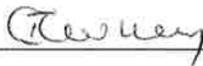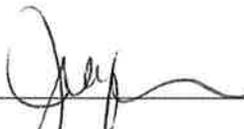DISSERTATION APPROVED BY

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A QUALITATIVE STUDY ON SUSTAINABLE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN CATHOLIC ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

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By

ALEXANDRA FERNANDEZ

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A DISSERTATION IN PRACTICE

Submitted to the faculty of the Graduate School of Creighton University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education in Interdisciplinary Leadership

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Abstract

This qualitative study examined the elements of professional learning communities within Catholic elementary schools. The purpose of this study was to investigate best practices of Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as reported by elementary principals in a random sample of Catholic elementary schools. The researcher interviewed 14 elementary school principals from various Catholic (arch)dioceses with self-identified successful professional learning communities to understand best practices of PLCs at the building level. The aim of this study was to design a framework for elementary school principals seeking to foster professional learning communities in Catholic schools. Five common themes emerged throughout this study: (a) Catholic mission, (b) collaborative culture, (c) professional learning, (d) relational context, and (e) PLC structure. The findings indicated that the elements found within professional learning community protocols are compatible with the standards of academic excellence in Catholic school education. The major findings indicated that there are five essential strategies for Catholic elementary school principals seeking to foster a sustainable professional learning community process at the building level. The researcher proposed an evidence-based framework for elementary school principals seeking to foster sustainable professional learning communities in Catholic education. This framework, proposed as five essential strategies, was tailored to meet the distinct mission and purpose of Catholic education and contribute to the professional learning community process in Catholic elementary schools.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Catholic elementary school principals.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family for supporting me during my doctoral program, especially my husband and daughters.

To my husband, Julio, thank you for being a loving, understanding, and incredibly supportive husband. You encouraged me to pursue my goals, and I could not have done it without you. I love you.

To my daughters, Karina and Sabina, thank you for setting an example of what it truly means to love learning. Your dedication and commitment to your own Catholic education has been a source of inspiration, strength, and support for me throughout this entire journey. You will always be my greatest gifts from God. I love you.

To the Catholic school principals who shared their knowledge and expertise of professional learning communities, thank you for your commitment to furthering the mission of Catholic education.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction and Background

Today's Catholic elementary school principal fulfills the various roles and responsibilities of Catholic school leadership by serving as the educational leader, spiritual leader, and managerial leader of the school (Ciriello, 1994). An effective Catholic school leader demonstrates an unwavering commitment to the mission of Catholic education and a deep understanding of the defining characteristics of Catholic schools. The *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) included four domains that guide schools in effective school functioning: Mission and Catholic Identity, Governance and Leadership, Academic Excellence, and Operational Vitality. Although not intended as Catholic school leadership standards, the Catholic school principalship includes strong leadership in each of the above domains.

In the area of academic excellence, the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) require that teachers collaborate in professional learning communities (PLCs) to improve student learning. To fully meet this requirement, the Catholic elementary school principal is responsible for implementing the PLC process in his/her school to improve student learning and enhance teaching practices. This imperative requires a more profound examination of PLCs within Catholic elementary education as a process for continuous school improvement.

Professional learning communities provide the supportive culture and conditions necessary for achieving significant school improvement (Hord, 1997). DuFour, DuFour,

Eaker, and Many (2006) defined a PLC as "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students the serve" (p. 11). The basic premise of PLCs is that improved learning for students requires continuous job-embedded learning for teachers. Therefore, creating a sustainable PLC plan requires the leadership and support of the school principal.

The five main elements of PLCs include: (a) shared and supportive leadership, where authority and decision-making are not limited to one person; rather, the power is shared and distributed fairly and equally among PLC members; (b) shared beliefs and values that shape the vision for where the school is headed; (c) collective learning and application, where student needs are specifically addressed and teacher effectiveness is continually improved upon; (d) shared personal practice, in which teachers gain feedback and support of teaching practices, thereby improving both individual and organizational capacity; and (e) supportive conditions that include the necessary structural and relational conditions such as time and trust (Hord, 1997). Creating PLCs requires active leadership support at every level of the process. This leadership component is especially important because the Catholic elementary school principal is responsible for establishing the necessary culture and conditions for the implementation of PLCs in his/her school.

In regards to this study, the elementary schools of the Archdiocese of Smith County included 47 elementary schools and educated approximately 34,000 students. At the first principals' meeting of the 2011-2012 school year, the superintendent of schools articulated the need to implement PLCs at the building level (Superintendent Communication, August 2011). The *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective*

Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) supported this requirement. Since there was no existing plan to guide the principals in this process, this dissertation study aimed to study PLCs within Catholic elementary education and design a framework for elementary school principals seeking to foster a sustainable PLC process within their respective schools. Thus, the impetus for this research.

The researcher conducted this qualitative study by interviewing 14 elementary school principals from various Catholic (arch)dioceses who self-identified as having successfully implemented PLCs in their schools.

Statement of the Problem

Professional learning communities, the process of working interdependently toward the same goal with learning for all as its primary focus (DuFour, et al. 2006), have been adopted by the Smith County Catholic Schools in an effort to develop, implement, and continuously improve the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction to result in high levels of student achievement. However, research indicates that school leaders must have the knowledge of the theoretical framework, best practices, and leadership roles and responsibilities to begin the process of creating sustainable PLCs in their schools. The elementary school principals of Smith County Catholic Schools, prior to this research study, had no existing plan to guide them in this process.

In addition to the Central Office of Smith County Catholic Schools' requirement to implement PLCs at the building level, the superintendent's vision for implementing PLCs was to strengthen students' faith through education while providing them with a challenging and engaging environment where Catholic school teachers work collaboratively to ensure evidence of student learning. Therefore, this study was essential

to helping principals create sustainable PLCs within the context of the Catholic school setting.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to investigate best practices of PLCs as reported by elementary school principals in a random sample of Catholic elementary schools. The theoretical framework for this study included the five dimensions of PLCs: shared and supportive leadership, shared beliefs and values, collective learning and application, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions (DuFour, et al., 2010; Hord, 1997).

Research Questions

In order to design a sustainable PLC plan for Catholic elementary schools, the following research questions guided this qualitative study:

Overarching Question: How do Catholic elementary school principals create sustainable PLCs?

Research question #1: Why is it important for Catholic elementary schools to engage in the PLC process?

Research question #2: How do Catholic elementary school principals initiate the process of creating PLCs?

Research question #3: How do Catholic elementary school principals sustain PLCs?

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to create a framework for elementary school principals seeking to foster PLCs in Catholic education.

Methodology Overview

This qualitative study included 30-60 minute telephone interviews with 14 elementary school principals from randomly selected Catholic (arch)dioceses with successful PLCs in their schools. The researcher used the snowball sampling method to identify the participants. The researcher developed and utilized the same interview questions with each participant. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and member-checked by sending the transcripts to the participants for verification of accuracy.

Definition of Relevant Terms

The following terms were used operationally within this study:

Collaboration: The process of working together to improve student learning and enhance teaching practices in a respectful and trusting environment.

Collective inquiry: The process by which educators build shared knowledge and learn together.

Continuous school improvement: The process by which schools fulfill their mission, values, and vision in achieving improved student learning outcomes.

Leadership: The process of influencing the activities of an individual or a group in efforts toward goal achievement in a given situation.

Professional development: The process by which educators participate in research-based professional learning that is ongoing, experiential, collaborative, and relevant.

Professional learning community: A continuous process in which "educators are committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and

action research to achieve better results for the students the serve" (DuFour, DuFour,

Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 217).

Sustainable PLC: The role of leadership in sustaining professional learning

communities based on Hargreaves' (2007) seven principles.

Assumptions

The first assumption of this study was that participants were experienced

practitioners in the development and implementation of effective PLCs in Catholic

elementary schools. The second assumption of this study was that participants would

openly share information that would improve the development and implementation of the

PLC process in Catholic elementary schools. The third assumption of this study was that

improved student learning requires that Catholic elementary schools participate in the

PLC process.

Delimitations and Limitations

A delimitation of this study was that participants were selected based on their

successful implementation of PLCs as determined by their school superintendents.

A limitation of this study was that participants were limited to Catholic

elementary school principals who developed and implemented the PLC process using

many variations of PLC definitions and different approaches to PLC work based on their

school building and student needs.

Leader's Role and Responsibility in Relation to the Problem

The Catholic elementary school principal serves as the faith leader, educational

leader, and organizational leader of his/her school. As such, the role of leadership in this

study was significant because the work of a Catholic elementary school principal includes

serving as the school's instructional leader with the responsibility of implementing and developing the PLC process in his/her school.

The scholarly literature surrounding this topic revealed that successful PLCs required leadership at all levels within the PLC process. According to Huffman and Jacobsen (2003), "As visionary leaders, administrators can incorporate the professional learning community model in their schools to increase understanding and communication, improve problem-solving capacities, and develop an organized change process for collectively building community in the organizational structure of the school" (p. 248).

To address the specific problem in this study, the researcher sought to study PLCs within Catholic elementary education and design a framework for elementary principals seeking to foster a sustainable PLC program. Therefore, the leader's role and responsibility in relation to the problem in this study was integral to the process. Likewise, to ensure the long-term success of the PLC process, the leader's role in establishing a strategic vision (Thompson, Peteraf, Gamble, & Strickland, 2012) and strategic plan (Bryson, 2011) for beginning the PLC process in Catholic elementary schools were equally important factors in designing a framework in this study.

Significance of the Study

This study was important because the archdiocese involved at the center of the study required the implementation of PLCs at the building level, but there was no existing plan to guide the principals in this process. Therefore, this study was essential to helping principals create sustainable PLCs within the context of the Catholic school setting.

The *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) provide Catholic schools with effectiveness standards and benchmarks. These school effectiveness standards provide the framework for the accreditation process for all Catholic schools. The creation of a sustainable PLC plan for Catholic elementary schools helped to improve the principals' practice in the area of academic excellence and meet the accreditation requirements with regard to PLC development and implementation.

The significance of this study was to improve the overall effectiveness of PLC work in Catholic elementary schools to benefit students, teachers, and principals, and contribute to the greater good of Catholic education.

Summary

In response to the Central Office of Smith County Catholic Schools' requirement to implement PLCs at the building level, this study was designed to help create a framework for implementation within Smith County Catholic Schools based on what could be learned as best practices of PLCs within other Catholic elementary schools. The purpose of this study was to investigate best practices of PLCs as reported by elementary principals in a random sample of Catholic elementary schools. The study's overarching question about how elementary school principals create sustainable PLCs in Catholic schools guided this study and the resulting framework. This study was important because the archdiocese needing the PLCs had no existing plan to guide the principals in this process. Therefore, this study was essential to helping elementary school principals create sustainable PLCs within the context of the Catholic school setting. This study included semi-structured telephone interviews with 14 elementary school principals of

random Catholic (arch)dioceses with successful PLCs in their schools. The role of

leadership in this study was significant because the work of a Catholic school elementary

principal includes serving as the school's instructional leader with the responsibility of

implementing and developing the PLC process in his/her school. Chapter Two begins

with a review of the literature on the organization of Catholic education and continues

with a review of the literature on theoretical and leadership perspectives with a focus on

the PLC process.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Since sustainable PLCs in Catholic education were explored in this study, a literature review on relevant topics was provided in this chapter with a focus on the main areas of this research. These fields of study gave a unique perspective of PLCs in the context of Catholic education.

Organizational Literature

Brief Historical Overview of Catholic Education

The origin of the Catholic educational system in the United States can be traced to Catholic missions established in California by the Spanish government in the 14th century. The founders of the missions were Jesuits, and in the early 16th century, they began to establish schools. In 1769, Franciscans, whose main purpose was to assist in promoting the economic and political interests of the Spanish government, replaced the Jesuits. In the 19th century, the United States was mostly Protestant and was characterized by anti-Catholic movements associated with immigration from Ireland and the belief that all Catholic children should attend the American educational system to become good American citizens. In the 1880s, the enactment of the Blaine amendments, which prohibited the use of tax revenue to fund parochial schools, negatively affected schools that were set up by other denominations (Buckley, 2004). By the 1890s, the Irish had built an extensive network of parish schools aimed at protecting the Catholic religion and enhancing their culture. Despite strong opposition from Protestants and other denominations, Catholics continued to build schools that were managed and taught by nuns (Walch, 1996).

The number of Catholic schools grew so quickly that by the start of the 20th century, there were more than 3,500 Catholic schools, which were managed by local parishes. After World War II, public schools were considered superior to Catholic schools, and the enrollment of students in Catholic elementary schools decreased as Catholics relocated to remote areas where children attended public schools (Dolan, 1985). The Catholic educational system in the United States also experienced a major transformation when the sisters left the schools and were replaced with paid teachers (Caruso, 2012; Greeley, 2004).

According to the National Catholic Education Association (NCEA), Catholic school enrollment reached its peak during the early 1960s with almost 5.2 million students but saw a decline both in students and schools in the 1970s and 1980s. By 1990, there were approximately 2.5 million students. From the mid 1990s through 2005, there was a steady (1.2%) enrollment increase despite continued school closings. Since 2015, the number of students, mostly in elementary schools, declined by almost 20%. In the NCEA's 2014-2015 *Annual Statistical Report on Schools, Enrollment, and Staffing* (McDonald & Schultz, 2012), there are currently 5,368 Catholic elementary schools and 1,200 Catholic secondary schools in the United States, which enroll almost 2 million students.

Mission of Catholic Education

The position of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) is to integrate intellectual and moralistic perspectives and closely represents the official position on Catholic education in recent times. Vatican II considers Catholic education to play a fundamental part in the individual's human formation and growth. Additionally, the Catholic

educational system should be harmonious with human growth by having a positive

impact on it (Wolleh & Schmitz, 1966). Integral education, an education that responds to

all the needs of a human person, has to be considered in three ways: the education of the

whole person, unification of human knowledge, and inclusion of all levels of knowing.

By encompassing the essentials of religion, morality, and social development, students

will be prepared to navigate the path of the changing world and focus on the eternal

(Trafford, 1998).

Today, the debate in education at the national level centers on K-12 educational

standards and preparation for students to succeed in college and the workforce. In fact,

the Common Core State Standards Initiative, established to address what students should

be expected to know and learn by the time they graduate from high school, set the stage

for major shifts in education (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2010). This shift

required Catholic schools to undertake specific measures to maintain its fidelity to the

Catholic mission while continuing to improve its educational program.

Defining Characteristics of Catholic Schools. The Center for Catholic School

Effectiveness, in the School of Education of Loyola University Chicago, in partnership

with the Barbara and Patrick Roche Center for Catholic Education, Lynch School of

Education of Boston College, sought to improve PK-12 Catholic school education

standards by providing a common, research-based framework of universal characteristics

for effective Catholic schools, as described later in the *National Standards and*

Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ozar & Weitzel-

O'Neill, 2012).

Centered in the person of Jesus Christ. Catholic education is rooted in the conviction that Jesus Christ provides an understanding towards the full realization of human potential. All activities, programs, and life in Catholic schools foster a relationship with Jesus Christ by providing service to others, especially the poor and marginalized members of our world (Miller, 2006).

Contributing to the evangelizing mission of the Church. Through educational activities, Catholic schools participate in the evangelization of the mission of the church. School is a place where the local bishop undertakes the pastoral ministry. Thus, Catholic schools should express Catholic culture, either "visibly or physically" (Miller, 2006, p. 40).

Distinguished by excellence. Church documents supported by Canon Law maintain that Catholic schools are characterized by excellence. Catholic schools should implement teaching processes and practices such as research in order to ensure excellence in every aspect of learning (Canon Law Society of America, 1999, p. 806).

Committed to educating the whole child. Catholic education is based on the fact that human beings have a destiny and that the education and formation of the whole person must include the spiritual, intellectual, moral, social, and physical development. Catholic schools in the United States implement service ministries, co-curriculum activities, and academic and faith-formation activities to educate the whole child in these dimensions (The Catholic School, p. 29).

Steeped in the Catholic worldview. Catholic education emphasizes the integral formation of the human person, including "preparation for professional life, formation of ethical and social awareness, developing awareness of the transcendental and religious

education" (The Catholic School, p. 31). This integral formation focuses on forming all dimensions of the human person: intellectual, character, spiritual, and apostolic dimensions. As such, all curriculum and instruction in a Catholic school should foster "the desire to seek wisdom and truth, the preference for social justice, the discipline to become self-learners, the capacity to recognize ethical and moral grounding for behavior, and the responsibility to transform and enrich the world with Gospel values" (Miller, 2006, pp. 43-45, 52).

Sustained by Gospel witness. Catholic education is dedicated to the vocation of educators and their participation in the mission of the church. A Catholic teacher is a role model, and his or her testimony should depict commitment to the development of the whole child (Miller, 2006, p. 53). Catholic schools should recruit teachers who ascribe to Catholic teachings and the moral demands of the Gospel. Teachers should also contribute towards the achievement of apostolic objectives, evangelization, formation of Catholic identity and commitment to social justice in society (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005a, p. 231).

Shaped by communion and community. There is a great emphasis on the school as a community within the Catholic educational system. As part of an educational community, Catholic schools should promote trust and collaboration among all school stakeholders. Catholic schools pay close attention to the interpersonal relationships between teachers and students and ensure that students' intellectual growth is harmonized with religious, emotional, and social development (Miller, 2006).

Accessible to all students. The Catholic educational system should be accessible to anyone who desires a Catholic education for his or her children. It is the responsibility

of the Catholic community to make Catholic schools available, accessible, and affordable

to all parents and their children (Miller, 2006).

     Established by the express authority of the bishop. Canon Law states, "Pastors

of souls have the duty of making all possible arrangements so that all the faithful may

avail themselves of a Catholic education" (Canon Law Society of America, 1999, p. 794).

Local Bishops support and enhance the work of Catholic schools and ensure that the

education is based on Catholic doctrines. Thus, Catholic schools work to establish trust,

cooperation, dialogue, and respect for legitimate authority.

     Within the above framework, Catholic schools can use the *National Standards*

and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ozar &

Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) for accountability and improvement purposes, as they support the

educational mission of the Church.

Theoretical Literature

Essential Elements of PLCs

     The evolution of PLCs is a concept that started in the business sector. The phrase

"learning communities" entered the educational sector in the 1990s and is associated with

Peter Senge's (1990) book, *The Fifth Element* (Hamos et al., 2009). The reconstruction

of business management strategies resulted in transformations in the learning institutions

that shared a common vision of employee management and new ways of solving societal

problems. Thus, PLCs have become an instrumental strategy for the improvement of

education.

     According to DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008b), a PLC is a group of educators

working together in collective inquiry and research aimed at achieving better results for

their students. A PLC operates under the assumption that, to improve learning among

students, especially elementary school students, educators should meet regularly to

discuss ways of improving learning. Thus, a fundamental building block of a PLC is a

"collaborative team whose members work interdependently in achieving common goals

that are linked to learning for all students" (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008b p. 15).

Mellard and Johnson (2008) agreed that the PLC is a strategy that can guarantee

improved results in student performance and the prospect of professional development

among elementary school teachers.

PLCs have common elements associated with excellent professional development,

long-term sustainability, and a safe and supportive environment for students. Newmann

and Wehlage (1995) described five key elements of PLCs: (a) shared norms and values

about students' abilities and school environment; (b) a focus on student performance and

achievement; (c) reflective dialogue on curricula and student development; (d)

publicizing education; (e) teacher collaboration. Similarly, Louis and Marks (1998)

found that the effectiveness of PLCs was based on two aspects, namely teaching practices

and collaborative behaviors. The following sections provide a brief description of five

key elements of PLCs.

Capacity building. In a British study involving 393 schools, the teachers

reported that their participation in PLCs had a positive impact on their teaching practices

(Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005); they became more open with each

other and reported better collaboration in their work. Sparks (2003) confirmed that there

is a reciprocal relationship between teaching and PLCs. The capacity building elements

of PLCs include increased staff retention, a conducive teaching environment, and

improved school programs and curricula (Boyd & Hord, 1994). These characteristics are associated with five dimensions, namely a shared vision, shared leadership, supportive environment, and shared personal experiences and practice (Hord, 1997). The capacity building elements of PLCs encourage supportive networks among colleagues and expand professional goals, which translates into a greater commitment to the teaching profession. Bryk and Schneider (2002) noted that capacity building of members of PLCs helps in building trust and sustaining group efficacy and commitment.

Collaboration. According to Newmann and Welhage (1995), better teaching practices are considered unachievable without teamwork or collaboration. However, conflict may arise in these learning communities, which negatively affects the outcome of PLCs; therefore, conflicts must be addressed effectively. Indeed, as Hargreaves (2003) noted, "Professional learning communities demand that teachers develop grown-up norms in a grown-up profession – where difference, debate, and disagreement are viewed as the foundation stones of improvement" (p. 163). This kind of collaboration means that all teachers are learners through the collection and generation of knowledge, whereby the learning communities interact and engage in meaningful dialogue about student information and data. One of the powerful elements of PLCs is sustained communication among teachers (Hord, 1997). The importance of integrating activities such as reflective discussions of teachers' work was noted to improve teaching practice (Fullan, 2005).

Concern for students' achievements. According to McLaughlin and Talbert (2007), strong PLCs base their work on shared responsibility for students' mastery of curriculum content. Teachers in a PLC develop innovative strategies of classroom instruction that are used to achieve better understanding by students without undermining

their expectations. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) noted that effective PLCs focus on student achievement. In addition, strict adherence by the PLCs in terms of results of student achievement that can be sustained over time is necessary. Furthermore, the degree to which teachers engage in PLCs towards talent development and commitment determines the level of intellectual quality delivered to students. Stoll and Louis (2007) agreed with this finding noting that student achievement helps in improving professional skills and capacity of teachers.

Flexible and voluntary. Ann Lieberman (2000) conducted research over a 10-year period on the National Writing Project in the United States that brought together a high number of teachers who share similar teaching practices, successes, and challenges. From this study, she found that collaborative PLCs were most effective and successful when there were few members and when they experienced growth. Additionally, PLCs flourish when the environment promotes voluntary participation and is based on the commitment to the purpose and vision of the community and collaborative rethinking and authentic learning activities (Lieberman & Miller, 1978).

According to Dalgarno and Colgan (2007), addressing students' learning needs should take place in the community of practice. Thus, social and individual construction of knowledge within safe environments is an essential component of PLCs. Lieberman (2000) also noted that teachers can voluntarily form their learning communities rather than working under prescriptive participation.

School factors. Several researchers have noted that the overall learning environment is important in the development of an effective and positive PLC (e.g. Brandt, 1992). School factors such as meeting times, the physical proximity of the

teachers to one another, and teaching roles and responsibilities have been found to be essential in the support of PLCs (Louis & Kruse, 1995). An effective PLC requires that such structures be re-organized, as most schools do not have the organizational capacity to release their teachers to work on issues of mutual interest (Leithwood, 2002). According to Darling-Hammond (1996), teachers' roles and responsibilities need to be restructured to maximize the impact of PLCs. Boyd (1992) suggested that additional learning features affect community development such as resources and structures that reduce working in isolation and encourage autonomy.

Establishing norms. PLCs are effective just by the fact that they exist; however, there are aspects that need to be established such as norms. According to Fullan (2001), strong teacher communities can make matters worse, if ineffective practices are reinforced among one another. This statement means that the benefits of PLCs are dependent on factors related to beliefs, norms, and the underlying purpose of the group. Hargreaves (2003) stated that teachers' PLC norms that include spirited disagreement about teaching approaches and how to improve learning are accepted as a productive component of intellectual discourse. There is a need for assertiveness characterized by the vigorous culture of argumentative debate that enriches PLCs.

Benefits of PLCs for School Improvement, Teachers, and Students

Professional learning communities are considered a means to an end. One important benefit of PLCs is that they enhance teachers' effectiveness as professionals, which is for the ultimate benefit of the school's improvement, teachers, and students at large (Morrissey, 2000).

School improvement. According to Little (2001), PLCs are an important contributor to school reforms and instructional improvement. The schools that have a high sense of community reported an increased sense of work efficacy, increased motivation, greater commitment and responsibility for student learning, and increased teacher satisfaction. A study conducted in Australia by Andrews and Lewis (2007) noted that teachers developed PLCs not only to enhance the knowledge and understanding of the group, but also as a significant impact on their work in classrooms. However, Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1999) cautioned that the relationship between PLCs and school instructional improvement is one of the main purposes of a school. They indicated that high performing schools with a long history of the provision of intellectual work for its students developed more effective and beneficial PLCs.

In a recent article, Seashore, Anderson, and Riedel (2003) suggested that PLCs have an important role to play in changing classroom learning practices. They concluded that PLCs guide teaching professional practices by providing a learning-enriched workplace that also enhances student academic achievement. The focus on authentic pedagogy, instruction and assessment promoting student achievement, enhances substantive conversations, a deep knowledge base, and a connection with the world beyond the classroom.

In a study of secondary schools, Wiley (2001) noted that student achievement in mathematics was positively affected by an increase in classroom learning in a school setting resulting from the professional community. In a longitudinal study of 820 high schools and 9,904 teachers, achievement gains for students in mathematics, science, and social studies were recorded (Wiley, 2001). Additionally, there was higher student

achievement where teachers took collective responsibility for the student learning process

(Lee & Smith, 1996).

Teachers. PLCs are committed towards improving student learning. Several

studies have found that PLCs have the most effective practices in instructional strategies

and student learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Guskey, 1997). Meeting with teachers who

share the same concerns about students is a means of focusing discussion on the

important mission of student improvement. Teachers in PLCs can treat their classrooms

as sites for intentional investigation and also treat knowledge produced by others as

generative material for investigation and interpretation. Thus, their dialogues are a

reflection of knowledge expansion. Additionally, professional development is achieved

as teachers become active consumers of research and resources in the education sector.

Furthermore, PLCs promote discussion around topics such as parental support,

assessment, and differentiated instruction (Bolam et al., 2005; Guskey, 1997). The

professional shift enhanced by PLCs marks a movement towards learning by practicing,

which is instrumental in promoting confidence. This shift is beneficial in making

learning a social enterprise that includes shared responsibility by the relevant

stakeholders.

Teamwork between PLC members creates a collaborative culture in which

teachers pool their synergies to learn from one another (Erkens et al., 2008). The

encouragement and support that teachers offer one another in a learning community

creates a team that is more resilient than the individual strengths of teachers who work in

isolation. Furthermore, the sustained open culture of a PLC is an opportunity for an

improved knowledge base for the PLC members.

Within a PLC, the members have a responsibility to ensure that all students

succeed. "The members of each team regard all the kids as, our kids" (Garrett, 2010, p.

5). This approach reduces isolation and encourages teachers to increase their mutual

support for each other, and to share the workload and responsibility for the success of

their students. This approach is also described as the collective responsibility. As Garret

(2010) also stated:

> It's a whole different atmosphere when you, as a teacher, walk into a room and
>
> other teachers are saying to you, 'Gee, all of our 5th-grade kids did well on
>
> fractions except your kids. Maybe we could help you with that. Let me show you
>
> what I do.' It's a different atmosphere when you have your very best teachers
>
> leading your instructional teams (p. 9).

Additionally, PLCs provide teachers with new teaching approaches and build

confidence in these techniques. "Working collaboratively in curriculum teams, teachers

are finding new innovative ways to develop lessons, improve their instructional practice,

and engage students in meaningful learning opportunities" (Erkens et al., 2008, p. 97).

Students. Students benefit from effective PLCs. Teachers committed to the

strategies of PLCs use regular formative assessment techniques to guide and inform their

instruction for students. "A key element of this inquiry cycle is looking at student work

to understand better student thinking and change instruction accordingly" (Nelson,

LeBard, & Waters, 2010 p. 36). This regular examination allows teachers to frequently

customize lessons that may have been poorly designed. Such collaborative investments

in PLCs become more meaningful when the students are involved in the process. Erkens

et al., (2008) argued, "Teachers must make students aware of what the learning targets or

goals are, where they are about those targets or goals, and what they must do to close the gap in their performance" (p. 166). Thus, through the implementation of PLCs, it is apparent that teachers who involve students in the learning process can help their students overall.

Best Practices for PLCs

The best practices and school effectiveness standards for Catholic schools are well articulated in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). The Catholic fraternity (parents, teachers, and the clergy) seeks to educate children in a holistic way by integrating education with Christian values. Since the inception of Catholic education, the United States Catholic leadership has offered endless support to Catholic schools as a foundation of the church's mission (Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, 2012).

In 2008, when Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States, he stated that, "It is an apostolate of hope, seeking to address the material, intellectual and spiritual needs of over three million children and students" (Pope Benedict XVI, 2008, p. 1). This commitment is also articulated in the 1971 seminal document that highlighted three main missions of Catholic schools: proclaiming the gospel, building communities, and serving humanity. In another article titled, *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005b), the Catholic clergy in the United States emphasized the mission of evangelizing communities where Catholic Schools are instrumental in its effect. Furthermore, the bishops stressed the importance of a school curriculum for an integrated Catholic-based education.

By recognizing the importance of the Catholic educational system in the United

States, it is paramount that an excellent academic program accomplished with PLCs is

based on the best practices and school effectiveness standards in the *National Standards*

and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ozar &

Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). These practices are intended for strengthening and sustaining

the operations of Catholic schools (Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, 2012),

which lay out some of the best practices and standards for PLCs. These standards and

benchmarks include over nine school effectiveness standards that Catholic schools should

work towards implementing within the context of their own school communities, which

include the areas of Mission and Catholic Identity, Governance and Leadership,

Academic Excellence, and Operational Vitality.

An excellent Catholic school offers services and programs that are aligned to the

academic program and supported development of teachers, parents, and students. Such

schools use assessment and practices to improve student performance and to continuously

inform the curriculum reviews and improvement of instructional practices. Catholic

schools use data to monitor, review, and evaluate programs; to plan and sustain student

growth; and to assess overall student performance. In addition, the different faculties

employ curriculum-based assessment strategies with learning outcomes and instructional

approaches. Of particular importance to this study are Benchmarks 7.7 and 8.5,

respectively, which state, "Faculties collaborate in professional learning communities to

develop, implement, and continuously improve the effectiveness of the curriculum and

instruction to result in high levels of student achievement, and "Faculties collaborate in

professional learning communities to monitor individual and class-wide student learning

through methods such as common assessments and rubrics" (Center for Catholic School

Effectiveness, 2012, p. 10).

Creating PLCs

In creating PLCs, the following research provides school leaders with the

theoretical knowledge to guide them in the practical formation of creating sustainable

PLCs.

Clarity of purpose. PLCs are based on shared values, norms, and mutual trust

and respect. According to DuFour (2006), there are four essential questions that schools

and their stakeholders should explore when forming the foundation of their PLCs:

1. Mission – Why do we exist?

2. Vision – What must our school become to achieve our vision?

3. Values – What values do we need to demonstrate to achieve our vision?

4. Goals – How will we assess our progress toward our goals?

As schools and stakeholders work toward answering these questions, they can

achieve some clarity of focus, identify their direction, and rally collective commitment.

DuFour (2006) emphasized the need to establish a clear vision and purpose and establish

assessment and evaluation strategies from the onset when creating PLCs. These

strategies should include S.M.A.R.T. goals that are specific, measurable, achievable,

results-oriented, and time bound.

Focus on learning. PLCs are focused both on teacher and student learning.

Successful PLCs recognize the value of knowledge among teachers and students. As

teachers acquire new knowledge, it is shared through professional discussion. According

to DuFour (2006), there are five stages in learning: noticing, sense making, making

meaning, acting upon the meaning, and transforming learning. These stages provide an important framework for PLCs and guide the initial dialogue and reflective exercises among teachers.

Graham (2007) described purposeful dialogue as those based on the underlying goals related to teaching and learning. Discussions on the purpose of PLCs are geared towards creating common assessment strategies, comparison of student work samples, consistent grading systems, and effective teaching practices (DuFour, 2006). The process of learning using data is used to inform the commitment to continuous improvement. The reason is because PLCs use data to develop strategies and implement and analyze progress in an ongoing learning cycle.

Guskey (1999) noted that successful planning of learning occurs when the learners or students are engaged in rigorous self-analysis. The professional collaboration in the development of strategies helps in addressing the needs of learners and must be an integral part of PLCs.

Collaboration. As schools plan to create PLCs, it is also important for them to work together and build shared knowledge on the best ways of achieving goals and meeting the needs of the students. Teachers share personal experiences and develop interdependence, which is opposite to the traditional closed-door classroom environment. In this manner, teachers can improve their professional development through observing the strengths of their teaching partners, reducing duplication, and gaining support from colleagues. Effective learning occurs through interaction, cooperation, and feedback. Collaborative learning practices are developed by supportive relationships on mutual understanding and respect. A mutually supportive community is essential to effective

PLCs and this should be taken into consideration during the formative stages of PLCs (DuFour et al., 2008b).

 Collective responsibility and commitment. This strategy is an important consideration when creating PLCs. There are three stages that need to be followed to rally commitment and collective responsibility: initiation, implementation, and institutionalization of the change (Bolam et. al, 2005). Many schools do not advance to the third phase where there is a need for embedding the change in the culture of the school. There is also a need for willingness to learn and acceptance of responsibility by PLCs members. According to DuFour (2006), collective commitment guides the actions and behaviors. Such commitment is demonstrated through asking questions, celebrating progress, challenging violations of commitment, and ensuring that there are supportive structures in place for PLC members.

 Need for supportive structures. When creating PLCs, conditions such as space, time, and funding, and human conditions such as trust should be established. Teachers forming a PLC should go through a process of building openness, trust, and respect with activities that include team building and self-reflection exercises; structural conditions such as financial resources ensure that these activities take place. Besides structural conditions, there is a need for supportive leadership when forming PLCs. Effective PLCs can only be built with leaders who are interested in nurturing staff development. Such leaders exercise shared decision-making and possess and driving force in the anticipated change process (Hipp & Huffman, 2003).

 Action-oriented. After the shared vision and purpose are identified and the group forming a PLC comes together, it is important that the members of the PLC start

"learning by doing" (DuFour, et al., 2006). This strategy is essential, as PLCs are about acting upon the agreed activities and behaviors. At this stage, there is a need for profound commitment because it is about implementing the approaches and strategies identified during the initial stages when the action takes place. The teachers work together and are encouraged to work on their personal development through self-evaluation and assessment. A key aspect at this stage is working together through professional dialogue.

Today, these dialogues have been positively affected by improvements in technology. Teachers can use media such as emailing, texting, and even calling one another to discuss their students' progress. Such conversations are geared toward empowering teachers and taking responsibility for decision-making in their schools. Leaders can model such purposeful dialogue and actively engage in the dialogue as well (DuFour, 2006). This form of active learning in which teachers introduce new approaches to their teaching practices, observe their colleagues, and encourage reflective practices enriches the action-oriented phase of developing and implementing a PLC.

Reflection and evaluation. Building a framework for a PLC and then forgoing the evaluation phase makes it meaningless. During the formative stages, it is essential for schools to consider the forms of assessment and evaluation used to review the progress and the impact of PLCs. From their onset, school leadership should clearly articulate goals for professional learning and describe how achieving those goals will be documented. The effectiveness of a PLC is assessed based on its impact of learning, its impact on professional learning, and the performance and morale of the teachers (DuFour, 2006). For effective PLCs, information should be gathered at all stages:

planning, implementation, and follow-up. Furthermore, evaluation tools should be

designed to help in gathering relevant information.

Important Factors to Consider When Creating PLCs

In addition to creating structures that support the PLC process such as space and

time, it is important for school leaders to consider the following conditions that will move

the PLC process toward a more effective progression.

Shifting the culture of the school. The focus on shaping school culture to

support and sustain the PLCs is an ongoing process that requires a great deal of

commitment. There is also the need for schools to balance between professionalism and

community. The most obvious cultural shift that schools should focus on is the

underlying changes that come with individualized routines and commitment to

professional dialogue (DuFour, 2006).

Commitment begins at the top. It is important for school leaders creating PLCs

to engage in deep personal change (DuFour, 2006). The teachers should see the school

leader's commitment to the PLC strategies. Thus, the school leader should be an integral

part of the PLC process.

Tailoring the work to the school. When introducing new teaching strategies, it

is important to note that PLCs in one school environment may not operate in the same

way in another setting. The guiding principles should be listed from the beginning and

ways to achieve those goals should be clearly articulated. It is also important for school

leaders to recognize the need to customize the PLC strategies to fit their school's

particular learning environments (DuFour, 2006).

Sustaining PLCs

In Hargreaves' (2007) study, seven principles of sustaining PLCs were articulated. This study borrows from this analysis while illustrating how it can be applied in Catholic education.

Depth and breadth. PLCs need to be implemented for a long period in order to experience impact. Self-assessments supported by colleagues helps in sustaining PLCs in learning environments.

Stability and change. Administrative decisions and mobility of teachers help in creating settings that build trust with new partners and establishing work relationships. It should be noted that when PLCs become stable, they may become very cohesive and enhance change efforts.

Diversity and focus. Self-selected members of a PLC comprised of teachers who know each other will easily blend in and find common ground within which to work. However, diversity within a PLC may lead to the PLCs' overall success. There is a need for diversity as well as flexibility when facilitating PLCs. Thus, all members of a school community should participate in PLCs (Bolam, Stoll, & Greenwood, 2005).

Networking and integration. In sustaining PLCs, there is a need for exploring talents of teachers and creating cohesiveness around the goal of student learning. Most importantly, there is no single person who is responsible for maintaining and sustaining PLCs; it is the whole group's collective responsibility. However, an individual should serve as a lead facilitator to ensure that the team works towards the shared goals and visions. Andy Hargreaves (2003) suggested that:

A network increases the pool of ideas on which any member can draw and as one

idea or practice is transferred, the inevitable process of adaptation and adjustment

to different conditions is rich in potential for the practice to be incrementally

improved by the recipient and then fed back to the donor in a virtuous circle of

innovation and improvement. In other words, the networks extend and enlarge

the communities of practice with enormous potential benefits (p. 9).

Leadership Literature

Leadership Roles and Responsibilities

Leadership is the act of influencing people through providing purpose and

direction while taking into consideration the mission and objectives of the organization.

Leadership is an essential aspect of Catholic school culture, and as such, has dynamic

effects regarding organizational and individual interaction. The quality of leadership

influences the motivation of teachers and the quality of teaching in a school (Fullan,

2001; Sergiovanni, 2001).

Educational leadership has been conceptualized as a necessary ingredient for

school reform. Leadership is associated with such concepts as community,

transformation, social change, and empowerment. According to Fullan (2001),

leadership is highly dependent on the relationships that leaders cultivate. Thus, teachers

play an important role in school reform as supporters of leaders.

Because of its structure, PLCs utilize leadership both from administrators and

teachers. PLC leaders have the responsibility of shared governance and collaboration

with teachers (Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010). Thus, PLC leaders ensure smooth

decision-making among teachers and administrators, members of PLCs, the community,

and even the students. Furthermore, teachers in the PLC have the responsibility of turning the school into a collaborative learning environment (Mullen & Hutinger, 2008). PLCs provide teachers with various platforms to exercise leadership, reflect, take action, and promote collaboration.

Catholic schools should develop long-lasting approaches to leadership since leaders play an essential role in shaping norms and assisting teams to adjust to PLCs. The leader-centered model provides considerable insight into the relationship between team performance and leadership. Some studies have concentrated on the function of leadership, leadership behaviors, and leadership paradigms that can promote growth (Yukl, 2006). Recent studies have proven that leadership behaviors have a direct relationship with the general performance of schools (House et al., 2004).

Leadership Practices

Various behaviors and practices have been developed to explain the social phenomenon of leadership. The following practices define leadership differently and explain the attributes and qualities of an excellent leader within the framework for effective PLCs. In general, these practices impart that leadership is the ability to influence a group of people who intend to achieve a common goal. These practices also depict leadership behaviors as a process or activity involving both followers and leaders and entail a high degree of persuasion to acquire individual commitment (Schein, 1985).

Servant leadership. According to Johnson (2012), servant leadership was Jesus' approach to leadership based on the fundamentals of that form of leadership: putting others first; desire to serve; self-awareness; moral sensitivity; and ongoing development (Johnson, 2012). Thus, as servant leaders, principals must communicate a clear vision

and mission when creating and sustaining the PLC process in their schools. Servant

leadership can transform a school's culture that is necessary to ensure the effectiveness of

the PLC process. "Servant leaders lead by example and thus enable others to act"

(Taylor, Martin, Hutchinson, & Jinks, 2007, p. 412). Servant leaders see themselves as a

support system for those whom they lead. In alignment with the PLC process, these

leaders understand that their role is to support teachers in achieving the PLC objectives

and provide them with the available resources to do so.

  Transformational leadership. A transformational leader employs enthusiasm

and passion that constitutes an uplifting experience to a group of members. This

leadership model begins with the creation of a mission and vision that should excite a

group and convert them. The leader can develop the vision after a series of deliberations.

Selling the vision follows as this allows members of a group to renew their commitment

to an organization (Bass, 1990).

  Transformational leaders demonstrate attitudes and actions that should be

emulated by the followers. Their remarkable efforts in motivating their followers

through listening and inspiring are a clear indication that these leaders are committed to

changing the organizational structure. In addition, these leaders believe in success

through sustained commitment (Bass, 1990).

  James MacGregor Burns (1978) first introduced the concept of transformational

leadership in his descriptive study. According to Burns, transformational leadership

requires that followers and leaders motivate each other in their daily activities. This

leadership model brings changes in both the people and the organization as leaders re-

design the values, beliefs, ideologies, expectations, and aspirations of a group of people.

Transformational leaders work towards benefiting the team, organization, and the community at large (Burns, 1978). Later, Bernard Bass (1990) expanded the transformational leadership model by incorporating psychological mechanisms as a foundation.

According to Bass and Riggio (2006), the impact of staff performance and motivation determines the success of a transformational leader. This statement means that the followers of such leaders exhibit high levels of admiration, trust, loyalty, and reverence because they have exemplary transformational leaders who work hard to produce better results. A transformational leader provides followers with identity through inspiring them to work hard and improve upon their skills. This type of leader motivates and transforms followers through idealized influence and intellectual stimulation. Moreover, a transformational leader designs challenging projects that can change the work environment to accommodate creative thinking and risk undertakings.

The 1990s was a period of leadership evolution in education that focused on the changing normative structures (Leithwood, 1994). Transformational leaders in a school environment focus on identifying problems, creating solutions, and collaborating with the objective of improving the overall school performance, as measured by student performance. Transformational leaders elevate teacher motivation and commitment to the next level and offer support to them in an effort to encourage them to reach their full potential.

The transformational leadership model is of great importance to the school leader in the PLC process, as he or she is key in influencing school culture. Transformational leaders offer intellectual guidance and promote innovation in instructional methods while

also empowering and enhancing teacher development. Transformational leaders are

instrumental in shaping the school culture and fostering collaboration and overall school

effectiveness (Fullan, 2001). They also encourage teachers to examine their beliefs about

the work and modify their teaching pedagogy. They are responsible for instituting

innovative instructional processes and support teachers' professional growth and

development (Marks & Printy, 2003). Additionally, transformational leaders focus on

both collective and individual competence (Hallinger, 1992).

According to Geijsel, Sleegers, Leithwood, and Jantzi (2003), the existence of a

transformational leader in the school setting has a direct effect on teacher commitment to

changing the school culture and putting extra effort in achieving the desired student

outcome. This factor translates to greater capacity and increased productivity in teachers

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999), which is consistent with the PLC process.

Shared leadership. The shared leadership model involves joint decision-making

between teachers and staff operating in a learning community. According to Ogawa and

Bossert (1995), this leadership style alters the traditional school norms by generating

well-coordinated efforts from all of the school's staff. "Shared instructional leadership

involves the active collaboration of principal and teachers on curriculum, instruction, and

assessment" (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 371). It is not dependent on a role or position.

"The principal and teachers share responsibility for staff development, curricular

development, and supervision of instructional tasks" (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 371).

The shared leadership style is inclusive and empowers teachers. The school

administrator is not the sole leader, as teachers take part in decision-making too. This

leadership style also reflects a means of shared responsibility among school staff and

allows teachers to learn about effective leadership on a daily basis (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). The role of the school administrator is to pursue teachers' experiences and expertise to promote school improvement. This approach is an inclusive strategy to leadership and is instrumental in supporting teaching and learning in a school setting (Heck, Larsen, & Marcoulides, 1990), also consistent with the PLC process.

Teachers exhibit leadership roles and responsibilities when they collaborate around school reforms, support each other to improve their professional work, and learn from one another as peers (Marks & Printy, 2003). Teachers are also given latitude to design their instructional approaches based on the needs of their students (Hallinger, 1992). Furthermore, in the shared leadership model, the existence of collaborative inquiry transfers administrator-centered supervisory leadership practices (Reitzug, 1997).

In shared leadership, school leaders and teachers carry out conversations about instructional alternatives rather than directives and work together as a "community of learners" committed to improved student outcomes (Blasé & Blasé, 1999). The school leaders promote teacher reflection and professional development (Marks & Printy, 2003). Thus, the principal is more of a catalyst for teacher development, and in partnership, teachers assume their roles and responsibilities for their instructional improvement and professional development (Poole, 1995).

Instructional leadership. This leadership model dates back to the 1980s when educators sought innovative ways of countering the traditional role of a school principal. In this leadership model, the school principal influences productivity by acting as an instructional manager (Andrews & Soder, 1987). This leadership model focuses on the

administrator's role in the management of school practices and procedures associated with supervision. The responsibilities of an instructional leader include "helping the group develop a school mission and goals; coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating curriculum, instruction, and assessment; promoting a climate for learning; and creating a supportive work environment" (Marks & Printy, 2003, p. 16).

Furthermore, instructional leaders work with staff in the development of the mission and objectives of the school. "Goals form a central part of the vision principals use to bring consistency to an otherwise unmanageably diverse set of demands" (Leithwood, Begley, & Cousins, 1990, p. 14).

Instructional leaders also provide staff with the required resources in the quest for attaining the school's set goals. They connect their daily activities and the needs of the school with the school's goals for students. Importantly, the most valuable priority of an instructional leader is a well-articulated school curriculum and assessment strategies. The school administrator advocates for the integration of instructional planning, achievement of objectives, performance for instruction, and teacher behavior. Thus, the roles and responsibilities of teachers and student performance are measurable (Hallinger, 1992).

School administrators who practices the instructional leadership model requires the knowledge and skills in organizing a school and provides staff with training opportunities and reflection of teaching practice (Bryk et al., 1999). They set expectations for continuous improvement of instruction through teacher development that enhances learning. Additionally, instructional leaders make frequent visits to classrooms

and provide feedback to teachers necessary for instructional improvement. They also value conversations that encourage reflection in teachers.

Specific strategies adopted by instructional leaders include making suggestions, giving observational feedback, modeling, and solicitation of input from teachers. The school leader develops problem-solving approaches based on mutual trust and respect, discusses student behaviors, addresses classroom interactions, and maintains the availability of follow-up dialogue (Blasé & Blasé, 1999).

The instructional leader is responsible for the overall "climate" of the school, both as an instructional setting and a positive work environment. According to Bossert, Dwyer, Rowan, and Lee (1982), the school administrator influences learning by shaping the school's instructional setting. Effective leaders create conditions for schools to achieve its goals and provide teachers with coherence in instructional goals and setting academic standards. Additionally, instructional leaders increase opportunities for interaction among teachers through PLCs. They influence student achievement by shaping teachers' beliefs and attitudes concerning students' abilities (Purkey & Smith, 1983).

Summary

To gain an understanding of United States Catholic schools, this literature review began with a brief historical overview of Catholic education. The researcher discovered that Catholic education has an extensive history with the first Catholic schools founded by the Jesuits in the early 16th century. Although Catholic school enrollment has fluctuated throughout history, Catholic schools continue to be centered on Catholic doctrines supported by Canon Law. Catholic education also continues to focus on its

distinct mission and holistic form of education, which includes spiritual, academic, emotional, social, and moral dimensions of life.

The second part of the literature review covered the theoretical perspective of PLCs. The essential elements of PLCs are capacity building, collaboration, concern for students' achievement, flexibility, and voluntary, established norms and school factors. Furthermore, the theoretical perspective of PLCs addressed their benefits on school improvement, teachers, and students.

In the next section, a discussion of the best practices of PLCs was provided. For Catholic schools to experience the excellent outcomes of PLCs, there are standards and benchmarks that have been established in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). These academic excellence standards seek to ensure that Catholic schools develop and implement PLCs. Furthermore, simple steps that Catholic schools can follow when applying the theoretical knowledge to the practical formation of PLCs were covered, along with ways of ensuring PLCs are sustained to maximize their impact, as per Hargreaves' (2007) study.

Lastly, a review on leadership was presented. Leadership is an important component of PLCs. The first part described leadership roles and responsibilities with a focus on the Catholic educational system. This review ended with a discussion of leadership theories or models: the servant leadership model, transformational leadership model, shared leadership, and the instructional leadership model.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate best practices of PLCs as reported by elementary principals in a random sample of Catholic elementary schools. Using a qualitative research method, the researcher interviewed 14 elementary school principals located at randomly chosen Catholic (arch)dioceses throughout the United States that were identified as implementing successful PLCs in their schools. The researcher analyzed the data, best practices, and previous research findings to create a sustainable PLC plan for the elementary schools in the researcher's archdiocese. This study adds to the research on PLCs within the context of Catholic elementary education. By investigating what successful PLCs look like in Catholic elementary schools, principals can facilitate the PLC process at the building level while addressing their unique roles as Catholic school leaders.

Research Questions

The Catholic elementary school principal is responsible for implementing the PLC process in his/her school to enhance teaching practices and improve student learning. Since there was no existing plan to guide principals in this process, the following research questions guided this qualitative study:

Overarching Question: How do Catholic elementary school principals create sustainable PLCs?

Research question #1: Why is it important for Catholic elementary schools to engage in the PLC process?

Research question #2: How do school Catholic elementary school principals

initiate the process of creating PLCs?

Research question #3: How do Catholic elementary school principals sustain

PLCs?

Research Design

This study was qualitative in design. Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004) stated

that "research methods should follow research questions in a way that offers the best

chance to obtain useful answers" (pp. 17-18). Thus, the researcher utilized a qualitative

methodology for this study. Creswell (2009) stated that qualitative research is a way to

explore and understand the meaning that individuals or groups of individuals attribute to

a social problem.

The researcher selected this qualitative methodology based on the aim of the

study, which required the researcher to gather information from the participants that

would guide the process of creating a sustainable PLC plan in Catholic elementary

schools. In order to achieve this aim, the researcher needs to understand the processes of

effective PLC implementation through this study. The study utilized the experiences and

perceptions of other principals in guiding the eventual aim of the study. Using this

qualitative approach, the researcher was able to have meaningful conversations with other

Catholic elementary school principals through interviews that provided relevant data

based on their experiences with the PLC process in their Catholic elementary schools.

The researcher audio-recorded the interviews and used descriptive field notes to

record detailed and accurate descriptions of the information the researcher obtained from

the interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The researcher transcribed the interviews and

coded the data for key themes and categories that provided the framework for the creation of a sustainable PLC plan for Catholic elementary schools.

Participants/Data Sources

In order to create a sustainable PLC plan for elementary schools in the researcher's archdiocese, the researcher focused on obtaining data from a group of elementary school principals of other Catholic (arch)dioceses that have what they perceive as successful PLCs in their elementary schools. To identify the participants, the researcher used purposive sampling, a method of collecting data where the participants understand the problem and research questions because of their experience with the situation, and they are willing to share their knowledge (Creswell, 2003). Therefore, Catholic elementary school principals were the participants for this study.

As part of the purposive sampling method, the researcher used snowball sampling to make initial contact with (arch)diocesan superintendents. Snowball sampling is a type of purposive sampling in which participants with whom contact has been made refer the researcher to others who could participate in the study (Creswell, 2009). The researcher's rationale for this approach was that (arch)diocesan superintendents of Catholic elementary schools would be knowledgeable about which principals in their (arch)diocese had what they perceive as successful PLCs in their elementary schools.

To begin the identification process, in October 2014 the researcher sent communication to 27 archdiocesan superintendents of major cities throughout the United States based on the above rationale to ask for contacts in their Catholic elementary schools (Appendix A – Communication to Superintendents). Out of 27 archdioceses, the researcher obtained 18 contacts.

After obtaining IRB approval on October 31, 2014, the researcher then sent an

Invitation Letter to the 18 contacts identified by their superintendents to have what they

perceive as successful PLCs in their elementary schools to obtain their consent to

participate in the study (Appendix B – Invitation Letter). Ten contacts agreed to

participate, and the researcher began to schedule mutually convenient dates for the

interview process.

To ensure adequate sample size, the researcher also sent communication to an

additional 14 diocesan superintendents in other cities throughout the United States to ask

for contacts in their Catholic elementary schools. The researcher used the same rationale

to identify the participants and the same communication letter to superintendents. Out of

14 dioceses, the researcher obtained four additional contacts. The researcher then sent

the original Invitation Letter to the four additional contacts identified by their

superintendents to have what they perceive as successful PLCs in their elementary

schools to obtain their consent to participate in the study. All four contacts agreed to

participate in this study, and the researcher continued to schedule mutually convenient

dates for the interview process.

The researcher secured a total of 14 Catholic elementary school principals

specifically identified by their superintendents to have what they perceived as successful

PLCs in their elementary schools to participate in this study. Of the 14 principals in the

study, 13 were female and one was male. Their work experience as school principal

ranged from 4-21 years with an average of 10 years of experience. Their school sizes,

described by the participants as small, medium, or large, included six small schools

(enrollment less than 300 students), seven medium schools (enrollment greater than 300

students), and one large school (schools with enrollment greater than 500 students).

Data Collection Tools

The researcher used qualitative interviews with a general interview approach to

achieve the aim of this study. McNamara (2009) stated that in using the general

interview approach, the researcher has the "ability to ensure that the same general areas

of information are collected from each interviewee; this provides more focus than the

conversational approach, but still allows a degree of freedom and adaptability in getting

information from the interviewee" (Types of interviews section, para. 1).

Using the general interview approach and this study's overarching question, the

researcher developed eight interview questions with a focus on implementing PLCs in

Catholic elementary schools (Appendix C – Interview Questions). To avoid interviewer

bias, the researcher developed interview questions that allowed the participants to discuss

their experiences with the PLC process in their Catholic elementary schools both honestly

and openly with a focus on Catholic education.

Since the participants in this study were geographically distant, the researcher

conducted telephone interviews averaging 30-45 minutes per interview. The researcher

communicated to the participants in advance that their interviews would be audio-

recorded, transcribed, and sent back to them to check for accuracy and provide additional

information or clarification if needed.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection began in November 2014 and was completed by the end of

December. In November, the researcher sent communication to the 14 Catholic

elementary school principals specifically identified by their superintendents to have what they perceive as successful PLCs in their elementary school informing them that the researcher had received IRB approval to proceed with the study. The researcher sent to the participants an invitation letter (Appendix B – Invitation Letter) describing the purpose of the study, and the informed consent outlining the responsibilities of the researcher and rights of the participants.

The researcher informed the participants that the telephone interviews would be scheduled at their convenience and last approximately 30-45 minutes. The researcher also informed the participants that the researcher would audio-record the interviews using a digital audio recorder. The researcher assured the participants that the researcher would maintain their confidentiality as well as the confidentiality of their schools and (arch)dioceses before, during, and after the interview. The researcher informed the participants that the researcher would provide them with a copy of the transcripts to check for accuracy and provide additional information or clarification if needed. The researcher scheduled the telephone interviews and began to collect the data.

The researcher completed the interviews in December 2014. The researcher transcribed the interviews using a professional transcription service, TranscribeMe, and sent the transcripts to the participants in April 2015. Through this member-checking process, none of the participants informed the researcher of any inaccuracies, additional information, or clarification with the transcripts.

According to Creswell (2009), data analysis requires that the researcher organize and prepare the data, read or look at all of the data, and code all of the data. The researcher analyzed the data as it was collected and continually reflected upon the data by

recording first impression notes and other observations based on the researcher's initial thoughts. The researcher hand coded the transcripts by creating a theme idea Word document to help the researcher organize the data into themes and categories. Then, the researcher analyzed the meaning of the themes and categories and connected them to the research questions guiding this study.

As a Catholic school principal, the researcher sought to study PLCs within Catholic elementary education and design a framework for elementary school principals seeking to foster sustainable PLCs. Kanuha (2000) stated that an insider researcher conducts research with populations within which they are members. Therefore, the researcher's role in this study was as an insider because of the very nature of the researcher's position as a Catholic school elementary principal.

As an insider, the researcher belonged to a member of the greater community of Catholic school elementary principals. However, since the researcher did not have any established professional or personal relationships with any of the participants in this study, the researcher was an outsider seeking to collect relevant, rich data for the researcher's study. The researcher did not conduct interviews within the researcher's own archdiocese.

During the interviews, the researcher used bracketing by placing assumptions about the PLC topic aside so that the researcher could focus on the participants' experiences with the PLC process. The researcher sometimes found this process to be difficult because of the researcher's own knowledge of the PLC research and experience with the PLC process in the researcher's school. The researcher addressed this issue by

paying careful attention to the researcher's knowledge of and experience with PLCs and noting any views and biases in the researcher's field notes.

The researcher verified the data by utilizing member checking. Member checking provides an opportunity for participants in a study to approve specific aspects of the information they provided (Doyle, 2007). The researcher provided the participants with a complete copy of their transcripts to ensure that the researcher accurately captured the participants' experiences. The participants had an opportunity to read their transcripts in their entirety and check for accuracy, and provide additional information or clarification if needed.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to collecting the data for this study, the researcher obtained approval from Creighton University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The researcher also obtained approval from (arch)diocesan superintendents when provided with the principal contact name. The researcher obtained a signed informed consent document from each participant outlining the elements of the study as well as the responsibilities of the researcher and the rights of the participant. The researcher informed the participants of their right to stop the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The researcher also informed the participants that all of the information obtained from the interviews would remain confidential and that the researcher would provide them with a copy of the transcript for their review and verification. The researcher assured the participants that the data would be stored securely in the researcher's home and that the researcher would be the only person who would have access to the information. To further ensure ethical research practices, the researcher informed the

participants that the audio-recorded interviews would be destroyed immediately after

transcription and that any paper versions of data would be destroyed at the end of the

study. Please see Appendix B for Invitation Letter.

Summary

        This qualitative study was designed for Catholic elementary schools in the

researcher's archdiocese. The purpose of this study was to investigate best practices of

PLCs as reported by elementary principals in a random sample of Catholic elementary

schools. The researcher's role in this study was to study PLCs within Catholic

elementary education and design a framework for elementary school principals seeking to

foster sustainable PLCs. Using a general interview approach, the researcher collected

data from 14 elementary school principals of other Catholic (arch)dioceses with

successful PLCs in their schools. The researcher analyzed the data by hand coding the

interview transcripts into themes and categories and verified the data by utilizing member

checking. The researcher followed IRB policies and ethical procedures to protect the

rights of the participants and ensure the integrity of the research process throughout this

study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND THE EVIDENCE-BASED SOLUTION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate best practices of PLCs as reported by elementary principals in a random sample of Catholic elementary schools. Qualitative data for this study included 14 personal interviews of elementary principals of Catholic (arch)dioceses with successful PLCs as identified by the superintendents leading those archdioceses. To understand how to implement a sustainable PLC plan for Catholic elementary schools, the researcher used the following research questions to guide this study:

Overarching Question: How do Catholic elementary school principals create sustainable PLCs?

Research question #1: Why is it important for Catholic elementary schools to engage in the PLC process?

Research question #2: How do Catholic elementary school principals initiate the process of creating PLCs?

Research question #3: How do Catholic elementary school principals sustain PLCs?

Chapter 4 includes the researcher's presentation of the findings from the participants' interviews followed by an analysis and synthesis of the data resulting in an evidence-based solution for elementary school principals seeking to foster sustainable PLCs in Catholic education.

Presentation of the Findings

The researcher gathered the data and analyzed the information utilizing three

levels of coding (Sherman & Webb, 2001). First, the researcher coded the transcripts for

initial codes by examining the participants' actual words. Then, the researcher coded the

transcripts for categories and themes by taking a more comprehensive approach to the

data analysis process to ensure that the researcher identified the most important aspects of

the participants' experiences with the PLC process. Lastly, to organize the results of the

analysis process, the researcher created a final theme idea Word document.

Five common themes emerged throughout this study: (a) Catholic mission, (b)

collaborative culture, (c) professional learning, (d) relational context, (e) PLC structure.

Qualitative Findings Information

Catholic mission. Participants described the importance of Catholic mission as it

relates to the creation of PLCs. They stated that mission and shared values in Catholic

schools set the stage for PLC work. Participant 4 stated, "Just because of who we are as

an institution, by the very nature of our ministry, PLCs are tied directly to Catholic

mission and Catholic identity." All participants explained that Catholic schools are

communities of faith, knowledge, and service and that the communal characteristic of

Catholic schools is in alignment with the PLC process. Participant 2 stated that the PLC

process in Catholic schools "offers a team – not only collaboration towards the mission

but also accountability towards the mission, which is a real benefit to the Catholic school

setting, because we are obligated to the faith mission…we are called to this." Catholic

schools are driven by a sense of purpose and shared vision just as the work of PLCs. The

difference between PLCs in Catholic schools and secular schools is the relational piece of

the PLC process - Catholic schools are communities of faith within academic

communities. The focus is not solely on student learning. This factor is an important

distinction. Catholic schools are unique in their mission and the PLC process can help

build a community of stakeholders that work towards school improvement with a

commitment to the development of the whole child. Participant 3 stated that through

PLCs in Catholic schools we can work "on helping students connect what they are

learning to how they are living their faith. Just the same way we look at a reading goal or

a math goal and give us a focus, that same kind of work you can do in other areas related

to Catholic identity." All participants described Catholic mission and the essential

characteristics of PLCs as described in the literature as working together to advance the

Catholic faith and student learning in Catholic schools. Participant 13 stated, "The PLC

process 'education' piece has to match our Catholic mission piece, and it does by

preparing our students to be global citizens that act ethically and morally." Participants

stated that Catholic mission nurtures the PLC process by providing opportunities for

community building that leads to improving culture and collaboration at the building

level. Twelve participants noted that the mission of Catholic schools lends itself to the

creation of PLCs by viewing the Catholic school as a community in Christ where there is

respect, teamwork, cooperation, interaction, and collaboration. Participants stated that

the importance of PLCs in Catholic schools must be communicated clearly to teachers so

that they understand that PLCs are part of the Catholic school's mission as it relates to

ensuring excellence in every aspect of learning. This point was noted as an important

part of the buy-in process for teachers in Catholic schools.

Collaborative culture. Throughout the interviews, participants emphasized the theme of Catholic school culture as it relates to the creation of PLCs. Participants explained that before authentic PLC work can begin in Catholic schools, a culture of collaboration must be present in the daily life of the school. Participant 3 described in her own words, "I need to get these teachers collaborating and seeing that they all have something positive and all have value to what they can learn from each other." Participant 14 stated that the PLC process helps teachers understand that "each and every one of us has something valuable to say, so let's share it and learn from one another." This theme was a prevalent factor among all participants in their experiences with successful PLC work. Participant 8 stated, "It's really through a collaborative environment that you are able to have your school reach its full potential." Participant 10 stated, "Collaboration is really critical in terms of moving the academic quality of the school forward." Participant 8 further stated that the PLC process in Catholic elementary schools is "essential to reach any school or archdiocesan goals." The participants explained that the school's mission, vision, and Catholic identity must be clearly communicated as part of the PLC process and that a culture of collaboration where trust, respect, and the educational philosophy of Catholic education must be collectively shared among PLC team members. The participants explained that the very nature of a collaborative environment fosters support from peers as well as administrators that reduces teacher isolation in their buildings and maximizes expertise at the building level. As Participant 10 explained, "They know they've got a support system much broader than an administrative team or a principal or assistant principal or resource teacher. They've got peers who are supporting what they do every day, and they can openly talk

about their successes and failures." Much of the discussion of the participants' experiences with fostering a strong sense of collaboration stemmed from their understanding of the challenges that exist in Catholic elementary schools with regard to the standards for operational vitality such as finances and human resources. They explained that a culture of collaboration helps with shared leadership and encouraging teachers to keep learning as part of their own professional growth and overall responsibility to the mission of Catholic education. Participant 2 stated, "The collaborative piece is critical to the role of the principal in PLCs too. Principals need to model the PLC process for their teachers by meeting as principals and being collaborative and researching best practices." In creating a culture of collaboration as an integral part of the PLC process, the participants emphasized both the development of the students and the development of teachers and principals.

Likewise, in creating a culture of collaboration, many participants stated that they encountered resistance from their teachers. Participant 7 stated that in Catholic schools "there is this very old model of 'this is my classroom, and I'm going to do what I need to do in my classroom to get the job done' and so, we were missing this really fantastic opportunity to put our heads together and work smarter not harder." Dealing with resistance from teachers was one of the greatest challenges in beginning the process of creating PLCs. Participant 5 stated that when she began PLCs she realized that part of this resistance was the fact that teachers had "misconceptions" about what PLCs are." Participants explained that one of the ways to address this challenge is by sharing the research with teachers that shows what PLCs are and how a collaborative culture can help both the teacher and student. Participant 10 stated, "You have to show your teachers that

you get the best out of your school community when there's a collaborative working

structure within your school." Participants also explained that the role of the principal is

critical in dealing with resistance from teachers. Participant 8 stated, "When you are

engaged in learning along with your teachers, you show them that you are committed to

the process, the good and the bad and that you are growing your school together."

      Professional learning. Participants cited improved professional practice as a

leading factor in creating successful PLCs in Catholic schools. They stated that it is

important to emphasize to teachers that they are professionals who need to engage in

research-based practices just as professionals in other fields, including teachers in the

public sector. Participant 13 stated that in addition to our Catholic identity, "We have to

make sure that we are as professional and as professionally competent to be just as good

as our public-school counterparts because that education is free. Fundamentally, we have

to have a good, solid education system." This emphasis on professionalism, competence,

and high expectations for professional learning was one of the key ingredients to

establishing a strong foundation for PLCs in Catholic schools. Participants explained that

the reason for this is that it is important for Catholic school teachers to view themselves

as professionals who continually strive to be highly effective in their practice as teachers,

but more importantly, in their vocation as Catholic school teachers who prepare and

challenge their students to give witness to Christian life. Participants also shared that in

creating PLCs in their schools, they highlighted the term "professional learning" in

professional learning communities. Participant 8 stated that she told her staff that "we

work in PLCs because we are professionals, because we are a learning community."

Many of the participants explained that was one of the first steps to creating successful

PLCs. Once teachers understood that professional learning is a pathway to improving

student learning as well as the students' experience with learning, they began to change

their mindset and understand the benefits of working in PLCs. Participant 13 stated,

"You have to make it very clear to the teachers that this is going to be the next step for us

moving up in professionalism." Participants stated that they communicated to the

teachers that no one has all the answers and that they have to keep learning in order to

improve strategies that focus on student learning. Participant 9 shared that she also

communicated to teachers that "safe lessons are not always best for students" and that

"moving out of their own comfort zone is a requirement for professional growth" that

will ultimately lead to continuous improvement in student learning.

     Relational context. Relational context was another theme that surfaced as

participants discussed their experiences with successful PLC work in Catholic schools.

Participants explained that in creating PLCs, they began with emphasizing to their

teachers that the relational aspect of PLC work was an important element of the actual

process. Participant 2 stated, "Catholic schools are so different and diverse, and we have

needs that are specific to Catholic schools that the relational piece becomes even more

necessary." Participants stated that Catholic schools have a smaller pool of teachers than

the public sector, and therefore, the professional learning and collaboration and that

comes from PLC work helps them to work more efficiently and with a spirit of teamwork

rather than in isolation. Participants stated that especially in smaller Catholic schools,

creating PLCs helped them to break patterns of such isolation not just in the support that

teachers receive from their peers but also from their administrators. Participant 3 stated,

"The PLC process offers a research element to it, an engagement practice element, a

feedback element, and that itself offers a great framework for professional growth within the Catholic school setting. That relational piece of the PLC process is a benefit to Catholic elementary schools." Participants stated that it was important to transform the mindset of teachers so they understood that PLC work was not something additional that they were required to do; rather, PLC work was about doing what they already do in a different way. In understanding the relational piece of PLCs and how successes and failures can be experienced together, Catholic school teachers are more inclined to buy-in to the process on an organic level. Participant 7 stated, "We need to engage in professional conversations with others who are experiencing the same challenges, but also can help us hold ourselves accountable." This change in mindset may help teachers experience the support that comes from learning in a community where team collaboration and accountability for student learning is lived and shared among all stakeholders.

PLC structure. The structure of PLCs in Catholic schools was another integral theme in creating successful PLCs. Participants shared their experiences with how they created PLCs in terms of the actual PLC structure to promote and sustain continuous school improvement. Participant 2 stated, "A portion of the day must be set aside for PLCs." Participants explained that this structure played an important role in the overall success of PLC work in their respective schools because without a solid system in place for PLC teams to meet, teachers would be unable to collaborate effectively on enhancing their teaching practices and improving student learning. Participants stated that it was their responsibility as school leaders to provide for the structural changes in their buildings that allow for PLC work to begin. Participant 5 stated, "You just can't say

'well we're going to have PLCs' but not make structural changes that would allow this to happen." Without deliberate structural changes, which promote common PLC time during the school day on a weekly basis, the PLC process in Catholic schools will be non-sustainable. Participant 10 stated, "PLCs have to be embedded into the schedule in some capacity, so we have to be creative about scheduling." Participants shared that there are many ways to create PLC team structures in Catholic schools depending on factors such as size, location, and resources; however, based on their collective experiences, the most successful PLC structure in Catholic schools is based on school leaders making the time for teachers to participate in weekly collaborative, job-embedded learning that impacts the education of the whole child. Participant 12 shared that she communicated to teachers that PLC meeting time was "sacred" and that "neither PLC time nor instructional time should be given way for any reason." When this occurs, teachers may begin to see many of the same patterns that emerge from collecting and analyzing the data that will help to guide the PLC process to meet the individual needs of the students and make the case for creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic schools.

Participants stated that while it was sometimes difficult from an administrative perspective to structure PLCs in terms of arranging common PLC meeting times, it was both imperative and non-negotiable. Many participants stated that this theme was another one of the greatest challenges in beginning the process of creating PLCs. Participant 2 stated, "The first year that we implemented PLCs, we used part of the time that we had for faculty meetings for our PLCs, so we had some faculty meeting time and we had some PLC time, that's how we started." Participant 14 stated that during her first year implementing PLCs, "I came up with some common planning time within the day,

and teachers had to come up with time on their own – there was a shared kind of time."

Participant 9 stated that when she first implemented PLCs, "We made the time, we

realized we just needed to be creative with scheduling, that's all." Participant 10 stated,

"PLCs can't happen at five o'clock on a school day. They have to be embedded into the

schedule in some capacity, it has to be a priority for the school itself and the

administration." Participants agreed that school leaders must be committed to making the

structural changes necessary for teachers to participate in regular PLC work during the

school day.

Analysis and Synthesis of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate best practices of PLCs as reported by

elementary principals in a random sample of Catholic elementary schools. To create a

framework for elementary school principals seeking to foster sustainable PLCs in

Catholic education, qualitative data were analyzed by utilizing the essential elements of

PLCs, as described in the literature review. The researcher also analyzed the qualitative

data by utilizing the best practices for PLCs, as described in the *National Standards and

Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-

O'Neill, 2012).

The overarching question in this study was to understand how school principals

create sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools. Although the research includes

a variety of PLC definitions and characteristics, the researcher found that these variations

are consistent with Hord's (1997) five dimensions of PLCs and DuFour's (2006) three

important elements of PLCs. Based on the analysis and synthesis of this study's findings,

the researcher determined that Hord's and DuFour's research served as a strong basis

from which to inform the aim of this study. The researcher found that the shared five

dimensions and three important elements cited in the literature review and the standards

and benchmarks cited in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic*

Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) supported the

participants' knowledge, skills, and successes with the PLC process in their schools.

Through analysis of the interviews, the researcher found that the participants

shared their experiences with creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic schools without any

major distinctions in the size of the participants' (arch)dioceses and schools, or the years

of experience as Catholic school principals. Based on the results of the data collection,

the following analysis and synthesis of the findings informed the aim of this study.

Understand Importance of PLCs in Catholic Schools

Understanding why it is important for Catholic schools in particular to engage in

the PLC process was an essential research question because the aim of this study was to

create a framework for elementary school principals seeking to foster PLCs in Catholic

education.

The review of the literature revealed that the purpose of the PLC process is a

focus on learning for all, collaborative teams, collective inquiry, action orientation, and

continuous improvement (DuFour, 2006). For these reasons, the PLC process is indeed a

valuable process to implement in schools. Based on the data analysis, the PLC process is

even more valuable, as the expectations of 21st century Catholic school educators and

students are constantly changing. By participating in the PLC process in Catholic

schools, PLC members have an opportunity to learn, share, and grow while fully

embracing the mission of Catholic schools and understanding the unique joys and

challenges of Catholic education.

DuFour (2006) emphasized the need to establish a clear purpose and vision as an

important step in the PLC process. The data revealed that while PLCs focus on student

learning in secular schools, there is one very important distinction with PLCs in Catholic

schools – the focus is not solely on academic achievement. This distinction was an

important part of the process in creating successful PLCs in Catholic schools, especially

as teachers begin to recognize that the PLC process supports their vocation as Catholic

school educators.

According to the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic*

Elementary and Secondary Schools (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012), Catholic education

is based on the education and formation of the whole person, which includes the spiritual,

intellectual, moral, and social aspects of a person's development. The data revealed that

the creation of PLCs in Catholic schools supports the Church's mission while promoting

continuous school improvement in the areas of Mission and Catholic Identity, Academic

Excellence, Governance and Leadership, and Operational Vitality.

Shape A Culture of Collaboration

Shaping a culture of collaboration was an important factor in beginning the

process of creating PLCs in a Catholic school environment. Hord (1997) stated that one

of the powerful elements of PLCs is sustained collaboration among teachers. According

to *The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools* (Miller, 2006), Catholic elementary

schools "should try to create a community school climate that reproduces, as far as

possible, the warm and intimate atmosphere of family life. Those responsible for these

schools will, therefore, do everything they can to promote a common spirit of trust and spontaneity" (p. 29). Miller further explained that Catholic educators should develop a willingness to collaborate among themselves and work as a team for the common good of the school to build a "genuine school community and strengthen scholastic solidarity" (p. 30).

The analysis of the interviews revealed that Catholic schools that engage in the PLC process help and support each other to exchange ideas and improve their teaching practices and student learning by maximizing their varying resources both at the building level and (arch)diocesan level. A culture of collaboration in Catholic schools not only enhances the shared knowledge among teachers at the building level but also enhances the shared knowledge among teachers and principals at the (arch)diocesan level. This collaborative model is especially important in Catholic elementary schools where all curriculum and instruction should advance the mission of the Church and where genuine trust and collaboration should exist among teachers, parents, and all school stakeholders. Emphasizing Catholic schools as collaborative communities of faith and knowledge guides the creation of PLCs within a Catholic context.

Improve Teachers' Professional Practice

Improving teachers' professional practice in Catholic schools was another important factor in beginning the process of creating PLCs in Catholic elementary schools. As stated in the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012), Catholic schools are distinguished by excellence. Participating in PLCs provides teachers with the opportunity to research best practices in order to ensure excellence in teaching and

learning. Teachers who participate in PLCs improve upon their professional practice by expanding their knowledge base, reflecting on their teaching practices, and sharing the workload and responsibility of ensuring the success of all students (Erkens, et al., 2008). In Catholic schools, the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools* (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012) provide the basis for PLC work that includes teachers collaborating in PLCs to develop, implement, and continuously improve the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction resulting in high levels of student achievement. By sharing in this process, Catholic school teachers improve their professional practice and grow both as teachers and learners. More importantly, this process engages students in meaningful learning that leads to the education of the whole person.

Communicate Value of Relational and Supportive Conditions

Communicating the value of the relational and supportive conditions of the PLC process as a research-based approach was another significant factor in beginning to create successful PLC work in Catholic schools. According to Erkens (2008), one of the main benefits of PLCs for teachers is the encouragement and support that teachers offer each other as PLC members. The data revealed that this relational aspect is especially important in Catholic schools where the PLC process helps to promote professional learning and collaboration among teachers in schools that experience many of the same challenges such as school staff size, teaching roles and responsibilities, and limited resources. Boyd and Hord (1994) stated that the supportive network that PLCs provide helps in the overall interaction and communication among teachers. Since Catholic

schools are unique in their services and educational programs, the relational aspect of the

PLC process helps to support and unite teachers in their ministry as Catholic educators.

Provide Structures that Promote PLC Process

Providing structural conditions that promote the PLC process was essential in

beginning the process of creating PLCs in Catholic elementary schools. Hipp and

Huffman (2003) explained that the need for structural conditions such as space and time

is just as important as collaboration. The analysis of the data revealed that providing

common PLC time during the regular school day on a weekly basis was one of the

greatest factors that led to beginning the process of creating PLCs in Catholic elementary

schools. The data further revealed that arranging common PLC meeting times that

focused on teachers taking collective responsibility and accountability for student

learning was essential. According to Hord (1997), the fundamental element of PLCs is

that improved learning for students requires continuous job-embedded learning for

teachers. The participants' experiences revealed that there is not one prescribed method

for facilitating common PLC time and that the process of teachers working

interdependently during the school day was dependent upon the school leader's

commitment to the PLC process.

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Summary

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Chapter 4 included the researcher's presentation of the findings from the data

collection followed by an analysis and synthesis of the data. Five common themes

emerged from the results of the data collection: (a) Catholic mission, (b) collaborative

culture, (c) professional learning, (d) relational context, (e) PLC structure. To create an

evidence-based solution for elementary principals seeking to foster sustainable PLCs in

Catholic education, the results from the data collection were analyzed by applying the

basic elements of PLCs described in the literature review. The researcher also analyzed

the results from the data collection by applying the best practices for PLCs described in

the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and*

Secondary Schools (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012).

     The overarching question in this study was to understand how school principals

create sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools. Based on the results of the data

collection and the analysis and synthesis of the findings, Chapter 5 presents the proposed

solution for elementary school principals seeking to foster sustainable PLCs in Catholic

education.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

To implement a sustainable PLC plan for Catholic elementary schools, this

qualitative study examined professional learning communities within a Catholic context.

This study was important because the researcher's archdiocese required the

implementation of PLCs at the building level, but there was no existing plan to guide the

principals in this process. This study was guided by three research questions:

Research question #1: Why is it important for Catholic elementary schools in

particular to engage in the PLC process?

Research question #2: How do school principals begin the process of creating

PLCs in Catholic elementary schools?

Research question #3: How do school principals sustain PLCs in Catholic

elementary schools?

Based on the analysis and synthesis of the findings, the researcher concluded that

Catholic school principals with sustainable professional learning communities apply the

basic elements and dimensions of PLCs as described in the literature review with an

emphasis on five essential strategies specifically tailored to meet the distinct mission and

purpose of Catholic elementary schools.

The researcher's proposed solution in the following chapter recommends that

Catholic school principals implement the five essential strategies as a framework for

fostering the PLC process in elementary schools. This study's proposed solution is

significant because it will address the need to implement PLCs at the building level in the

researcher's archdiocese and guide principals in sustainable PLC work in Catholic

elementary schools. In doing so, it will also help to initiate Principal PLCs as a model for the collaboration among all Catholic school educators.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate best practices of PLCs as reported by elementary school principals in a random sample of Catholic elementary schools.

Aim of the Study

The aim of this study was to create a framework for elementary school principals seeking to foster PLCs in Catholic education.

Proposed Solution

Based on the themes that emerged from the data collection, the researcher proposed the following solution, presented as five essential strategies, for elementary school principals seeking to foster sustainable professional learning communities in Catholic education:

- Understand Importance of PLCs in Catholic Schools. Principals understand that Catholic mission supports the PLC process both in its function as communities of faith and communities of knowledge. Principals communicate the importance of the PLC process in their schools to strengthen Catholic school identity and impact student learning. Principals provide teachers with opportunities to learn, share, and grow in their ministry as Catholic educators to enhance student learning on all levels – spiritual, intellectual, moral, social, and emotional.

- Shape A Culture of Collaboration. Principals shape a culture of collaboration with an emphasis on the school as a community in Christ. Principals promote a culture of collaboration that encourages respect, teamwork, and cooperation to

enhance the shared knowledge among teachers in their buildings. Through

dialogue, teachers interact and work together to address students' specific needs

and ensure student learning on all levels. Principals also promote a culture of

collaboration among principals and teachers by sharing ideas, pooling varying

resources, and maximizing expertise at the (arch)diocesan level. Principals begin

the process of forming and participating in Principal PLCs to lead by example and

model collaboration and the PLC process in their schools.

- Improve Teachers' Professional Practice. Principals improve teachers'

  professional practice both as teachers and learners. Principals provide teachers

  with regular, job-embedded opportunities to participate in PLCs and improve

  upon their professional practice by expanding their knowledge base through

  research based practices, reflecting on their teaching practices, and sharing the

  workload and responsibility of ensuring the success of the development of the

  whole child.

- Communicate Value of Relational and Supportive Conditions. Principals

  communicate the value of the relational and supportive conditions of the PLC

  process to support and unite teachers in their ministry as Catholic educators.

  Principals communicate the value of the relational piece of the PLC process by

  facilitating the PLC process in their schools and building upon the professional

  network within and across (arch)dioceses to support teaching and learning for all.

- Provide Structures that Promote PLC Process. Principals provide structures that

  promote the PLC process. Principals provide structural conditions for PLC work

  with a primary focus on weekly common PLC time that focuses on learning

together, applying research-based practices, and working toward the common

goal of increasing student learning through the lens of the mission and vision of

Catholic education.

These five essential strategies provide Catholic elementary school principals with

a solid foundation for beginning the process of creating sustainable PLCs at the building

level. The proposed solution requires the implementation of a new policy that requires

principals to participate in PLC professional development tailored to meet the distinct

mission and purpose of Catholic elementary schools. There are no additional resources,

as any professional development component will be facilitated by (arch)diocesan

principals through shared leadership.

Support for the Solution

The overarching question in this study was to understand how school principals

create sustainable professional learning communities in Catholic elementary schools.

Throughout the data collection process, the researcher found that while the participants

relied on the fundamentals of PLCs based on the research, specifically, Hord's (1997)

five dimensions of PLCs and DuFour's (2006) three important elements of PLCs, five

common themes emerged throughout this study: (a) Catholic mission, (b) collaborative

culture, (c) professional learning, (d) relational context, (e) PLC structure. Therefore, the

creation of sustainable PLCs in Catholic schools required a specific emphasis on these

five themes as a framework for fostering the PLC process in elementary schools. This

framework, proposed as five essential strategies, includes the following: (a) understand

the importance of PLCs in Catholic elementary schools; (b) shape a culture of

collaboration with an emphasis on the school as a community in Christ; (c) improve

teachers' professional practice both as teachers and learners; (d) communicate the value

of the relational and supportive conditions of the PLC process to support and unite

teachers in their ministry as Catholic educators; (e) provide structures that promote the

PLC process, beginning with common PLC time so that teachers can work

interdependently during the school day to impact professional learning and student

learning. The above framework, proposed as five essential strategies and the

implementation of a new policy, lays a solid foundation for beginning the process of

creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools.

Based on the information gathered from the data collected, the researcher learned

that without these five essential strategies, the case for PLCs in Catholic elementary

schools is non-sustainable. The researcher also learned that the quality and breadth of the

Catholic school leader plays a substantially significant role in the creation, development,

and sustenance of PLCs at the building level. An effective Catholic school leader who

practices servant leadership, transformational leadership, and instructional leadership

greatly influences the process of creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary

schools.

Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Solution

To aid in the implementation of the proposed solution, the support from the Office

of Catholic Schools is critical. The archdiocese's district school leaders must

demonstrate a commitment to implementing the PLC process in elementary schools

throughout the archdiocese by establishing a new policy and providing the necessary

professional development to support principals in this process. This proposed solution is

practical and feasible, as a new policy would require the basic implementation of a

written policy in the Archdiocese's Administrative Handbook requiring schools to

function as PLCs and requiring principals to participate in PLC professional

development. The new policy will serve as the key starting point for beginning the

process of creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools.

Policies Influencing the Proposed Solution

The elementary schools in the researcher's archdiocese are required to seek

accreditation from the Florida Catholic Conference (FCC). The FCC uses the standards

by the *National Standards and Benchmarks for Effective Catholic Elementary and*

Secondary Schools (Ozar & Weitzel-O'Neill, 2012). Through the accreditation process,

each school measures its existing quality, demonstrates compliance with accreditation

standards, and identifies the means and methods of attaining higher levels of student

achievement and overall school performance.

Of particular importance to the PLC process, each school is required to measure

its compliance with Standard/Benchmark 7.7 and 8.5, respectively: "Faculties collaborate

in professional learning communities to develop, implement, and continuously improve

the effectiveness of the curriculum and instruction to result in high levels of student

achievement," and "Faculties collaborate in professional learning communities to monitor

individual and class-wide student learning through methods such as common assessments

and rubrics" (Center for Catholic School Effectiveness, 2012, p. 10).

The FCC accreditation standards serve as the policy for creating sustainable PLCs

in Catholic elementary schools. However, since there is no existing plan to guide

principals in this process, the researcher recommends that the Office of Catholic Schools

in the researcher's archdiocese implements a new policy requiring principals to

participate in professional development that is focused on the planning, implementation, and evaluation of the PLC process with a specific emphasis on the proposed five essential strategies for creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools.

Potential Barriers and Obstacles to Proposed Solution

The pre-requisite for the researcher's proposed solution requires that principals participate in PLC professional development tailored to meet the distinct mission and purpose of Catholic elementary schools. Potential barriers to PLC professional development include organizational barriers. As such, there is the potential for resistance from school principals in terms of principal buy-in of the PLC process and ownership of the PLC process in their schools. This resistance is significant because the research literature is clear that the leadership and support of the school principal are critical to the success of the PLC process. There is also a potential for resistance from teachers once the PLC process is initiated at the building level. This resistance is also significant because teachers are the actual PLC members and without their buy-in the PLC process will be unproductive and ineffective. The principal's role as a transformational leader will address these potential obstacles.

According to Hargreaves (2003), there is no single person responsible for maintaining and sustaining PLCs; however, an individual should serve as a lead facilitator to ensure that the team works towards the shared goals and vision. Therefore, to address the potential obstacles, the researcher recommends that the Office of Catholic Schools in the researcher's archdiocese appoint an archdiocesan elementary school principal, who is experienced in the PLC process, to serve as the PLC representative and facilitate the PLC professional development for the elementary principals. This shared

leadership model will not only promote the professional development of principals but also serve as a catalyst for transformational change as principals begin the process of creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic schools.

The proposed five essential strategies for creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools will help to guide this process at the principal level and building level.

Internal Issues Related to Proposed Solution

In addition to the potential barriers stated above, another possible obstacle that the leader may need to be aware of is that the PLC process may be viewed internally by stakeholders as "another" program or initiative mandated by the archdiocese, which may interfere with the implementation of the proposed solution at the building level. The leader should be aware that in order to move forward with implementing the proposed solution, the distinct goal of PLCs in Catholic elementary schools should be clearly articulated to stakeholders.

To address this potential barrier, the leader must communicate and emphasize to stakeholders that the PLC process is not a new program, initiative, or reform; rather, it is a process that strengthens and supports continuous school improvement for Catholic educators as well as the students they serve. The school principal's transformational leadership and implementation of the five essential strategies for creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools will serve as the basis for this potential internal obstacle.

Change Theory

Throughout the researcher's study on creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic schools, the researcher found that this study directly related to organization change. Burke (2011) stated that mission and vision set the direction of whom we are and whom we want to be. In addition, according to the Burke-Litwin model, leadership is a key transformational factor that leads to successful organization change (Burke, 2011). Likewise, Fullan (2005) stated that there are seven basic premises that contribute to successful changes in school improvement. These premises include a focus on motivation, capacity building with a focus on results, learning in context, changing context, a bias for reflective action, tri-level engagement, and persistence and flexibility in staying the course – all relevant and essential to the change process in creating sustainable PLCs.

The Office of Catholic Schools in the researcher's archdiocese has established a vision for the implementation of PLCs at the building level; however, without clear strategies for action, such as a new policy requiring principals to participate in PLC professional development and the proposed five essential strategies for creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools to guide principals in this process, the PLC journey will be challenging and the vision will be difficult to attain.

The researcher applied Burke's (2011) organization change theory and Fullan's (2005) seven basic premises for effective change to this dissertation to ensure the overall success in beginning the process of creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools.

Implementation of the Proposed Solution

As Catholic school principals begin the process of creating sustainable PLCs at the building level, the proposed solution requires that principals participate in PLC professional development with an emphasis on the following five essential strategies to help foster the PLC process in their schools:

- Understand the importance of PLCs in Catholic schools.

- Shape a culture of collaboration with the emphasis on the school as a community in Christ.

- Improve teachers' professional practice both as teachers and learners.

- Communicate the value of the relational and supportive conditions of the PLC process to support and unite teachers in their ministry as Catholic educators.

- Provide structures that promote the PLC process.

Factors and Stakeholders Related to the Implementation of the Solution

The integral factors necessary to implement the proposed solution include the support from the Office of Catholic Schools, the implementation of a new policy, the appointment of a PLC representative, and PLC professional development for Catholic school principals. The integral stakeholders necessary to implement the proposed solution include the superintendent, principals, and teachers. These factors and stakeholders are directly related to the implementation of the proposed solution, as they will ensure that the five essential strategies to help foster the PLC process in Catholic elementary schools are put into practice.

Leader's Role in Implementing Proposed Solution

According to the research literature, the school leader's role is integral to the PLC process. This study's proposed solution was created for elementary school principals seeking to foster sustainable professional learning communities in Catholic education. As such, the role of the leader in implementing the proposed solution is specific to Catholic school principals, who serve as instructional leaders with the responsibility of implementing and developing the PLC process their schools.

Before the building level principal begins the PLC process, the leadership aspect that needs to be addressed includes the principal's leadership capacity to create, develop, and sustain PLCs in their schools. This leadership piece is critical to the success of the PLC process and should be addressed as part of the PLC professional development for Catholic school principals. The emphasis on the five essential strategies proposed in this chapter will help to address the practical problems associated with the Catholic school principal's leadership capacity as transformational leaders to create sustainable PLCs in their schools.

Building Support for The Proposed Solution

In implementing the proposed solution, the Catholic school principal must have buy-in from the teachers in their schools. To aid in this process, the role of the principal as a transformational leader is key.

As a transformational leader, the principal's main goal in fostering the PLC process is to develop and nurture a Catholic school culture of collaboration in their schools that will motivate teachers to work and learn in new ways so that learning can be achieved for all – teachers and students – and so that the goals and vision of Catholic

education can be advanced at the building level. The principal, as transformational

leader, must support and cultivate this new way of working and learning on an ongoing

basis to help teachers improve their teaching practices that will ultimately influence their

classroom practices and student learning, thus improving their schools both as

communities of faith and communities of knowledge. The role of the principal as an

effective school leader is critical in creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary

schools, and the proposed five essential strategies will help them to address and navigate

any potential areas of resistance and build the support that is needed from Catholic school

teachers.

Evaluation and Timeline for Implementation and Assessment

The researcher recommends the following evaluation and timeline to implement

the proposed solution beginning in Year 1 of the new school year:

1. Office of Catholic Schools will implement a new policy requiring principals
   to participate in PLC professional development tailored to meet the distinct
   mission and purpose of Catholic elementary schools – Month 1.

2. Office of Catholic Schools will appoint a PLC representative to facilitate
   professional development for principals – Month 2.

3. Office of Catholic Schools will schedule district early release days once per
   month to support PLC work – Month 3.

4. PLC representative will plan, organize, and implement professional
   development for the review and approval of the superintendent – Months 2
   and 3.

5. Principals will participate in PLC professional development with an emphasis on the five essential strategies for Catholic elementary school principals – Months 4 through 5.

6. Principals will start the process of creating sustainable PLCs at the building level based on the five essential strategies – Month 6.

7. PLC representative will establish Principal PLC and regular meetings to support principals' learning of the five essential strategies as well as develop principals' individual and group capacity to function as professional learning communities at the building and district level – Months 6-10/bi-monthly.

8. Principal PLC will develop an online survey for principals' and teachers' feedback and input specific to the five essential strategies, and distribute, collect, and analyze survey results for review by the superintendent – End of Year 1.

9. Superintendent and PLC representative will review survey results, share results with principals, and collaborate with principals to refine the PLC process in their schools – Beginning of Year 2 and annually each school year on an ongoing basis.

Implications

Practical Implications

The practical implication of this study is that principals in the researcher's archdiocese will have a plan to guide them in the process of creating sustainable PLCs in their Catholic elementary schools. Therefore, this study will help to develop the principals' practice as instructional leaders with a specific focus on PLC work within a

Catholic context. This study will also help to establish learning communities for principals that will provide them with opportunities to learn from each other and solve shared problems of practice as Catholic school leaders. Ultimately, this study will improve the overall effectiveness of Catholic elementary schools in their function as communities of faith and communities of knowledge.

The findings in this study have potential implications for informing PLC work in other (arch)dioceses to build principals' capacity to provide instructional leadership and improving Catholic principal preparation programs. This study will benefit students, teachers, and principals and contribute to the greater good of Catholic education and community.

Implications for Future Research

The research in this study provided valuable data from school leaders from other Catholic (arch)dioceses with successful PLCs. To build upon the researcher's findings, the researcher suggests conducting the following studies specific to the PLC process in Catholic education:

- Quantitative studies that document teachers' perceptions of the PLC process in Catholic elementary schools
- Quantitative studies that document changes in teaching practices as a result of the implementation of the PLC process in Catholic elementary schools and its effect on student achievement.
- Qualitative studies that examine principals' perceptions of the Principal PLC process at the district level

- Quantitative studies that document changes in principal leadership practices as a

  result of the implementation of the Principal PLC process at the district level

Implications for Leadership Theory and Practice

This study's findings directly relate to leadership theory and practice, as the work

of creating sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools requires the application of

various behaviors and practices associated with effective leadership.

Through this doctoral journey, the researcher learned that servant leadership can

transform a school's culture to ensure the effectiveness of the PLC process. The

researcher also learned that as a transformational leader, the Catholic school principal can

motivate his/her teachers and inspire them to commit to participating in the

organizational changes that are required for sustained PLC work in Catholic elementary

schools. The shared leadership theory also applied to this dissertation was equally

important in that the proposed solution included a shared responsibility from all

principals for their own PLC professional development as a means of supporting teaching

and learning at the building level. Of course, the instructional leadership model provided

the researcher with the knowledge and skills required for creating a sustainable PLC plan

for Catholic elementary schools as a means for continuous school improvement. This

study's implications inform the leadership theories and practices by providing the greater

Catholic education community with evidence-based solutions for leading the work of

PLCs in Catholic elementary schools.

<div align="center">

Summary of the Study

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This qualitative study examined professional learning communities within

Catholic elementary education. The purpose of this study was to investigate best

practices of PLCs as reported by elementary school principals in a sample of Catholic elementary schools. The review of the literature revealed that there are basic elements and dimensions of professional learning communities that are compatible with the mission of Catholic education. The researcher interviewed 14 Catholic elementary school principals from other (arch)dioceses with successful professional learning communities to gather information on how principals create sustainable PLCs in Catholic elementary schools. Five common themes emerged throughout this study: (a) Catholic mission, (b) collaborative culture, (c) professional learning, (d) relational context, (e) PLC structure. The researcher discovered that there are five essential strategies for Catholic elementary school principals seeking to foster sustainable professional learning communities at the building level. Based on this study's overall findings, the researcher proposed that these five essential strategies, tailored to meet the distinct mission and purpose of Catholic schools, serve as the foundation for beginning the PLC process.

The implementation and evaluation plan includes the support from the Office of Catholic Schools, the implementation of a new policy, the addition of district early release days, the appointment of a PLC representative, and PLC professional development with an emphasis on the five essential strategies for Catholic school principals seeking to foster sustainable PLCs at the building level. This study contributes to the greater good of Catholic education by enhancing teaching practices and student learning, and also serving as a catalyst for collaboration among (arch)diocesan principals through the implementation of Principal PLCs at the district level.

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Appendix A

Communication to Superintendents

Dear Superintendent,

My name is Alexandra Fernandez, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Ed.D. Leadership Program at Creighton University. I am also a Catholic school principal in Florida.

I am conducting interviews of school leaders in other Catholic dioceses with successful professional learning communities (PLCs) as part of my doctoral research. The purpose of the study is to create a sustainable PLC plan for the elementary schools in my diocese.

If you can refer me to a principal in your diocese that could answer a few questions about successful PLCs in their schools, I would greatly appreciate it.

Thank you for your help.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Fernandez

Appendix B

Invitation Letter to Principals

Dear Principal,

My name is Alexandra Fernandez, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Interdisciplinary Ed.D. Program in Leadership at Creighton University. I am also a Catholic school principal in Florida.

Your school superintendent/superintendent representative provided your name to me because of your success with professional learning communities in Catholic education.

As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting interviews of school leaders in other Catholic dioceses with successful professional learning communities. The purpose of the study is to create a sustainable professional learning community plan for the elementary schools in my diocese. You are invited to participate in the study, which will include a telephone interview lasting approximately 30-45 minutes to be scheduled at your convenience.

As the researcher, I agree to meet the following conditions:
1. I will audio-record the interview with your permission and transcribe the recording for the purpose of accuracy.
2. I will provide you with a copy of the transcript to ensure that I have captured your words correctly.
3. I will destroy the recording and transcript at the end of the study.
4. I will maintain your confidentiality as well as the confidentiality of your school and diocese before, during, and after the interview.
5. I will provide you with a consent form for your signature outlining the elements of the study as well as the responsibilities of the researcher and rights of the participant.
6. As a participant in this research, you may stop the interview and/or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.

I am excited about using the data that I collect and analyze to create a sustainable professional learning community plan that will benefit the schools and students in my diocese.

Please contact me at ███████████████████████████ to schedule a telephone interview at your convenience.

I look forward to speaking with you and thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Alexandra Fernandez

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Why is it important for Catholic schools in particular to have sustainable professional learning communities?

2. Do you see a difference between professional learning communities in public schools vs. Catholic schools?

3. How is mission and Catholic identity important, if at all, to a successful professional learning community?

4. What do you envision as an ideal Catholic school professional learning community?

5. How do elementary school principals create professional learning communities in Catholic education?

6. What do successful professional learning communities in Catholic elementary schools look like?

7. What are the steps to creating successful professional learning communities in Catholic elementary schools?

8. What is the principal's role in sustaining professional learning communities in Catholic elementary schools?