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Investigating the Establishment and Sustainability of Professional Learning

Communities in Rural East Texas: The Principals' Perspectives

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The role of principals, especially in rural schools, where educational outcomes fall below the national average, is significant in implementing changes in the school. The focus of this qualitative study was to explore factors that principals deem most crucial to establishing and maintaining Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). Moreover, elements linked to how principals perceive the practicality of developing and supporting PLCs in rural schools were examined. The researcher conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with principals to determine their perceptions about attributes most important in establishing PLCs. Seven principals with a minimum number of 3 years in the position were included in the study. Findings indicated that buy-in from teachers and mutual trusts were substantial factors influencing the leadership component of PLCs in rural schools. As the researchers concluded, principals must intentionally facilitate connecting the PLC framework using professional development to affect organizational change and subsequently impact campus learning.

Keywords: Professional Learning Communities, rural school leadership, organizational change

Rural students account for approximately a third of all pupils in America, and about half of all students globally live in non-urban areas (Parsley & Barton, 2015). Rural students in America are disadvantaged compared to their urban counterparts in a number of ways including student achievement, school involvement, and community involvement (Walden, 2015). Disadvantages are exacerbated by the challenges that administrators face related to recruitment, retention, and faculty training (Parsley & Barton, 2015). Monk (2007) stated, "Such rural attributes as sparse settlement or geographic isolation can raise transportation costs and draw resources away from the core instructional program in general, and teacher salaries in particular" (p. 163). As a matter of moral imperative, children in rural communities deserve the same amount of attention and resources, as do children in urban communities; however, teachers in rural schools often lack the same access to resources (Schreuder, 2010).

Moreover, in rural areas, at-risk students are more likely to fail compared to their counterparts in urban areas (Monk, 2007). One justification may be that students who reside in urban and suburban areas have access to a myriad of resources and programs that are nonexistent in remote locations (Johnson & Strange, 2007). However, schools play a critical role as the social fabric of desolate and underserved areas

and provide focal points of activity, senses of pride, and reasons for families to remain residents (Johnson & Strange, 2007). Therefore, schools are important both economically and socially to these communities as they provide a sense of purpose (Monk, 2007).

Similarly, teachers in rural schools have added demands to serve functions beyond the purpose of education (National Education Association [NEA], 2008). Because schools are the foundation of small communities, educators must be equipped to provide students with the programs and structure necessary to overcome obstacles to academic success. One such structure is through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs).

PLCs work to improve learning for all students and include job-embedded learning opportunities for teachers (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006). While the need to establish PLCs exists, many schools do not attend to matters that can lead to achieving the goal of improving student outcomes through PLCs (Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, & Moller, 2011). Specifically, rural schools face several challenges to providing quality education because of limited attention and support from the national government. Hence, it is not surprising that rural schools also have difficulty establishing and sustaining PLCs. Resources for rural schools are scarce compared to those at urban schools; therefore,

it is difficult for rural schools to seek improvement in various areas. In particular, Texas has the highest rural enrollments (Johnson, Showalter, Klein, & Lester, 2014) of nearly 900,000 rural students as of 2014. This figure is growing at a rate of 30,000 students per year (Johnson et al., 2014). However, the percentage of rural adults in Texas who finished high school is less than the national average. Moreover, educational outcomes are below the national average; for example, Texas eighth-grade NAEP performance is ranked 41 out of the 50 states (Johnson et al., 2014).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify factors that rural school principals perceive to have the most influence in establishing sustainable PLCs. Specifically, a need existed to identify factors associated with principals' perceptions of the practical aspects of establishing and supporting PLCs in rural schools. By determining these elements, school leaders may gain insight into how to transform a rural school into a PLC, increasing the overall performance of teachers and students alike.

Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify factors that rural school principals perceive to have the most influence in establishing sustainable professional learning communities (PLCs). In line with this purpose, the following research questions guided this study:

1. What factors have the greatest influence on establishing the leadership component of PLCs in rural schools?
2. What elements of principal leadership are required to establish PLCs in rural schools?
3. What elements of principal leadership are required to sustain PLCs in rural schools?
4. How can factors identified to influence PLCs be applied to improve the effectiveness of PLCs in rural schools?
5. How can factors identified to influence PLCs be applied to increase the sustainability of PLCs in rural schools?

To answer the research questions, the researcher employed a qualitative method for this study. This qualitative study was designed to understand the meaning of events and interactions of ordinary people in particular situations (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The ordinary people represented the participants in this study and the particular situation was establishing the supportive and shared leadership component of PLCs. Qualitative studies involve the collection of non-numerical and non-statistical data. The use of qualitative studies allows researchers to investigate the why and how of a phenomenon

question instead of only the what, where, and when, which are normally asked in quantitative research (Gay et al., 2009). Researchers also conduct qualitative studies to investigate the attitudes, behaviours, motivations, and concerns of a target group (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2009). Throughout the course of a qualitative study, the researcher collects contextualized descriptions of the subject under investigation in the form of narratives that represent participants' attitudes, perceptions, or experiences with the subject (Moretti et al., 2011). The use of a qualitative method was appropriate to generate findings based on participants' experiences and perceptions of the chosen topic (Denscombe, 2007). The appropriate design for this study was narrative inquiry, which is a way to understand experiences and allow participants to tell their stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For this study, the researcher conducted interviews to obtain participants' perceptions about the supportive and shared leadership component of PLCs.

Population, Sample Size, and Sampling Procedure

The researcher selected participants from rural school districts in East Texas. As an inclusion criterion, participants were required to have at least 3 years of experience as principals at their respective campuses. A sample size of 5 to 30 participants is considered sufficient for qualitative studies (Creswell, 2009). Therefore, the researcher interviewed seven principals for this study. The final number of principals to be included in the study depended on data saturation. Data saturation is the point at which adding more participants yields no new information to answer the research questions. In this study, saturation was reached when no new information emerged from participants' interview responses. The objective of achieving data saturation is to obtain as much rich information as possible about the topic being examined (Polkinghorne, 2005).

For this study, the researcher used a purposive sampling method to select principals. Purposive sampling is conducted when the information needed must be obtained from a specific population in which there is a probability of occurrences of the phenomenon (Barratt, Ferris, & Lenton, 2014). Additionally, purposive sampling saves effort, time, and money (Patton, 2002) as it allows recruitment efforts to focus on a particular group of individuals who fulfill the characteristics or criteria pertinent to the study and its purpose (Yang & Banamah, 2014). The sample was chosen based on principal availability and willingness to share information. The Region 7 Educational Service Center (ESC7)

was used to identify a school district that had successfully established PLCs at multiple campuses. The researcher selected seven principals from different campuses in the same region to participate in the interview process. Only principals who were available to meet with the researcher for the interview sessions were included in the study. Physical presence during interviews helped the researcher gather accurate data. Hoofnagle (2007) described that physical interaction of the researcher and participant creates an environment appropriate for discussion. Aside from years of experience, no other demographic restrictions were imposed on the sample of principals selected for the interviews.

Participants

Demographics

Participants included seven administrators who served as principals in rural East Texas schools.

Participants varied in age from 30-52 years old. Of the seven participants, five were male and two were female; all were Caucasian. Five participants had been in the education field for 20 or more years, and one participant had been in the field for slightly less than 16 years. Two participants had been principals for 10 or more years, and five had been principals for 5 years or less. Participating principals discussed their lived experiences in their roles as leaders of their schools and PLCs. During the interviews, the researcher noted principals' characteristics to gain further insight into individual participants. Self-identification as the primary coordinator of professional development activities existed for all participants except two who indicated that they shared responsibilities with another administrator or committee that helped plan such activities. Pseudonyms were assigned to protect the identities of participants and schools represented in the study (Creswell, 2009).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Ethnicity	Gender		Total
	Male	Female	
Caucasian	5	2	7
Experience as Principal (Years)			
3 to 5 years	3	2	5
10 years or more	2	0	2

Instrumentation

The researcher used a narrative inquiry method of interviewing campus principals to collect data related to the experiences of establishing and sustaining PLCs. The researcher used interviews as the main data collection instrument, and he was the main interviewer during data collection. In-depth and semi-structured interviews encouraged participants to reflect on the meanings of their experiences in ways beyond initial, possibly facile, responses that considered intricate relationships of factors and contexts of their present situations (Seidman, 2006). Semi-structured interviews used open-ended questions that did not have pre-defined answer options and allowed participants to provide their own responses (Bynner & Stribley, 2010).

The researcher coded responses to the interview questions to develop themes or categories. Open-ended questions made it possible for the researcher to obtain as much information as possible from

respondents (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interview protocol allowed the researcher to develop a script to guide the process (Jacob & Furgerson, 2012). The researcher developed 14 semi-structured, open-ended interview questions, which an expert panel validated prior to the interviews. These questions were used in combination with the five research questions to guide the interviews. The expert panel will comprise of a K-12 professor at a regional university, a rural east Texas superintendent not related to the study, and a retired school superintendent with rural experience also not related to the study. The validated interview questions allowed participants the opportunity to discuss their lived experiences regarding factors that rural school principals perceived as having the most influence on establishing and sustaining PLCs in rural schools.

Data Analysis

Data collection occurred through seven semi-structured interviews, which provided participants the opportunity to reflect on the meanings of their experiences in ways beyond initial, possibly facile, responses that consider intricate relationships of factors and contexts of their present situations (Seidman, 2006). Open-ended questions, which do not have pre-defined answer options and allow participants to provide their own in-depth responses (Bynner & Stribley, 2010), were included in the interview protocol.

Data analysis included the transcription, organization, identification, and coding of emergent themes from participant interviews. Interviews were interpreted and analyzed to investigate experiences as they were lived at the time of the study (as cited in Moustakas, 1994). The researcher carefully read the transcribed data and listed all expressions related to the experience (Moustakas, 1994). Expressions were then analyzed to determine the invariant constituents (essential to capturing a specific moment of the experience that can be abstracted and labelled). Following this step, the invariant components of the experience were retained and the remaining were eliminated (Moustakas, 1994). After determining the invariant components by analyzing the data, the researcher developed a coding scheme to group the data (Mertler, 2006).

An open coding system was used to create categories or groupings of similar topics (Saldaña, 2013). Codes that emerged from the interview responses were arranged and grouped into categories of themes by similar ideas, phrases, or relevant information. The researcher created 15 codes. These codes were then categorized to create themes based on the research questions. The researcher reflected on the themes to capture the essential meaning or essence of the lived experiences in question. Five overarching research questions were used to guide this study in learning factors that principals perceived to be most influential in creating and sustaining successful PLCs. Specific to each question, data were grouped into broad thematic categories that describe participants' perceptions and experiences of leading and sharing leadership of PLCs.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify factors that rural school principals' perceive to have the most influence in establishing sustainable PLCs. Participating principals in small rural schools discussed their leadership experiences related to developing successful PLCs. Each described their

roles as leader, and most viewed themselves as facilitators rather than true leaders. All principals expressed the importance and practice of creating a "shared leadership" that included teachers. The one principal who shared his leadership role with an assistant principal also expressed this theme. Such leadership in these small rural schools allowed for PLCs to be established and sustained, but it also presented challenges. Several themes emerged from principal interviews regarding perceptions of establishing and sustaining PLCs successfully at their rural schools.

Principals discussed perceived influential factors to establishing leadership among PLCs. Specifically, buy-in from teachers and creating mutual trust were reported as important factors and were viewed as going hand-in-hand. As Participant C1 described, "Teachers have to get along, they have to buy into what they're doing." A self-described educational leader and facilitator, Participant C1 recognized that teachers needed to see the benefits of their efforts in order to "buy-in" to the school vision and their roles in that vision. Therefore, principals needed to trust their teachers in their roles within PLCs and teachers needed to trust their principals in the direction each set out for their schools. Participant A2 emphasized the need for trust and noted that staff members have to trust principals enough to be "open and frank," and principals "have to trust the staff to carry out the task that they're assigned" and encourage these efforts.

Principals also recognized that gaining teacher buy-in was a challenge in itself as was communication with teachers to do so. Being in small school environments meant some subject areas had only one teacher for multiple grades and courses within that subject area. Therefore, time was limited for these teachers to communicate and collaborate with others. At the same time, teachers and principals may have "dual roles" that further limit communication among staff. Participant T2 described one situation of making sure to "backtrack" to ensure that even coaches and mentors were informed of leadership discussions.

The challenge of communication also presented the challenge of gaining teachers' trust. Two principals recognized that trust in and of teachers were needed, but could be difficult to establish on both ends. Teachers need to feel "support" among leadership and leadership need to trust that teachers will act as leaders "beyond the classroom." Participant A1, who admittedly had a hard time delegating, and Participant C2, who oversaw a junior high and made efforts to collaborate with all teachers, shared that gaining trust to be their biggest challenge. As leaders of small rural schools, principals

perceived essential leadership elements to establishing and sustaining PLCs successfully. In establishing PLCs, some principals perceived trusting faculty as a necessary leadership characteristic. To these participants, trusting teachers meant that principals needed to allow them to perform their roles in and out of the classroom as assigned.

Participant R emphasized that leading as a “micromanager” would not benefit PLCs; to effectively lead PLCs, the role of principals should be to “set the mission,” facilitate, and give teachers opportunities to work together toward that mission. This also meant showing respect to faculty as the professionals they are. Other principals shared their beliefs that teachers needed to feel they were skilled enough to provide leadership, not only in their classrooms, but also as teacher leaders. They also needed to feel valued in each role, which principals could accomplish by listening to “teacher input” as a demonstration of respect that lends to the successful establishment of PLCs.

Principals described additional leadership elements to sustaining PLCs successfully. Three principals believed that consistent leadership was the most important element to the sustainability of PLCs. Teachers needed to know that leadership actions were consistent. Participant T1 had experience setting up and facilitating PLCs. She explained that leadership should have a strong foundation from which faculty can expect, otherwise PLCs “will crumble.” Some principals also perceived the inclusion of faculty as essential to sustaining PLCs. Teachers need to feel their “viewpoints” are not only heard but also considered. Participant R pointed out, “They are the ones on the front line”; therefore, they see, learn, and know what is needed for their schools and students to realize improvement.

Once established and sustainable, PLCs also need to be effective. Participating principals emphasized three factors that can influence the effectiveness of PLCs—continually recognizing goals, providing time for teachers to collaborate, and communicating with and among teachers. By continually keeping school and PLC goals in mind, principals can assure that everyone is working in the “same direction.” However, teachers need to perceive this direction as “benefiting the kids” in order to continue their efforts. Principals also described allowing time for teachers to collaborate and work together as factors to improve and challenges to ensure the effectiveness of PLCs. Principals shared their efforts and hopes of providing more time for teachers to meet, including common planning periods, to improve PLCs. Time to collaborate allowed for communication, a factor that principals firmly believed was needed among and

between teachers and leadership. Similar to other principals, Participant T2 made efforts to give teachers information they needed, and she used their input so they could be more effective in their roles and in their PLCs.

Of factors identified to influence PLCs, principals discussed how each could be applied to increase the sustainability of PLCs in rural schools. Except for two principals, all were the sole leaders of their schools. Principals perceived that being consistent in their own leadership was not only expected by teachers but also contributed to the increased sustainability of PLCs. If teachers are assured of leadership actions, of which most principals described themselves as “facilitators,” then PLCs can continue successfully. Doing so meant that principals had to continue their communications with teachers. As Participant C2 described, “good communication with the teachers” allowed all to “know exactly what’s going on and why,” in the classroom and with leadership discussions.

However, with communication, came the challenges of time to do communicate, which could limit principals’ abilities to understand teachers’ needs. All principals recognized that being small rural schools did not provide teachers with much free time, as many were the only teachers in their departments or subject areas. These small school environments do not lend themselves well to creating time during the day for teachers to share ideas or for leadership to learn what teachers may need to be effective in their roles. Despite these challenges, all principals believed time and mutual understanding were also strategies that could increase the effectiveness of PLCs. Participant R increased the school day for teachers to meet during, rather than after, school. Other principals reported trying similar approaches. Participant A1 had experience as a coach, mentor, and principal. He agreed that acknowledging the element of time for teachers and allowing teachers to talk with leadership lent itself to a shared leadership where teachers “understand that their interaction is important” and their feedback is “valued.”

Because PLCs involves shared leadership, all but one principal perceived changes in the school culture of their campuses. At the time of the study, Participant A2 was beginning to establish PLCs; however, he saw the important contributions of learning communities, as others have recognized. Principals felt that empowering “teachers as leaders” provided opportunities for teachers to be involved in decisions concerning their schools and classrooms.

Participant C2 took a facilitator approach, similar to the other participants. He noted that this style gave teachers the freedom to take what was

being decided and “go forth with their leadership roles to lead and support the students of the campus.” Allowing teachers to provide direction for the school created a “community among teachers” that, as perceived by principals, produced culture change within their schools. From changing teacher

expectations of student work, as Participant A1 noticed, or the overall mindset being “our kids” rather than “my kids,” as Participant R described, principals strongly believed that collectively teachers and their PLCs changed the culture of rural schools as they were intended.

Table 2

Factors Influencing the Sustainability of PLCs

Themes/Subthemes	Number of occurrences (<i>n</i> = 7)	Percent of occurrences (<i>n</i> = 7)
Certain factors influence the sustainability of leadership among PLCs.	6	86%
Consistent leadership	2	29%
Communication with and among faculty	4	57%
Challenges exist in sustaining support and leadership of PLCs.	6	
Provide time for teachers to communicate and collaborate	4	57%
Understand what faculty, and students need to support instruction and learning.	3	43%
Strategies to improve the sustainability of PLCs.	7	100%
Understand teachers and get them to understand the goals of leadership.	7	100%
Give teacher time to collaborate and time with principals.	6	86%

Conclusion

Most participating principals felt that they had successfully established and sustained PLCs at their rural schools. Only one participating principal was in the beginning stages of forming PLCs at his high school; however, he recognized the influential and important elements in doing so, and he believed PLCs at his campus would be formed successfully in the near future. Principals with established and sustained PLCs believed these learning communities contributed to creating change in their school cultures. Specifically, principals believed that empowering teachers to be leaders and creating the sense of community among teachers influenced the positive outcomes of PLCs not only for school goals but also for student learning.

Change begins with establishing PLCs, and principals perceived that gaining teachers’ trust and respect were essential elements. They also perceived trust as influencing the establishment of PLC

leadership. A principal’s ability to establish PLCs will be more effective if teachers feel they can trust and are trusted by leadership. Participants also felt that teacher buy-in—gaining teacher support of PLCs and school goals—contributed to successfully creating PLCs in rural schools. Once established, sustaining PLCs was perceived to depend on consistent leadership and include faculty. According to the participants, teachers need to know the foundation of leadership and what to expect otherwise, their support of leadership will “crumble.” Similarly, by including faculty, teachers recognize they are valued and their input is heard, which leads to continued involvement and support of PLCs. Principals also believed in the importance of providing time for teachers to collaborate, understanding teachers’ needs, and gaining understanding from teachers of leadership and goals that influence the sustainability of PLCs. In some cases, participants perceived these factors as

challenges, but also noted that they are invaluable in keeping teachers involved in PLCs.

All participants noted that time and trust both contributed to the successful establishment and sustainability of PLCs and served as ongoing challenges that needed addressed. The most common factor among principals' perceptions was time for teachers to collaborate or meet as a leadership team. In small rural schools, it is typical for a subject area to have only one or two teachers. Finding time for those teachers during the day was a task that principals felt important; therefore, they made efforts to create time during teachers' schedules.

Principals also perceived trusting teachers as an ongoing challenge to establish and sustain PLCs successfully. This meant that principals needed to not only "delegate," which may be difficult for principals to do, but also to be comfortable that teachers are working toward the direction of the school. Similarly, teachers needed to trust leadership support and decisions. Trust involves one's own personality and the relationship he or she has built with others. In this respect, principals saw the need to learn and understand their faculty and build trust to have successful PLCs. Most principals perceived their PLCs as contributing to creating change in their

school cultures; therefore, they need to be able to address such challenges toward school improvement.

The results of this study provided insight into principals' perceptions of factors, elements, and strategies of leadership that contribute to establishing and sustaining successful PLCs at rural schools. As participating principals continue to sustain their PLCs, and in one principal's case establish his PLC, all recognized actions that they as leaders needed to continue to implement or adjust. They also recognized what teachers needed to continue their support of and involvement in PLCs. The number of teachers and staff in small rural schools may be considerably less than that of larger schools. Principals in this study believed that shared leadership among leaders and teachers could make up for the size and type of school.

Finally, proper and responsible allocation of resources (time) is a pivotal question in all organizations, as is the mutual understanding and appreciation of the roles of leadership and followers (principal and teachers). Through intentional instructional leadership, principals must facilitate connecting the PLC framework to actual changes in the school thereby using professional development to affect organizational change and subsequently impact optimal learning for all students and teachers.

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