the professional needs teachers had as they strove to increase their expertise in teaching. These processes were essential to the structuring of professional development at City Elementary. Teachers' instruction ability level varied in degree of knowledge and application, thus conversations that happened within the context of PLCs increased the common shared knowledge, as well as highlighted the need to attend further developmental training.

In traditional school organizations, teachers have limited opportunities to develop targeted professional development opportunities; rather, teacher learning is contingent on individual teacher effort or the competency of the administrator in charge, who could either enhance or inhibit this process (Lortie, 1975). This may be one of the reasons that the professional competency of teachers has lost its legitimization when compared to the long-standing professions.

It could be argued that, although teachers have had multiple opportunities for professional development, because of randomness in purpose and lack of consistency in application, their expertise varies widely and often tends to be achieved by individuals, rather than the community of professionals (Lortie, 1975). Paradoxically, professional development has usually been organized in such a way that there is little or no consistency among school districts as they attempt to apply new knowledge or innovative

teaching skills (Fullan, 2001; Little, 1999; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994). The lack of normative professional learning inhibits teachers' capacity to systematically arrive at agreements that would eventually affect the teaching and learning school wide (Senge, 1990).

The principal stated that, at City Elementary, teachers seemed to have "a purpose to learn." Their collective effort became regulatory in matters of professional development and every opportunity they had for increased learning was brought forth to the team so that its collective application became the norm. In my observations, the members of both teams who participated in some form of professional development returned to the site and began to publicly entertain the new ideas they learned. This process had at its core student learning and not only strengthened the ties among team members, but it also increased their collective shared knowledge (see Table 19).

During teachers' collaboration time, questions went back and forth between team members regarding their accomplishments or lack thereof. Their joint responsibility evoked a closer examination of their instructional practices, and what they did within the confinements of their own classrooms became open knowledge to the team as they were expected to share and justify the academic achievement of their students, especially after the rest of the team knew individual students. As professionals, there seemed to be a

shared sense of urgency to show mastery and competency on the subject matter. Hence, teachers who in the past had been isolated and working on their own were now willing to foster collegial relationships with their team members, relationships that bound the group to better respond to the needs of students.

In Table 29, (Jane) stated her experience after participating in the conference about PLCs. In this case is noticeable once again the technicality of interactive patterns teachers had in which, decisions about leveled groups (line 2), collaboration, goals, and data (lines 3, 6 & 7) were substantiated by students' academic achievement (line 6).

Table 29

Jane's Perspective on PLC

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 When I trained on PLCs with the DuFour's, it totally changed my
- 2 perspective. It's amazing because I finally heard what they had to say
- 3 about why leveled groups worked, and why collaboration and data and all
- 4 of that stuff is so important. And it totally changed what I thought. In the
- 5 past, we were not collaborating as a professional learning community, yes,
- 6 we had collaboration, but it was not the same as what we're doing now.
- 7 It's effective for student learning. We have goals, we have data.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.



These comments were consistent across teams, and they appeared to be part of their shared technical language. The institution, in this scenario, responded by providing a change to the structure of the school and created a schedule that reflected the time allocation needed for teams to meet on a weekly basis (see Table 14). Within the context of these meetings, teachers seemed to have a purpose. They developed norms. They maintained agendas. Teachers' dialogue focused on student learning, and the questions driving their conversations were aligned to the proposed expectations found in the literature about PLCs (DuFour et al., 1998):

1. Exactly what is it we want all students to learn?
2. How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills?
3. What happens in our school when a student does not learn?

Do PLCs allow teachers to acquire and articulate technical knowledge together? This investigation has shown that within the observed teams, they have at City Elementary; PLCs enabled professional conversations which made this process happen. Nevertheless, much debate has risen as a result of the PLC initiative, not necessarily because of the benefits associated with collaborative practices, but because of the traditional mold in which schools operate, ranging from schools organized so that their teachers are interdependent on each other to schools where teachers are independent of

each other. Within my research site, the principal stated that different teams were at different levels on the continuum of collaboration. This, however, did not invalidate the process, but strengthened the argument regarding the varying outcomes of PLCs. Furthermore, it solidified the notion that teachers might be on the right path to establish new parameters identifying their professional status when compared to other professions.

### **Shared Agreements: the Norm of PLC**

In the summary of terms related to PLCs provided by Huffman (2001) , the foundational terms include: connectedness, shared norms and values, shared decision making, and joint responsibility (as cited in Hipp et al., 2001). These attributes were evident in one of my observations. The fourth grade team was discussing the specific needs of their students and how each teacher would meet those needs. The discussion focused on the extra help offered by the administration in the resource setting. Although the number of students allowed to participate in resource intervention was just three to five, they argued back and forth about who would benefit most, even considering that most of the resource students came from one classroom. The scheduling and identification of students grabbed most of their time at that session. In Table 30, I encapsulated a comment Ron (4L) made during one of their PLC meetings in dealing with disagreement.

Table 30

Ron's Approach to Shared Agreements

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 One of the things we have to realize in PLC is that we're four and if three
- 2 of us agree on something, the last one has to learn to live with it... the
- 3 thing is, what we learn you're going to learn it too, and perhaps, don't like
- 4 it, but can live with it.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

There was disagreement among team members; thus, they tried to reach consensus regarding the group of students to be offered the additional resources. The discourse features highlighted in Table 30 denote a remarkable reflection by Ron (4L). He was part of the original leadership team that decided to implement the initiative. As the leader of the group, he clarified the process embedded in PLC which does not require agreement among all members but rather an opportunity to express concerns and then to move on with the agreements of the majority (lines 1-2).

Learning to live with decisions that perhaps were far from their core belief system was at the heart of this collaborative team (line 4). Moreover, it was a test of compliance to demonstrate that, although the decision was not fully accepted, everyone had an opportunity to be heard. What happened in the classroom was still subject to the teacher's discretion, however, \after Ron's comment, the team discussed the intervention rotations and the

number of students serviced in each group. They critically reflected in the need to agree and move on and engaged in a relevant dialogue about what mattered most, students' academic achievement.

The interaction of this team, however, brings to light a criticism to PLC, which occurred in repeated occasions. Although the collaborative process should have addressed instruction and learning, teachers spent most of their time discussing who should be in each group and what skill should be given priority. Learning in these PLC meetings was not evaluative of instructional approaches or metacognitive processes, but rather of individual student deficiencies, skills needed for testing, and distribution of assignments based on personal criteria and mastery of a concept. Because of the limited amount of time teachers had to collaborate, minor tasks subtracted from opportunities to maximize professional learning. If the process is not regulated by a shared professional code, then the focus of meetings can easily deviate from desired objectives (see Table 15). The literature supporting PLC states that teachers should jointly participate in collaborative practices and interdependently arrive at agreements that specifically define who the students are, what they needed to learn (standards), the assessments intended to evaluate student learning, the scaffolding of interventions for those students with specific needs, and, last, the enrichment activities for the

students who showed mastery of the concepts being taught (DuFour et al., 2004).

Clearly, teachers at City Elementary perceived themselves as still learning about each other and about their students, and in repeated interviews, they defined their status as beginners in the PLC implementation process. At this stage of their implementation, the knowledge acquired and articulated was centered on student learning and mastery of academic skills. Their pattern of discourse revolved around student grasp of content standards, which promoted a form of professional accountability that both bound the teachers together and raised the bar for academic achievement. During their collaborative meetings, teachers defined what students needed to learn and how they were going to assess student learning. The sophistication of their assessments was not centered on external measures of accountability, but on a thoughtful analysis of students' strengths and weaknesses and a definition of the particularities of possible interventions.

As stated by Little (1999),

Schools organized for teacher learning would promote the systematic study of teaching and learning in at least two ways. First, the school would support teachers in investigating questions, problems, and curiosities that arise in teaching ... Second, a school would promote the

study of teaching and learning by developing the organizational habit of shared student assessment. (p. 236-237)

The joint work and collective agreements teachers can achieve as a result of their involvement in PLC greatly differ from their traditional role in the classroom once permeated by privatization and isolation. However,, these processes involving joint work, collective agreements, and professional accountability happened at City Elementary as a result of the trusting relationships established among team members. The next chapter will look more closely to this element, the power of relationships, and how relationships influenced the way teachers communicated with one another, the way they learned about each other.

## Chapter 6

### The Power of Relationships on the PLCs

Collegial relationships include five critical attributes: caring relationships; trust and respect, recognition and celebrations; risk effort and a unified effort to embed change... We found the schools that were functioning at the institutional phase had these support systems firmly in place, which were deemed essential elements for school learning and school improvement (Hipp et al., 2003, p. 10).

I have constructed two main themes from the observations and interviews pertaining to the acquisition and articulation of technical knowledge: (a) through collaborative practices, teachers involved in PLC share technical knowledge about students (academic achievement) and teachers (professional expertise, practices, and beliefs), and (b) participating teachers are accountable to each other. Both of these themes are intertwined and of prime importance as I considered the continuum of learning. However, to fully understand teachers' interactional patterns, I must go back to the core-- relationships. Much has been said regarding the content and adequacy of the collaborative practices of teachers as they become a PLC. The spectrum is wide, ranging from groups of teachers who are persistent in maintaining their sense of privacy and are now placed in settings that expect them to relate to one another in a collegial manner; to groups of teachers who have brought their collective effort to unify their instructional strategies as a way to meet the academic expectancies of students because of their trusting and

professional relationships,. Thus, I must first define the role relationships have in the school as an organization.

Fostering efficacious relationships seemed to be an important goal for both the principal and teachers at City Elementary. The principal stated that, in retrospect, their involvement with PLC was “all about relationships.” Teachers also supported this assertion stating that the successful implementation of PLC with their teams was due to the way they related to each other in and out of the school setting. They made remarks regarding their closeness even before collaborative practices were institutionalized.

I observed, in numerous instances, how the affection and respect teachers demonstrated for one another facilitated the creation of effective patterns of interaction during collaborative PLC meetings. In Table 31, Becky (2T) stated that in the past, they did relate to one another and share ideas (lines 1-2). She made references to exchanges of information that happened informally. The excerpt in Table 31 is indicative of how teachers related to each other prior to PLC:



Table 31

Becky's Perspective on PLC

Line	Transcript Excerpt
1	We always <u>got together</u> . We <u>did lesson plans</u> and we <u>shared ideas</u> . But
2	now <u>we actually share students</u> , which makes a big difference. Now <u>we</u>
3	<u>have data</u> so, we're looking at where kids started, where kids are now and
4	kids are rotating through different groups, and that's all different... The
5	<u>focus is on different skills</u> , coming up with <u>common assessments</u> , I think
6	is the number one difference.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

Becky (2T) explained that in the past teachers had been friends with each other, “we always got together” (line 1), but their collaborative practices were limited to the phenomenological discrete forms of interaction, as defined by Little (1990): (a) storytelling and scanning, (b) sharing, and (c) aid and assistance—“did lessons plans, shared ideas” (line 1). Then, they became part of a formal process in which they not only shared these informal interactional patterns, but, they also trusted one another in sharing what traditionally constituted an individual responsibility, students. She said, “we actually share students” (lines 1-2). Furthermore, she discussed an emerging technicality about “different skills” and “common assessments” (line 5), taking ownership of instruction for all students and agreeing upon data based on specific benchmarks. This statement was further validated by her

colleagues. From their comments, I inferred that their social relationships, in and of themselves, did not cause professional interconnectivity, but rather provided the initial support for the sociocultural norms and processes proposed by PLCs that enabled communicative patterns that went beyond social relations into the heart of professional enterprise.

### **Relationships as Enablers**

Relationships at City Elementary were considered carefully in the implementation of PLCs. The principal stated that he invested much of his first year in building social capital, establishing relationships with “key players” and getting to know the staff, so that he could promote much-needed reform for the school. After introducing the concept and technical language related to PLC on his second year, the leadership team, led by the principal, decided to make City Elementary a PLC. Several factors came in to play in their decision regarding the continuation of PLC at City Elementary: (a) their relative success (as perceived by participating teachers and administrators) in year one of implementation; (b) the professional development conferences they attended; and, (c) the support received from Riverside County Office of Education. As a result of their focused approach in math, participating teachers stated that a great number of students significantly increased in their academic achievement in this area, which gave teachers the confidence

to take on a new challenge and extend the focus area of intervention to language arts for the 2007-08 school year.

The principal and participating teachers, however, described this next step within PLCs as convoluted and taxing. There were several factors they described as contributors to their confusion, including limited time to collaborate, restricted financial resources, partial training pertinent to the needs of students, inadequate understanding about the theoretical foundation of collaborative practices, and faulty assumptions about collective agreements at the time. Thus, the principal, after close scrutiny of the way teachers approached this challenge and how it was causing conflict to the existing relationships of staff members, decided to redirect teachers' attention and streamline their approach to intervention. Mr. Pal (A) redirected teachers to focus on only one area, language arts, so that their expertise could emerge in this area, paralleling the approach they had taken towards math instruction during the previous school year (2006-07).

The role of the principal in this situation was decisive in ensuring the continuation of PLC reforms at City Elementary. He noted that the relationships of his staff members were threatened by increased stress levels and their lack of expertise in implementing a new intervention. Thus, his decision to redirect their attention to a specific area was intended to sustain

the supportive culture of the school and the momentum they had in implementing PLC.

The teams, then, redirected their focus and addressed the needs of students in the area of language arts. Although, teachers stated, “at first it did not seem to have the same fluidity as math had,” they established a pattern of interaction that facilitated the discussion of student learning goals. Teachers stated that having gone through the process the year before allowed them to apply the same process to the acquisition of skills in language arts. Specific and targeted objectives were demarcated and timelines set, in addition to the leveling of students and group formation among team members. During my observations, it was evident that during that school year (2008-09), the conversations had specificity regarding the joint work (see Little, 1990) that teachers needed to accomplish in helping students acquire mastery of skills.

### **The Role of Relationships**

McAllister (1995) stated that horizontal working relationships are critical to sustain effective coordinated action, which are “only possible where there is mutual confidence or trust” (pp. 25). Relationships, then, must be acknowledged as the primary source for professional interaction among participating teachers. Furthermore, it was the validation of this affective component within the institution that created the conditions necessary to

foster collegial relationships among team members. At City Elementary, relationships evolved to permeate the negotiations and transactions happening during PLC meetings regarding teachers' professional growth and student academic achievement. They also allowed teachers to change the status of privatization of practices in relationship to student mastery of academic skills in specific areas related to math and language arts. Therefore, relationships directly impacted teachers' awareness and understanding of student learning from a grade level perspective as opposed to their traditional view of their individual classrooms. This tacit knowledge increased substantially throughout this process and allowed them to meet students' academic needs with accuracy and success. Relationships, then, could be defined as a concrete universal affecting the meaning and meaning-making of the cultural currency found in groups of teachers who are part of a PLC. McDermott and Varenne (2006) stated that this significant feature permeating collaborative practices is salient to, pervasive in, and characteristic of teachers as professionals, to creating cultures that engage teachers and arrange their collaboration.

Teachers ventured into what Little (1990) defined as joint work. At City Elementary, the norms and expectations for the participating teams were clearly demarcated and personal friendships, although implicit, became prerogative to their interactive patterns. Such was the case when

participating teachers tried to hold each other accountable or bring an issue to the team; their exchanges were coded with messages that showed a connectivity that went beyond the process itself to a camaraderie that extended beyond their classrooms into their personal life (see Table 32).

For instance, Correen (4T) referenced how her mother helped her younger brother as a valid tip to help struggling readers (lines 5& 6). This comment would not be considered as relevant in a different setting. However, based on the relationship connecting Correen (4T) to the group, Roy (4T) reaffirmed the suggestion, named the brother, and reflected back on his own childhood memories (lines 14-15), which served as a way to validate the suggestion and to consider it as a viable option to apply within the context of instruction. What Correen (4T) communicated is a reflection that involved self-disclosure of a childhood memory based on the trustworthiness of the team. Wheelless (1978) defined the different degrees of self-disclosure as “necessary to assess their linkage to each other within the broader concept of trust” (pp. 144). Furthermore, this particular way of associating teaching to one’s own experience was documented by Lortie (1975), who stated that teachers have a sense of familiarity with the profession because of the association they had during their own schooling (lines 7-8).

Table 32

Fourth Grade Exchange of Relatedness

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 **Ron:** I think we can create something like directions or reading  
2 directions... because if our kids don't take the time to read the  
3 directions...
- 4 **Correen:** You know what? This is gonna sound so stupid... but I bet if we  
5 did this I think we should do a little experiment before testing about  
6 reading and reading everything thoroughly like create a list or something.  
7 My mom did this with my brother, and I've been wanting to do this with  
8 my class, but when he was little because he didn't listen to steps. So, she  
9 made him a list to do this, do this, do this, and do this. When you are  
10 finished, come read this list to me. Well, he never got to the end of the  
11 thing. He never came and read the list to her. Because our kids go  
12 through it the same way, they don't read the questions thoroughly. If they  
13 did, they would find the answers, especially when they read to the end of  
14 the test.
- 15 **Karen:** Make it something like that.
- 16 **Phil:** You're talking about Kyle, right. That would be great. I remember  
17 taking a test when they ask you to read everything and when you get to  
18 the end it says only do number one.
- 19 **Correen:** They don't read it.

20 **Ron:** A couple of my kids are very question oriented. But we should teach  
21 them specifically what to do.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

It was also common to hear teachers ask for suggestions or assistance in specific areas within the context of the group in which an exchange of ideas and information was expected without risking the status within the group. Therefore, it could be argued that the teachers participated in traditional, informal, technical exchanges and applied themselves in contexts that affected all teachers within the team.

Teachers who have willingly ventured into this process relate to one another in such a way that their togetherness becomes the catalyst for their professional growth. Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) stated that working together involves interdependence, and trust plays a pivotal role in enabling this process. When the administration referred to the successful practices of these teams, the principal defined it in light of the relationships being established and teachers' response to them. "It's all about relationships," the principal stated. Thus, until we are able to define and assess the role that the affective elements play in the school organizations, we may well be limited in our ability to sustain efforts to enhance teacher collegiality such as PLCs.



Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) propose a model of trust to explain the organizational conditions that must be present to lead social actors into action. Their conceptualization of trust is based on ability, benevolence, integrity, and the existence of perceived risk which will lead to outcomes. This idea has been further validated by other scholars who distinguish affect-based trust, one existing in dating and other such relationships, from cognition-based trust, one based on an organizational setting where there are specific boundary conditions (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995). It can be argued that teaching is about relationships; the way a teacher relates to students, the way he/she establishes trusting relationships either enables or inhibits student learning; and a case can be made regarding teams of teachers within the context of PLCs. The relationships to each other enabled by the cognitive and affective-based trust among team members becomes the foundation that fosters learning.

### **The Significance of Supportive Dialectic Practices**

The dialogue used by participating teachers often centered on student academic achievement. Each member contributed based on his/her individual experience and how she/he approached tasks in the past. In one instance, one of the teachers explained how she posted a chart showing the writing and editing steps for second graders, and how her students followed the prompt successfully. All team members exchanged ideas in a non-intrusive way, by

either contributing to and/or validating one another as often as they could. In Table 33 there are comments loaded with emotion and supporting statements validating a proposed idea: “too cute,” “I wish I was in one of your groups,” “I like that,” “a good idea” (lines 1, 2, 4 & 7).

Table 33

Second Grade Team Relatedness

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 **Carol:** That is too cute...
- 2 **Lisa:** I wish I was in one of your groups.
- 3 **Jane:** I made it really simple at the beginning...
- 4 **Liz:** Yea, I like that.
- 5 **Jane:** If there’s a way to assess on the 25<sup>th</sup>, we can use that PLC to level
- 6 for writing instead of making CFAs, and that might carry us for a while.
- 7 **Carol:** Yea, that might be a good idea to plan the rest of our PLCs.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

This kind of interactive patterns demonstrates that the strength of the existing relationship is at the core of collaborative practices. The affective side of the interaction found in a PLC is one that requires more attention, as it becomes the cultural determinant of the processes through which teachers are able to share and to learn from one another (e.g., line 3 when Jane explained how she made the task “really simple at the beginning”).

During my observations, teachers validated each other's instructional practices through targeted expressions of personal affection (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995), such as: "I like it a lot," "I really like it," "I like that," "I'd like to try that," "I think I like it," "I don't like it," and "I love that." This sense of approval reflected the value teachers placed on relationships through a shared, learned system of interaction. It was extremely rare to hear anyone challenging someone else's ideas or to have someone question a suggestion. This metacognitive process could arguably be attributable only to situations in which teachers referred to specific outcomes associated with students' academic achievement. Otherwise, their thinking was more in line with their feelings as they applied their intellect and reasoning skills to solve problems. During my observations of the group, teachers maintained their connectedness, made suggestions, and/or implied changes in such a way that seemed to look for the approval of the group—peer pressure could be a powerful tool to conform to the norm of the group—and conflict was rarely directly presented, but always veiled and diminished so that the dynamics of the group interactions and the relationships were not affected by this process.

### **Relationships as Disablers**

DuFour and Eaker (1998) emphasized the term community, an environment where educators, linked by common interests, cooperate and provide emotional support for one another in order to achieve collectively

what they cannot achieve individually. The authors focused on the effects of the school culture on student outcomes as a long-standing concern in educational research. During the interviews, trust was evident in both the second and fourth grade teams (e.g., Tables 27 and 26). I found this ethos of trust in both grade levels. Second grade had seven members in the group while fourth grade team had four. Both of these teams, although different in size, grade level, and gender ratio, relied heavily on relationships. The way they approached an issue or an idea was by questioning and asking for clarification. No one backed up their statements with absolutes, but rather with options that often were open for discussion. Even when the application of an instructional strategy proved to be effective, teachers made it sound as part of their thinking and expected some form of validation from the group (see Table 33). Ideas were not challenged explicitly, but rather through innuendos that implicitly asked for clarification.

In the excerpt described in Table 34, Becky (2T) voiced a concern using a soft tone of voice and minimized her apprehension by calling it “little tiny concern” (line 1). What I interpreted from Becky’s approach to addressing her concern was a hidden statement: We’re overlooking the importance of math. Let’s stop and discuss how we can teach math within the limitations of our time. Is this a problem for everyone? The response given by Lisa (2L) validated her concern, yet, rather than addressing the dilemma as a grade

level, Jane (2T) gave Becky (2T) the authority to do what was needed within the context of her classroom (lines 6-7) if she felt like it (line 6).

The vignette in Table 34 exemplifies the dialogical practices of teachers as they approach concerns:

Table 34

Second Grade Team's Approach to Concerns

Line Transcript Excerpt

- 1 **Becky:** I just have a little tiny concern.
- 2 **Jane:** Sure
- 3 **Becky:** When are we teaching math? Because my math cuts off into my
- 4 writing.
- 5 **Lisa:** Yea, math runs into 1:40.
- 6 **Jane:** I would say if you feel that your math block needs to be longer...
- 7 don't cut your math short because you're right they need that.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined; major speech function italicized.

The concern regarding the allocation of time to teach math was significant to Becky (2T) and from Lisa's (2L) statement was an issue for the grade level. However, it seemed that Becky (2T) did not want to offend Jane (2T) or to go against her proposed time for intervention, which is why she voiced her opinion in such a way that the group would not perceive it as confrontational. First she introduced the question using a plural pronoun that included all team members, we (line 3), rather than directly questioning

individual teachers. Then, she switched to the use of a personal possessive pronoun *my* (line 3) as though she were the only one with the issue. Lisa (2L) confirmed Becky's (2T) concern stating that "math runs into 1:40" (line 4), which indicated that the issue was not of one teacher but of the team. At this point, not all participating members discussed the options available, but rather Jane (2T) made the call to leave the instructional objective in this situation to Becky's (2T) discretion rather than the agreement of the group. Jane (2T) provided a sense of independence for one teacher to make a choice that would affect her classroom if she felt like it (line 6).

Paradoxically, in this kind of scenario relationships could become disablers as they could get in the way of professional accountability. When participating actors base their relationships on affect-based trust only, then organizational goals and professional accountability could affect teachers ability to monitor the improvement of their performance (McAllister, 1995). For both of the participating teams, existing relationships enabled them to informally exchange information and collaborate with one another prior to becoming a PLC. From my observations, relationships within the PLC became crucial in maintaining the dynamic of the group and in allowing teachers to be accountable for the academic achievement of their students. However, the strength of teachers' relationships hindered the possibility of

professionalizing collaborative practices in situations like the one described in Table 34.

This study was not intended to uncover the primacy of relationships in PLC nor was it meant to decontextualize the effect of relationships in the work environment. It does, however, provide an overview of the relevance of relationships to PLC reforms and recommendations that could guide future studies of the matter.

The literature pertaining to PLCs defines the idea of a community as the kind of culture that produces a communal ethos in which interdependent systems focus on student learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 1998; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lieberman, 1995; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989; Senge, 1990). It specifically addresses the behaviors and actions that create the professional knowledge necessary to foster high student achievement. The premise of the PLC model proposed by DuFour and Eaker (1998) focuses on the technical aspects of teaching as they relate to student learning: the need to specify what students need to learn; identify the way to assess what students have learned; and determine what to do when students fail to learn. From an organizational perspective, a collaborative approach does impose, in teachers, requirements that are linked to student academic achievement. However, this kind of approach does not guarantee that teachers will become interdependent and relate to one another (Cooper,

1988). It is at this stage where the affective side of institutions must be acknowledged to ensure that dialogical practices among teachers could be fostered in a climate of collegiality and support.

In PLCs, members foster relationships of trust among their constituencies—teachers, administrators, and community members—providing the opportunity to rely on each other’s strengths. Sergiovanni (1994) further validates this view and defines a professional community as a collectivity of individuals who share values, a common vision, and are bound to ideals. Although an intricate part in the making of a community, relationships of trust and interaction must be established for the purpose of accomplishing professional goals.

### **Trust and Interaction**

The account of collaborative practices at City Elementary shows how trust and cooperation enable the sharing of knowledge and expertise that, in turn, breaks down the barriers found in traditional settings. Although the implementation of PLC was fairly recent, teachers testified to the benefits of building a common knowledge base. The interaction found in schools where PLC has been institutionalized is confronted with four issues as highlighted by Cole (1991): “self-socialization, collegueship, community, and opportunity” (p. 415). In collaborative teams, interaction becomes a factor that alters the condition in which teachers traditionally develop their



expertise. Teachers are now willing to share ideas and best practices. In Table 35, the second grade team discusses alternatives for students to check their answers on a given test.

The kind of interaction portrayed in Table 35 could be considered unprofessional and lacking the structure found in formal meetings or in other professional settings. Teachers go back and forth arguing over the benefits of returning to the students the same test they had taken so that they could recheck it (lines 10). The counter-comments were posed as feelings, “I’m not sure how I feel about that” (line 16) while the validating arguments seemed to rely on personal preference, “I kind of like that” (line 23), or “it might be beneficial” (line 27). However, there are two elements that must be considered when referring to teachers’ interactional patterns. First, teachers related to each other on a personal level, (e.g., line 16-17); in order to have an ethos based on trust and cooperation, they must first develop an interdependent relationship that considers the person holistically. Furthermore, my observations demonstrated that for both grades, upper and lower, gender played a role where women tended to be more open regarding their personal life as opposed to men, who appeared more reserved regarding sharing anything personal other than the task at hand.

Table 35

Second Grade Interaction on Test Taking Strategies

Line	Transcript Excerpt
1	<b>Mary:</b> We can <u>pretest for the next level</u> groups maybe that Friday after
2	we're done... and it will give us <u>Monday to get the results</u> get the groups
3	going...
4	<b>Becky:</b> Starting Tuesday, 'cause that'd give four days on your level
5	groups.
6	<b>Lisa:</b> We <u>still have to think something</u> to do for our level groups here...
7	<b>Mary:</b> The day we test, we can hold our own kids and then test them?
8	<b>Becky:</b> Yes, <u>we'll test our own kids</u> .
9	<b>Liz:</b> Do we give them <u>the same test</u> ?
10	<b>Becky:</b> Yes, <u>we talked about giving them back the test</u> that they took
11	<b>Mary:</b> Yes, that's why we didn't write on them.
12	<b>Becky:</b> ...and have them go through it...
13	<b>Mary:</b> Yes
14	<b>Becky:</b> ... And redo it...
15	<b>Liz:</b> OK
16	<b>Jane:</b> <u>I'm not sure how I feel about that</u> .
17	<b>Cynda:</b> <u>I'm not sure about that</u> either.
18	<b>Becky:</b> About what, doing the same test or...?
19	<b>Cynda:</b> No, <u>handing them back the test that they took</u> , say you are
20	whoever took the test, Andrew, and then said, OK Andrew, I want you to

21 look over your test again and make sure that you're happy with all your  
22 answers.

23 **Lisa:** I kind of like that... We ask them to do that over and over in CSTs and  
24 they don't do anything, so it's kind of a nice teachable moment.

25 **Jane:** How do you relook over a test to see if you missed anything?

26 **Becky:** I don't know, we can always try it and see how it goes.

27 **Lisa:** It might be beneficial.

28 **Cynda:** But if they know it's the same test, they're gonna go: "we already  
29 did it" and they may not want to do it again.

30 **Becky:** Maybe if they have another color, crayon, pen, and if you think is  
31 right you need to put a happy face by it showing that you checked it...

32 **Lisa:** Look I checked it.

33 **Becky:** And if it's wrong or you think it's wrong, then you make it clear  
34 that, that's your answer changed. At least you know that they are  
35 touching every single one.

36 **Lisa:** They can use highlighters, or something, or color pencils.

37 **Mary:** I'd like to get a set of red pencils.

Note: Key marker of discourse feature underlined.

Although this study was not about gender differences or the characterization of interactive patterns among men and women, the difference in how men and women relate to one another must be highlighted as a subject for further inquiry. And second, the affective component of the group dynamic must be considered as precursor to enabling conversations

about teaching and learning. Teachers often expressed their feelings, as noted in the dialogue above. The foundational principles of teachers' interaction within this context relied heavily on values, activities, and relationships that portrayed community values.

However, this set of expectations and behaviors cannot be bestowed among teachers, nor can they be achieved by changing institutional arrangements and requirements. The need to rely on group values, activities, and relationships to foster educational change requires an understanding of the organizational and professional roles of teachers. As the research has shown, a new paradigm of school's functioning as a PLC has emerged with increased teacher reflection, data, and assessment to drive decision making, and shared responsibility for student achievement.

The literature supporting this new standard of change was that of PLCs (DuFour, 2004). However, to promote the development of PLCs requires professional development that is systematically embedded in the organization of the school, so that it becomes essential to the school structure, as well as its culture (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2006). Ultimately, this institutional model could serve as a model for school improvement and reform initiatives, one that provides increasing opportunities to facilitate the articulation and acquisition of technical knowledge to ensure that all students learn as proposed by PLC literature. However, all stakeholders (including district

level and teacher unions) must work collectively to overcome possible barriers that could come as a result of contractual agreements and negotiations to succeed as a school community that works in improving teaching and learning (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2001; Marzano, 2004). With these structures in place, enduring success could be achieved (Collins, 2001).

## Chapter 7

### Summary of Findings and Significance of Research

A systematic approach that builds a strong teaching profession and recruits and retains teachers where they are most needed must... develop, recognize, and share teacher knowledge and skill to create widespread expertise that can improve schools (Darling-Hammond, 2010, p. 206-207).

Schools in the United States often venture into promising practices intended to increase the academic achievement of students. A wave of educational reforms and possibilities bombards administrators, who often find their decision making affected by budgetary issues, accountability factors, and educational policies, in addition to institutional constraints. One promising reforms efforts has spread throughout the country with a rather simplistic approach to teacher learning and student accountability. The argument for this particular reform builds on a widely accepted body of literature regarding teacher collaboration and collegial practices stating that for schools to become effective, they must provide the means by which teachers, through joint practices and common agreements, could meet the academic needs of all students. The reform advocates for schools to become PLCs, based on specific and measurable outcomes pertaining to the academic achievement of students.

The literature provides empirical evidence to support the PLC approach to school reform (see DuFour et al., 2005). Researchers (Hipp et al.,

2003; Little, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1989) have endorsed collaboration for more than two decades as a way to increase teacher expertise. Thus, a needed area of analysis was whether or not the intended meaning embedded in the organizational model proposed by PLCs actually translated into meaningful acquisition and articulation of technical knowledge for teachers as professionals. This study explored PLC collaborative practices at an elementary school and how these practices translated into shared technical expertise and common language. It analyzed how the knowledge generated among participating teams evolved.

The rhetoric that supports the PLC approach has been substantiated by decades of research highlighting the importance of organizing schools into communities to foster individual and collective learning. However, the widely marketed approach, *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*, by DuFour and Eaker, (1998) fails to consider the overall complexity of establishing a collaborative culture in a school setting. PLC arguable involve a substantial effort that requires the redefinition of teachers as professionals, their professional knowledge, the reconceptualization of their traditional status given organizational constraints, and, most important, the fostering of trusting relationships among constituents as enablers for action.

Throughout this study, I have demonstrated how this initiative not only became instrumental in shaping City Elementary School's culture and affecting change, but also how PLC has significantly influenced the role and status of teachers as professionals from a cognitive perspective. At City Elementary, the dialogical practices that took place under the umbrella of collaboration impacted the way teachers viewed their practices and how those practices affected student learning. In both teams, second and fourth grades, teacher expectations became shared agreements and their decision making transformed the sphere of influence that individual teachers had over student academic achievement. Participating teachers were urged to ensure that all students learn, notwithstanding their socio-economic level, ethnic backgrounds, or linguistic ability.

The research also considered this reform effort through a sociological perspective, considering teaching as a profession and its characterization as affected by the institutionalization of PLC in a specific setting. At City Elementary, teachers systematically applied the PLC approach to their daily practices and took a risk based on the relationships they established (McAllister, 1995). Indeed, as noted in the results of standardized assessments over the course of four years (see Table 5), the changes instituted through PLC, although specifically affecting only a fraction of their day, reveal significant academic gains for students at City Elementary. This



focused approach was based on the learning that occurred within the context of teachers' collaborative meetings, which focused on student outcomes, and, also, on immediate interventions when learning objectives were not achieved.

The acquisition and articulation of professional knowledge among participating teachers when compared to the long standing professions revealed some similarities based on the increasing technical language they shared and the collective agreements being upheld, which could attribute an increasing professional characterization to teaching as a profession.

Therefore, the process by which instruction has become more systematic substantiates the argument that qualifies teaching as the learning profession. This process, of course, comes as a result of the unique link that qualifies and substantiates the collaboration of teachers' trusting relationships as validated by literature on trust and relationships in organizations (Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995; Wheelless, 1978).

The example of City Elementary also exemplified the impact change has on an institution and its members (Fullan, 2003). While teachers at City Elementary underwent a cultural shift institutionally driven by the boundary change and new administration, they also coped with the change of staff members leaving the school and new staff members arriving. City Elementary lost 15 of its staff members to other schools because, according to interviewed participants, they had a difficult time adjusting to the possible

challenges projected by the change in the student population. Although this study did not address the reasons some teachers decided to leave, it is important to note that unequal representation of student subgroups at a school site represented a major challenge in matters of consistency and cultural cohesiveness. As stated in a report of the status of the teaching profession in the state of California:

Underprepared teachers are distributed unevenly throughout the state. California's lowest-performing schools—those where highly qualified and experienced teachers are most needed—continue to have the least prepared teaching staffs. Similarly, schools that serve the highest proportion of poor and minority students and English-language learners struggle more with attracting and retaining fully prepared teachers. (Esch et al., p. xi)

Furthermore, schools confronted with these kinds of cultural challenges have to redefine their vision, mission, and goals. Such was the case with City Elementary, which led its principal to open a dialogue with teachers that elicited a wide range of responses, from adaptation to adoption, or even refusal to change.

This study demonstrated that teachers participating in a PLC develop a stronger sense of professionalism based on their collaborative and dialectic practices. Their participation, although locally contextualized, could

transcend its immediacy to other collaborative teams, sharing common attributes and showing similar organizational patterns. Furthermore, the study highlighted the complexity of teaching and learning and how the intricacies of both processes must be locally contextualized and representative of the needs of students. It would be an error to define teacher learning without considering the locale and the context in which it evolves. Teacher learning developed in direct response to the academic, socio-economic, and linguistic needs of a specific community of students.

When PLC is considered as a reform effort, there is a need to involve institutions and policy makers in a conversation about the need to fundamentally reorganize the school day to schedule non-instructional time for the purpose of collaboration. It seems to be that the new buzz of the twenty-first century focuses on the skills of tomorrow that are needed for students to be successful. If such is the case, there is a need to increase allocated time for joint practices, so that teachers have an opportunity to systematically address student academic needs and come to collective agreements about curriculum and instruction. Scheduling non-instructional time within the school day could represent a major challenge for school administrators, who are constrained by policies and regulations. Furthermore, for institutions to achieve such complex tasks, teachers'

associations and districts must come to consensual agreements modeling a level of professionalism comparable to other professions.

The two recurring themes found in this study revealed, first, the evolving state of the dialogical practices among participating teachers regarding the technical knowledge acquired and articulated within the context of PLC. This body of knowledge, although permeated by accountability policies that come from the federal, state, and district level, took on a much broader sense of professional accountability: that of the individual teacher to the team. Teachers demonstrated a focused, instructional approach based on specific standards and student mastery of those standards. The second theme found in this investigation indicated that teacher conversations were driven by specific benchmarks and timely interventions which resulted in increased student academic achievement. This kind of setting views accountability from a different perspective. Participating teachers hold each other accountable, and their professionalism becomes the norm for their actions. This kind of accountability could represent a new dimension to teaching as a profession which, when institutionalized, could become the driving force for the institution. Policy makers must consider this in the new area of accountability, so that policy can take into account the status of teachers as professionals when they become involved in learning organizations.

Last, the study focused on the primacy of relationships within the context of collaborative teams. If PLCs function within the context of schools as learning organizations in such a way that student outcomes are directly correlated to instruction, then the characterization of students by their ethnic background would not be a determining factor of academic success. To do this, teachers must trust each other, be willing to take risks, and develop professional relationships that systematically enable them to meet student academic needs as a function of their instructional expertise (Darling-Hammond, 1995, 1999; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001, 2003; Lasiter, 1996; Liberman, 1988; Little, 1990, 1999; Mayer et al., 1995; McAllister, 1995; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1979; Riley et al., 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sergiovanni, 1994; Talbert & McLaughlin, 1994; Wheelless, 1978). Only collegial relationships and professional dialogical practices will allow teachers to view goals in a systematic way, to disclose their areas of strength and weakness, and to compel them to learn from one another.

The evolving stage of PLC implementation at City Elementary demonstrated an increasing instructional expertise concerning teachers' ability to meet the needs of students who were considered disadvantaged due to their ethnicity, socio-economic level, or language fluency. It provided teachers with the rationale to change their practices and to address specific academic needs in a systematic way. The research also revealed how

participating teachers at City Elementary increased their shared technical language and commonality of practices. The de-privatization of practices affected the way in which teachers saw their individual instruction and how they were held accountable to each other. Participating teachers stated that PLC reforms leveled a t great impact on their daily practices, shifting organizational practices from a plurality of instructional practices to a remarkable collective approach to teaching and learning.

I also demonstrated that the common technical language and shared practices, qualifiers of PLC, were clearly evident during intervention time. Indeed, both seemed to be gradually affecting the full instructional day, and the understanding teachers held about interventions. The slowly evolving state of PLC happened due to the complexity of schools as organizations and the need to reexamine the way our institutions either foster or inhibit educational change, a finding validated by the literature (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fullan, 2001, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

To conclude, this study contributed to the current literature about PLC and to the way in which this organizational model might affect the status of teachers as professionals. The intent was to demonstrate the evolving state of teachers as professionals and how PLCs are affecting the way schools, as institutions, view teaching and learning. Further studies must look into the contextual characterization of relationships as affected by and directly

affecting the making of schools as learning organizations. Additionally, further studies could consider the mechanisms and processes in place at City Unified School District to ensure the successful and legitimized approach to institutionalizing PTT for the purpose of collaboration.

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