

**THE CHALLENGES AND COMPLEXITIES OF INITIATING
A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY OF TEACHERS**

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education
in conformity with the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Queen's University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada

April, 2008

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ABSTRACT

This is a case study of the challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers. Situated in a school in the British West Indies, this study draws on the experiences of seven teachers initiating a professional learning community (PLC) over a 12-week term in 2007. Individual interviews, group meetings, journal entries, and exit comments were analyzed to construct five main themes: Initiating a PLC, Features of a PLC, Challenges of initiating a PLC, Benefits of a PLC, and the Future of the PLC.

These teachers recognized the need for this community because of challenges and problems they faced. Many features reported in the literature on PLCs were present in this nascent PLC of teachers. The teachers created their own shared vision and provided evidence of collective learning in the weekly meetings. Participants developed trust and shared many personal practices and experiences of teaching.

Challenges to initiating a professional learning community included finding time to meet, a weak school culture, and barriers associated with immigration status. Despite the challenges, there were many perceived benefits, including saving time through subject integration, personalizing professional development, and increasing socialization to reduce teachers' sense of professional isolation. The teachers also displayed changes in their attitudes towards teaching and how they approached teaching their classes. Classes became more student-centred as teachers tried to meet the diverse needs of their students. The promise of increased collaboration and membership at the conclusion of data collection failed to materialize when a new leader did not come forward.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks and praise to God who gave me the strength to persevere. To my supervisor, Dr. Tom Russell, and my doctoral supervisory committee, Drs. Nancy Hutchinson, Peter Chin, and Skip Hills, thank you for providing me with many thought-provoking questions, with both the proposal and the writing of my Ph.D. thesis. Special thanks to Marlene, Heather, Erin, and Angelina for your invaluable assistance that contributed to my success at Queen's. I also wish to thank my examiners, Dr. Clare Kosnik, Dr. Jan Mennell and Dr. Azza Sharkawy, for taking the time to read my work and providing insightful comments.

I would also like to thank the Canadian Bureau of International Education for funding my education. I express gratitude to the Government of the British Virgin Islands for allowing me this opportunity to forge ahead in my pursuit of higher education. Most importantly, I would like to thank the participants, without whom the study would not have been possible.

I wish to express gratitude to my friends and family who supported me during my 4 years at Queen's University. I dedicate this Ph.D. thesis to my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Harrinanan (Bob) Yamraj, who have supported and encouraged me at every stage of my educational endeavours.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction to the Study

This study documents the experiences of seven teachers participating in the creation of a professional learning community. The origins of the study can be traced to discussions with my teaching colleagues in the English-speaking Caribbean and with graduate students in Canada. These discussions compelled me to look more critically at my teaching practices. I worked as a science teacher for 10 years and have since come to realize the extent to which the culture of most schools is one in which teachers tend not to take time to analyze their teaching practices. As I review my teaching career at a public high school in the Caribbean, I realize that other teachers and I lacked the collegiality and professional support required for meaningful conversations about what we considered to be effective teaching in our classrooms. We also lacked a supportive context for discussing which of our classroom experiences may have restricted rather than augmented the learning of our students.

During coursework and discussions with colleagues in the Ph.D. program, I realised that this is not an isolated occurrence. Indeed, it is an important area for research. My interest in learning more about the effects of collaborative teacher dialogue on classroom practice led me to the extensive work of Shirley Hord at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in Austin, Texas. Hord's (1997) work outlines clearly the characteristics of professional learning communities (PLCs), pointing to benefits for schools that operate as learning communities characterized by

significant collaboration among members of staff. Interesting characteristics of such collaboration include shared practice as well as collective learning and application among teachers.

The absence of professional collegiality makes teaching an isolating experience. Although teachers are constantly surrounded by students, the interactions among students and teachers are different to those of colleagues in a school. Conversations among colleagues may include discussions of classroom management, teaching strategies, and other teaching responsibilities, such as record keeping and assessment. In my experience, more time was spent discussing unruly student behaviours and discontent with administrative decisions than student learning and how to improve teaching practice. As mentioned, Caribbean schools are not an isolated case. Researchers and administrators in many other countries have also tried to find ways to reduce this isolation.

Statement of the Problem

Hobson (2001) has characterized teaching as a lonely profession and DuFour and Eaker (1998) have described teaching as one of the most private acts in which adults engage. Teachers “work out of sight and hearing from one another, plan and prepare their lessons and materials alone, and struggle on their own to solve most of their instructional, curricular, and management problems” (Little, 1987, p. 491). Little’s study of schools with collaborative departments found that collaboration produced a variety of ideas, materials, and methods as well as a collective ability to generate higher-quality solutions to problems. She also reported that one benefit of collegial work is “breaking the isolation of the classroom” (p. 494). Rosenholtz (1989), in a study of the teachers’

workplace, reported that “where teachers perform their work independently, they show little concern for the professional needs of colleagues . . . , [and] the less teachers talk professionally, the lower the faculty’s cohesiveness” (p. 18). This cohesiveness is necessary for interaction among teachers; it strengthens feedback and presses teachers to internalize goals. Simply put, “in cohesive settings . . . teachers commit themselves to the goals of student learning and the agreed upon means to achieve them” (p. 44).

Schools tend not to be organized to facilitate interaction among teachers (Hobson, 2001). The physical arrangements of schools can contribute to the isolation of teachers, both physically and mentally (Boyd, 1992; Court, 1999). The physical layout of classrooms and the fact that teachers teach in the same rooms throughout the day isolates them from colleagues. This isolation influences teachers’ attitudes while limiting the relationships among teachers, students, administrators, and the community; these are all relationships that are significant for any change process. Modifications in the physical structure of the school, such as creating more spaces for teachers to meet, may facilitate more professional interaction while reducing teacher isolation (Boyd, 1992).

Collaborative work cultures help to reduce professional isolation of teachers and allow for sharing of successful practices and provide support (Fullan, 1991) as well as multiple sources of knowledge and expertise (Morrissey, 2000). Teachers working together have the potential to raise morale and enthusiasm (Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995). This collaboration may also increase the likelihood of experimentation among teachers (Rozenholtz, 1989). “Despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of a collaborative culture, the tradition of teacher isolation continues to pose a formidable

barrier to those hoping to implement PLC concepts in their schools” (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005, p. 18).

More than the leadership of the principal is required to support a learning community (Katzenmeyer & Moller, 1996): “We can no longer ignore the leadership capability of teachers, the largest group of school employees and those closest to the students. Empowered teachers bring an enormous resource for continuing improving schools” (p. 2). In the same way, teachers want to make a difference with their students, and those teachers who see themselves as leaders discover the potential to influence student learning through their actions. The actions of teachers may be reflected in teachers as continuous learners, and this parallels the role of students as learners. In professional learning communities, teachers and administrators “are active in their own learning and are open to new ideas” (Fleming, 1999, p. 1). Fullan (2001a) illustrates the power that teachers have when it comes to educational change: “Educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it’s as simple and as complex as that It will require that teachers understand themselves and be understood by others” (p. 115).

This study addresses the levels of isolation and collaboration among teachers in one school. It documents the experiences associated with initiating a professional learning community of teachers and explores the challenges and complexities teachers face in such an activity. This study also reports the benefits teachers experienced and anticipated they would experience in such a learning community. The features of this new learning community are described, together with challenges and successes experienced.

Rationale for the Study

Previous research on learning communities has investigated schools that had already established such a community. These studies attempted to find out what the schools were already doing. Despite the findings in the studies on creating and sustaining a PLC, the studies have failed to address certain issues. The reports to date do not provide a case study of a school that did not already have an established learning community. There is a need for such a study to investigate and document the experiences of teachers who are trying to create their own learning community.

Although Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth (2001) outlined community formation in detail, no attention is given to the perceptions of individual teachers as they progress through the stages of community formation. Also, there are no reports of the extent of actual changes in classroom practices during the initiation of a PLC or after schools established learning communities. For example, we know little about what changes occurred in the classroom with respect to planning and presentation of lessons.

Although Lee and Smith (1994) and Lee et al. (1995) emphasized student gains from school restructuring, we still do not know if these gains followed directly from changed teacher practices in classroom instruction and assessment.

Grossman et al. (2001) examined the growth of a community from beginning to mature stage. They investigated the maturation of a teacher community and provided a model of the stages of development for a teacher community; this model may be useful in creating teacher communities. While they reported on the changes in group dynamics, they did not report the individual changes made by teachers. For example, what did it mean to for an individual teacher to go from identifying with one group (as

in a department) to becoming a member of a larger, more communal group of teachers?
How would that change play out in instructional practice?

Existing studies have not attempted to document how learning communities may have affected teaching practice. This study focuses on the teachers' interactions and their reported changes in practice, as well as the relationships among the teachers. This research focuses on teachers, whose shared values and vision, collective learning and application, and shared personal practice are emphasized. The complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers have not been reported in the literature, and this study attempts to provide such a report.

There have been some studies of PLCs in the U.S. and the U.K, but there have been no studies of PLCs in the Caribbean region. In terms of my personal research interests, I see a number of important questions: How would a PLC in the Caribbean region function? How effective is the support system of administration in Caribbean schools when creating PLCs? What effects would a professional learning community of teachers have on a school in the Caribbean region? How will teachers react to learning communities? How accepting are teachers of change in the Caribbean? Are teachers willing to share their practice with colleagues? If a professional learning community is created, what factors contribute to attrition of teachers?

Purpose of the Study

This study seeks to better understand the challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers. In order to address this purpose, a range of enabling questions (presented in the next section) must be asked. Collaboration among teachers was sought through the creation of a professional

learning community in which teachers could examine their own and their colleagues' teaching practices through dialogue. Sharing of experiences is intended to create a culture in which various instructional strategies and other issues concerning teaching and learning may be discussed openly with colleagues.

Hobson (2001) reported that teachers find it difficult to find time to talk with each other and the opportunities to converse are rare. He goes on to report that teachers are interested in sharing practices, given the time and resources. My intent in this study is to initiate such scenarios to allow teachers to talk more about their practice and perhaps share their practice through teacher observations and peer teaching.

“Establishing teacher research community groups enables teachers to celebrate their successes with each other, create and re-create ways of helping groups of children learn more effectively, and strengthen the connections teachers have with each other”

(Hobson, 2001, p. 176). PLCs can also function to improve student learning through teacher collaboration. Professional growth among teachers involves observations, trying new things, testing different practices, examining their own work, and being intellectually curious about teaching, learning, and the world of schools.

Tafel and Fischer (2001) concluded that for teachers to grow professionally there must be enhanced communication and empathic understanding between stakeholders such as teachers and students as well as among the teachers themselves. They also reported that teachers provide the greatest insights and understanding about both teaching practice and student learning. Accordingly, teachers should be given accolades for what they know about their practice in classrooms. McLaughlin and Talbert (1993) suggested that when teachers have opportunities for collaborative inquiry and the learning related to it, they develop a shared body of wisdom constructed from their

experiences. In addition, Van Gyn (1996, as cited in Glazer, Abbott, & Harris, 2004) suggests that teachers gather various perspectives from collaborative reflection among colleagues.

Glazer et al. (2004), in a study of collaborative professional reflection among in-service elementary teachers, stated that collaboration is the nexus of teachers' professional development and reflection. They also indicated that the participants saw reflection as important in their professional development and as strengthened by the collaboration among them. The participants also recommended in-service time for groups of teachers to meet regularly to discuss their concerns as well as to support each others' professional growth. Glazer et al. (2004) concluded that participating teachers had a positive experience in the collaborative reflection group. Participants also revealed that "by being a part of a supportive and sympathetic group of colleagues helping identify and address professional practice-related issues and challenges, teachers may feel more energized and therefore can be more effective in their classroom practice" (p. 37). This notion of collaborative reflection among teachers is not new. Zeichner and Liston (1996) concluded that "an emphasis on helping teachers to reflect individually and a neglect of reflection as a collaborative social practice unduly inhibits teachers' deliberation and their professional growth" (p. 77).

This study seeks to provide an understanding of collaboration among teachers in one school, in this instance in a school in the English-speaking Caribbean. The central purpose of this research is to examine the challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers.

Research Questions

This study documents and interprets the challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers in one English-speaking Caribbean school. The following questions are addressed.

1. What do teachers perceive as a professional learning community?
2. What do teachers perceive as challenges in initiating a professional learning community of teachers?
3. What does shared vision among the teachers in a beginning professional learning community look like?
4. How do the teachers begin to exhibit collective learning in the initiation phase of a professional learning community?
5. What does shared personal practice among the teachers in a beginning professional learning community look like?
6. What are some of the critical features of initiating a professional learning community of teachers?
7. What benefits do teachers perceive in initiating a professional learning community of teachers?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used throughout this research.

Classroom practice: Everything affecting a lesson, including the preparation, execution, and evaluation of a lesson.

Collaboration: Teachers working together for the improvement of instruction with the aim of improving student outcomes. Through collaboration, teachers bring

diverse views, skills, and experiences to the teaching and learning process
(Roberts & Pruitt, 2003).

Collective learning: Staff learning together; teachers sharing new knowledge acquired
outside of the normal school setting.

Community: "A unified body, individuals with a common interest" (Astuto, Clark,
Read, McGree, & Fernandez, 1993, p. 43).

Dialogue: An important way to gain ideas and redefine questions. Dialogue leads to in-
depth reflection on ideas and practices, as well as deconstruction of what
happens in our classrooms and why (Snow-Gerono, 2005).

Professional learning community: A group of professionals who continually seek and
share learning to increase their effectiveness for students and act on what they
learn through collaboration and subject integration.

School culture: "School culture is conceptualized to include attitudes and beliefs,
cultural norms, and relationships" (Boyd, 1992).

Shared vision: A set of goals and aims for the learning community that is geared
towards making teaching more student centred through sharing of best practices.

Shared personal practice: Teachers sharing teaching techniques and their experiences to
enhance student learning. It includes discussions about classroom successes and
failures as well as sharing other professional experiences.

Significance of the Study

This study has educational significance because it informs teachers about their own practices and ways of examining what is occurring in their classrooms. Teachers may share their successes and failures in their practice with their colleagues. The diversity in experiences and teaching styles may create a collection of various teaching strategies that colleagues may implement in future classes.

This study has research significance because it is the only study of its kind conducted in a Caribbean school setting. It also has significance because it may lead to future research in other Caribbean schools with similar research questions. How would in-service teachers perceive collaboration among staff after being exposed to an autonomous school culture? Many studies focus on creating PLC schools by investigating existing PLCs schools. This study focuses on a high school that has not established a PLC of teachers. What experiences do teachers have when initiating a professional community of teachers? What are the challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers?

Researcher's Assumptions

Data collected in this study indicate challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers as experienced by both teachers and administrators. This study seeks to identify ways to reduce isolation in Caribbean schools by fostering learning communities of teachers who collaborate about teaching to enhance student outcomes. The study highlights efforts to initiate professional learning communities in a school that has been characterized as experiencing teacher isolation.

In initiating a professional learning community of teachers, it is assumed that the participants will see the need to dialogue more among themselves and to share best practices to enhance learning in their classrooms. The intention is that teachers will openly discuss ideas that will strengthen their practice as well as the practice of other teachers so that students benefit from this collaboration.

In addition, the self-examination and sharing of ideas should prompt individual teachers to question their own practices with respect to both successes and failures. For example, if in a lesson the students were able to perform the tasks for the lesson as expected and there were minimal errors or interruptions, then the lesson would be considered a success. If it were a success, the teacher could ask “Why was it a success? What did I do differently from previous lessons? What did the students get from the lesson? How can I create this type of learning again with other lessons or topics?” Similarly, if the lesson was a disaster or failure, teachers could ask questions such as “What went wrong?” and “What could I have done differently to avoid this problem?” It is anticipated that by questioning one’s actions and receiving comments from other teachers, such issues may be resolved in a collegial manner.

Summary

This chapter provides introductory information about a study of the process of initiating a professional learning community of teachers. It presents the statement of the problem, rationale, and purpose of the study, research questions, definitions of terms, the significance of the study, and my assumptions about the research.

Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature about professional learning communities. Chapter 3 presents the research design and procedures used to collect and analyze data.

Chapters 4 through 8 present and analyze the data collected. Chapter 9 discusses the findings of the study and also provides recommendations for practice and further research.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature on Professional Learning Communities

In this review of literature I identify and analyze studies pertinent to creating and sustaining a professional learning community (PLC) of teachers. Studies about learning communities and pre-service teachers or professional development schools (see Snow-Gerono, 2005) have been excluded from this review as the focus of this review is on creating in-service teacher communities, which is the focus of my research. This chapter is presented in five sections. The first section provides background information about professional learning communities (PLCs). Next I describe and analyze some pivotal studies in the area of PLCs. The third section reviews necessary conditions for creating and sustaining professional learning communities, and the fourth section identifies barriers and possible ways of overcoming these barriers in creating and sustaining PLCs. The fifth and final section offers conclusions and practical implications for creating and sustaining PLCs.

I first need to situate PLCs within educational research. Because most research on PLCs is conducted in the United States (U.S.), this review is primarily situated in that country, although longitudinal studies from the United Kingdom (U.K.) are also relevant. The concept of a professional learning community is central to many recent attempts at school reform in the United States, where education reform often seems to be reactionary. For example, the launching of Sputnik forced Americans to identify the inadequacies of their schools, especially in mathematics and science. Americans were concerned to know

how they had lost the race to space, so they emphasized science and mathematics education in their schools. Since then, reforms have flooded public schools in the United States. In the 1970s the focus was on the principal's authoritative role in schools. In the 1980s the new initiative was the Excellence Movement, another top-down initiative based on standardization, increased reliance on rules and regulations, and specific and detailed school practices that could restrict local school autonomy (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This Excellence Movement was another reaction in response to *A Nation at Risk*, a report from The National Commission on Excellence in Education that suggested that U.S. schools were behind the rest of the world in science and mathematics and that American schools were still failing. This report appeared to serve as a catalyst for school improvement initiatives across America. The early 1990s followed with the Restructuring Movement, which called for site-based management with meaningful authority over staffing, programs and budgeting, as well as shared decision-making (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This new movement encouraged teams and more shared planning time for teachers as well as shared responsibility for student instruction (Newmann, 1996). Essentially, restructured schools made significant departures from the conventional practices in schools, particularly in student experiences, the professional life of teachers, leadership and management, and coordination of community resources (Lee & Smith, 1994; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995). Although the restructuring movement provided some benefits, it appeared to have some deficiencies and teachers blamed students and society for student failure (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Thus there was a need for another approach that might improve students' achievement and also improve the teachers' workplace.

Hord (1997) suggests that Senge's (1990) work on learning organizations in the corporate world made its way into the education arena. Senge's work emphasized the

nurturance of individual staff members and collective commitment of staff through shared vision, problem identification, learning and problem resolution. At about the same time, Rosenholtz's (1989) work on teachers' workplaces influenced new approaches to education reform. In this new workplace there would be structures and support for frequent and regular professional meetings that would allow staff to reflect on their work and assess their effectiveness in improving student learning. If ineffectiveness was identified, staff would plan how to make their teaching more effective. Teachers applied new strategies in their classrooms, evaluated their success, and made the necessary adjustments (Hord, 2003). To increase success in these workplaces, collaboration was common as staff worked together to resolve issues and improve their workplace and students' learning. The emphasis was on professional learning in a community of teachers and support staff within schools. The term "professional learning community" was popularized by Hord (1997) at the inception of a 5-year study of the creation of a community of continuous inquiry and improvement when she reviewed studies in professional and learning communities.

Professional learning communities were responses to failing school reform strategies in the United States. This approach relies heavily on the cohesiveness and collaboration of school staff and their willingness to become lifelong learners with a focus on enhancing student achievement. In the next section I review briefly definitions and characteristics of PLCs.

Definitions and Characteristics of Professional Learning Communities

There is no uniform definition of professional learning communities. Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1999) defined professional learning communities as “schools in which interaction among teachers is frequent and teachers’ actions are governed by shared norms focused on the practice and improvement of teaching and learning” (p. 753). Hord (1997) defined professional learning communities as schools in which the professionals continually seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students’ learning. Similarly, Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, and Wallace (2005) defined an effective professional learning community as having the “capacity to promote and sustain the learning of all the professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning” (p. 2). Essentially, the emphasis across these definitions is that teachers should collaborate with a focus on improving their teaching and learning to enhance student learning and achievement.

While the literature provides several definitions of PLCs, the characteristics of PLCs seem to be similar: shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice or shared practice, a collective focus on student learning, and collaboration (Hord, 2004; Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995). Other characteristics include openness, networks, and partnerships, inclusive membership, mutual trust, respect, and support (Bolam et al., 2005) and continuous learners.

This section of the literature review has placed professional learning communities in context by providing background information about their evolution. Definitions and characteristics of PLCs were used to illustrate a professional learning community of teachers. The next section introduces teacher learning communities by first clarifying

different terminology used in the studies. A description and critique of each study is presented.

Pivotal Studies of Professional Learning Communities

This section of the review examines nine pivotal studies of professional learning communities. Each study is described by reporting the number and type of participants as well as the duration of the study. The types of data and the method of analysis are also described and the studies are grouped by their purpose. The first five studies report on school restructuring programs and their effects on teacher communities and student achievement. These studies drew from the same survey databases provided by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools in the United States. However, their purposes and interpretations of the data varied. In addition, supplemental data were collected in each study. The sixth study highlights the process of building a teacher community, while the seventh study looks inside a teacher community. The final two studies directly target creating and sustaining professional communities within a range of schools and settings by studying schools that were categorized as PLC schools. The schools used in these studies were existing PLC schools and the researchers reported on what was being implemented in these schools to allow them to be classified as PLC schools.

Prior to describing and critiquing the studies that follow, it is important to explain specific terms that are used in the literature. The studies in this review use diverse terminology, participant selection, data collection methods, and analysis. For example, communal (Lee & Smith, 1994) or organic (Lee et al., 1995) schools have been treated as learning communities. In communal schools, teachers work collaboratively, often in

teams formed across subjects, and provide more input into decisions affecting their work than in traditional schools. Both teachers and students engage in common activities to familiarize themselves with each other, and thus the contact between people is more personal and sustained. In addition, communal schools group students of diverse talents for instruction (Lee & Smith, 1994). Organic schools are schools in which teachers are encouraged to work together to examine the challenges they face and to decide as a team how to proceed (Lee et al., 1995). Teachers have greater authority over curriculum and instruction and they also work together to identify challenges and craft the best practices to address them. Generally, teachers in organic schools collaborate more than teachers in traditional schools and develop common expectations that they convey to their students. These features of communal and organic schools are similar to features of PLCs.

Another variation in these studies was their target populations, which were chosen to reflect the purposes of each study. For example, studies concerned with effects of restructured schools (communal or organic) on student achievement analyzed students' test scores (Lee & Smith, 1994; Lee et al., 1995), while those studies interested in the effect of restructured schools on the faculty in schools included the teaching population (Bryk et al., 1999). Studies that focused on providing models of teacher community formation (Grossman et al. 2001) target teachers only. Studies that focused on creating and sustaining professional learning communities (Bolam et al., 2005; Hord, Chapman, Hinson, Hipp, Jacoby, Huffman et al., 2000) involved whole school populations, including principals, teachers, and other staff members.

Effect of School Restructuring Programs on Communities and Achievement

Lee and Smith (1994) conducted a 2-year study of restructured schools (referred to as “communal” schools) and student achievement. The data consisted of test scores and surveys completed by 11,794 students in 820 high schools across the United States. Hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) was used to analyze data and draw conclusions about the effects of restructuring on student gains in achievement and engagement. Statistical controls eliminated the influences of other factors that could have affected student performance, such as socioeconomic status, minority status, gender, differences in engagement, and academic achievement before high school. At the school level, the researchers controlled for average socioeconomic status, minority concentration, and degree of academic emphasis and different selection of courses by varying students.

Lee and Smith (1994) reported higher student engagement and achievement gains in restructured (communal) high schools in the first 2 years. These gains were evident in math, reading, history, and science test scores. Students who attended smaller schools constantly achieved higher gains in these four cognitive areas. Results also indicated that students in these restructured schools also displayed higher levels of engagement with their work. Another important finding indicated that the achievement gap was narrower between students of lower and high socioeconomic status.

Unfortunately, the data did not indicate how vigorous the restructuring practices were and the study did not report how many students and teachers participated in the reforms. There was no consideration given to how the restructuring practices were connected to the instruction or when the practices were implemented (Lee & Smith, 1994).

In response to the limitations of Lee and Smith's (1994) study, Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995) examined 9,570 students' academic progress in 10th to 12th grade in 789 high schools. This study expanded on the previous study (Lee & Smith, 1994) that found evidence of strong links between school restructuring and improved learning among students in their first 2 years of high school. Lee et al. (1995) examined student engagement and academic achievement in math and science in organic or communal schools in their last 2 years of high school. Hierarchical linear modelling was used to estimate the effect on students' learning of specific factors, while controlling for the effects of socioeconomic status, previous academic success, and other factors that can influence student achievement (Lee et al., 1995).

The analysis indicated that schools that moved away from conventional school organization and practice towards an organic school saw benefits for their students. For example, there were greater academic gains in math and science over the second 2-year period. In addition, the achievement gap between students from different backgrounds was smaller. These gains in students' achievement increased more in the last 2 years of high school than in the first 2 years.

For teachers, the move away from conventional school organization to organic schools meant more opportunity to work together to examine and adapt practices to reflect student needs. This included such elements as common academic curriculum, high academic standards, authentic instruction, and a collective sense of responsibility for student learning. Authentic instruction is intended to help students move beyond recalling memorized pieces of information to engaging in sustained, disciplined, critical thinking relevant to school (Lee et al., 1995). Implementation of authentic instruction encouraged students to learn through independent study, project-based instruction,

cooperative learning, and real-life problem solving (Lee et al., 1995). These elements were used to explain much of the improvement in student learning in these restructured schools.

Although these two studies focused on student achievement in learning communities (restructured schools), they did not address the effects of learning communities on teachers. Louis, Marks, and Kruse (1996) studied teachers' professional community in restructured schools, hypothesizing that how teachers interact when they are not in classrooms may be critical to the future of school restructuring and its effects on students. As a result, they examined the structural conditions and the human and social resources of schools as well as the influence of professional community on teachers' responsibility for student learning.

This study was conducted over 3 years and included 910 teachers from 24 nationally selected schools in the United States. Researchers conducted interviews with teachers, administrators and other stakeholders twice each year. The researchers observed faculty, governance council, and other group meetings, and collected artefacts such as documents from meetings. The interview, observation, and documentary materials were summarized in school case studies and were used to explain the quantitative data.

Descriptive analysis was used to report the data. A two-stage path-analytic framework was used, with professional community as the dependent variable in the first stage and teacher's responsibility as the dependent variable in the second stage. One-way ANOVA was used to compare, by grade level, the structural conditions and the human and social resources of schools potentially supportive of professional

communities. Then HLM (hierarchical linear model) analysis was employed to estimate the influence of school features on teacher professional communities.

Using descriptive analysis, professional communities were most common in elementary, then middle, and then high schools. Similarly, distribution of responsibility for student learning reflects the same grade level pattern. Elementary schools had the smallest student population while high schools had the largest. Elementary schools also had the highest proportion of female teachers. Scheduled planning time available did not vary according to grade levels.

Utilizing HLM analysis, it was found that school size had no significant influence on professional community. Professional community was more likely in schools with less complex staffing, such as elementary schools. One attribute of this is class scheduling. For example, in most elementary schools, teachers' shared a common class schedule. Scheduled time for teachers to plan had a very strong impact on professional communities and accounted for 70% of the variance among schools in teacher professional community. Schools with empowered teachers, that is, teachers with influence over school, teacher, and student policies, were more likely to be a professional community.

Human and social resources also enhanced professional community in schools. For example, where teachers experienced support from principals, the level of professional community was higher. In addition, the respect that teachers received (from students or other teachers) contributed substantially to the level of professional community. When openness to innovation characterized faculties, the level of professional community was also high. Feedback from parents and colleagues as well as focused professional development contributed significantly to professional community.

The previous study by Louis et al. (1996) indicated that teachers reported high levels of community within their schools when there was principal support, openness to innovation, and parental feedback. However, how did these out-of-class activities affect instructional practice or student learning? How were these class meetings structured? How did teachers support each other in these professional communities?

In a 3-year investigation of the effects of professional community on classrooms, Louis and Marks (1996) surveyed 609 teachers and 5,943 students in 24 selected restructured urban schools—eight elementary, eight middle, and eight secondary across the United States. Restructured schools were schools that made progress in organizational restructuring with respect to student experiences, the professional lives of teachers, the coordination of community resources, and school governance, management and leadership (Louis & Marks, 1996).

Observations of 144 math and social studies classrooms at four different times during the 3-year period, 235 assessment tasks collected at two specific times, and 5,100 samples of student work in response to authentic assessments were analyzed. In addition, 24 in-depth case studies were conducted within the schools. Teachers responded to questionnaires about their instructional practices, professional activities, personal and professional background, their perceptions of the school culture and the effects of the school restructuring. Students completed a survey about their experiences in their class and in the school.

This study investigated whether the development of school-wide professional community among teachers positively affected classroom organization and students' performance on authentic assessments. In addition, this study examined the impact of professional communities on student performance (authentic achievement) and the

relationship of professional communities to the technical and social organization of the classroom. Technical organization referred to authentic pedagogy; social organization referred to support for learning. Survey data collected were identical to that collected by Louis et al. (1996).

One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used for the comparison across grade levels. To evaluate the relationship of school professional community to the technical and social organization of the classroom, hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) was applied. HLM was also utilized to evaluate the influence of school professional community and classroom technical and social organization on student achievement. The case study data helped to illuminate some of the quantitative results, and two of the 24 cases were reported in detail. The first was an elementary school on the west coast and the second was a high school on the east coast. These two schools scored very high on both professional community and authentic student achievement.

The main conclusions drawn from this study were that professional communities were more characteristic of elementary schools than middle or secondary schools. In like manner, social support for achievement was also strongest in elementary schools. On the other hand, students' performance on authentic measures was lowest in elementary schools and highest in middle schools. Classroom technical (authentic pedagogy) organization was equal across grade levels; and thus there were no differences in instructional and assessment practices among elementary, middle, or high school students.

Where schools achieved professional communities, the quality of classroom pedagogy was considerably higher; as a result, student achievement levels were significantly higher. The effect of professional community on school levels of authentic

achievement is partially explained by classroom social organization of the schools. In further analysis, it was found that authentic pedagogy subsumes the social organizational effects previously found to contribute to authentic student achievement. In light of these findings, Louis and Marks (1996) concluded that “professional community boosts achievement because it engenders authentic pedagogy” (p. 20).

To find out how professional communities enhanced classroom practice, the researchers examined shared norms and deprivatized practice. An examination of shared norms revealed that more value was placed on common commitment to educational goals such as using minds well and preparing for college. The support of authentic pedagogy came from creating more self-motivated, independent learners and making connections between content and real-life issues. Another conclusion was that genuine dialogue can occur when there is trust and respect among staff and when differences can be freely aired.

Teacher teaming, an example of deprivatized practice, indicated that teachers continually focused their attention on improving practice, as well as on creating and sustaining supportive relationships with students. During teacher teaming, teachers observed each other, planning units and lessons together on a regular basis. These teams were the basic units of collaborative work in the schools and they held substantive discussion about pedagogy. Professional communities were associated with authentic pedagogy and social support for achievement among students. Consequently, in schools where professional communities functioned, students achieved at higher levels. One can only wonder how feasible teaming is in the competitive workplace and whether the pressure on teachers to cover the curriculum makes this initiative more challenging.

Limitations of this study included the non-representative nature of the sample of the 24 schools. Most of these schools were located in bureaucratized urban environments with a high enrolment of minority and economically disadvantaged students (Louis & Marks, 1996). The researchers acknowledged that the uniqueness of the sample limited the generalizability and suspected that these constrained variations have weakened their findings in this study.

This study did not focus on the experiences of the teachers outside the classroom, on what teachers do that affects their work or how they collaborate. Will providing these physical and human resources automatically result in a community of learners? Based on the findings, was it possible to formulate a theory about the structural conditions necessary to create a teacher community?

The studies reported to this point have not attempted to provide educators with a theory about the support required to stimulate intellectual activity for all students. This stimulation in professional learning community schools is intended to enhance student learning and achievement. Bryk, Camburn, and Louis (1999) conducted a 5-year study of 5,690 teachers from 248 urban elementary schools that examined professional communities in Chicago's elementary schools, with specific interest in facilitating factors and organizational consequences of restructured schools. Their aim was to develop a comprehensive and integrated theory of the embedded contexts of support needed to sustain rigorous intellectual activity for all students.

The teachers completed a survey after 5 years of restructuring in Chicago's elementary schools. The purpose of the survey was to gather information on teachers' views of the school environment, classroom learning, parental involvement, governance, and the professional work life of teachers in these restructured schools. Measures of

facilitating factors, such as principal leadership, school size, and teacher trust, were also included in the survey to predict the existence of a professional community.

Statistical treatment of data included the Rasch rating-scale model and a three-level hierarchical linear model to test the conceptual framework. Measures of the components of professional communities were developed by applying a Rasch rating-scale model to the cluster of items. Components of professional community were clustered into six component measures: reflective dialogue, deprivatized practice, staff collegiality/collaboration, focus on student learning, collective responsibility for school operations and improvement, and teacher socialization. There was also a professional community composite. The last cluster was organizational learning.

This study concluded that teachers who spent a considerable amount of time outside of class involved in school-related activities were more likely to provide positive reports about professional communities. Consequently, high involvement teachers generally had a positive view of their school. Another conclusion about teacher characteristics from this study indicated that African-American teachers and teachers with more years of experiences reported higher levels of professional community. The researchers also found a positive effect associated with female teachers and organizational learning. With respect to school context and composition, professional communities can develop in schools with widely varying characteristics, such as the students served, faculty composition, and the kind of neighbourhood (school location). In other words, school location and composition did not determine professional communities, meaning professional communities can flourish regardless of these two factors.

Facilitating factors for creating professional communities included small school size. Specifically, professional communities were more prevalent in elementary schools with small populations (less than 350). Some reasons for the success of these smaller schools were that there were simpler management problems because they tended to have more constrained missions and the overall social network among adults tended to be more compact (Bryk et al., 1999). However, small schools did not mean that a professional community would automatically be present.

Other facilitating factors included a school environment that supported innovation and experimentation, as this was more prevalent where professional communities were developed. Other important facilitating factors were the principal's leadership and supervision, as well as trust among faculty. These factors facilitated growth and maintenance of professional communities in elementary schools. The strongest facilitator in this study was the social trust among faculty members. "When teachers trust and respect each other, a powerful social resource is available for supporting the collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization characteristics of a professional community. As the practices of community are enacted, trust and respect should deepen" (p. 767). One can imagine that these facilitating factors would improve teacher collaboration, which should improve student learning, but how these things play out remains unclear.

Creating a Teacher Community

The preceding studies indicated the presence of professional and teacher communities but they have not acknowledged that there may be a process for creating a teacher community. What processes are involved in creating a teacher community? Are there stages in creating learning communities? Grossman, Wineburg, and Woolworth

(2001) posit a model for the formation of a teacher community. They conducted a 2½-year study with 22 English and social studies teachers in one urban high school in the United States. This study focused on creating a community that would lead teachers from the English and social studies departments to prepare an interdisciplinary curriculum.

The teachers met for one day each month, every other week after school, and for 5 days in a summer retreat. Data included field notes from meetings, verbatim audio recordings from meetings, e-mails, journals, written evaluations, notes from phone conversations, and semi-structured interviews. There were five interviews over the 2½-year period. Data were treated with extensive analysis of group discourse with a focus on coherence of discourse. For example, transcripts of text-based discussions were subjected to a four-tiered coding scheme.

The model of the formation of teacher professional community provided three markers (phases)—beginning, evolving, and mature. This model highlighted four dimensions of teacher community formation:

1. formation of group identity and norms of interaction
2. navigating fault lines
3. negotiating the essential tension
4. communal responsibility for individual growth.

Essentially, the group shifted from individualistic to more group-oriented attributes. They recognised that diversity enriched the groups' perspectives and knowledge base. These teachers also accepted that a teachers' learning community provided benefits for both students and teachers. Similarly, they accepted the notion that all their colleagues could be resources for their learning and that they were committed to collegial growth.

In addition to this model, forming a professional community required teachers to engage in intellectual and social work, such as new ways of thinking and reasoning collectively, and new ways of interacting interpersonally. The traditional high school offers little opportunity for learning with colleagues outside a few short interchanges, making it difficult for teachers to interact (Grossman et al., 2001).

Every teacher knows different things and this collective knowledge exceeds that of any individual in the group. Learning from colleagues requires a shift in perspective and the ability to listen carefully to other adults. This is particularly true when colleagues struggle to formulate their thoughts in response to challenging intellectual content (Grossman et al., 2001). Over time, teachers should develop understanding of the various perspectives in the group so that they will be able to experiment with these perspectives. Teachers must also try to maintain focus on their collective learning as well as the individual changes within the group: “In a professional community of teachers, a core responsibility is to the learning of other teachers” (p. 980). This may be achieved through contributing to group discussions, pushing others to clarify their thoughts, and providing resources for others’ learning.

Student learning was also affected as teachers changed their practice by integrating activities from the group into their classrooms. For example, some of the project books made their way into classrooms, new courses and units were planned, guiding questions discussed in the group were on classroom walls and were integrated into some teachers’ instructions. In the end, the researchers concluded that many reasons exist to cultivate teachers’ professional community. These reasons included providing opportunities for teacher learning, enriching the possibilities for student

learning, retaining talented teachers, and enabling teachers to work together toward a common goal.

Although Grossman et al. (2001) provided a useful model to illustrate the stages that teachers' PLC development may involve, it included teachers who already existed as working groups. In my view, Grossman et al. (2001) integrated two groups of teachers to form one community with one clear focus, creating a common curriculum, yet little attention was given to how individual teachers changed because of this new learning community. The exception was that some questions that were highlighted in the teachers' community were re-used in classrooms. It seems that Little's (2003) study responded to a concern of Louis et al. (1996) about teachers' interactions outside their classrooms, and in this case the interactions of three teacher communities were aimed at discussing classroom practice.

Little's (2003) study explored teacher knowledge, practice, and learning among teachers in a professional community. She examined how classroom teaching practice comes to be known, shared, and developed among teachers through their out-of-classroom interactions. A guiding question in this research was what teacher learning opportunities and dynamics of professional practice were evident in teacher-led groups that consider themselves collaborative and innovative (Little, 2003).

This study involved English and math teachers from two high schools. The focus was on teachers' groups with some clear collective identity (e.g., departments) that profess clear task orientation while engaged together in improvement-oriented work (Little, 2003). No time frame was reported for this study. Data were collected through observations, interviews, pen-and-paper instruments, and school documents. In addition, audio- and video-taped records of situated interactions among teachers

(meetings) were collected. A report of how the data were analyzed was not provided in this article. However, it seems that triangulation of the data occurred because multiple data sources were collected.

Little (2003) reported on three selected occasions of teacher communities. The first was an English department meeting with a focus on portraying students' problems as problems of teaching. The second was the algebra group's "check-in" routine and an intern's teaching problem. The third was a weekly meeting of the academic literacy group with a focus of the challenge of being "on track." These occasions represented portrayals of classroom practice in routine out-of-classroom interaction of ongoing teacher work groups.

Despite the interpretive challenges, particularly with the "common" language in each group, this study concluded that groups reserved time to identify and examine problems of practice and open up these problems in ways that create new considerations and possibilities. Furthermore, they readily disclosed their uncertainties and dilemmas, while also inviting comments and advice from their colleagues. In addition, artefacts of classroom practice, such as lesson plans and student work, were made accessible to the group for examination. These conditions represented the many ways the group displayed dispositions and habits that contributed to teacher learning and improvement in teaching practice.

Another important conclusion was that specialized language existed within these groups. The particulars of the language were considered fundamental and constitutive of each community. Although this language presented resources for the group, it posed challenges for the novices. This practice of common language may also lead to isolated teacher groups, not just isolated teachers.

In these teacher communities, the ongoing interactions tended to open and close teacher learning opportunities, both at the same time. Although these teacher communities were collaborative, innovative, and committed to improving practice, teacher learning appeared to be enabled and constrained by the ways that the teachers went about their work. The force of tradition and habit conflicted with the lure of innovation and moments of surprise and led to the confusion of enabling or conflicting beliefs for teachers (Little, 2003). Similarly, the need to get on with the work clashed with the need to question practice and thus teacher learning was conflicting for members of these communities.

A limitation of this report is that the information provided represents one meeting in each of the groups observed. Therefore, generalization about these groups' environment is not possible. In addition, classroom accounts may not be accurate. For example, the classroom accounts presented in the group were condensed narratives that presented selected aspects of teaching that may have been out of context. These accounts tended to be partial, selective, and situational, based on the relevance to the group.

I agree with Little's (2003) statement that a close look at teacher interactions across a range of settings naturally occurring in schools "will further open the black box of professional community and show when and how it is conducive, or not, to the transformation of teaching" (p. 940). I believe this closer look should also help to show how these interactions among teachers result in changes in classroom instruction and teacher-student interactions. It should also illuminate teachers' experiences in creating a professional learning community.

Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry

The previous two studies indicated that teacher communities progressed through stages but, once again, individual experiences were not considered. Grossman et al. (2001) focused on group dynamics and changes. One benefit of Little's (2003) study was the case study approach to how classroom practices changed. However, like Bryk et al. (1999), generalizations across the various school levels were limited. These studies did not address how to create a professional learning community of teachers. A study by Hord and her colleagues (2000) attempted to address how to create a professional learning community.

Hord et al. (2000) embarked on a study of creating communities of continuous inquiry and improvement or professional learning communities. This was a 5-year study to find out what was necessary to create a professional learning community. The researchers investigated 22 exemplary schools of professional learning communities across the United States, including elementary, middle, and secondary schools. They then conducted case studies in 6 of the 22 schools, including two each of elementary, middle, and secondary schools.

After Hord (1997) conducted a literature review of characteristics of PLCs, her group of researchers (co-developers) assisted in locating schools that fit the profile of professional learning communities as stipulated by Hord's (1997) characteristics of PLCs. Questionnaires collected staff perceptions of their school as a PLC. During the third to fifth years of the research, semi-structured interviews with principals, assistant principals, teachers, librarians, paraprofessionals, and support staff were conducted to determine teachers' perceptions of supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application, supportive conditions, and shared personal

practice (peers sharing with peers). Data from these interviews were analyzed using the constant comparative method to develop common themes in the data. Case studies of exemplars and non-exemplars indicated the progression of the PLCs in these schools. These schools progressed through three phases of initiation, implementation, and institutionalization (see Fullan, 1991). In the first stage, initiation, the staff shared leadership and information, sought new knowledge and dialogue, and committed to achieve their goals. In the second phase, implementation, the leader encouraged the staff to set high expectations and helped them to meet their goals. The final and ultimate stage for change was institutionalization. At this point, schools have the changes imbedded in them. These phases seem to parallel Grossman et al.'s (2001) beginning, evolving, and mature phases or markers.

In Hord et al.'s (2000) study, co-developers were practitioners and consultants from higher education faculties, state, intermediate, and local education agencies, a regional development laboratory, and individual school campuses. They worked in close collaboration with Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) in four capacities as:

1. members and collaborators in the process of developing a professional PLC,
2. external facilitators and field-based developers of schools,
3. contributors and documenters of the research effort, and
4. disseminators of information about the PLC study to other audiences (Cowan & Capers, 2000; Hord, 2004).

Based on the educational research literature, it seems that several co-developers reported on this PLC study to wider audiences by presenting papers at conferences, writing articles, and contributing chapters in books.

The results reported here draw from reports of the study by Hord and her co-developers. The first finding in this study was that the five characteristics of professional learning communities found by Hord (1997) were present in these schools. A second important general finding was that leadership is key in creating professional learning communities. There must be shared leadership among the principal and the teachers, and this leadership must be experienced by several people in the community. A third finding was that there must be shared vision that includes teachers' input.

In addition to these findings, there was overlap between collective learning and its application and shared personal practice in professional learning communities. In these learning communities, teachers learned together, applied what they learned, reflected on the process and then discussed the results. Furthermore, staff worked as a team, trusted each other and took collective responsibility in their schools. Consequently, there were high levels of collaboration among the staff in professional learning community schools. Supportive conditions, such as trust and time to meet, held the other dimensions together. Another important factor in professional learning communities was that leaders and teachers must be continuous learners. Continuous learning meant improving skills by attending workshops and conferences with the intention of sharing this new information with colleagues.

In my view, Hord et al. (2000) attempted to find out what was needed to create a community of continuous inquiry and improvement by examining schools that were classified as PLCs. Although this study spanned 5 years, it did not address the sustainability of these professional communities. It did reinforce some of the conditions and characteristics of PLCs from previous studies, but again they studied schools that were established PLCs. This study did not report on how to create a PLC in a school

that was not already a teacher community of learners. How to initiate a PLC by attempting to have teachers buy in to this approach to student learning was not addressed. However, a group of researchers in the U.K. attempted to extend Hord's study by including sustainability of PLCs as one of their aims in an exploratory study. This was the first time that a study of PLCs was conducted in the U.K. This group of researchers anticipated providing a model of how to create and sustain a professional learning community of teachers for schools in the U.K.

Bolam et al. (2005) sought to find out what was necessary to create and sustain effective professional learning communities in schools. This was a 34-month exploratory investigation to identify and convey characteristics of effective PLCs. In addition, this study was intended to identify inhibiting and facilitating factors and to find innovative and effective practices for managing resources to create time and opportunity for professional learning. In the end, the researchers wanted to generate models that illustrated effective PLCs as well as assess generalizability and transferability to other schools in the U.K.

After a literature review of professional learning communities was conducted, 2,300 surveys were distributed to nursery, primary, secondary, and special schools around the U.K. Unfortunately, there was a low response rate of 17%; hence only 393 surveys were admissible. However, the schools that responded were representative of schools in the United Kingdom. Case studies of 16 schools (3 nursery, 5 primary, 5 secondary, 3 special) were also conducted. These schools represented the different school types, the willingness of the school to participate, and the self-reported stage of development (e.g., starter, developer, mature). Finally, workshop conferences with staff from the 16 schools were conducted to supplement site data collection, review emerging

case study findings, and promote systematic sharing of the practical experiences of effective professional learning communities. Other data included semi-structured interviews with individuals and small groups; document analysis of school prospectuses, handouts from in-service training and school development plans, and non-participant observation of collective activities.

Using the surveys, data analysis included basic description of characteristics of a PLC. In addition, factor analysis techniques were used to identify and examine key factors related to the process of developing PLCs. Another step in the data analysis included comparisons of key PLC indicators with selected pupil and teacher outcome data using multi-level analysis.

The conclusions drawn from this study were that a PLC is worth pursuing as a means of promoting school and system-wide capacity building for sustainable improvement and pupil learning. Consequently, pupil learning was seen as central to PLCs; the more developed the professional learning community, the more positive the association between the pupil achievement and professional learning. Professional learning in these schools focused either directly on promoting effective pupil learning or indirectly on creating conditions to enable effective pupil learning to be promoted.

In addition to the five characteristics highlighted by Hord et al. (2000), this study revealed three additional characteristics of effective professional learning communities:

1. inclusive membership
2. mutual trust, respect, and support
3. openness, networks, and partnerships.

Researchers concluded that professional learning communities were created, managed and sustained through four operational processes:

1. optimizing resources and structures
2. promoting individual and collective learning
3. explicit promotion and sustaining of an effective professional learning community
4. leadership and management.

Conclusions from the 16 case studies indicated that facilitating elements of creating a PLC included individual staff commitment and motivation, links with other schools, focused continuing professional development coordination, and site facilities that helped collaborative work and professional dialogue. On the other hand, inhibitors to creating these learning communities included resistance to change, staff turnover, and central and local policies affecting resources, budgets, and staff changes, especially at senior levels.

With respect to examples of innovative ideas, the primary school teachers used their staff meetings for collaborative work and professional learning. Similarly, special schools held three weekly conferences about individual students. On the other hand, nursery and secondary schools did not have common non-contact time to meet and collaborate about their practice. Although these differences between nursery, primary, secondary, and special schools have been reported, context and setting were important for understanding how these characteristics and processes played out in practice.

Like Louis and Marks (1994) and Louis et al. (1995), Bolam et al. (2005) concluded that primary schools were more likely than secondary schools to exhibit the eight characteristics of PLCs, but not in all cases. This finding may be attributed to smaller staff, common planning times, and the greater cohesiveness of primary school staff. In consideration of work with support staff, it was reported that some similarities existed

in nursery, primary, and special schools because support staff worked closely with teachers. Another fundamental conclusion was that professionals in these learning communities included not only the teachers, but also leaders, support staff, and assistants. Alternatively, demarcation among teaching and support staff was prevalent in high schools. This demarcation may be attributed to the fact that high schools departments tend to produce small independent PLCs, thereby developing distinctive ways of working together.

Professional learning communities went through three stages: starter, then developer, and finally mature. Over time, these changes may or may not be planned or visible to the participants and it is difficult to label exact stages. Professional learning communities looked different at different phases as well as in different contexts and settings; for example, a PLC progressed or regressed on one or more dimensions at any given time and such changes might not be easy to notice. These stages resemble the markers described by Grossman et al. (2001).

Bolam et al. (2005) acknowledged limitations of their study. For example, the study's limited time frame made it difficult to determine sustainability of PLCs. Another limitation of this study was that information needed to be collected from other staff, not only head teachers or continuing professional development personnel. An additional limitation was that neither the professional learning nor the process of a PLC were monitored or evaluated, nor was the follow-up action to maximize effectiveness. This lack of monitoring contributed to the difficulty of producing many conclusions about how to sustain a PLC. Staff in schools wishing to promote and sustain an effective PLC should monitor and evaluate the development of the characteristics and the processes over time, taking appropriate follow-up action to maximize their effectiveness.

Another critique of this study was that, like Hord et al. (2000), they studied existing PLCs. Once again, there were no reports of what teachers experienced or how their practices changed because of these communities.

Thus far I have addressed specific points about each pivotal study. It is also appropriate to make general comments about all the studies: How would a group of teachers who are willing to improve their practice change by creating a PLC in their school? What would they need to know before creating a learning community of teachers? What effects would shared practice have on otherwise isolated teachers? How does collaboration affect classroom instruction and assessment? Little (2003) reported that there were not many changes in teacher practices and that earlier studies have over-represented the benefits and the effects of professional learning communities. The literature also stressed individual and collective learning, but how does a PLC of teachers affect individual learning? Most of the studies reported on group or collective learning and their benefits. Were there any negative effects of this collective learning? If so, why? The literature also indicated barriers to creating and possibly sustaining these PLCs, but they appeared to have been externally imposed by leaders or other external agencies. If that is the case, how would individual teachers respond to those barriers? How much of a difference can the teachers make? Why do people choose to remain isolated? How can teachers make collaboration effective to retain members of their learning community? Why do people leave a professional learning community of teachers? Is it because their personal issues infringed on their professional lives, or is it because the learning community has not met their professional needs?

This section has summarized and analyzed studies pertinent to this review of literature. Limitations of the studies as well as possible links between the studies were

identified. The next section describes what a professional learning community is. That description is followed by barriers to creating PLCs. This review of literature ends with conclusions about this research related to creating and sustaining PLCs.

Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

The previous section summarized studies of teachers' learning communities. This section of the review elaborates on the characteristics of PLCs found in the studies. These characteristics are important because knowledge of them is necessary to create and sustain a PLC. Furthermore, they provide signals used to identify the existence of a PLC of teachers. The characteristics presented in the first section of the chapter are elaborated here. The characteristics of PLCs include shared norms, reflective dialogue, deprivatized or shared practice, collective focus on student learning, collaboration, networks and partnerships, inclusive membership, mutual respect and trust, and continuous learners.

The first characteristic, shared norms or values and vision, refers to the collegial establishment of a school's vision committed to student learning. The staff, including teachers and support staff, assists in developing the school's vision. The vision is known throughout the school and is apparent to visitors through posted mission statements and teachers' practices. Having shared value and vision is important, as it seems to form the basis for the other characteristics of PLCs (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1995). Louis and Marks' (1996) study reported that an examination of shared norms revealed that more value was placed on common commitment to educational goals, such as using minds well and preparing for college, and shared norms that led to increased student achievement.

The second characteristic, reflective dialogue, involved conversations about serious educational issues, such as practice, pedagogy, student learning, and application of new knowledge (Bolam et al., 2005; Kruse et al., 1995). Reflective dialogue also has implications for the interactions among staff, as it allows others to “walk in each other’s shoes” and leads to deepened understandings of the process and product of teaching (Kruse et al., 1995).

Encompassed in reflective dialogue is reflective practice. In a study of collaborative professional reflection among five elementary teachers in one school, Glazer, Abbott, and Harris (2004) reported that teachers agreed that reflection was important not just in their professional development, but also in maintaining a balance between their personal and professional lives. Furthermore, reflection helped teachers to gain insight into other perspectives, leading to professional growth both inside and outside classrooms. The teachers involved in the study also reported that reflections were strengthened by collaborating with colleagues and agreed that reflection was a catalyst for professional growth. Group reflections provided an atmosphere of support for colleagues.

The third characteristic of PLCs is deprivatization of practice (Louis et al., 1996) or what Hord (1997) terms shared practice. In this case, peers become critical sources of insight and feedback to improve reflective teachers’ understanding of their own classroom practice (Kruse, 1995, as cited in Louis et al., 1996; Reyes, Scribner, & Scribner, 1999). Shared personal practice encourages teachers to interact through observation and shared outcomes of new practice and to provide feedback and analysis of student work and related practice (Hipp & Huffman, 2003).

Examples of shared practice include team teaching and peer coaching. Team teaching occurs when two or more teachers share responsibility for instruction of a particular group of students (Rosenholtz, 1989). Rosenholtz (1989) cites the literature review of Cohen (1981) to show that team teaching is a vehicle to increase instructional interaction among teachers, as they discuss and challenge each other's ideas about students, curriculum, and classroom management issues. Contrary to isolated settings, team teaching encourages more collaboration among teachers as well as increased exchange of advice and assistance to others (Cohen, 1981, as cited in Rosenholtz, 1989). In teacher teaming, teachers continually focus their attention on improving practice as well as on creating and sustaining supportive relationships with students. During teacher teaming, teachers observed each other and planned units and lessons together on a regular basis. These teams were the basic units of collaborative work in the schools and they held substantive discussion about pedagogy (Louis & Marks, 1996).

In the same way, peer coaching relationships are based on mutual problem solving through discussion and classroom observations. Peer coaching is similar to team teaching because educators discuss and share teaching practices and observe each other. Peer coaching encourages reflection, promotes feedback, and fosters collaboration among teachers. This peer coaching has been a method to improve classroom practice and collegial relationships (Kruse et al., 1995). As successful collaborators, teachers also take responsibility for collective learning and application.

The fourth characteristic is collective focus on student learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Hord et al., 2000). Because enhancing student learning is the goal of learning communities, professional learning is focused either directly or indirectly on promoting effective pupil learning or indirectly on creating conditions to enable effective pupil

learning (Bolam et al., 2005). This emphasis on student learning leads to a more positive association between pupil achievement and professional learning (Bolam et al., 2005). To assist in achieving this goal, teacher communities are collaborative, innovative, and committed to improving practice (Little, 2003).

Professional learning communities, like other reform strategies, seek to improve student achievement and provide appropriate environments for students (Hord, 1997). One way to achieve this is to create authentic pedagogy that is student focused. Louis, Kruse, and Marks' (1996) study of school restructuring found that schools with strong professional communities tended to have more authentic pedagogy. This meant creating more self-motivated, independent learners, and highlighting connections between content and real-life issues. They inferred that because authentic pedagogy produces high-quality student performance, the strong professional community contributes indirectly to student academic achievement. In other words, "as teaching becomes more closely aligned with authentic assessment tasks, student achievement is likely to improve" (p. 19).

Collaboration, the fifth characteristic, is widespread in the many activities of PLCs. For example, teachers' actions focused on student learning may be cooperative, collegial, or collaborative (Hord et al., 1989 as cited in Kruse et al., 1995). Collegial teachers share lesson plans and spend time together planning sessions related to teaching activities centred on improved student learning. As Huffman and Hipp (2003) reported, "staff at all levels of the school share information and work collaboratively to plan, solve problems, and improve learning opportunities. Together they seek knowledge, skills, and strategies, and apply what they learn to their work" (p. 45).

Other characteristics of PLCs are openness, networks, and partnerships. In this case, neighbouring schools establish functional links and partnerships with each other. Then teachers are able to observe fellow teachers in other schools working with students of the same age. This allows for increased collaboration among teachers of the same level or subject. These links are built within same-level schools and across levels, such as between secondary and primary schools. In addition, focused continuing professional development and site facilities cultivate collaborative work and professional dialogue among school staff by creating networks within a school (Bolam et al., 2005).

Inclusive membership, another characteristic of professional learning communities, reflects the inclusion of other members of staff beyond the leader and teachers, as is typical of the United States studies. Inclusion of support staff and teaching aides is necessary to support learning communities. They too contribute to developing the school's vision. In many schools in the U.K., the cleaners, lunchtime support assistants, nurse, and teaching assistants are all members of the PLC. The support staff's duties also enhance student learning, a function of PLCs. This inclusive membership is more characteristic of primary, nursery, and special schools than of secondary schools (Bolam et al., 2005).

Mutual trust, respect, and support are evident in several studies of learning communities, and Bolam et al. (2005) report that they should be included as characteristics of professional learning communities. Mutual trust and respect are necessary because teachers are not likely to open up to classroom observations, voice concerns, or discuss pedagogical issues unless they are confident that it is safe to do so.

Trust and respect from colleagues is essential for teachers to express these concerns (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Louis et al., 1995).

Another characteristic of PLCs is a staff of continuous learners. Hord (2003) observed that the new approach of PLCs embraces a workplace where “professionals work with and support each other as learners” (p. 8). At the same time, staff members reflect on their work and then assess its effectiveness with respect to the benefits to their students within their time together (Hord, 2003; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999). To support teachers, principals also model this continuous learner attitude. An essential characteristic of PLCs is to have a staff comprised of continuous learners (Hord et al., 2000) who will attend workshops and return to their schools and become disseminators of new information. “Such continuous learning by staff results in more successful learning for students” (p. 10). In addition, these teachers also take collective responsibility for students’ learning (Hord et al., 2000). Ultimately, through their participation in PLCs, teachers first become learners, then continuous learners, and then more effective teachers. In turn, student outcomes improve (Hord, 2004).

Grossman et al. (2001) posit that conditions for improving teaching and learning are strengthened when teachers collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to conflict, and engage actively in supporting one another’s professional growth.

This section has provided a picture of what a learning community of teachers should resemble. The next section describes the conditions necessary for creating and sustaining a professional learning community as reported in the educational research literature.

Creating and Sustaining a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

There is no recipe, quick fix, or fool-proof formula for creating professional learning communities (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002). There are, however, some conditions that seem to be common to learning communities among teachers, and these conditions are introduced in this section. Barriers and possible ways of overcoming barriers when creating and sustaining professional learning community are also examined.

Conditions for Creating and Sustaining a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

The conditions for creating and sustaining a community of professional learners of teachers include physical conditions such as time to meet, physical proximity, small school size, and communication structures. Human and social conditions, such as shared leadership, trust, empowerment of teachers, and socialization, are also important. Socialization encompasses agreed upon rules and collaborative group work. In addition, specialized language within these groups and diverse contributions by members of the community are also considered to be part of the socialization process in community building.

Teachers need scheduled time together, such as common planning times (Little, 2003; Louis et al., 1996). Scheduled time for teachers to collaborate had a strong impact on professional communities and accounted for 70% of the variance among schools in a teacher professional community (Louis et al., 1996). Teachers need time to meet as teams and as a whole faculty (Louis et al., 1996). Teaching teams should meet on a regular basis to address issues related to instruction and student concerns. Teachers also need time to come together to focus on issues that are related to school-wide goals and values (Louis et al., 1996).

In addition to time, physical proximity is also necessary. For example, Glazer et al. (2004) scheduled regular meeting times in a designated space on a single campus. This practice of regular meetings on one campus facilitated teachers' collaboration and reflection on their practices (Glazer et al., 2004). A study of restructured schools reported that common work spaces, such as planning rooms, provided relief from classroom isolation and pressure of schedules found in many schools (Kruse et al. (1995) "Moreover, when teachers are physically close, occasions for sustained observations and conversations related to teaching and student learning increase" (p. 35).

Bryk et al. (1999) reported that small school size was conducive to creating professional communities, particularly for elementary schools with populations less than 350 students. Small school size attributed to greater success of school restructuring among primary schools than among secondary schools. Smaller school populations allowed for greater interaction among teachers because the probability of teachers being on the same teams or committees was higher. Smaller groups of teachers seemed to be easier to manage (Bryk et al., 1999).

Professional communities must have school-wide communication to encourage the exchange of ideas within and across organizational boundaries (Kruse et al., 1995). Regular meetings and teacher networks facilitate this communication. Kruse et al. (1995), in their study of restructured schools, reported that teacher networks "foster an environment where talk about pedagogy, school organization, and student learning is common" (p. 36). They acknowledged that this interaction does not have to be face-to-face to be effective. With the growing use of technological communication, e-mails allowed teachers to interact electronically

Supportive structures such as human and social resources also enhanced professional communities (Louis et al., 1996). Human and social support allowed for teacher innovation and experimentation. For example, support from the principal and respect from teachers influenced the creation of professional communities. In addition, supervision and social trust among staff were also important in creating PLCs (Bryk et al., 1999; Hord et al., 2000). This was reflective of a school atmosphere in which risk taking, improvement, and development can occur freely (Louis et al., 1996). These conditions were prevalent in professional community schools (Bryk et al., 1999).

As mentioned before, the strongest facilitator in PLCs was social trust among faculty members (Bryk et al., 1999). In addition, when teachers trusted and respected each other, this produced a powerful social resource for supporting collaboration, reflective dialogue, and deprivatization in professional communities. When these practices of community are enacted, both trust and respect deepen (Bryk et al., 1999).

Another condition that was important in creating professional communities was empowerment of teachers. This meant that teachers had some influence over school, teacher, and student policies and this accounted for 49% of the between-school variance in professional community (Louis et al., 1996). Empowered teachers also share leadership roles with the principal. Teachers have more input in school decisions and more collective responsibility for students' learning. In addition, teachers become empowered as a group because of the impact of their collective actions and practice on students. As a result, these teachers strive for physical and social growth that affects their students as a school-wide issue and not as individual classroom autonomy (Kruse et al., 1995).

Agreed upon rules are also necessary in creating a learning community among teachers. For example, Glazer et al. (2004) ensured that there was consensus among group members to participate in discussions and to be respectful and considerate towards members and facilitators. Other agreed-upon conditions among the participants were to “speak as self.” This meant that teachers voiced their own opinions and perspectives on the topics being discussed. Teachers were also encouraged not to include irrelevant and past issues in their group meetings. This practice hindered collaboration and progress within the group.

One condition necessary to create a professional community of teachers includes collaborative group work (Little, 2003). Teachers possess diverse skills and knowledge, and as such there needs to be collaborative group work because the collective knowledge of the group exceeds that of individuals in the group (Grossman et al., 2001). Collaborative groups tend to make contributions in decision making, lesson planning, variety in classroom practice, and general pedagogical advice among a community of learners.

There is also a specialized language within teacher communities that distinguishes them from other groups and perhaps from each other, and this allows for communication within the groups (Little, 2003). This was evident when the algebra “check-in” group used terms such as “warm-ups,” “guess and check,” and “lab gear.” This localized pedagogical talk animated the standard mathematical topics within the group and reflected what it means to be a knowledgeable and competent member of this mathematics group (Little, 2003). This dense specialized language also expresses how each teacher is positioned in relation to others with respect to issues in mathematics teaching and learning (Little, 2003). This specialization of language is fundamental and

constitutive of a community of practice and it provides resources for the group's members (Little, 2003).

Despite the common language, teacher communities also need diversity and conflicts among members of the group. Conflict provides varying perspectives on similar topics and contributes to the collective knowledge of the groups. Conflict is also a natural part of group formation (Grossman et al., 2001). In teacher community formation, hidden conflicts in the beginning become more apparent as the group evolves. Eventually, as the group matures, conflict is expected to be a part of group life that should be dealt with openly and honestly (Grossman et al., 2001). As a result, people voice opinions and others listen to various views. Conflict provides benefits in groups as well. For example, dialogue tends to be more valuable when it involves conflict, as we are more likely to learn from people who disagree with us than from people who agree with us (Fullan, 2001b).

In summary, teachers require opportunities to actively engage, reflect, and analyze current conditions as well as to explore new possibilities while learning from one another (Mitchell, 1999). These opportunities include study groups, grade and subject-level meetings, dialogue, peer coaching, and team teaching. Consequently, the work environment must be conducive to collective learning. This may be achieved through an affective climate that promotes collegial trust as well as open and honest communication (Argyris, 1993, as cited in Mitchell, 1999). Another important condition for collective learning is organizational structures that promote this type of learning among teachers (Mitchell, 1999). Some of these include joint planning and problem solving, which require time for colleagues to meet and share their practice, to seek new

directions, and to experiment with new strategies. This collective learning reflects collaboration among staff, including dialogue about best practice (Chapman, 2000).

Barriers in Creating and Sustaining Professional Learning Communities

Grossman et al. (2001) reported that creating a professional community is not a quick or easy process. This difficulty may be attributed to barriers in attempting to create or sustain a professional learning community. Some barriers include lack of shared leadership and vision, poor school culture, lack of involvement, teacher work load, and lack of time. Other barriers are school-wide problems, such as poor communication, and externally imposed barriers, such as staff turnover. Barriers are described in this section of the chapter.

Barriers to creating and sustaining PLCs included a lack of shared leadership. When teachers had limited input into the school's vision, they did not buy in to PLCs. In some cases, principals were perceived as uncaring (Huffman & Hipp, 2000), and in other cases, there was a lack of leadership because the principal was reactive, directive or laissez-faire (Huffman & Hipp, 2000). At other times, the leadership resulted in low levels of teacher empowerment and low expectations of student achievement potential (Morrissey, 2000). This lack of shared leadership may lead to poor school culture.

Another barrier was a weak school culture, with lack of trust and lack of collaboration among staff (Leo & Cowan, 2000). In a study of creating PLCs, one group reported that trust was foundational in building and sustaining a professional learning community (Hipp, 2001). Trust among teachers enables teachers to share their teaching practice with colleagues and trust also allows others to observe their teaching. Trust also allows teachers to ask for advice without seeming incompetent to their colleagues. Hinson (2000) reported that PLCs "breathe and survive on the oxygen of trust and

openness” (p. 47). Although trust is important in creating a PLC, trust takes time to develop (Farrell, 1999). A lack of trust in schools may mean teachers perceive examining personal practice as a “risky undertaking” (Leo & Cowan, 2000). As a result, the sharing of practice among colleagues may remain low (Hipp, 2000). In cases where the school culture is not supportive of PLCs, teachers may refuse to participate in collaborative work with their colleagues.

An additional barrier is the lack of involvement by staff. The fact that some individuals refuse to participate in a PLC means that there is resistance to change (Bolam et al., 2005; Hinson, 2000; Hipp, 2000; Knapp, Copland, & Talbert, 2003) and this makes functioning as a PLC difficult (Bolam et al., 2005). Lack of involvement by some teachers in the collective process hinders the development of a PLC (Mitchell, 1999), as collaboration among teachers is vital in creating and sustaining PLCs. Such individuals do not contribute to enhancing the learning community. On the other end of this participation continuum are the teachers who dominate the group learning and discussions. Their voices are heard most often in the group, and this may lead to control of both group discussions and decisions (Mitchell, 1999). Some teachers may refuse to collaborate because their workload does not permit collaboration.

Workload and stress caused by overload were also cited as barriers in creating PLCs. Many teachers found it difficult to add one more thing (Chapman, 2000) to their schedules (Huffman & Hipp, 2000). “Building a professional learning community is difficult due to many demands on teachers and administrators, the growing accountability issues, the increasingly diverse needs of students, teacher isolation and burn-out, and many other unmanageable stressors” (Huffman & Hipp, 2000, p. 3). According to Mitchell (1999), when staff felt that they already had many tasks to

accomplish, creating a PLC was just another task that burdened them. Because teachers have so much to do, there is often a lack of time to function as a PLC of teachers. One factor that can contribute to teachers' overload is the over-crowded curriculum in schools.

Hord and her colleagues (2000) reported that the lack of time for shared reflection, professional development, and working together was the second main reason for not creating a PLC. Time is a vital resource for PLCs, yet it is the hardest to find (Hall & Hord, 2006; Morrissey, 2000). Although time is needed to create a PLC, lack of time becomes a barrier for both creating and sustaining a PLC (Hipp, 2000; Hord, 2004). Lack of time for teachers to meet and collaborate about new strategies and their continuing work limits professional growth in PLCs (Leo & Cowan, 2000).

School-wide issues that prevented the creation of professional learning communities included poor relationships and communication among teachers, lack of trust and lack of openness. There was also lack of shared vision and involvement, no sense of achievement, no valuing of what teachers learnt, and lack of commitment by leaders (Stoll et al., 2003). These barriers must be overcome before a successful PLC can be created and sustained.

In addition to the internally imposed barriers, there were also some externally imposed barriers. These were not in the teachers' control and, in some cases, not even in the school's control. Barriers for sustaining PLCs in the U.K. study included staff turnover, central and local policies affecting budgets and staff changes. Other barriers to creating and sustaining a PLC included a lack of finance that led to staffing and release time issues. Without finances for release time, teachers would find it difficult to meet to discuss their teaching practice.

Yet another barrier to creating and sustaining a PLC is frequent staff turnover (Bolam et al., 2005; Mitchell, 1999). As individuals who have become attuned to the culture of a PLC leave, new staff must then learn the school's culture of collaboration. A constant cycle of learning and leaving hinders the creation and maintenance of an effective and well functioning PLC. Novice teachers may experience difficulties trying to understand the specialized and common language within groups (Little, 2003). Although specialized language was considered fundamental to forming teacher communities, it may also lead to group isolation and force new teachers to learn a new language. This requires time and trust by members of the group.

This section has highlighted several barriers to creating and sustaining PLCs identified in the literature. Some of these barriers function as both barriers and enablers. For example, time provided to meet is a positive condition affecting the successful creation of a professional learning community. On the other hand, lack of time becomes a barrier in creating and sustaining professional learning communities. Following are some plausible solutions to overcoming those barriers to creating and sustaining a professional learning community of teachers.

Overcoming Barriers

Although Grossman et al. (2001) reported that creating professional learning communities would be difficult, they did not report that it is impossible. The previous section described a range of barriers to creating a professional community of learners among teachers. The barriers listed above do not indicate that the creation and sustenance of PLCs among teachers is an impossible task.

Possible solutions for overcoming barriers include scheduling, such as providing time for staff to meet in both small and large groups (Morrissey, 2000; Thiessen &

Anderson, 1999). One way of integrating collaborative meetings within a schedule of events for teachers is by creating a routine time for meetings. This may minimize some of the difficulties mentioned before and also provide opportunities for more collaborative activities in schools. In addition, scheduling should facilitate teachers observing teachers, and enhance sharing strategies and discussions of student work (Chapman, 2000). Similarly, opportunities for teachers to discuss individual students and alternatives to the curriculum and instruction should be a part of a regular work day (Astuto et al., 1994; Gideon, 2002).

Another way of overcoming barriers such as lack of trust might involve creating a school culture that fosters trust and respect; this may facilitate sharing of ideas and best practices among teachers (Smylie & Hart, 1999). This school culture may be accomplished by “creating occasions for teachers to observe one another’s teaching, engage in reciprocal helping, relationships, and the development of new programs and practice” (p. 432). These interactions should promote a collegial school environment. To overcome challenges to a PLC, leaders build relationships because strong relationships enable professional improvement (Knapp et al., 2003).

To reduce distrust, communication is important. Effective communication may be accomplished through e-mails among members of staff, posting messages on bulletin boards, frequent staff meetings, and printed documents with pertinent information about the school (Morrissey, Cowan, Leo, & Blair, 1999). Communication should be imbedded in many learning community activities, including meetings, shared visions, or shared practices.

Empowering teachers to be teacher leaders could be another means of overcoming a lack of shared leadership in schools. Teachers are enabled to take

responsibility for more learning that fosters collaboration to improve practice. Teachers share leadership with other teachers so that each member of the community shares similar roles and contributes to the group's growth.

Countering the issue of more work for over-worked teachers means imbedding PLC structures, such as opportunities to discuss individual students and alternatives to curriculum and instruction, into the teacher's work day (Astuto et al., 1994; Chapman, 2000). Creating routines that include these tasks or integrating these tasks into a regular work schedule alleviates some the problems experienced by adding one more thing for busy teachers to do. In addition, setting short term goals in smaller groups of teachers may also eliminate some on the failures to create a PLC (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 2005).

Although school staff members are important in creating PLCs, stakeholders outside the schools, such as parents, may play crucial roles in establishing and sustaining PLCs. In one study, parents became an important school resource by nurturing the developing PLC by supervising classes, supporting instruction, and underscoring the importance of education to students (Sattes, 2000). Through parental support, time for meetings to discuss instruction and assessment may be increased.

Implications for Professional Learning Communities

Teachers play important roles in creating and sustaining professional learning in schools. They become empowered by becoming continuous learners and competent collaborators through dialogue and classroom observations. They assume teacher leadership positions to successfully work in groups to meet the needs of their students through authentic pedagogy and team teaching.

Teachers have an important role in the lives of students. Teachers have the most direct, sustained contact with students and considerable control over what is taught and over the climate for learning. Thus improving teachers' knowledge, skills, and dispositions through professional development is a critical step in improving student achievement (King & Newmann, 2000, 2001). In previous research, this helped to reinforce teachers' individual and collective commitment to their work and the value they placed on their collaborative inquiry.

There are benefits for both teachers and students when schools restructure to create learning communities of teachers. In a study of professional development in collaborative communities, Butler, Lauscher, Jarvis-Selinger, and Beckingham (2004) highlighted benefits of a collaborative learning community. These included opportunities to share ideas and solve problems with colleagues. Teachers also valued expertise from other members by welcoming advice from colleagues or by asking for help. Another benefit was observing authentic activity as a means for understanding instructional goals by identifying best practices and enacting changes in their own classrooms and reflecting on outcomes and adapting approaches.

Teacher learning is most likely to occur when teachers concentrate on instruction and student outcomes. This is possible when teachers have sustained opportunities to study, experiment with, and receive purposeful feedback from their colleagues. In addition, teacher learning is enhanced when teachers collaborate with professional peers and when teachers have some control over their own professional development (King & Newmann, 2000). "While individual teacher learning is the foundation of improved classroom practice, teachers must also learn to exercise their individual knowledge, skills, and disposition to advance the collective work of the school" (p. 577).

Teachers are not the only ones to benefit when PLCs exist. The ultimate goal of the PLC is to improve student achievement and thus the focus is on students' learning. This was illustrated in a school restructuring study reported by Lee et al. (1995). In these restructured or organic schools, students benefited more than in traditional schools. They displayed increased learning that was distributed more equitably in smaller high schools; larger academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools; and smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds. Other benefits of these restructured schools included a lower drop-out rate and fewer missed classes (Lee et al., 1995). These benefits provide reasons for teachers to strive for PLCs.

One important feature of PLCs is the reduction of isolation among teachers. Teaching has been characterized as a lonely profession (Hobson, 2001) and has been described as one of the most private acts for adults (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers generally work out of sight from one another and they usually plan and prepare their lessons and materials on their own. Furthermore, teachers struggle alone to solve most of their instructional, curricular, and management issues (Little, 1987). In her study of collaborative departments, Little (1987) found that teachers report one benefit of collegial work to be "breaking the isolation of the classroom" (p. 494). She also found that collaboration produced a variety of ideas, materials, and methods as well as a collective ability to generate higher-quality solutions to problems.

One way to effectively reduce teacher isolation is through dialogue but there are many other benefits to talking to colleagues about practice. Dana and Yendol-Silva's (2003) article on teacher collaboration concluded that collaboration was important for several reasons: Teachers talk all the time to students, other teachers, administrators,

and parents. However, dialogue with colleagues heightens an awareness of knowledge about teaching and what a teacher knows becomes visible to their colleagues. In addition, this dialogue may also force teachers to question assumptions about their own practices. The benefit of talking to colleagues is to generate possible alternatives to practice, provide different interpretations, and to gain perspective as inquiry unfolds about teaching (Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003).

Collaborative work cultures help to reduce professional isolation of teachers and allow for sharing of successful practices and provision of support (Fullan, 1991) as well as multiple sources of knowledge and expertise (Morrissey, 2000). Teachers working together have the potential to raise morale and enthusiasm (Lee et al., 1995). This collaboration may also increase the likelihood of experimentation among teachers (see Rozenholtz, 1989). “Despite the overwhelming evidence of the benefits of a collaborative culture, the tradition of teacher isolation continues to pose a formidable barrier to those hoping to implement PLC concepts in their schools” (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005, p. 18).

As mentioned before, there is no simple checklist or recipe to guide the creation of a PLC (Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Little, 2000, as cited in Seashore, Anderson, & Riedel, 2003). Creating and sustaining PLCs will not be an easy task and it requires hard work and commitment. Likewise, establishing a PLC within a school does not occur quickly or spontaneously. Professional learning communities are essentially reform strategies that require changes within schools; however, change, especially educational change, is gradual (Fullan, 2001) and not immediate (Court, 1999; Cowan & Capers, 2000). Therefore, creating and sustaining a PLC will take time to develop and flourish as

it works to reduce teacher isolation and improve student achievement through improved teacher practice.

Ultimately, PLCs provide many benefits for schools, especially for students and teachers. Challenges are immense and include leader and collegial support, resources, including finances and time, and effort. Although PLCs are demanding, one of the key features of sustaining a PLC is to integrate activities into daily routines to avoid extra duties for overworked teachers. The most important focus of PLCs should be students' outcomes through successful and routine reflection and collaboration among staff in schools. However, PLCs are also important to reduce isolation among teachers (Dudley, 2005) and to improve student achievement (Lee & Smith, 1994; Lee et al., 1995).

Summary

This review has defined, described, and explained conditions for the creation and sustenance of teachers' professional learning communities as identified in the recent research literature. These conditions include time to meet, shared leadership, trust, collaborative work groups, and diverse contributions by members of the teacher community. Studies of PLCs have been examined and analyzed. Some barriers and possible ways of overcoming those barriers have also been presented. This section of the literature review provides a brief summary of the major findings in the studies presented above. Practical implications of PLCs in schools are introduced.

Drawing on the variety of studies presented earlier, it appears that learning communities are more characteristic of elementary (primary) schools than secondary schools (Bolam et al., 2005; Louis & Marks, 1996; Louis et al., 1996). This seems to be the case because of small school size, common scheduling for teachers, and the contributions

made by support staff within elementary schools. Primary schools tended to use their staff meetings for more collaborative work and professional learning (Bolam et al., 2005). I concur with Bolam et al. (2005) that a possible reason for fewer PLCs in high schools is the prevalent demarcation between teachers and support staff. This demarcation may be attributed to the fact that high school departments produce smaller independent professional communities and tend to develop distinct ways of working together.

Learning and teacher communities undergo stages of development (Bolam et al., 2005; Grossman et al., 2001; Hord et al., 2000). Although each group of researchers used different terminology to depict these three stages, they seem to represent similar elements. For example, Hord et al. (2000) used initiation, implementation, and institutionalization adopted from Fullan's (1990) model to indicate the three stages of change in their study. Bolam et al. (2005) termed their stages of community development as starter, developer, and mature. Similarly, Grossman et al. (2001) applied the terms beginning, evolving, and mature to show the same progression of community formation.

The teachers in these communities begin with individualistic goals and gradually these mature into more group-oriented goals with shared vision and acceptance of diverse contributions from members in the community (Grossman et al., 2001). Also, the community moves from viewing diversity as a hindrance to viewing it as a way to include variety in the group's work. Mature teacher communities exhibit PLC characteristics and integrate them into their daily routines.

Glazer et al. (2004) reported on a collaborative study of reflective practice, but the other studies in this literature review did not examine reflective practice in PLCs. Reflective practice appears to have the potential to improve schools (Osterman &

Kottkamp, 1993). Reflective practice is a meaningful professional development strategy with the potential to create significant change in schools (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). It is “a challenging, demanding, and often trying process that is most successful as a collaborative effort” (p. 19). Reflective practice can also create an opportunity for continuous learning from and about educational practice and provides a greater variety of perspectives to draw on in addressing challenges and dilemmas of practice. Furthermore, it can create opportunities for new knowledge and understandings that may be applied to practice, to increase personal responsibility for learning and improvement, to strengthen relationships and connections among teachers, and to build bridges between theory and practice (York-Barr, Sommers, Chere, & Montie, 2001). These conditions would seem to strengthen and enhance the professional learning communities among teachers.

Dialogue and collaboration are both critical for reflective practice and learning (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). Reflective practice “relies more on dialectic instruction, involving dialogue, discussion, and a critical, learning process” (p. 20). Learners clarify their thinking and deepen their understanding by asking questions, challenging ideas, and processing their learning verbally. “Reflective dialogue is described as those conversations which focus on teaching behaviours and learning outcomes in order to encourage teachers to discuss their teaching practices and collaborate on how they can be improved” (Roberts & Pruitt, 2003, p. 8). These elements of reflective practice provide a conceptual link between reflective practice and collaboration among teachers. Thus reflective practice may contribute to creating and sustaining a PLC among teachers.

This chapter has provided an extensive review of a broad range of significant studies of professional learning communities, highlighting the benefits and barriers of PLCs and identifying the characteristics that are most common in learning communities. The next chapter outlines the research methods used in the study.

CHAPTER 3

Research Design

This chapter describes the research design for this study of challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers. This chapter is organized with the following sections: overview, research questions, recruitment of participants, case study approach, roles of the researcher, research setting, data sources, data collection procedures, data analysis, validity and reliability, and limitations of the study.

Overview

Some of the methods chosen for this study are similar to those used in a study by Glazer et al. (2004). Glazer's study involved reflective collaboration among elementary in-service teachers. They conducted group discussions allowing for venting time and closure (exit comments). The researcher also served as facilitator/mediator, which was a role I assumed in this study. The facilitator role requires careful listening in group meetings, summarizing, clarifying, and projecting for future meetings. These are all actions I took in this study in an attempt to capture rich data to formulate conclusions about collaborative practice in a school in the Caribbean. In addition, group work was stressed; previous research indicates that individual reflection has a lower probability of achieving success when compared to collaborative efforts.

The research data were collected during one 12-week term. Participants were selected for the study in December, 2006; early recruitment of teachers ensured that the research began at the beginning of the next term and was carried through to the end of term. Participants were sought on a voluntary basis. A letter of information and invitation was sent to the teachers of this secondary school in an e-mail message from an assistant principal. Teachers were informed of a meeting on December 11, 2006 to explain more about the research as well as to address any concerns about the study. A group of 6 to 10 teachers was sought, with representation from various departments within the school. On December 11, 2006, only one teacher attended. Another e-mail message was sent to the staff indicating December 14, 2006 as the date for a second meeting. At that time seven teachers attended and they represented two departments, geography and science.

In that meeting, teachers were told the expectations for the group, including the number of individual interviews and group meetings and the plan to ask for journal entries and exit comments. Signed consent forms were collected. Data sources included group discussions, individual interviews, journal entries, and exit comments. Data were collected from January 10 to April 7, 2007.

Research Questions

The focal points of this research are the challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers in the context of one school in the English-speaking Caribbean that does not have an established professional learning community. As indicated in Chapter 1, there are seven research questions:

1. What do teachers perceive as a professional learning community?
2. What do teachers perceive as challenges in initiating a professional learning community of teachers?
3. What does shared vision among the teachers in a beginning professional learning community look like?
4. How do the teachers begin to exhibit collective learning in the initiation phase of a professional learning community?
5. What does shared personal practice among the teachers in a beginning professional learning community look like?
6. What are some of the critical features of initiating a professional learning community of teachers?
7. What benefits do teachers perceive in initiating a professional learning community of teachers?

Recruitment of Participants

To address these questions, it was necessary to recruit volunteers who would permit me to investigate what they perceive as challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers. The population available for this study consists of the 138 teachers in one English-speaking school in the Caribbean. The sample consisted of the eight teachers who volunteered to participate in the study (one teacher withdrew after the first meeting).

Both Patton (2002) and Creswell (2007) provide extensive lists of purposeful sampling strategies. In this study, selection of the school was the fundamental decision in determining where volunteers would be recruited. Some would term this

convenience sampling; others may see it as opportunistic or emergent. Once both the site and the time period had been determined, all teachers at the school were invited to participate (see Appendix C). Those who volunteered must be assumed to be those who were intrinsically interested in the possibilities that a professional learning community might offer. They saw themselves as available at the time, but their decision was informed by an initial awareness of the purpose of the study.

Participants

The participants for this study included a group of eight teachers who expressed interest in initiating a professional learning community of teachers, after an introduction to the concept of collaborative practice among teachers. There was attrition after the first week when one participant withdrew for personal reasons. After the sixth week, one other teacher stopped attending meetings and did not attend the final interview. In the end, there were three teachers from the geography department and three from the science department who participated throughout the entire period of data collection.

Participants were full-time teachers at one secondary school in the Caribbean. According to Patton (2002), “there are no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 244) and the group of seven teachers generated considerable data for analysis. In addition, Patton indicated that the sample size is dependent on what the study is about. In this study, a group of seven teachers was large enough to generate an elaborate data set for understanding the process of initiating collaboration within a professional learning community.

The teaching experience of the participants ranged from a first-year teacher to a veteran-teacher with 33 years in the profession. These teachers had taught various subjects over the years and were all qualified teachers or were completing their teacher

qualifications concurrently with this research. The qualified teachers held either a certificate or a diploma in education along with an undergraduate degree in a science- or geography-related area of study. One teacher held a Bachelor of Education degree from a North American university. Two teachers were completing their certificates in education concurrently with the study. All the participants were teachers who came to this school from Canada, the USA, and other Caribbean countries; none of the volunteers was native to the island.

The participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Matt is a science teacher who also teaches mathematics. He has taught for 7 years and is completing his certificate in secondary education. Jamie has taught science for 5 years and this is her first year at this school. Skye is a first-year science teacher who recently graduated from a Bachelor of Education program. Geoff is another science teacher who has taught for 19 years, during which he has also taught several other subjects at secondary level. Katie is the veteran geography teacher in the group and has taught for 33 years. Like Geoff, she too has taught a number of other subjects. Kolin now teaches Geography but has taught several other subjects over the past 14 years. Kyle has taught geography for the last 18 years.

Case-Study Approach

This study explores the challenges and complexities of initiating a professional learning community of teachers in one secondary school. A case-study approach is employed to provide in-depth understanding of the teachers' experiences. In Stake's terms, this is an intrinsic case study because it seeks a "better understanding of this particular case" (Stake, 2005, p. 445). As is common with case studies, purposeful

sampling of teachers was utilized to discover, understand, and gain insight from the participants (Merriam, 1998).

This school was selected through purposeful sampling because such sampling provides for studying information-rich cases that offer in-depth understandings (Patton, 2002). This sampling method is also used to understand a central phenomenon (Creswell, 2005), in this case the complexities of initiating a professional learning community in one specific school in the English-speaking Caribbean. The chosen school is the one school well understood by the researcher and where the researcher is well known to some participants, thereby maximizing data collection opportunities in the limited time available for that purpose.

A qualitative case study is appropriate for this study because the data were collected in the school setting over a specified period of time. The qualitative approach reports on the lived experiences of these teachers in the process of initiating a PLC of teachers (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Case studies are “designed to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participants by using multiple sources of data” (Tellis, 1997, ¶4). I designed the study to be able to present the participants’ perspectives on initiating a PLC of teachers using dialogue from the group meetings and individual interviews.

According to Stake (2005), a “qualitative case study is characterised by researchers spending extended time on site, personally in contact with activities and operations of the case, reflecting, and revising descriptions and meanings of what is going on” (p. 450). In a similar manner, I was at the school several times per week for meetings and individual interviews. I also was on the campus dialoguing with the teachers about teaching and learning as well as observing how they interacted with their

colleagues. I was available for these participants when they asked my opinions about issues such as exam questions and technological resources.

Roles of the Researcher

The researcher assumed several roles in this study. At the outset, the researcher introduced the staff to the proposed research through letters of information and invitations that were distributed through the staff e-mailing system. These letters introduced the research and the concept of a professional learning community as well as the researcher's expectations of the volunteers. Those interested were invited to a session where the research was explained in detail and they could ask questions or voice concerns about the research. Furthermore, logistics of the study were described including data sources, time line for the study, and participants' roles. Interested teachers who agreed to participate were given consent forms to complete; these forms were returned to the researcher immediately. An agreed meeting time was set for January after teachers' timetables were reviewed and a venue for the initial and subsequent meetings was suggested. The agreed venue was a classroom of one of the participants.

The researcher acted as facilitator and mediator at the group meetings. As facilitator, I introduced open-ended questions to the group to initiate discussion. In addition, I encouraged the group to ask questions of interest. I attempted to mediate during meetings to allow all members to have input into the discussions and to focus the group when the meeting seemed to be drifting. To structure the meetings, I followed suggestions developed by Glazer et al. (2004) that participants would contribute, be respectful and considerate toward others, respect confidentiality, and speak as

individuals in group meetings. Glazer and colleagues also suggested that the facilitator guide the group back on topic if members go off on a tangential topic that is not of sufficient interest to the group as a whole. I adopted the same protocol for my meetings and teachers were respectful of others and their opinions. Other mediated roles included pointing out patterns among emerging topics and asking follow-up or clarifying questions to support members' understanding of the reflections in progress.

A crucial role of the researcher was that of interviewer. Interviews were conducted throughout the study to explore whether or not teachers' attitudes and perceptions had shifted during this study. Interviews also addressed whether teaching practices had been affected in any way since the beginning of this study. These interviews sought to answer the research questions posed earlier. Semi-structured interviews were utilized as there were common questions that needed to be addressed to answer the research questions. Open-ended questions were used to encourage participants to speak freely about what they were thinking about their experiences of initiating a professional learning community of teachers. Documents such as journals and exit comments from the group meetings were collected. A document in a computer file was created to keep a record of the data collected from the participants' journals. Exit comments were also collected at the end of each meeting and they were recorded into another document that grouped the data by date and participant.

Investigator as an Insider Researcher

I considered myself an insider to this group of teachers because of my 10 years of teaching at this school where I was a colleague to some of the participants. As a result, I was aware of the issues discussed and the teachers' experiences were familiar to me. Despite recent restructuring in the school, I could readily identify issues that I had

experienced in this setting. Teacher isolation continued to be present, along with a general lack of collaboration within and among departments. These and other personal experiences influenced the way I designed and conducted the data collection. One example of this is the need I perceived to have the teachers become leaders and to discuss or present issues relevant to them.

Because of my personal familiarity with the setting, I was able to gain entry to the school to conduct my research and had easy access to the participants. Having taught at the school, I found myself able to build the necessary trust with the teachers to be an effective leader and researcher at this site. My familiarity with the setting also allowed me to understand what teachers were saying and, in some cases, their dialogue illustrated assumptions made by teachers that I could understand. My awareness of the setting certainly enabled me to understand the culture of the teachers and to comprehend what was spoken in their own dialect. I made every effort to minimize my taken-for-granted assumptions.

Although a strong similarity existed between these teachers and myself, there were instances when I realized that our experiences also differed and I was reminded that my purpose was to report on their experiences, not my own. Despite our common experiences and memories at the school, I realized that they had different perspectives on some situations. I was able, in some instances, to point out those differences in perspectives or experiences; however, I endeavoured not to dominate the dialogue.

Research Setting

To situate this study globally, I need to locate the Caribbean on a map. The Caribbean is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean and the Caribbean Sea in the East and

West, respectively. To the north and south are North and South America, respectively. Many of the islands are English-speaking. The school chosen for this study is one secondary school in one of the English-speaking Caribbean countries.

The school operates in the context of post-colonial education in the Caribbean. It once followed the external examination of all colonies of the United Kingdom by administering the General Certificate of Education (GCE) O-level examination. These external exams were replaced by the equivalent but more culturally relevant examinations now administered by the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC).

School Population

More than half the 150 teachers at the school are expatriate teachers, most of whom come from other Caribbean countries; a few come from the USA and Canada. The school serves a population of approximately 1,000 students on an island with a population less than 100,000. The student population is predominantly of African descent. The island also has a small Spanish-speaking population from Dominican Republic and a small East-Indian population from Guyana. Many Caribbean schools have teaching staff from other neighbouring countries and there is constant movement of teachers among the islands.

My personal experiences teaching at this school for 10 years helped to inspire me to conduct research on collaborative practice. While teaching at this school, I observed that teachers rarely took time to discuss the teaching and learning that was occurring in their classrooms with reference to their personal practice. Most conversations focused on behavioural issues of students, and these were predominantly negative discussions. I felt that not enough time was spent examining one's own teaching practice. Teachers did not question what was successful or unsuccessful in their classrooms. How was one

to improve one's own craft if one did not self-evaluate lessons and the events occurring in classrooms? What were teachers interested in learning to improve their teaching and their students' learning?

Physical Layout of the School

This school has many buildings spread out across the campus. There are several single-storey blocks that house eight classrooms in each block. There are also two adjacent, but connecting, four-storey buildings that house several departments. In addition, several trailers house two teaching classrooms or home economics labs/classrooms. Another building houses the main staffroom and the school's office staff, the assistance principals' offices as well as the nurses' offices and a sick bay for ill students. Elsewhere on the school grounds are technical workshop teaching rooms and a music room with several practice areas. Just outside the courtyard of the two four-storey buildings is a huge tent for whole-school assemblies and meetings that require a large space. There are enough chairs to seat the student population inside the tent and a small stage for the people conducting the assemblies or meetings.

Generally, the school is spread out according to department. The geography teachers are housed in one area. Similarly, the English department occupies one of the four-storey buildings. The other four-storey building houses the art department on the ground floor, science labs and classrooms, the principal's office and a guidance office on the next two floors, and the business department on the fourth floor.

In a few cases, there is a lab or room that is away from the rest of a department because of how the school was laid out many years ago. For example, there is one computer lab, one science lab, and a food and nutrition lab that are all located in one of

the older buildings. There is also a small tuck shop where the students and teachers can buy snacks and lunch. The math block is supplemented by a trailer and an annex.

There is a small school library for the students and there are five computer labs equipped with the most recent desktop computers. There are four major science labs and several science classrooms. The technical department is located at the rear of the campus. The block next to the main staffroom houses the history and social studies department. Directly opposite are the physical education office and the home economics classrooms for needle work and food and nutrition. Above the technical rooms are the Spanish classrooms and two guidance offices. A trailer across the yard houses the other Spanish teachers and one history teacher. Further away, towards the side of the campus, is the geography department. One of the central features of this school campus is its sprawling and disjointed nature.

Timetabling and Coursework

The current timetable is a 5-day schedule, running Monday to Friday. The school day begins at 8:40 a.m.; classes begin at 9:00 a.m. and end at 3:15 p.m. There are six 35-minute periods and two 45-minute periods in each day, with a 15-minute morning break and a 1-hour lunch break. Forms are the year levels used in this school and they are equivalent to grades in North American schools. For example, form one is the same as grade 8. First form students are required to take 10 subjects. The second and third form students take 8 subjects each. The fourth and fifth form students take 7 or 8 subjects, depending on their stream, and 3 of those subjects are in the major area of study.

The required subjects are English Language, Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies. Electives include Art and Craft, Auto Mechanics, Biology, Bookkeeping,

Chemistry, Computer Applications, Electronics, English Literature, Food and Nutrition, Geography, History, Keyboarding, Metalwork, Music, Needlework, Physics, Principles of Accounting, Principles of Business, Spanish, Technical Drawing, and Woodwork.

In the first three years of high school, students are taught the local curriculum for their required subject areas. This curriculum is geared towards preparation for the external examinations in the final year of high school. In the last 2 years of high school, students are taught according to the syllabi of the regional external examining body, the Caribbean Examination Council (CXC), so they can write the appropriate examination in the last few months of high school. For example, in addition to the required subjects, a science stream class will do physics, biology, and chemistry; while an accounting stream class will do principles of business, principles of accounts, and bookkeeping.

Classes are blocked into double periods in most cases. In some instances, with the more technical, artistic, and home economic subjects, three and four periods may be allocated sequentially for practical lessons.

Data Sources

Data sources for this study included semi-structured interviews, group discussions, journal entries, and exit comments. Several data sources were utilized in this study to increase credibility through triangulation (Patton, 2002). Methods triangulation was used to check for consistency of the findings using different data collection methods. This included comparing what people said in private (individual interviews) with what they said in public (group meetings) and what the same individual said over time. Another triangulation of data sources included checking interviews against written evidence (journals) (Patton, 2002).

Interviews

Interviews were audio-taped and transcribed as a major data source. Interviews were conducted throughout the study to establish the participants' perceptions of learning communities as well as to provide a forum for them to voice any concerns. The initial interview, held in January after the first group meeting but prior to the second meeting, was aimed at establishing the participants' current levels of collaboration. Subsequent interviews sought clarification of comments made in group meetings and answers to research questions. Final interviews were conducted after the final group meeting and after school closed for the term. There were two exceptions involving teachers who were unable to attend the final meeting or the final interview. One of these teachers was interviewed prior to the final meeting and the interview addressed the PLC evaluation questions. The other teacher was the science teacher who stopped coming to the meetings in the sixth week of the study. The culminating interview gave participants an opportunity to indicate what they perceived to be the complexities and challenges of initiating the PLC of teachers. Additionally, this final interview sought to understand how teachers intended to share their practice in the future. Thus in all I conducted four individual interviews of about 30 minutes each.

Individual interviews provided a forum for teachers to discuss issues they may not have been comfortable discussing in a group setting. The interviews were important because they allowed me to find out things I could not directly observe (Patton, 2002). They allowed me to learn what people might have been thinking, their feelings about issues, and their intentions. The purpose of interviews was to let me enter into another person's perspective (Patton, 2002), and the richness of the data came from finding out other people's stories through interviews. Questions were clear and concise, using

language that was common to the teachers (Patton, 2002). Because of my familiarity with the setting, I was able to use language that was familiar to the participants.

Group Meetings

Group meetings were held once every Wednesday at 3:30 p.m. between January 10 and March 30, 2007, with the exception of January 17. Thus there were 11 group meetings. The meeting time involved a non-contact period because there are no supply teachers (substitutes) at this school. Teachers may ask their colleagues to fill in if necessary, but this action is not practiced or well accepted in this school. This was the reason for a common non-contact meeting time after school. Because students were dismissed at 3:15 p.m., this meeting time was appropriate and did not disturb the regular school day. Light snacks were provided for the participants. The PLC group meetings were audio-taped and transcribed as another major data source in the study. Meetings lasted on average from 60 to 90 minutes and were held in a classroom suggested by the participants. The room was equipped with a marker board to record notes, questions, and topics for meetings.

In the initial meeting, minimal introductions were made because many of the volunteers were already familiar with each other. The initial meeting was guided by the researcher. During this meeting, a demonstration of a teaching strategy was introduced to the group to create interest and to show a different teaching technique. The protocol of the following meetings was also explained. At the time, meetings were expected to begin with free writing, then move into discussions or activities, and end with the exit comments. Participants were also given questions to answer in their journals (see Appendix A for questions). Both the free writing and the exit comments were introduced and explained in this initial meeting. Subsequent meetings were facilitated

by the participants and the final meeting was an evaluative meeting to seek feedback about how the group functioned as a professional learning community. Table 3.1 provides details about the weekly meetings.

Glazer et al. (2004) allowed for a period of “venting” and I attempted this practice in my group meetings. Initially, at the beginning of each group meeting, participants were allowed five minutes of free writing in their journals. This free writing activity was not well received by the participants and was discontinued early in the study. As a result, these comments were not used in the analysis. One goal was to have ideas flow, without interruption, about a provocative topic or question arising from the teachers’ experiences of the day’s events. It was clear the teachers preferred talking to writing about their ideas.

Journal Entries

Journal entries were encouraged at least twice per week but these teachers did not complete their journal entries. Teachers made entries on the first and second days and a few made entries on the third day. One teacher made another entry following a meeting to vent his frustrations. They only made entries when asked to do so during meeting times. The intention was to have entries about the participants’ thoughts about the research, any new techniques they tried, and the result of those experiences. In addition, entries were encouraged to document successes, failures, or disasters that were occurring in their classrooms. Along with the events, it was expected that participants would include why they believed the events were successful or not. The researcher encouraged journal entries at the beginning of group discussions to allow participants to write freely about their concerns about teaching and learning. Although general

prompts for the weekly entries were provided, the participants did not use their journals as expected, and these entries were not a major source of data.

Exit Comments

At the end of each meeting there was a concluding exercise to gather exit comments. These comments included responses to guiding questions such as “Was there something from today’s meeting that you will remember and why?” or “Is there something you would like to find out more about?” Initially, the exit comments were crucial because they guided the focus of subsequent meetings and interviews. These comments were collected and used to track changes in individual participants’ perceptions of the group’s challenges in initiating a professional learning community of teachers. Glazer et al. (2004) recommended closure activities to end group meetings by summarizing the issues explored and gathering suggestions for ideas to be explored in future meetings. Exit comments provided a closure activity for the group meetings. Although teachers completed these exit comments, I rarely included them in the data because they were largely superficial. On January 24, Katie said “I am feeling so sorry for the new and younger teachers” and on March 7, Khyle said “The meeting was quite interesting.” Such information did not help to answer the research questions.

Data Collection

A qualitative research approach was used to “capture the richness of the qualitative context and the personal perspectives of the participants” (Gay & Airasian, 2003, p. 9). In addition, the study attempted to probe deeply into the experiences of the participants in the setting and to understand the way things are, why they are like that, and how these experiences are perceived by the participants (Gay & Airasian, 2003).

“To achieve the detailed understandings they seek, qualitative researchers must undertake sustained in-depth, in context research that allows them to uncover subtle, less overt, personal understandings” (p. 13). The attempt to venture beyond simple description of the experiences of the participants is made by the researcher through several data sources, as well as participation in and facilitation of group meetings.

Consistent with Merriam’s (1998) description of qualitative research, this study focuses on the *nature* of initiating a PLC of teachers and also seeks to *understand* the challenges and complexities of initiating a PLC of teachers. One goal of the investigation is to create thick descriptions of the experiences of initiating a PLC of teachers. Merriam (1998) suggests a small, non-random, purposeful sample, and this study used a purposeful sample of eight teachers. I was the primary instrument for data collection; I conducted the individual interviews and was a participant observer in the meetings. I also collected documents such as journals and exit comments. During the data collection phase of the study, I recorded my thoughts about the meetings and about what transpired in those meetings. These comments supplement the transcripts of the audio-taped sessions. My research journal provided a forum for me to record my own thoughts, feelings, and experiences throughout my efforts to initiate a professional learning community of teachers.

On December 14, 2006, a meeting was held with the volunteers. After a script about the research was presented, teachers were invited to ask questions and these questions were addressed and consent forms were distributed. Participants signed the forms and immediately gave the forms to the researcher. All participants were from the science and geography departments.

The timetabling of classes was checked across the two departments to determine if there was a suitable time period within the school day and week to accommodate the meetings. There were no non-contact periods when all the participants were available. Participants agreed that Wednesday afternoons after school, from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m., would be suitable for the meetings, as most people found it most convenient. Two volunteers mentioned having other duties that would result in their being late to the meetings but they assured their attendance.

Meetings were held every Wednesday afternoon from January 10 to March 31, 2007. On January 17, we were unable to meet because that was the day for the once-yearly parent-teacher meetings to discuss students' work. On March 28, 2007, due to torrential rains we were unable to meet. As a result, that meeting was rescheduled for Friday, March 30, during lunch time. On most days the meetings began and ended later than expected; in some instances, meetings lasted more than one hour.

Meetings

There were 11 weekly group meetings for the teachers in this professional learning community. These meetings ranged from 45 to 105 minutes in length. Attendance was not always perfect; there were teachers who missed meetings because of school or family obligations.

The first and second meetings were facilitated by the researcher. In the first meeting, I made sure the teachers knew each other and then I proceeded to talk about the research. I then gave a demonstration as a method of sharing practice with the participants. I used a Predict-Observe-Explain (POE) strategy using diet and regular Coke cans in a trough of water. In this particular exercise, the teachers were required to predict whether one or both cans would float or sink and explain to themselves why

they expected that prediction. I would perform the demonstration and then the teachers would observe the experiment. They were then required to write a possible explanation of their observations and then share that with the group if they wanted to. They seemed to enjoy the demonstration and thought about ways they too could use such a teaching strategy in their classrooms. We talked about the research questions and teachers discussed the need for volunteers in a group such as this, as well as administration support, to ensure that the group survived. In the second meeting, we discussed discipline and classroom management, two topics that had arisen in the interviews with these teachers.

The third to the ninth meetings were facilitated by individual teachers; however, the fifth and eight sessions were facilitated by the group of teachers. In the first group session, the teachers planned a unit of work on the water cycle. In the second group facilitated session, teachers taught a lesson on earthquakes and volcanoes, and received feedback from the others in the group. The individually-facilitated session activities ranged from group discussions to presentations. The table that follows provides a breakdown of the meetings, the facilitators, and the topics that were discussed.

Table 3.1 Weekly Meetings with Facilitators and Meeting Topics

| Session | Date | Facilitator(s) | Meeting Topic |
|---------|---------------|----------------|--|
| 1 | Jan. 10, 2007 | Yamraj | Introduction, New Teaching Strategy (POE), Meetings to follow |
| 2 | Jan. 24, 2007 | Yamraj | Topics suggested by Teachers: Classroom Management, Discipline |
| 3 | Jan. 31, 2007 | Matt | Assessment Practices |
| 4 | Feb. 7, 2007 | Katie | Collaboration/ Community Building |
| 5 | Feb. 14, 2007 | Group | Planning Session: Water Cycle |
| 6 | Feb. 21, 2007 | Geoff | Use of Technology: Demonstration of Power Point and Excel |
| 7 | Feb. 28, 2007 | Skye | Literacy and Motivation |
| 8 | Mar. 7, 2007 | Group | Teaching Session: Volcanoes and Earthquakes |
| 9 | Mar. 14, 2007 | Kolin & Khyle | Attitude versus Aptitude |
| 10 | Mar. 21, 2007 | Group | Meeting with School Administration |
| 11 | Mar. 30, 2007 | Yamraj | Group Evaluation of the PLC |

In the second to last meeting of the 12-week term, the group agreed to invite two administrators of the school, the principal and the academic assistant principal. These individuals were chosen because they would have the most influence if the group of teachers tried to expand its learning community across the school over time. The principal would have to commit support to help the group increase its membership. This meeting provided a forum for two administrators to hear what had transpired within the group over the past 11 weeks and to hear what the teachers had been experiencing as a result of the PLC group. Teachers were given the opportunity to speak openly to the administrators about what they thought about the learning community and its benefits. The teachers also expressed thoughts of where the PLC might be headed within the school.

The last meeting for the term was a lunch meeting at which the researcher asked several questions that evaluated the progress of this professional learning community of teachers. Appendix B presents sample questions. Teachers were also asked to make a final journal entry that they would submit electronically. Only two teachers submitted a final journal entry (a letter to administration asking for time for a PLC within the school day). Although follow-up e-mails were sent reminding the others to send the letter, none of the other teachers responded.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted at a time and in a place convenient for each teacher. The first round of interviews was conducted from January 12 to 19, 2007. The second set of interviews was conducted from February 15 to 26, 2007. The third set of interviews was held from March 13 to 21, 2007. The last interviews were conducted from March 29 to April 7, 2007. There were four interviews with each teacher. The only exception was Jamie who could not attend the final interview.

Journal Entries

The journal entries were made by teachers within the first and second week of the data collection. This data source proved to be of minimal importance as it did not generate sufficient data. In the first entry teachers responded to five questions (see Appendix A). The second entry was free writing during the second meeting.

Exit Comments

The exit comments were completed by most of the teachers at the end of each session. Index cards were provided for them to write their comments about what had been accomplished. Some teachers took the cards home with the intention of returning

them, but they did not. Prompts were provided for teachers to write about the PLC and their experiences.

Data Analysis

“The challenge of qualitative inquiry involves portraying a holistic picture of what the phenomenon, setting, or program is like and struggling to understand the fundamental nature of a particular set of activities and people in a specific context” (Patton, 2005, p. 480). Prior to the analysis of the data, I transcribed the data from the meetings and interviews verbatim. According to Merriam (1998), “ideally, verbatim transcription of recorded interviews provides the best database for analysis” (p. 88). The initial step in analysis of the data was content analysis. This “involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labelling the primary patterns of the data” (p. 463). Data were revisited several times to extrapolate patterns. The categories and codes identified early in the study changed over time as new data were collected. This was an important step in identifying significant themes in the collected interview and discussion data. Later, data was categorized as responses to six of the seven research questions.

The data analysis technique for this study was a constant comparative approach in which I revisited the data several times to identify emerging themes (Gay & Airasian, 2003). This approach provided a constant comparison to identify different categories of data. Categories were modified as necessary to produce more general patterns in the data. Constant comparative analysis sought to understand and explain the qualitative data; coding was facilitated with the software program *Atlas.ti*.

Coding the Data

Coding transcripts of the meetings was a daunting task that required several months. I used *Atlas.ti* to create open codes in the data in order to locate patterns in the codes and develop families of codes. In the end, 90 codes were created. A review of the codes made it clear that some codes needed to be merged, and codes were then collapsed into families. Ten families emerged from the codes assigned to the data. These included some families that were clearly evident from the codes and some that were made clearer based on the enabling research questions. These families included administration, benefits of the PLC, challenges of initiating a PLC of teachers, characteristics of a PLC, collective learning, future of the PLC, school culture, shared personal practice, shared vision, and subject integration.

In a similar manner, the interviews were also coded. Seventy-three codes emerged when those data were analyzed, and these codes were collapsed into seven families: challenges, benefits of a PLC, changes over time, features of a PLC, future of PLC, profiles, and setting up a PLC. The two sets of data were ultimately grouped into common themes. Five main themes emerged from both meetings and interviews: initiating a PLC, features of a PLC, benefits of a PLC, challenges in initiating a PLC, and finally the future of this PLC of teachers. Subsequently, these themes provided the headings for the findings that are presented in the next five chapters. The findings are reported in this manner because “much depends of an investigator’s own style of rigorous thinking, along with the sufficient presentation of evidence and careful consideration of alternative interpretations” (Yin, 2003, p. 110).

The reported data were coded using the type of data source, the speaker, and the line number of the quote in the saved hermeneutic file in *Atlas.ti*. Thus the code

(I2:Yamraj;4) indicates that the quotation came from the second interview, was spoken by Yamraj, and appears in line 4 of that interview. The letter "I" refers to individual interviews, "M" indicates meetings, EC refers to exit comments and "J" indicates journal entries. The number immediately after the name indicates the place of the meeting, interview, exit comment, or journal entry in the overall sequence.

Validity and Reliability

Trustworthiness of the data addresses the issues of validity and reliability in this study. Trustworthiness in this case relies on triangulation of the multiple data sources, such as group meetings, individual interviews, and other written comments by the teachers in this study. The data collected through meetings and individual interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The written data from journals and exit comments were typed verbatim into electronic files. The computer software *Atlas.ti* was used to analyze each of the major data sources, and then cross data source analyses were conducted (Patton, 2002).

The construct validity of the case was increased through the use of multiple evidences such as the use of individual interviews and group meetings as data sources (Yin, 2003). According to Yin (2003), one other way to increase the construct validity is by having key informants review the draft case-study report. The individual transcripts and a draft of the data analysis chapters were sent to participants for review.

Limitations of the Study

As with all cases studies, there is a lack of generalizability beyond the case. In this case, there are two departments in one secondary school in one region of the world represented. Case studies may also have an inherent limitation because of the bias relating to the subjectivity of the researcher and its participants. As mentioned previously in this dissertation, I acknowledged my assumptions in Chapter 1 and I also presented my role as an insider researcher earlier in this chapter. By bringing forth my assumptions and subjectivities in this dissertation, I acknowledge my influence in the entire research process (Charlesworth, 2000).

Summary

This chapter has presented the research of the study, including the research questions, recruitment of participants, and general descriptions of the participants. It has also provided an in-depth explanation of the data collection procedures. The next five chapters present the analysis of data using a range of relevant perspectives.

CHAPTER 4

Initiating a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

This chapter and the four chapters that follow each address one of the five themes identified during analysis of the full set of data collected over the 12 weeks of my work at the school. Each chapter also addresses one or more of the study's initial research questions. The five major themes identified in the data are these:

1. Initiating a professional learning community of teachers
2. Major features of a professional learning community of teachers
3. Benefits of a professional learning community of teachers
4. Challenges in initiating a professional learning community of teachers
5. The future of this professional learning community of teachers.

Chapter 4 discusses the theme of initiating a PLC of teachers and it directly answers question six: What are some of the critical features of initiating a professional learning community of teachers? Chapter 5 describes features of the PLC of teachers and addresses research questions three, four, and five with regards to shared vision, collective learning, and shared personal practice. Chapter 6 speaks to question two: What do teachers perceive as challenges in initiating a professional learning community of teachers? Chapter 7 addresses research question seven: What benefits do teachers perceive in initiating a professional learning community of teachers? Chapter 8 goes beyond the initial questions asked in this study and reports on the projections these teachers have for themselves in the next term and school year.

The first research question focuses on what teachers perceive a professional learning community to be. At the first meeting, I asked the teachers to write in their journals a response to what they thought a professional learning community should look like. Their responses integrated many aspects of what they interpreted from the terms “professional,” “learning,” and “community.’

Many of their responses mention a group of teachers or a “body of professionals” collaborating to “improve their teaching skills” (J1:Khyle;1). The participants relate learning to improving teaching skills. These professionals have an “interest in strengthening [their] own skills and knowledge in education to be more effective in assisting others” and “strengthen[ing] relationships to create a professional working environment” (J1:Geoff;1). In addition, Geoff said the group should “seek improvement through sharing experiences.” In this case, learning should occur in the community of teachers but through sharing experiences. The first-year teacher described the PLC as “a group of individuals that would like to see changes or improvements in a profession as a result of experiences, critical analysis or reflection on one’s work with the ultimate goal of what is best for the profession” (J1:Skye;1). This teacher also included a component of self-reflection on one’s own teaching to improve or learn from one’s own experiences. The teachers were clear that a group of professionals must be involved and they are collaborating to seek improvement in their profession.

The most experienced teacher had objectives for the PLC, including that the PLC “should facilitate, integrate, and collaborate about learning styles and objectives to bring out the best in the students and [the PLC] must have a shared vision and goals that impact students in a positive way” (J1:Katie;1). Clearly, the focus is on student learning. She emphasized shared vision that is geared towards the students. Katie endorsed

learning in this community, but her focus was on students' learning and meeting the students' needs. In addition, Matt wrote that the PLC should "give teachers the opportunity to collaborate on solving problems within education, share ideas on issues of lesson planning, classroom management, assessment and evaluation" (J1:Matt;1). He encompassed many aspects of teaching in his expectations of this PLC. Matt also indicated the need to dialogue among teachers and saw this PLC as "an avenue for teachers to express concerns and make recommendations to handle similar problems or even avoid the problem altogether" (J1:Matt;1). Matt pointed out the need to have conversations about teaching and learning and the need to talk about issues and concerns that they face and to possibly find some solutions to their problems. His expectations seem to warrant a broad spectrum of topics about teaching and learning in this setting.

This chapter reports on the elements that were needed to initiate one professional learning community of teachers in one school. During meetings and interviews, these teachers reported what they thought were directly or indirectly necessary to start this PLC of teachers. In the analysis of the data, it became clear that the teachers saw a need for this type of collaboration within their school. In addition, they reported the need for content integration across the various subject curricula. The interviews revealed other elements necessary for the initiation of a PLC of teachers. I categorized these as the physical, interpersonal and social elements, and personal elements.

The Need for a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

To initiate a learning community like this one, teachers must see the need for such an undertaking that will require both their time and their effort. These teachers

were faced with real problems in their daily lives at the school and they saw the PLC as a way of helping them to lessen their teaching loads and to resolve some of their problems. One feature that was identified through the dialogue in the meetings was the need for subject integration across the various disciplines and how beneficial that integration could be for both teachers and students. In his final interview, Geoff explained this need for collaboration in a PLC of teachers as a way of finding solutions to problems they faced; in this case, they wanted to have more success with their students:

I would say all of the teachers have recognized the weakness, the lack of motivation among the students, we have recognized that this school is not performing at the level that the secondary school should be performing. I think just seeing that there is the need to have more success with the students.

(I4:Geoff;80)

Subject Integration

The teachers expressed the need to have a PLC to curtail some of the problems they faced. One need that concerned the teachers was the lack of transfer of knowledge across subject areas by students and the isolated teaching that hinders the work of teachers and the progress of students. Katie, a geography teacher, described an authentic problem to demonstrate the need to have subject integration to benefit the students. This example also illustrates the lack of transfer of learning across various subject areas. She said:

I really wonder if English is really taught in isolation because when I teach something, even with ecosystems, weather, and so on, I make reference to what is done in science. A lot of time we have to make reference to elements. Simple

things I have encountered; fourth form students beginning a sentence with a common letter and writing the names of places with common letters

Sometimes they are bewildered that you know English; that you know something they think you shouldn't know. (M1:Katie;282)

Because students perceive each subject as distinct, they do not see the connection of basic English writing skills to different subject areas, in this case geography. Katie has tried to use concepts taught in science to show the links in both subject areas. She also built upon the basic knowledge of chemical elements from science class. In like manner, other teachers share the common idea of a need for more subject integration. This excerpt from the first meeting illustrates the problem of disconnection between subject areas and indicates the desire to create more relevant and meaningful links across subject areas. This dialogue involved four teachers who saw the need to integrate many subject areas to enhance student learning. They emphasize that the skills learned in both English and mathematics are the same skills necessary in their subject areas of science and geography. One teacher suggested how to go about teaching similar topics simultaneously to create links between various subject areas:

Matt: The PLC is needed. For instance, in science, because that is what I teach, students don't even know how to change sentences into the past tense. In mathematics, they don't know how to multiply and divide by 10. When they do conversions in science and, it's a fact, we know that is taught in primary school, but what can we do inside of the school now, here and now? Can we collaborate with math while we do conversions so that we can teach it in science at the same time? And collaborate in terms of the methodology? Can we ask English for help with the vocabulary that we have in science? How to spell these words, or

even the past tense? Could they be done simultaneously so that when they come to science it can be transferred across to science?

Jamie: Across the board.

Matt: Right. The only way this can be done is if we have a PLC where English, math, science, and other subject teachers meet. For instance, we teach soils in science and I see this soil diagram up there [in the geography room where the PLC met]. The students who do science and geography too, we could come together, and compromise too. We did all the terms up there too.

Katie and Kolin: Right, yes.

Matt: Right now, we could have some sort of subject integration in planning where geography would not plan in isolation.

Katie: That's what I am saying, right.

Kolin: I want to endorse what you said: Students not being able to express themselves in science, given that they should've done this in English language. Take geography, and every other department, while you have collaboration and shared practices, [to me] it would be more critical if we would do some more cross-faculty sharing because just yesterday we were discussing [this] but it's a problem that has been plaguing us for a while. The same students that get As and A+s in English cannot express themselves well in geography and so they fail. They can't construct a proper sentence. It's not a matter of them not understanding the content, it's that they can't express it and we should be able to come together as two departments and work out something. If you could get an A in English, then you are able to get an A in geography.

Matt: But the only way that can happen is with a community like this, where we

sit down and say we are going to do this, this week, and this should happen. We should have a big meeting before we even decide on the yearly planning so that everybody could be almost simultaneous [with teaching topics]. We are going to do the lab report method, the experimental method in science. We are going to collaborate with English. English is going to do past tense at that time.

Mathematics is going to do graphs, conversions, et cetera. Because, really, we have a set of kids going up and they are not second- or third-form material.

Jamie: When you are going across the board like that there, you are actually teaching for mastery. Because you are hearing it in English, geography, it's just drilling in their head. So they can't forget it because it's drilled in their head.

Matt: To me it takes less time, because with collaboration we could finish conversions. (M1:262-280)

This excerpt of the dialogue among the participants shows their strong convictions about subject integration and the potential for creating links across subject areas in order for students to realize there is overlap between subject areas. As such, the teaching of content in each subject should not be treated as separate entities as they are now. Solutions also surfaced through dialogue. For example, Matt suggested English and mathematics teachers teaching skills needed in science concurrently as a solution to the lack of subject integration. Creating these links and teaching similar topics simultaneously should save teaching time and relieve student boredom as well. In the meeting before the first planning session on the water cycle, Matt reiterated this by saying "another thing, [subject integration] might cut back on boredom too. Some kids knowing the information might be bored to death, we just did this in geography, why do we have to do this again? You are re-inventing the wheel too" (M5:Matt;135). The

dialogue among four teachers in this group demonstrates their sense of the importance of subject integration. This dialogue also indicates the common need across the subjects and their individual needs in this setting. They also illustrate their support and understanding of each other's needs.

Despite the widely varying levels of experience, ranging from the veteran 33-year teacher to a first-year teacher, through collaborative dialogue these teachers were able to find gaps in their work and then try to find solutions to the real issues that they all face. Thus they appear to suggest that the PLC could be a way of responding to the problems in their day-to-day teaching. It is clear that this type of dialogue provides teachers with the forum to openly discuss their needs in this school. In addition, they are more inclined to discuss their challenges and find common and relevant solutions to these challenges.

To alleviate some of the problems that the teachers mentioned, one teacher indicated that a PLC group should be the link across the subjects. He said: "I was thinking, coming out of a group like this, we should be able to, there should be something to connect across the subjects" (M1:Kolin;304). Another teacher picked up on what Kolin said:

The only way that could be done is sitting and planning, with heads of department meeting and planning, and collaborating. This is what we have in geography, you tell me what you have and we could help you in science. Then we [all] collaborate and structure [the objectives] so that we have them being taught at the same time. (M1:Matt;306)

Later in the meeting, Kolin further qualified his previous statement:

Among other things, what I would like to see coming out of this [PLC] is

students being able to understand that the same English they learn in English class is the same thing that must be applied to a report when you are writing up for geography or science. The same mathematics that you learn in that block [mathematics] is the same thing you apply when you are calculating density or gradient or time based on longitude. In order to achieve that, we have to stop teaching in isolation. (M1:Kolin;316)

These teachers believed that they should show transfer of knowledge across subject areas in order for students to understand and apply both the skills and knowledge taught in subjects such as English and mathematics. This lack of transfer is problematic for these teachers because educating students does not seem efficient and appears to leave gaps in knowledge, with the result that the students cannot function optimally in other subject areas that rely on application of basic English and mathematics skills, such as geography and science. These teachers see the need for a PLC in this school to help solve some of the problems they face in their daily teaching.

Geoff, formerly a geography teacher and currently a science teacher and thus familiar with both subject areas, indicated that working together to create the links across the subject areas is important, with real benefits for students: "I think if we work together, one is going to reinforce the other and complement the other. Also, the students will be able to transfer their learning easier. So I agree with this sort of coming together" (M4:Geoff;16).

The teachers also provided practical examples for collaboration between the two departments. Jamie talked about this PLC being a good approach. For example, if the topic is biomes, geography can teach the geographical aspects and science can construct a biome, such as a tropical rain forest. Skye was in agreement with this idea and added

that a common assessment across subject areas is possible. This could save time because teachers would split the work between the two departments, especially with multiple teachers working on the same topic. Matt supported this concept, but offered a different example of soil types and explained how the resources could be reduced. If geography taught the theory or concept of drainage, then science could do the experiments on drainage because of limited resources in the school. In the end, students would benefit from this approach by seeing the links between the subject areas and realizing that drainage is the same concept but they were applying it in two different contexts. Thus there could be a reduction in repetitive teaching and more of a constructivist approach to teaching soil types and drainage.

Based on these teachers' proposals to teach concurrently to provide the necessary links between subject areas, it is clear that they need to plan their approach early enough to create a map to guide them. Teachers need the sense of direction that a map can provide, indicating a pathway to a goal when it is important for teachers to be able to show that they have accomplished their goals. In like manner, Skye talked about "establishing conversations where to go" and in this case she meant "it's a common curriculum or discussion, that commonalties to the overlap in that topic" (M4:Skye;8). The concurrent teaching approach to topics was highly favoured by the group. Matt suggested that the science and geography curricula need to be developed simultaneously and that they should "marry the two curricula and look for similarities and have them clear cut so that you could plan out where you want to go. You must have a map, using both curricula" (M4:Matt;6).

Planning Session

This need to plan to integrate geography and science was more evident in the first planning session, where Matt also indicated that the proper planning would mean avoiding covering topics twice. Instead, “if it’s taught in geography, we don’t have to go into depth, we can ask why, we know they have information from geography coming over” (M5:Matt;182). In this planning session, Kolin said that geography can start a topic and science can continue. Matt responded that “to make this more effective, we have to teach it simultaneously” (M5:Matt;201). He further explained that the overlap in the two subject areas will expose the students to a week of the same material but in different contexts, within the scientific and geographic approaches.

To demonstrate the teachers’ willingness to collaborate, we had a planning session in the sixth week of the study. In this session, the teachers became more familiar with the objectives in each other’s subject areas. They brainstormed what to do and at which level (form) of the school to schedule the teaching of this topic. The water cycle was finally agreed, upon after many other topics were deemed inappropriate because they had already been taught. In this planning session, new objectives were written and the two departments decided which department would deal with particular objectives. One objective involved the various processes in the water cycle and Matt, a science teacher, provided a good example to illustrate how they could share the work:

We do the changes of states too. That comes in there, under the processes. What comes out too is that water soaks in the ground by percolation, but we don’t get into why it happens. Geography can help us with the porous nature of the rocks because percolation will only take place if the rocks are porous. If the rock is not porous, percolation will not take place. If you bring out the rock formation that

influences percolation, then students should be able to draw [connections] between the two subjects. (M5:Matt;166)

Further to the discussion of objectives, the teachers agreed on a common assessment for this topic. Students would be required to build a working model of the water cycle. In addition, students would do an oral presentation and write a paper to submit for grading. Through the discussion they realized that parents and administration may not favour such an approach, because the one assessment affects two subject grades. It was decided that if parents and students were informed beforehand, it might be more accepted by them. This could be dealt with at a later date when this concurrent teaching would take place. One point that may have been overlooked by these enthusiastic teachers was the fact that the students who take mandatory science may not choose geography as an elective. One way to overcome this hurdle is to have this cross-teaching in the lower school where students are required to take both geography and science.

This planning session produced an in-depth description of a model with the processes involved, such as condensation and evaporation. The intensity of this collaboration produced details about the model, including landscaping and the choice of materials to demonstrate how porous materials apply to real-life situations. The expectation here is that choosing materials based on what they know about porous rocks would indicate their understanding of how porous rocks and percolation are related. As a result, this assessment evaluates how the students apply what they know to what they choose as their materials to represent parts of their model.

This planning session provided a practical example of collaboration involving two departments, highlighting the curricula overlaps and thus providing a means to

show teachers how they can teach their lessons concurrently without repeating the same content. It also enabled them to take a constructivist approach to teaching by building on previous knowledge in the other subject areas. They were able to create a common assessment that would demonstrate the learning in both subject areas.

A need for a PLC must be established to initiate a PLC of teachers. I have described these teachers' perceptions of the need for a PLC to help to alleviate some of the issues they identified. Their arguments focused on the need for subject integration across the various subject areas, and they provided a real example of the problems they are experiencing that indicate the need for collaboration across subject areas in a PLC. I have included quotes from a planning session to illustrate the point of collaboration and teaching concurrently to make concepts taught in the two subjects relevant. The next section addresses what physical elements are needed to initiate a PLC of teachers.

Physical Elements Needed to Initiate a PLC of Teachers

These teachers indicated some necessary elements of a PLC that I categorize as physical. These include time to collaborate and dialogue with colleagues about teaching and learning. Although time is the biggest issue, resources and materials are elements that teachers also see as important in initiating a professional learning community. Also included in these physical elements is a space to meet to collaborate across subject areas.

Time

Time was the most critical element in initiating a PLC of teachers. All the teachers stressed the importance of time and indicated that meeting during the regular school day is optimum. This would have improved attendance, because members

reported conflicts with family obligations after school that led to absenteeism and tardiness, as these quotations indicate:

You need to set a common time, which you realize can be a big problem; that's a very critical factor and, as teachers, time is a big factor It would better if [PLC meetings are] scheduled into the timetable. (I4:Khyle;54/56)

Matt also talked about the time frame of the meetings:

[The PLC meetings] seem to coincide with when people have to pick up their kids; if it could be a little earlier than that, realistically at 2 o'clock or 2:30pm until 3:30pm, that would be a good time It is the most critical [issue] at this point, because with proper timetabling, we could have more participation.

(I2:Matt;206/210)

Being an observer in this school setting, I realized that there would be some issues with meeting after school, particularly if this group were to expand its membership. Many of the teachers did not want to remain after school. In Matt's last interview he qualified his comments about the timing of the meetings and explained why after school would not work in this setting:

You want to eliminate all of [people's problems picking up their kids], so if you could at least say, let's say the afternoon of every other Friday off, just to sit, plan, do what you have to do. In terms of PLC collaborating, meetings, discussions, whatever, just to ensure that people attend. You put this at 3:15, 4 o'clock nobody is going to come. Everybody is ready to get out of here.

(I4:Matt;93)

Matt emphasized the need for a time that avoids conflicts and for a regular day and time to allow for better planning and routines. To further understand this scheduling, Matt

said that if the time is scheduled into the school day, the attendance should improve and there should be more participation from the members. In the same vein, Skye said that the time must be convenient and the scheduling is the “biggest thing” (I2:Skye;212). An extension of the time issue is punctuality and regular attendance. Katie indicated that a critical feature of a learning community is for teachers to be regular and punctual, so that they are current with what is happening in the group and many more ideas can be voiced and more solutions may be found. Based on the participants’ concerns, finding appropriate time was seen as essential for productive collaboration.

Resources

Resources were seen as another critical element for initiating a PLC of teachers. With reference to a session where one teacher was sharing how to use technology in the classroom, Jamie indicated the need for more resources in terms of computers. She reported that computers would enhance teachers’ learning about technology in the classroom. They provide hands-on learning and teachers learn by doing. Khyle, a geography teacher, expressed the importance of resources:

With the physical, we would definitely need to have the necessary resources to work with; for instance, if we need to be working along with science to teach a certain topic and we are going to do certain experiments, we want to make sure that enough material is there for the students to work with. (I2:Khyle;143)

Kolin also reported the need for administrative support with regards to resources that might be needed to facilitate learning in their classrooms. He suggested that teachers need some “physical resources, and we might need some materials, equipment, we might need transportation, if we take the students out, and financial support” (I4:Kolin;77). These teachers saw resources as important to enhance teaching

and learning in a learning community. They made it clear that the right resources in the appropriate amounts will facilitate learning. Field trips provide real-life experiences for these students, especially in this setting, and provide real examples to show how science and geography are important in their lives. Therefore, financial support to assist with these types of learning experiences should enhance students' achievement, which is a goal of the PLC of teachers.

There are some resources that seem to be under-utilized in the school. In many instances, the teachers indicated that resource persons or guest speakers are usually people from outside the school setting. As a teacher at this school for many years, I too was not pleased with the fact that we had knowledgeable people on staff who knew about many different fields, yet teachers and administrators brought in resource persons from outside the school to guest lecture. I also believe that our own teachers are competent and are experts in the same areas as the outsiders.

One teacher brought to light this very important point by saying that we should use more of our own teachers in the school:

We always look at guest speakers as somebody coming from the outside. Why can't we get somebody from the inside? When you teach nutrition, have somebody from Food and Nutrition come over and give a little presentation . . . They are right here, they are accessible, it's not like we have to book them. Ask somebody here. We don't do enough of that around here. (M5:Matt;422/430)

Space

In this study, finding a place to meet was not a problem. We met in a classroom that was vacant every Wednesday afternoon after school. However, one participant who was asked about the critical features to set up a PLC indicated that space to meet, plan, and organize was important. Kyle indicated this after identifying a need for both physical and mental elements, with space as a physical element. As mentioned, space within this school was not an issue, because all departments had their own staffroom and there was a general staff room. Because our meetings were held after school hours, finding an empty classroom was also an easy task. However, for others who want to initiate a PLC, one must be aware of the need for physical space to meet and to collaborate about teaching and learning.

This section has summarized the physical elements needed to initiate a PLC of teachers. Time was perceived as most important by this group, particularly time within the school day. Resources were another important element that helped with creating a PLC of teachers. Space to meet was not an issue in this case. The next section takes a look at the interpersonal and social elements needed to initiate a PLC of teachers.

Interpersonal and Social Elements Needed to Initiate a PLC of Teachers

The interpersonal and social elements included good communication among teachers and other stakeholders interested in education. One element is the support of the administration to provide both time and space to meet, as well as the resources mentioned. Inclusion of parents was also seen as imperative for this community to make a difference in the lives of the students. Parental involvement would complement what is done in by these teachers. Another important element is leadership of the

group. Prior to my leaving the school, teachers expressed concerns about who would lead the group in my absence. This proved to be a very real problem; after I left the research site, the group did not meet and this did not accomplish what the teachers hoped to do as a group of learners. The community seemed to dissolve.

Administration

In the first meeting, teachers indicated a need to create an administrative awareness of what the group was doing and discussing. Matt said that if they were to implement anything, “we [would] need some sort of support [from administration] . . . we need to have somebody here from that level so they could know what we are talking about and discussing” (M1:Matt;352). Teachers also reported that they needed administrative support, particularly with scheduling time to meet and providing resources when needed. Geoff reported a need for administrative support “in terms of scheduling time because we don’t want to do this outside of school hours” (I4:Geoff;64).

We did invite two of the school’s administrators to a meeting in which we reported the group’s goals and what we had been discussing for the past 10 weeks. The two administrators were the principal and the academic assistant principal. The principal is an ideal person to assist with PLC membership expansion and financial issues. The academic principal is responsible for timetabling meetings within the school’s schedule and also for the curricula in the school. Both would play pivotal roles in initiating a PLC. These administrators reported that they were very pleased with this small group of teachers who took on an initiative without it being mandated by the administration or by the Department of Education.

In the meeting with administration, it was clear that they shared our vision for the school to enhance teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of increased

students' achievement and learning. They revealed to the group that they too had been thinking about team teaching with specific groups of students. This was new information for the group, as this initiative was only discussed at higher administrative levels within the school and had not been announced to the entire staff. The administrators agreed with the cross-subject collaboration to enhance learning for the students, and they embraced the ideas of teaching the same topics and showing the links between the subject areas.

With regards to teachers as learners, the principal was in total support of such a stance and praised this group of teachers for its work after school, despite being tired and having other commitments. She praised their efforts for wanting to improve their own teaching and their students' learning while acknowledging the dynamic nature of teaching and learning:

I must say that I am happy to see this type of initiative coming up [instead of coming down] Sometimes I think [teachers] think the learning can only take place with our students, but it cannot be that way. It must be all of us learning together. I have said in my first little speech as principal, if we continue to do the same old things, we will still continue to get the same old things. We have to change attitudes; the dynamics are changing and we have to change along with them. I will welcome the day when I see teachers eager to stay back and share. You made mention you are going through the door and the discussions are still going on. It's the end of the day and you are feeling tired and you are still energized and want to share. This is what you would like to see happen, you are pitting ideas against each other rather than just packing up at 3:15 p.m. and going through the gate. (M10:Principal;39)

The principal was in strong support of this learning community initiative and said “you want to see a spin off, so in your little cohort, you would want to see spread and spread until you get the whole of the campus [involved]” (M10:Principal;57).

Other Stakeholders

The teachers extended the need for support beyond the principals to other stakeholders outside of the school compound. Geoff commented that “we need the support of all stakeholders, parents, administration, we need support” (I4:Geoff;60). This included personnel in the Department of Education and the Ministry of Education. Parents were considered important stakeholders, because these teachers were convinced that having parental support would facilitate such a learning community. When asked about the support of the Ministry and Department of Education, Geoff responded by saying “yes, sure, because in the end, they are still part of administration. They are not directly on the grounds here. The thing is, the more people you have supporting a program, the more likely it will succeed” (I4:Geoff;72).

Both the Department of Education and Ministry of Education are critical stakeholders because ultimately they need to provide resources and materials for teachers and students. A major resource is money, because teachers may need financial assistance for field trips or to purchase materials for their students. The Ministry and Department of Education are in a position to allocate funding in their annual budgets to support more professional development sessions and travel to overseas conferences and workshops for teachers. Teachers can return to the school and share the knowledge gained overseas with their colleagues. Allocated money may be used to buy books and other resources to help teachers learn how to improve their teaching practices in the classroom.

Parents were considered important because they would need to be familiar with what is happening in the school and with the effects on their children. Matt said that parents are part of the teaching-learning process and their influence in this dynamic is “huge.” This PLC is expected to change teaching and learning in the school, therefore, keeping parents abreast is important to avoid resistance to the changes. Furthermore, this awareness should help to assist students at home in the absence of teachers. Geoff believes if parents know about the PLC and “if they can see the benefits to their children, they can be more motivated to do more at home with them” (I4:Geoff; 68).

To some extent, parents also provide some financial support by paying for off-campus excursions and purchasing materials for projects. To keep good relations with parents, teachers must keep parents abreast of their children’s learning. Ultimately, these teachers reported that parents must share with the teachers the vision to improve learning for the students. As such, there needs to be a partnership between teachers and parents.

Both Kolin and Katie suggested that one forum to reach parents is the parent-teacher meetings. This forum would allow the teachers to promote the PLC and to recruit other influential parents. These parents should help the teachers to share the benefits of a PLC to education. Kolin suggested that we need to seek parental support and we need parents to:

Share this vision and we say we want you to help us, we don’t want you to drop your sons off with their shirts out of their pants and you [should] insist that your girls wear the right earrings and socks. If we can get that core [of parents] moving, maybe we can make a difference. (M10:Kolin;297)

Leadership

Most of the teachers in the group expressed leadership as important in initiating a PLC of teachers. The leader is expected to be a guide, to help teachers to navigate their way through the learning and teaching processes in a community like this. A leader is seen as important because the idea of a professional learning community is new to these teachers; therefore, someone to lead the group was seen as critical. In this case, I was perceived as the leader, although I had made it clear early in the study that I would be sharing the leadership role with all of the participants. This shared leadership meant providing teachers with the opportunity to lead sessions in whatever manner they chose and to select topics that were relevant to them. Teachers seemed to appreciate this shared leadership because they were able to raise relevant issues and to create dialogue about those issues. Prior to my departure from the research site, concerns about leadership were discussed in meetings and one teacher talked about the leadership component in initiating a PLC. Skye said: "You were the leader, there was the leadership component, and Katie expressed some concern with you not being here next term. There has to be some leadership component or somebody in the group has to take some sort of initiative" (I4:Skye;68).

Unfortunately, after I left the research site, the group did not meet again. Although, some attempts were made by several of the teachers, those attempts failed. I sent follow up e-mails to the participants to find out what progress they had made, but only two people responded. I sent another e-mail to find out why they were not able to meet, and the response was that there was no leader. This was unfortunate because I deliberately shared the leadership while I was there with the intention that they would continue to share the leadership after I left. In addition, there were two teachers who I

thought would have been ideal for leadership roles, but it seems that there were many other responsibilities for them and one more thing was difficult for them to handle.

Teachers indicated it was a busy and short term as well.

One teacher suggested that, although the shared leadership was important, he thought having a more experienced person lead the group was important in the beginning. Kyle said "I think at the outset you need an experienced person to guide us and then after that we have shared leadership" (I4:Kyle;72). This was the approach that I took in the study. I led the group and then shared the leadership with the members of the group. On the other hand, Matt thought teacher leadership would be one way to get "great leadership." He said:

Leadership from the teachers themselves and treating everybody as an individual and listening to what someone has to say, just listen, because some people have unorthodox methods of dealing with kids and they do work, once they are not harmful to the kids. (I4:Matt;85)

The social elements needed to initiate a PLC of teachers included administrative support, parental and other education stakeholder support, and the presence of a leader. These stakeholders might provide support and resources for the PLC of teachers. There is a definite need for a leader to guide the group in collaboration and dialogue. The next section addresses the personal elements necessary to initiate a PLC of teachers.

Personal Elements Needed to Initiate a PLC of Teachers

The participants indicated that there are certain traits that teachers must possess to be a part of a learning community of teachers. They reported that teachers must be motivated and committed to the group and must value the ultimate goal of students'

success. Another trait that teachers must possess is a passion for teaching. Teachers must also be willing to learn and be open-minded. In other words, they need to be open to new ideas while being receptive to changes about teaching and learning. These teachers must have a desire to improve their teaching methods and techniques with the aim of improving students' learning as well. In addition to these traits, teachers must have a clear understanding of what the learning community is about and how relevant it can be to their teaching practice.

To illustrate what the participants perceived as necessary to initiate the PLC, I asked what was missing from the group. Khyle responded as follows:

I am not sure, I think there is enthusiasm, I think there is excitement. There is a willingness to learn. So I basically think we are on the right track. I don't know if there are other aspects of PLC that you'd want to introduce to us, but as far as I can see, some of the basic things are in place. (I2:Khyle;107)

Khyle's response gives a general expectation of the group and of what is necessary for a PLC to begin by showing what already exists. Clearly, the teachers saw the need for a sense of excitement within the group and a willingness to learn; both are important features of this PLC. For teachers to be effective, they must not forget that they too need to continue to learn. This desire to learn helps them to stay abreast of innovations in education, teaching, and learning. The principal also reinforced the need for continuous learners.

Commitment and Dedication

Although time for meetings was reported as the most important element for these teachers to initiate a learning community of teachers, commitment also ranked high on the list of elements necessary to initiate a PLC of teachers. Early in the study,

Geoff said that you need “commitment.” In his last interview, he indicated the need for motivated people:

You definitely need [motivated teachers]. If people are just in this thing to cash a pay cheque at the end of the month, they might as well continue cashing the pay cheque and forget the students. I think you really need to have people who want to see the students succeed . . . you need committed people, people who can agree to stick to it. (I4:Geoff;45/49)

From Geoff’s comment, I conclude that he questioned the other teachers’ motivation for being at the school. He seemed to be suggesting that some teachers are not there to teach the students and stimulate eager minds, but rather to collect a pay cheque. This view could have serious implications when trying to expand the membership of the group.

Matt also reported that you need commitment for this initiative to be successful but you need commitment from more than the teachers; you need it from decision makers and administration as well. Committed people were seen as the teachers who met regularly and participated in each of the sessions. Katie argued that being punctual and regular to meetings shows commitment to the PLC.

To illustrate the type of commitment in this group, I offer a few examples. Katie went on a field trip and was late in returning to the campus for our weekly session. Although she was tired, she stayed and participated actively in the group discussions and remained until the end. Conversations were still continuing when we left the room that evening.

Another example to demonstrate the level of commitment and dedication of the group was an unexpected interruption when there was a territory-wide educational

lecture for teachers. The lecture ran over the school hours and into our meeting time that Wednesday afternoon, but we all hustled back to the school campus to meet, carpooling to get back to the meeting room as quickly as possible. Although we lost some time, the facilitating teachers still led the meeting and other teachers still participated and seemed excited to meet. There was a great deal of energy for talking about teaching and learning as related to students' attitudes and aptitudes in the school.

Willingness to Share and Learn

Some of the teachers indicated that a willingness to share and learn was necessary to initiate this PLC. In this group, the teachers seemed very willing to share and learn from others. They displayed a high level of sharing and empathy with their colleagues because they shared similar concerns about discipline and other classroom issues. Kolin commented on the fact that teachers need to be willing to learn and share both by bringing ideas and by being receptive to others' ideas. He also said one has to "embrace change," which suggests that change is expected through sharing and one must be willing to accept there are other ways of dealing with students in the classroom. A teacher's work in the classroom goes well beyond the administrative duties and certainly includes teaching methods and techniques.

When asked what is necessary to initiate a PLC of teachers, Kolin responded by saying that teachers must want to improve their teaching methods and be willing to learn. The teachers in this group were not afraid to ask questions or seek advice that would improve their classrooms or their management skills. They were willing to share and listen to ideas and techniques from their colleagues. For example, one meeting was dedicated to sharing ideas about classroom management as the first-year teacher sought

advice about some discipline issues he faced in his classroom. Many more examples of sharing are reported in Chapter 7.

The level of sharing increased to include assessment as well. Assessment is an essential feature of every school. In this school assessment seems to be driven by continuous and multiple tests to generate grades for the teachers' mark books. Many experiences related to assessments were shared, including prompt feedback to students from the veteran teacher in the group. As time progressed, a planning session materialized and one common assessment for both science and geography was suggested by the group.

Understanding the PLC as a Concept

Several teachers reported that they needed to have an understanding about the PLC in order to start it. They wanted to know what the benefits might be and how it would relate to them as teachers. Would it help them save time? How might it help their teaching? How might it help their students? And what is in it for them? Teachers are busy people who need to understand what they are getting themselves into and how much time the group might require.

In addition, Geoff mentioned an "understanding as to where we are going and how we are all going to benefit from [the PLC]" (I2:Geoff;132). A part of understanding this PLC involved a plan or a "map," as Matt termed it. This guide would help teachers to see where they are headed. It is necessary to realize that vision and goals are important in initiating a PLC of teachers. Once these teachers accepted the shared vision and goals, they could decide if they were willing to share and receive from others in the group.

The Importance of Relevance

Khyle mentioned that, in addition to the physical elements needed to initiate the PLC, there is also a mental component. He explained that you have to convince people about the importance and potential benefits of a PLC as elements to initiating it. These mental elements are more difficult. Many times people need to see the relevance to join a cause such as a PLC.

Skye also talked about the relevance of the PLC to people, and a closer look seems to indicate that relevance is actually intertwined among all the other elements. To find solutions, one must see the relevance of the issues raised in the PLC. Skye, a new teacher, perceived the benefits and relevance of this group to her career at this school and to her profession as a teacher. She needed to hear what the other teachers had to say about this school and the curricula. As a first year teacher, Skye might have benefited the most because she would hear about many ideas and techniques that she many not have been exposed to otherwise. In the end, issues relevant to these teachers were discussed on a weekly basis. Similarly, teachers observed that you have to make the work relevant for the students; they too must see the relevance of the PLC.

Another factor that plays into relevance concerns the reality that joining a PLC is asking for people's time and meetings must have something to offer them. They need to see how the PLC can benefit them. Matt talked about relevance in an indirect way in his last interview: teachers must see the relevance and the PLC must have some benefit for them to want to participate and remain with the group:

You must have these things. What are we going to do when we come here? You want to keep them occupied and motivated. It could be by the content, but you have to keep teachers motivated. When you ask of people's time, they don't

want to feel like they are wasting time. That would be disappointing. They would say what they are doing up there is not interesting and word gets around very fast. You want to ensure that the time that is spent is really, really well spent. (I4:Matt;77)

In the everyday culture of most teachers, time is a precious commodity. A professional learning community represents an unfamiliar intrusion on that everyday culture and thus the relevance of a PLC to teachers' everyday work is a significant issue in initiating such a community.

Summary

This chapter describes elements that the teachers considered necessary to initiate a professional learning community of teachers. Teachers suggested elements of a PLC directly through interviews and indirectly through discussions in meetings. It was necessary to describe a planning session in this chapter to illustrate the need for subject integration across the various subjects. The planning session also provided a snapshot of the collaboration within the group and illustrated how the PLC of teachers functioned. These teachers tended to be pragmatic and product-oriented, so this exercise of planning around a topic provided teachers with a product that could be implemented and is expected to be beneficial for all the parties involved. In other words, it provided them with a sense of direction and accomplishment. The next chapter describes the central features of this PLC. Subsequent chapters present additional themes in the analyzed data and then the final chapter provides a discussion of this data with some implications of this study and suggestions for further research.

CHAPTER 5

Features of a Teacher-Initiated Professional Learning Community

This chapter reports three of the features of a professional learning community of teachers. Through interviews and the meetings with these teachers, I was able to group events into three teacher-controlled features that are necessary to initiate a PLC of teachers. There are many features of a PLC, including saving time, collaboration, trust among teachers, sharing ideas and techniques. This chapter focuses on three teacher-controlled features of PLCs: shared vision, collective learning and shared personal practice.

Shared Vision among Teachers

The teachers reported that they must share a common vision with goals related to enhancing teaching and learning. These goals included making students' learning a priority and the willingness of teachers to learn. An important feature of the shared vision is the desire to be continuous learners, whereby teachers realize that they need to learn constantly, along with their students. Another goal of these teachers was to improve their teaching practice.

The School's Vision Statement

In the first meeting and interview, I asked about the school's vision statement to establish whether or not the teachers were familiar with the school's vision or instrumental in developing that vision. Unfortunately, these teachers were not familiar

with the school's vision statement and none had contributed to its formulation. The new teachers were hearing about the vision statement for the first time, and the teachers who had been at the school for several years reported that the statement was not readily apparent to the teachers or the public, including the parents. The teachers could not provide the actual vision at the time, but I later learned that the school's vision statement is *Committed to Excellence: This institution shares a vision of quality education that will equip students morally, socially, and academically to assume their role as productive citizens.*

To illustrate the lack of awareness of the school's vision statement, Geoff commented that "I have read the vision. I have not paid too much attention to it because clearly not too many people, including administrators, are actually working towards the vision in my opinion" (I1:Geoff;115). Kolin responded similarly when asked about creating the school's vision and how visible it was: "I don't think there was collaboration in formulating a vision for the school. I think it was given and not a lot of emphasis was placed on it. I don't think the school is working towards realizing that vision" (I1:Kolin;138). When asked if the vision is clear among teachers and people outside of the school, Matt said:

To be honest, it's not really visible in terms of [signs]; there are hardly any physical signs around. Sometimes it comes out in the classroom, but ask most teachers what's the vision for the school? Half of us don't know. . . . You walk into the main staffroom and [the vision] is not there. (I1:Matt;134)

It seems that these teachers have not identified personally with the school's vision. It is possible that the vision was developed by administrators who have made little effort to share it with the teaching staff.

Shared Vision of PLC Teachers

The teachers shared a vision of collaborative teaching among the members of this group. Interviews with the teachers provided some ideas about what they considered to be their shared vision. Prior to the meeting with administration, I used the participants' concepts of a vision for the PLC to synthesize a statement that I shared at the meeting with the administration: "To improve our teaching and to provide students with every opportunity to learn while raising the standard of education through subject integration, team work, cooperation, and collaboration among teachers" (M10:Yamraj).

The shared vision for this group of teachers revolved around improving students' learning by improving the members' teaching practices. To improve teaching practices, teachers wanted to see more subject integration across subject areas. Kolin said the vision is to "improve [our] teaching practice, to facilitate learning at a higher level, to create motivation in students, and to foster motivation in students" (I3:Kolin;49). Geoff said: "I think the vision is to see how we can merge subject areas, bring them together and have them complement each other" (I3:Geoff;57). Matt provided a comprehensive PLC vision:

The vision we should have is, basically, providing students with every opportunity, and when I say every opportunity, I mean go out of the way, the little extras, to make education a little [better] to raise the standards of education in [this country] through integration, cooperation, team work, anything to suggest that we work together. The vision should be something like that, it's just togetherness. So team work, cooperation, integration, anything to suggest that there is some linking for the betterment of education. That's the only vision. Ultimately, anything we do is for the kids. (I3:Matt;60)

The participants had progressive visions for teaching at this school. Like Kolin, Matt focused on students' learning, but Matt stressed creating more learning opportunities for students. Matt wanted to meet the students' needs and varying abilities by using new teaching techniques and not the outdated techniques of a decade ago. In the meeting with administration, Matt, who is a younger science teacher, said:

That's one of the major things I would like to see, the teaching dynamics evolve because kids are evolving. They don't learn the same way that they did 5 to 15 years ago. We would sit there and soak up like a sponge whatever was thrown out. These kids are not like that; they are exposed to different technology and so on. We need to tap into their mode of learning; I don't think we look at the way we teach most of the time. (M10:Matt;47)

Matt acknowledged the changes occurring in education. In other meetings he emphasized that students have changed and learn differently today than years ago. Matt also pointed out the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning in classrooms, regardless of subject area. The future of the group is dependent on the shared vision among these teachers and the support they receive from administration.

During the meeting with administration, it became clear that the administrators supported this initiative by the teachers because they too wanted to see more team teaching and collaboration among teachers. The administration's plans for more collaborative teaching had become dormant and Matt thought that our meeting with them may have increased their motivation to have more collaborative teams within the school to teach the students:

I believe that administration has the same vision [that] we have, but it has been years since they had this vision and they haven't mentioned it to the staff. It

shows that they are sometimes, somehow, reluctant to get it done because if they had this for years in the pipeline, I think something should have been up and running already. So I think that they were reminded that they should do something and I hope that the impact that we made in the meeting would be a lasting one that they could actually plan it, get it into the timetable system, and get it in somehow without trying to impose it on anybody as if it's the law.

(I4:Matt;109)

As Matt's statement suggests, despite the administration's declared support of the PLC, they did not seem to be actively following through in action.

Beyond the words in the statement of the PLC's vision, these teachers shared several implicit goals as a part of their overall vision for a professional learning community. The willingness and dedication displayed by the group was more implicit than explicit, given that the teachers were voluntarily contributing their time after school to meet and collaborate about teaching and learning and to share ideas and techniques. Skye said there was an implicit shared vision among the PLC group: "The fact that we do meet after school every Wednesday, we want to improve our practice, and we want to improve our classrooms" (I3:Skye;123). The PLC's vision is extended to include the dedication shown by teachers, their sharing of ideas and techniques, as well as the need to be a continuous learner.

Sharing Ideas and Teaching Techniques

Katie facilitated a session on collaboration, and she indicated that sharing of ideas and techniques is important to collaboration among teachers. She stressed collegiality and camaraderie as features of teacher collaboration. She described what these teachers need to do to share their practice as well as collective learning by

providing examples. Katie, the veteran teacher in the group, said that the group must be willing to “develop an ethos of collegiality”:

It’s more or less a feeling of camaraderie. You talk about professional practices; we have been doing that all the time in all the sessions. We’ve been sharing ideas. We need to observe each other teaching, observe and learn from each other. We should be able to take constructive criticism. As a teacher you are supposed to be like that. Develop collectively, especially if you are going to work towards collaborating. You have to do it collectively, teach each other, and while we teach each other, we must be honest enough to say yes or no, we need help or we do not need help. (M4:Katie;141)

Katie provided examples of how this group was sharing ideas. She emphasized that the willingness to share and to be open to new ideas were existing traits in this PLC. One example was the first-year teacher who asked for help with her classroom management issues. In addition to working as colleagues, Katie suggested that “when we see glitches, we stop and thrash it out and move on from there. We support each other, try things, share ideas, and work harmoniously” (M4:Katie;159).

The upcoming chapter on benefits of this PLC reports how these teachers shared their previous experiences in other schools. They also discussed their experiences of what worked and what did not work in their classroom practice. There was always sharing of ideas about teaching and learning in each session, and the teachers reported that every session was a learning experience.

Teachers as Continuous Learners

These teachers, along with the administration, acknowledged the need to be continuous learners to function effectively as teachers. The teachers talked openly about

learning through participation in the professional learning community. Katie agreed that they needed to be learning all the time: "I consider myself the older one, but I am picking up so many strategies from the younger guys" (M10:Katie;73). She elaborated on this new learning by providing an example of the word wall to help students learn vocabulary. This was shared with the group by the first-year teacher when he facilitated a session. Matt said, "I am willing to learn, that is why I am here" (M10:Matt;271). This need to be a continuous learner was reinforced when the principal said:

We come back to the professional learning community, where we never stop learning, and the day we stop learning is the day we are dead. And [we should ask] our teachers, would you like to go to a doctor who hasn't been to a refresher in 10 years? (M10:Principal;273).

Matt summarized the features of a PLC to show that there is sharing and continuous learning with the intent on improving teaching practice:

I think this [PLC] is an avenue for learning experience, for instance, I came over here and I learned different ways of dealing with the class troubles that I have, and I have shared different strategies that I use. Another thing is the use of technology; we have collaborated to show how technology should be useful in teaching any subject. So far we have been doing geography and science but it can be transferred to any subject. You teach more engaging lessons, because the kids like to see stuff in action, movement. (M10:Matt;23)

The belief is that teachers must remain current in the field and be willing to learn all the time. "As teachers you have to be open and learn every day" (M10:Katie;279).

These teachers shared ideas and teaching techniques and they saw themselves as continuous learners. They wanted to remain current with teaching strategies and new

knowledge. They demonstrated that they had a clear vision for the PLC. They displayed a collaborative approach to teaching and learning and their focus was on student learning. The next section addresses their collective learning.

Collective Learning in the Professional Learning Community of Teachers

Collective learning requires time and space to meet as well as dialogue about teaching and learning. In the collective learning process, teachers must be willing to share ideas and practices with others. Although collective learning was not the norm in this school, these teachers indicated that staff meetings would be the ideal forum for collective learning. Current staff meetings failed to be effective as a forum for staff and professional development. The teachers reported that the general staff meetings lacked structure and professionalism, as well as opportunities for staff development.

In the teachers' first interviews, I tried to establish a baseline for collective learning in the school. I asked about collective learning opportunities that existed in the school, including when and how teachers come together to dialogue about students' work. School-wide collective learning was not practiced. Kolin said: "I don't think a lot of opportunity is provided for that" (I1:Kolin;146). Similarly, Khyle said:

I don't think many. I hardly think we do come together as a general body to really examine what we are doing and to learn something. We do have staff meetings once per month but most of it is spent on administration lecturing rather than us learning anything of real value. (I1:Khyle;121)

Geoff said, "I don't think there are too many structures that support collective learning here" (I1:Geoff;171). These quotes represent the general consensus of the group. The collective learning at this school was minimal, but if it was mandated that teachers

attend a workshop, two science teachers reported that they would attend, even if half-heartedly.

The teachers wanted to have more collective learning opportunities. They have realized that funding may not be available to send all the teachers overseas to attend workshops and conferences, but if the teachers who attend such workshops could share what they learn, then more teachers could learn and apply this new knowledge. The teachers saw the PLC as an ideal forum for collective learning and hoped that eventually this sharing would become second nature to the teachers (M10:Matt).

The teachers in the group reported that meeting space is not a problem for teachers who wish to learn as a group. Space was not an issue because there are individual staffrooms for each department and there are two lecture rooms that can hold the entire staff as well as a general staff room located centrally on the campus. Time was much more of an issue, given the way the school's timetable is constructed.

Although having a common time to meet was problematic for the science teachers, this was not the case for the geography teachers. They were fortunate enough to have some of the same periods off each week and this allowed them to meet and plan. The head of that department, who is also a member of the PLC, indicated that the geography departmental meetings were compulsory. The other two geography teachers in the PLC reported that these sessions were beneficial for them to ensure they were all teaching the same content at the same pace. They also used this time to raise other issues they were experiencing or to share other experiences outside of the school setting, such as an individual attending a workshop that was of interest to the group.

There is a clear distinction between school-wide learning and departmental level learning. Based on reports from these two departments, they are not representative of

the norm in this school, nor of the many other departments. Apparently, the other departments did not meet as frequently to plan and discuss the curriculum. The two departments represented in this PLC also saw the level of collegiality in their departments as higher than in most departments on the campus. Skye said that “I don’t really think that my department is a good representation of the school” because the science department met to “discuss and disseminate information” (I1:Geoff;147). Both of these departments met to discuss their objectives, whether for planning or for assessment purposes. The geography department met once each week to plan a unit of work to ensure that the geography teachers were all teaching the same content to the students in each level at the same time. They indicated that the sessions were helpful for their planning and thus there was one less thing to do later. In a similar fashion, the science teachers met, but not on such a regular basis and not for the purposes of planning. Instead, their meetings served as information dissemination sessions that allowed teachers to find out where individuals were with regards to the objectives for each unit and to be informed of upcoming assessments. The teachers reported some incidental discussions of teaching, but these were not common.

In the third interview, I asked the teachers again about collective learning within the PLC. The responses were all positive when compared to the initial responses about the school. Khyle said that the group had displayed collective learning and he provided the example of when Matt presented his lesson on plate tectonics to the group. Khyle said: “To me, that is really working together or learning at the same time” (I3:Khyle;60). Geoff also talked about his learning when his colleagues presented in the meetings:

I was able to gather from [the presentations] some of the strategies they use to cover the same areas that I have to cover. And you get multiple [views] from

various people, so I can pull that together into my own method and I think everybody would be doing the same thing. (I3:Geoff;73)

In addition, he suggested that we can use our colleagues as resource persons to be able to assist other teachers, particularly those who might be struggling. This too can be done in a collective learning environment such as the PLC:

While I believe that everybody has a little more in an area, you might have more experience in a particular field, it might not be technology, it might be lesson planning, another person, technology, and another person in terms of gathering resources or whatever it is, so when we can pool all of that together, it takes off the strain of one person trying to get everything. I think it just makes the whole process easier. (I3:Geoff;77)

Collectively, teachers can share responsibilities and help each other, thus reducing the workload of any one person. In addition, teachers can teach their colleagues based on their personal areas of expertise. Matt's example of collective learning showed various themes that emerged from the group's discussions:

Everybody came to the conclusion that linking content to real life situation makes it more interesting and relevant and easier for the kids to understand. Another thing that came out is that first we have to control within our classrooms, we have to look at the big picture, but that begins in the classroom in terms of classroom management, control, and motivation. Everybody agreed that motivation of the kids was very important. (I3:Matt;70)

Relevance was a theme that resonated throughout this study with respect to how and what was taught to the students. As well, the PLC was relevant professional development for the participants. Two other issues that surfaced periodically were the

empowerment of teachers and the amount of control they have and the relatively low motivation of the students.

Katie reported there were many instances of collective learning and referred to the planning sessions and the example of the word wall that she learned from another teacher. The technology session run by one of the teachers was cited as a collective learning experience by teachers. It seemed to be helpful to both those teachers who were novices and those who were familiar with the software programs. The novices learned at a slower pace but seemed to gain a tremendous amount of skill using the software introduced to them. The novices also wanted to have another session on the use of technology in classrooms and they asked Geoff to meet with them at a later date.

Kolin talked generally about collective learning as a means to save time for both departments:

Collective learning, for one thing, we learned that there is quite a bit of similarity between the curriculum for geography and science. I like the fact that, if we could cooperate some more, if we could collaborate between those two areas, we don't need to teach so much, especially in the higher forms where a lot of material is compressed over a year and a couple months. But I think that one thing that came out for everybody, there is a way in which we can save time, if nothing else. (I3:Kolin;65)

Collective learning was not school-wide but it was present in the PLC setting as every session appeared to be a collective learning experience for the teachers, who displayed collective learning and application by using ideas and techniques learned in the PLC. The next section looks specifically at how participants shared their personal practice.

Shared Personal Practice among Teachers

Shared personal practice was not the norm at the school. Over the 12 weeks, these teachers did not display any change in the level of sharing their personal practice in terms of team teaching or peer observations. The one exception was a head of department being called into another teacher's classroom to assist with a class that was seen as problematic. The teacher who requested assistance was not a member of the PLC, but the teacher who went to that class to assist was a member. The teachers in the PLC did share their personal practice on other levels and through dialogue with each other.

Prior to this study, teachers were not observed by their peers for feedback about their teaching. Teachers did not ask their colleagues to observe them teaching and they too were not invited to observe others. There were two exceptions. Many years ago, Katie was observed by a teacher from another department to see how she interacted with a particular class. After the PLC started, Katie observed two of her teachers and talked to them about their low level of interactions with their students. This was her duty as the department head and she attended these classes at the teachers' request because the students were considered unruly. Matt was also observed by Skye, but that was for practicum purposes. In her final year of her Bachelor of Education program, Skye was required to complete a practicum and she chose this school; during her non-contact periods, she would observe Matt teaching and they discussed lessons after the class was over.

When asked if the teachers in the PLC would mind being observed by colleagues, they all welcomed the possibility. They also expressed a willingness to

observe others' classrooms and provide feedback. Although these teachers seemed willing and open to peer observations, it was not the norm at this school. Matt suggested, "That would be you breaking the law" (I1:Matt;274) if you observed another teacher. He clarified that it was an unwritten rule, not an actual rule in the school, but reported that teachers do not appreciate feedback on their teaching or their tests.

Generally, at this school, classroom observations are conducted by the head of department for evaluation purposes only. These teachers did not observe others teach nor did they ask others to sit in on their colleagues' classes. The first-year teacher expressed scepticism about allowing his classroom and teaching to be observed.

When asked about sharing personal practice in the future, Matt had definite plans about what he wanted to do in the science department, based on his knowledge of the new curriculum that was being piloted in the school at the time:

Working with the curriculum program, there are a lot of things I am aware of that my colleagues are not aware of. I would like to formally conduct mini-workshops within the department if given the opportunity. [Workshops on] the use of technology, use of resources, assessment, the whole lot, because I think there is a dire need for it. I've been seeing that people are a little short-sighted when it comes to teaching the kids. They look at the quantity of the information and not the quality of it. And that has been plain in the teachers, they become tired and frustrated by the whole situation. If everyone could be aware of the different assessments, instructions, and planning. (I4:Matt;50/58)

Matt wants to share some of his areas of expertise, such as using technology, resources, and appropriate assessments. He wants to make his colleagues more aware of teaching practices as they relate to the new science curriculum that was currently being piloted.

Two teachers, Kolin and Matt, indicated that in the future they would like to observe other teachers and be observed as well. Although teachers reported that team teaching would be a good initiative, they voiced concerns about space and time because they tend to teach the same level classes at the same time. Space would be the biggest problem because they would have to merge two classes into one room, and this could lead to other classroom management issues. Despite the willingness to teach as a team, logistical issues of time and space posed problems.

Members of the geography department indicated that they had considered observing each other teach but, because of scheduling restrictions, these classroom observations were not conducted. Similarly, when asked if it was possible to schedule team teaching and classroom observations, the science teachers indicated that scheduling might be a huge problem, but one teacher, Geoff said that it might be possible, because one person might be off at a certain time while others are teaching.

At the end of the 12 weeks, these teachers had not shared personal practices with respect to group marking of students' work or team teaching, nor did they conduct peer observations. They all claimed they would like to do peer observations or team teach in the future. Katie, a geography teacher, even talked about being able to team teach across other departments, such as business and science.

Despite the lack of shared marking and team teaching, there was shared personal practice in many instances with the group. The literature limits shared personal practice to peer observations and assessing students' work together, but in this case that definition may need to be expanded. Based on my observations and what was discussed in these meetings over the 12 weeks, there was clear evidence that these teachers were sharing practice.

As mentioned, the teachers planned a unit of work on the water cycle and they also conducted a teaching session during the study. Details of this planning session and sharing the work are outlined in the previous chapter. In every meeting over the 12 weeks, they shared their own experiences as teachers, both in this school and in other schools. Additional examples of sharing practice are reported in Chapter 7.

Summary

This chapter shows the cohesion among teachers within this fledgling professional learning community. The teachers were clear that a shared vision is important and they identified with the vision they created for the group. They indicated this dedication to the vision of the group through their attendance and participation in group meetings and their willingness to share about teaching and learning. One important element of their shared vision was the need to be continuous learners. Every session was a collective learning experience for them. Although the literature's view of shared learning was not explicitly displayed in this group, it was clear that these teachers shared their practice. They discussed at length the curriculum, their teaching practices and techniques, as well as what worked for them. In addition, there were two group sessions in which the teachers planned and taught together.

This chapter has explored some of the teacher-controlled features necessary to initiate a professional learning community of teachers. At the same time, it responds to the three research questions related to the shared vision, collective learning and application, and the shared personal practice of this group of teachers. The chapters that follow speak to other research questions. The final chapter discusses the analysis of the data and suggests implications for further research based on this study.

CHAPTER 6

Challenges of Initiating a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

Teachers reported many challenges when initiating and sustaining a professional learning community. The challenges they faced were categorized as logistical, personal, and socio-cultural. Logistical challenges reflected less teacher-controlled and more externally-controlled situations, including time to meet as a group, confines of the school, such as deadlines and the segregation of the departments, the curriculum, and the physical layout of the school. Personal challenges included more teacher-controlled actions, such as attendance at meetings, dedication or commitment by the teachers, and attitudes towards work, as well as attitudes along immigration lines. The socio-cultural challenges seemed to be an amalgam of these two aspects and are woven into the other challenges. These socio-cultural challenges included the problems teachers encountered with the school's culture, which seemed to be perceived as the biggest problem they faced.

Although some of these challenges are ones that teachers themselves faced in their daily work, it is important to report them here because they could create other problems for the initiation a PLC of teachers. For example, poor student attitude discourages teachers and, as a result, teachers may be less inclined to find ways to improve their teaching practice through collaboration with colleagues. A weak school culture, particularly one marked by divisions among departments and along

immigration lines, makes it difficult to recruit other teachers into a professional learning community.

There were no clear divisions among the various challenges; rather, there seemed to be overlaps. One example concerned the way that the physical layout of the school affected the segregation of teachers; thus leading to smaller schools within the school. Another example focused on the timing of the group meetings, which led to absenteeism or tardiness by some teachers because the after-school timing conflicted with their personal obligations.

Logistical Challenges

During my individual interviews and in the group meetings, the teachers indicated some of the challenges that they faced in this school. Teachers provided some specific concerns and raised issues about what they felt might prove to be problematic in creating this PLC. Some of the challenges were externally controlled, such as finding time within the timetable to meet and collaborate. Other challenges that teachers had no direct control over were the confines of the school, such as school and departmental rules. One example of a departmental rule was same day and time assessments. Teachers also experienced the effects of the division among departments and the influence of this division on the level of teacher isolation. They described the manner in which the curricula were implemented as a problem for the PLC because of the lack of subject integration across subjects and the isolated teaching that followed. This isolation is more personal and is discussed in the next section. Another feature that teachers reported as problematic was the physical layout of the school, including the clustering of same subject teachers and their classrooms, as well as the physical distance between the

different departments. Part of this physical problem was the way in which the classrooms were constructed and how this increased the level of distractibility.

Timing

The after-school meeting time seemed to be problematic for teachers, mainly due to conflicts with other commitments and activities. The teachers had family obligations and other teaching jobs scheduled after school. One teacher taught in an adult education program after school. This was common at the school because many of the teachers taught adult classes for people who wanted to complete their secondary education. When asked in the final interviews about the challenges of setting up the PLC, four of the six participants said timing was definitely a challenge. Geoff said:

The timing might have been [awkward], because it's after school and you might have stuff you might want to run off to do. That was a challenge to some extent, but generally I don't think we could have gotten another time anyway.

(I4:Geoff;5)

Khyle said: "I think basically challenges we faced had to do with timing and finding an appropriate place and also finding persons who would commit to the program"

(I4:Khyle;5). Kolin also indicated that a critical feature of the PLC was time and it needed to be during the school day and not after school because of clashes with family and other obligations. "Personally, meeting after school is a challenge for me. I suspect it's that way for all of us. But if you say every 2 weeks or once a month and you put it into the timetable, teachers meet and share" (M11:Kolin;177).

Matt, a teacher without family obligations, also realized the strain of attending meetings after school, especially for teachers with families. He said in his last interview:

It's kind of hard to balance work and coming here in the afternoon, that's one of the challenges. Another challenge might be time, because [the PLC does] not fit into the timetable of the school, it's going to be hard because a lot of people have obligations, family obligations after school. So if it can fit into regular school hours where we could, when we are here, I think it would be more effective.

(I4:Matt;9)

Skye, one of the first-year teachers, also reported attendance and time as challenges in initiating this PLC and said that "as a group we had a problem with attendance. Whether it be different schedules or responsibilities, we did have trouble having everybody come to all the meetings" (I4:Skye;9).

Deadlines

The confines of the school system, including deadlines and departmental rules, were discussed throughout the 12 weeks. Deadlines and departmental rules limited teachers' autonomy. For example, the many deadlines and the sense of urgency to finish the syllabus or prepare for the Caribbean Examinations Council external examinations forced teachers to rush and explore less with their students or collaborate less with their colleagues. Katie provided a brief description of the school when she said "we are meeting deadlines, deadlines, in one weekend we have a million deadlines" (M1:Katie;186). It was because of these deadlines that teachers felt pressured to "rush-off" work with students. Matt reinforced this need to rush by saying "to me that is one of the problems we have here. Everybody is in a rush to finish everything" (M1:Matt;190). Matt indicated that the system is not working:

That's why we can't have [school time allocated for teachers to meet] because we have these strict deadlines to meet and these objectives to finish, but do the kids

really learn? That's the question. Because at the end of the day, we finish the whole syllabus, but do the kids really learn? I [would] rather finish 80% of the syllabus and know that they understand it than finish 100% and they don't know squat about it. (M1:Matt;196)

Deadlines led to frustrations among teachers. In the third meeting, one teacher indicated "you are just rushing through the topic without any form of mastery" (M3:Jamie;168), while another teacher commented that "the aim is to finish the syllabus. Especially in fourth and fifth form where there is an external exam; in third form, if you don't finish, you could adjust the test" (M3:Kolin;170).

Departmental Rules

Another constraint of the school related to the departmental assessment rules. For example, the teachers in the school administer identical unit tests across the same form or grade level. Ideally, tests are administered at the same time if scheduling permits. This meant that teachers must complete the same number of objectives within the same time frame for assessment purposes, regardless of the students' abilities. This proved problematic for some of the science teachers. To further add to the lack of autonomy in the school, teachers in the science department were not allowed to administer or mark their own class' test papers. This practice had been in effect for many years. Instead, an exchange of test papers among teachers is required. As a result, teachers may not receive their students' papers back to return to them on time.

Because of same-time testing, some teachers were forced to rush the material and eliminate certain learning experiences for their students to ensure that their students covered the objectives for the test instead of being properly prepared for the test with authentic learning experiences. The strict testing deadlines also stifled a teacher's

creativity in the classroom. Matt reported his frustrations with this urgent need to cover the syllabus and how this need to finish work disrupted his creativity and hands-on approach to teaching:

We teach to finish the curriculum. I am in a position where my fifth formers are supposed to take a test next week, and they haven't completed part of the syllabus because we are going at a slower speed. Everybody wants to test and not check for understanding. All that I am trying to say is that all of these things happen because of the curriculum. Some of the things that we teach are trivial, bland; they have no meaning, no meat to them. They are just presented in no colour, no innovation. The time frame that we have to finish stuff stifles our creativity sometimes, but creativity takes time; hands-on activities take time. Getting the students involved is time consuming; if you want chalk and talk, you'd finish your lesson in 2 days. I could finish something in 2 days with notes [but] because of the system we working in, teachers like me and others who are basically hands-on in their approach suffer. (M2:Matt;200)

It seemed that the students were being cheated with respect to the types of and quality of their learning experiences. Because teachers rush to cover the syllabus, they cannot provide the learning experiences to help their students and check for understanding. In addition, if teachers are so busy with covering the curriculum that leaves limited time, if any, for collaboration with colleagues.

Curricula

Teachers reported that the curricula are not structured to maximize subject integration across subject areas and this led to isolated teaching of topics. They would prefer that teachers collaborate to enhance learning by their students where teachers can

build upon what was taught by other teachers in various subject areas. In the first meeting, Matt spoke about this isolated teaching: "I think the curriculum has a lot to do with it, the way it is structured. To me, there is no collaboration, there is no subject integration. English has their own curriculum and science has their own curriculum" (M1:Matt;290).

This lack of cohesion was clear when these two departments, science and geography, met. Although there were many topics that were related and in some cases identical, the two groups taught in isolation. However, because of the awareness created by initiating the PLC of teachers, they began to make conscious efforts to teach topics with consideration of what was being taught in the other subjects. The teachers tried to show the connections between the two subjects while teaching their own subject area. They also used previous knowledge from the other subjects to build upon and form new knowledge.

The curricula at the school do not seem to foster learning among students who do not thrive on pen-and-paper testing. Some teachers reported that the current assessment practices did not evaluate learning properly and were heavily influenced by writing skills and did not test other abilities of the students. Matt spoke about this detrimental practice and how it affected the students:

I think we are short changing some of the kids. By that I mean that some kids are not into the books only, they can do stuff with their hands, performance assessment, and they don't get enough opportunities in the school to show these abilities. (M3:Matt;3)

In a session about assessment, other teachers also indicated their dissatisfaction with the assessment practices at the school. They agreed with Matt and with the need

for alternative assessments to better evaluate the students. Although the teachers were in favour of more alternative assessments, they acknowledged the lack of resources as a reason for so few alternative assessments for students. They also attributed the use of pen-and-paper tests to laziness among some teachers and to the need to keep assessing students to get a mark for the grade book.

Physical Structures

Another important challenge in this school is the physical layout of the campus. Although there are spaces for teachers to meet, such as department staffrooms, the layout of the buildings, and the situation of the classrooms contribute to an environment that is not conducive to learning. Matt described this environment:

It is not an environment conducive to learning; therefore, whatever learning occurs, I do not take much credit for it. The kids who do well are the kids who go home and do extra because the physical environment, the noise, the control on the campus, the campus is always like a loose cannon. The kids are running about the place. (M9:Matt;155)

Clearly, this environment does not foster learning or effective teaching. The classrooms have windows along two walls. The windows along the corridors enable students to see what is taking place outside of the classrooms at all times. This also allows students who pass outside of the classroom to see in and potentially disturb the class. In some rooms, there are opened blocks that make up the entire wall so there is no privacy and this allows for items to be thrown in at anytime. This also means constant outside noise and other distractions that pose a problem to the teaching and learning experiences in those classrooms. In one meeting, Matt described some issues with

classroom management and made mention of the physical structure of the school as a hindrance to learning:

Another thing is the distractibility in the school. The way the school is designed, distractions are endless; everybody can attest to that. Students pass in the corridor, they make statements to students in the class and they turn around. That's one of the things I would like to lessen in the classroom. Whether they are engaged, sometimes they are engaged and it works, but even during a questioning, somebody passes outside and it blows out of proportion, and I've been trying to get that fixed. The physical structure of the school, I can't fix now. But what can I do in the classroom itself? That is one of the keys to me in classroom management. (M3:Matt;24)

Khyle empathized with Matt's classroom situation. The following is an excerpt from a meeting in which teachers discussed the physical pitfalls that currently exist in the school:

Khyle: But Matt, I am thinking of a situation over here where they tend to be under more control because we have these closed rooms.

Matt: The distractibility for this room is very low.

Khyle: It is low.

Matt: What about my classroom? That dust bowl!

Khyle: See the people who teach history, every day I pray for them, I don't know how they concentrate every day. I don't know how they teach there.

Matt: I am teaching there where there is always traffic, going to the tuck shop, to music, teachers putting kids outside their door, and the drumming; no serenity, no calmness.

Khyle: I don't know how you manage in that room, it's so open.

Matt: It doesn't have windows in it.

Katie: I am so sorry that any classrooms that you pass the kids have to shout out your name, Miss Katie.

Khyle: Yes, they have to be calling you.

Matt: The dust, the noise, the kids put their garbage right there, it's very annoying. Another thing that I have that upsets me is when teachers put kids outside and then leave them there. Sometimes they are coming all the way from English and they are on my block.

Khyle: The truth is that some of them, you can't keep in the room, and you can't teach, and you can't go out there and manage them. (M10;157/179)

These teachers provided detailed descriptions of what some teachers had to deal with on a daily basis. If the classrooms are not conducive to learning, it is difficult to teach, and distractibility seems to be high in this setting. This type of environment made it difficult to keep teachers motivated to do the best teaching possible.

More problems arose from taking the students out of the classrooms and around the campus for more hands-on lessons. Katie said that taking the students outside of the classroom contributes to some of the problems due to the "the number of distractions you are going to get" (M3;Katie;27). The students tend to run and scream and these behaviours may disturb other classes in session. Kolin also described one of his out-of-classroom experiences:

I tried going out into the compound. I had students look at different sections of the yard and try to compile if it's porous. That didn't work out very well

because students went and bought things over the fence, so it's difficult to control your students. (M3:Kolin;57)

In addition, a large tent intended for assemblies for the entire school has proven to be a hindrance to some teachers who want to teach using that facility because of its space. Skye described her experiences with using that space and the interruptions:

Some teachers throw out their students or some teachers just send them under the tent. They don't want to deal with them, so they send them under the tent. I remember I've done classes under the tent because I needed more space than a classroom and I'll have other students come by and say they got sent under the tent. (M2:Skye;32)

Again, the classes are disrupted and teaching becomes difficult. When I asked Skye what sending students under the tent achieves, she replied:

I don't know what it achieves, but it's distracting to my class. I decided to have my class under the tent because there is more room there or whatever the reason may be, but now I have these stray students. Or they are roaming the halls, especially in the science department, we are at the beginning there and they come up. You're right, [Matt], the school, the design, we can't change that. It is one of my bigger difficulties, because you have kids that walk by and poke their head in. I don't know why. I ask where are you supposed to be and they run away. (M2:Skye;36)

Although these problems could seem minor, they are problematic for teachers at the school. The reports of these teachers seem to indicate that the school culture is such that children often cut their classes and roam the campus. These students then disturb other classes and do not seem to respect other students' learning. Such problems make

teaching and learning difficult and neither students nor teachers benefit. Dealing with these problems frustrated the teachers, making them less enthusiastic about collaborating with their colleagues.

Division among Departments

To complicate matters at the school, yet another challenge arises from divisions among the various departments. These may have been related to the physical layout of the school in which departments were set up in specific areas on the campus and the teachers of one department are within that same area. Another contribution to this division among departments was the fact that each subject area had its own staffroom to accommodate departmental meetings and gatherings. Each department seemed to be functioning independently of the others and this behaviour was evident when teachers were possessive about their resources. Based on comments made in the meetings of this fledgling PLC, there was limited socialization among the members from various departments. In a discussion about sharing resources, Geoff said:

Sometimes the way in which the system is set up [constrains us], when you have one department with reservations about letting other people coming in and doing stuff in your department. Maybe if Katie comes to my room, because I know her, but that doesn't mean that she can do it with others. There are conflicts that exist here and that is not an easy problem to fix. (M3:Geoff;41)

This type of attitude was evident to new teachers at the school as well. Skye made this comment:

I just want to say, I have been here for 4 months. There is no cooperation among the departments, but there should be. I would be hesitant to go to other

departments because I know that sometimes my department, sometimes, some departments are very possessive with their resources. (M3:Skye;45)

When asked about collaboration among teachers in the school, Skye again mentioned this isolation among departments:

Actually, I don't find any communication between departments, at least not that I have noticed. I find that each department is an island of its own and science does its thing, English does its thing, geography does its thing, and PE does its thing. (I1:Skye;345)

These departmental divisions seemed to be a prevalent feature of this school's culture and appeared to hinder students' learning. This made it challenging to have cross-subject sharing of ideas and resources and limited collaboration among teachers. These divisions have led to teaching topics in isolation and teachers just "doing their own thing."

When asked about collective learning across departments, Geoff said:

Within a department, most times, you have the people within [the same] department being fairly open and cordial with each other. Outside of that, it's like people come from separate schools altogether. I hardly find that people are open to greeting each other. You would pass someone else and there will be no response. (I1:Geoff;171)

Based on his comment and on the sentiments expressed by others in the group, it was obvious that inter-departmental collaboration is not the norm at this school.

Furthermore, teachers identified strongly with their departments and were not inclined to being social with teachers from the other departments. Unfortunately, this type of attitude was not conducive to collaboration across departments.

Many logistical challenges existed at this school and these made it difficult for teachers to collaborate or initiate a professional learning community. Time was not allocated within the school day to meet and meetings could only be held after school. There were numerous constraints in terms of testing and deadlines. The separation of departments made it difficult for teachers to collaborate about teaching and learning and perpetuated teaching in isolation. The physical layout of the school also contributed to the difficulty of teaching students effectively and seemed to contribute to the division among the departments in the school. The next section addresses personal challenges of initiating a PLC of teachers.

Personal Challenges

Several personal challenges existed for this group if it were to expand its membership. Attendance was one challenge identified by the core group of teachers. Although reasons were provided to explain some absences, the conflict between other after-school obligations and the PLC meetings proved to be problematic. The level of dedication and commitment was also challenging, even among this core group of teachers. This was made evident by the teacher who stopped attending meetings after the fifth week. Another challenge was the professional attitude of teachers, as influenced by the school's divisions, not only along departmental lines, but also along immigration lines. In this case the two groups were the locals ("belongers") and the expatriates ("non-belongers"). These issues would ultimately affect the level of camaraderie among the teachers. These issues must be resolved on some level to ensure that a PLC of teachers can survive at this school.

These personal aspects seemed to be influenced by both logistical and socio-cultural challenges. As mentioned, there were links among the various challenges. In this case, many teachers' attitudes reflected the school's culture. In addition, the level of collaboration was also influenced by the physical layout of the school and the school-within-a-school culture.

Attendance

Attendance was satisfactory for most of the meetings. There were sessions when only three participants attended but eventually one other person strolled in late. In positive terms, there were at least four of the seven participants at all the meetings. Ten of the 11 meetings were attended by five or more teachers, even if one or two were late in coming. As noted, there were always a few teachers who missed meetings or were late due to family obligations after school.

In the beginning, the majority of the teachers expressed satisfaction with the time allocated to meet. They indicated that they did not feel the pressure of going to classes or having to rush the meeting within a specified time. When asked about the timing of the meetings in his second interview, Geoff said:

I think after school is fine, because it gives us more time. I do not think, if there is a time when we are all off, that may just be a double period and I don't think that would give us enough time. (I2:Geoff;31)

Matt also said "there is no problem" with the after-school meetings. Katie also supported the after-school meeting time by saying "I prefer the afternoon because you don't have to rush" (I2:Katie;21).

Skye said she used her non-contact periods to plan, so the after-school arrangement worked better for her. Jamie, the other first-year teacher, also preferred the

after-school meetings. She said “actually, it’s been working real well. School finishes at 3:15 so that gives a little grace period, a 15-minute window, and it works for me” (I2:Jamie;33). Therefore, going overtime after school was a positive feature of the time chosen. Only one teacher made it clear that he did not like the after-school meeting time. In his first interview he said: “It’s been a sacrifice for me. I am the only driver in my family so the timing is a little inconvenient. I have to take my daughter to lessons” (I2:Kolin;27).

In his second interview, before I began my questioning, Kolin admitted that he was tardy with meetings and said “I have been absent and late all the time” (I2:Kolin;3). In his third interview, when asked about missed meetings, Kolin said “most likely, it would be because of a clash in terms of time with family obligations” (I3:Kolin;29). Another teacher also had family obligations after school and, when asked about his absence at group meetings, said:

Wednesday is a little tight for me, because I have to take care of personal stuff. I have to take my child to music classes and usually by the time I pick her up and get back here, it’s already late, I don’t get to attend as I would want to.

(I3:Khyle;19)

He went on to state that his family obligations “could interfere with the [PLC] program” (I3:Khyle;37). Other reasons given for teachers’ absences included being ill (Kolin) and having other meetings within their departments (Jamie & Geoff). In the third interview with Jamie, who had missed several meetings I said, “so you’ve missed meetings. Please tell me why you’ve missed” (I3:Yamraj;20)? Her response was:

The first time was due to a field trip. The second time I was sick for the whole week, actually. I missed again when I was helping the students with labs and

one time because of a meeting with the head [of department] concerning a test.

(I3:Jamie;22)

I then asked if these activities were after school and she responded by saying “yes, after school. I apologize” (I3:Jamie;26).

In the end, the teachers collectively indicated that a meeting during the school day would be best. This was more evident in the last meeting. When asked what these teachers wanted to happen next term, Kolin said: “I would like to see a slot timetabled into the school’s program to allow us to continue the collaboration” (M11:Kolin;173). In support of this time during school, Kyle said “as you mentioned that, we maybe, could ask for every Friday from 1:00 to 3:15” (M11:Khyle;175). These two teachers had family obligations after school and thus had difficulties participating fully because of the after-school meeting.

After listening to the teachers and their concerns about meeting after school, I suggested to the administration that the time to meet should be scheduled during the school day because there were conflicts after school for some teachers:

One of the problems that I have experienced with the group, as far as the attendance would go, [is that] some people have family obligations right after school. It is problematic with a regular attendance, you still have the group and they still chat otherwise, but if you want to have the best attendance, it has to be scheduled within the school day. Teachers have no excuse for not being there in the school day. Attendance should be better that way. (M10:Yamraj;133)

Choosing an after-school meeting time became problematic because of unforeseen meetings and other obligations such as family. The challenge was that the timing was not included within the school day; therefore, attendance was low and,

without teachers in attendance to collaborate, there was less sharing of ideas about teaching and learning. When teachers missed meetings, they would fall behind in following the PLC's progress and development. Attendance is important for a PLC of teachers to start and to thrive. If these meetings were held during the regular school day and within the weekly timetable schedule, teachers may not have missed meetings.

Dedication and Commitment

The issue of commitment and dedication became evident when one teacher stopped attending after the fifth meeting and provided little justification for her absence. Furthermore, the teachers in the PLC also described this lack of dedication and commitment shown by other teachers at this school as a challenge to initiating a PLC. At the end of each school day, teachers were in a rush to leave the campus and reluctant to extend themselves any more than was necessary. Matt said in the first meeting "that's the problem with creating something like this, 3:15 and everybody through the gate. It's the truth. If you look around right now, there is hardly anybody here" (M1:Matt;230).

Skye said that she expected the other teachers, not already involved, would not be committed to spending time with the PLC:

School ends at 3:15 and [administration] can't get them to stay until 4:30 even though it's a requirement of their job. I can't imagine them staying otherwise. Look, today [the kids are home and] there is half the cars that are usually here and there are grades that have to done. I can't imagine what it would be like.

(I4:Skye;128)

He talked about how teachers do not want to attend staff meetings: "Teachers come in at 3:30 and leave at 3:45" (I4:Skye;132). Clearly, if the teachers cannot commit to

mandatory events within the school, it seems highly unlikely that they will commit to voluntary group meetings on their own time.

Attitudes

Attitude seemed to play an important role when initiating this school-wide PLC of teachers. These attitudes also reflected the school's culture, and in this case attitudes refer to both students' and teachers' attitudes.

One overall student attitude that teachers reported was that minimal work was required because of the "I am from here" mentality. Their attitudes were such that they are "from here" and they have all that they need; therefore, learning about the world is insignificant. For example, one teacher observed that while another teacher was teaching about capitals of the world, the students were "asking why we have to learn this? We don't need to learn this, we don't need to know this, we need to know about [our country] and they limit their lives to [their country]" (M7:Matt;256). Another closely related factor that plays into the attitudes of the students is the "where you from?" factor. These two factors overlap and cannot be separated in reporting about them. This leads to a poor attitude toward school learning, inspiring a tendency to settle for the bare minimum to get through the system. In a meeting about motivation, Geoff made this comment:

A lot of students here feel like they are set for life and they don't really have to do a lot or anything whatsoever. There is a mentality that I will always be OK, I will always be taken care of. Things will always work out my way. I think that is a major problem. Too many students here don't think they have to work hard. They do not know the meaning of working hard. (M7:Geoff;234)

Skye agreed with Geoff's comments:

I completely agree with what you are saying, Geoff. I totally see that mentality, but isn't that the problem? The problem is that we are saying that those parents are saying "because of this, you can be mediocre." Mediocrity is OK, because you have this last name. (M7:Skye;250)

These elements of "where you are from" contributed to divisions among teachers and students along immigration lines.

The negative attitude with respect to teachers' immigration status was discouraging to the teachers in the PLC group, as one person summarized:

All I am saying is, we could sit here and run our mouths. The first question, "where are they from?" Everything here is [about] where are you from. Any time you open your mouth to speak, they want to know where you are from. Whether you are saying something that is true, you don't have any [reason] saying anything if you are not from here. (M7:Matt;324)

It was clear that these teachers knew that the division among teachers would prove to be a problem when trying to expand the membership of this group. In addition, the ideas may not be accepted by the wider teaching community, but the teachers participating in the study met regularly to discuss teaching and learning. This poor attitude in students made it difficult to teach the students and to keep teachers motivated. In addition, this attitude was problematic for the PLC because all the members were expatriates. It seems that because the PLC group involved teachers who were not "from there," the chances of people buying into it appeared to be slim.

Students seemed to be laissez-faire with their work because they were under the impression that the standards would be lowered for them and they did not have to rise

to the standards of the school. This attitude was learned from parents and from some teachers, and it carried through their whole high school career because students did not feel the need to exert themselves for the school-leaving exams in their final year of secondary school. Matt stated that the “kids don’t pass the school-leaving exam because they don’t need to pass it. If you [are] getting 85% of your work completed before the exam, and you did well, you don’t need the exam to pass” (M7:Matt;274).

Unfortunately, many teachers seemed to have the impression that the administration had been perpetuating this poor attitude by lowering the school’s standards over the years. These teachers accused the administrators of “watering down” everything to accommodate the students (M7:Katie;392). Katie shared with the group events of a senior teachers’ meeting in which the administration was going to “water-down” the classes again to accommodate the children who were not meeting the standard by initiating “introduction” biology, chemistry and physics courses for the senior school. The students who were in the level 40 program (more difficult program; similar to university bound) were being allowed to take level 41 (less difficult; similar to workplace/college bound) subjects such as math and English when they could not cope with the original (level 40) program. This was unfortunate, Matt said, “I know this system is being destroyed when you have a level 40 student taking level 41 math. Something is definitely wrong” (M7:Matt;164).

This poor attitude towards learning discouraged many teachers and seemed to have reduced their motivation to improve their teaching skills to help students. It also meant teachers did not feel comfortable maintaining communication with administration about raising the standards within the school. It hindered collaboration between teachers and principals about teaching and learning.

Participation by Teachers

When one teacher summarized the two problems that existed early in the group as attendance and participation, he gave this explanation:

When I say participation, I mean people actually saying what's on their mind and not just sitting there passively taking in information and agreeing. The "yes" man type. If you see it another way, just say it. Because if I disagree with anybody, I would let them know and I am open to the same sort of differences you may have. That's one of the things I would like to see a little more of. The increased participation will come with early attendance because people come in [late] and they don't know what we are talking about. (I2:Matt;190)

Based on what Matt said, there seems to be a relationship between being on time and actively participating. Initially, participation, especially by newer teachers, was low. They contributed briefly and agreed with what was said by other teachers. Over time, their contributions to the group increased; however, teachers did not comment on some issues or share what they did in their teaching, with other teachers outside the PLC, for fear of ridicule. One contributing factor to the initial lack of communication and participation was the low level of comfort and trust among members of the group in the early meetings. Teachers had to get to know one another and forge some level of trust. As the teachers got to know each other, they began to open up more and to become more vocal about issues and solutions.

Participation increased and varied as each teacher facilitated a session to share the leadership of the group. In addition, the two group sessions seemed to be well received by the teachers present and they all made contributions to these group sessions.

Selling the Professional Learning Community

The teachers concluded that the whole staff would not buy into the PLC concept for several reasons, one being the time commitment. The participants indicated that the PLC required considerable time, at least initially, and they voiced concerns about the other teachers' willingness to make that commitment. Matt, in his third interview, was discussing the process of subject integration and how time consuming it can be:

Yes. It's a time-consuming process. That's the problem; teachers don't have enough time on their hands. . . . but a PLC, it takes a lot of commitment, and to be committed to something after school when you already had this whole experience of dealing with kids from 9 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon, it's tough. And some people have to pick up their kids. It takes away.

(I4:Matt;149/153)

The PLC was seen as something quite new in this setting and teachers indicated that this too can pose a challenge. In his interview about his colleagues' attitudes and commitment, Khyle said:

These new things, in most cases, pose a challenge and I think some people are afraid to experiment and we would just basically have to prove to them that these things can work, because in many cases they will [join] if they see others doing and they see it working for them. I think that's basically how we could change the attitude and the perceptions if they are negative. (I2:Khyle;147)

Trying to get the teachers in this school to do one more thing will be difficult and to get them to participate in the PLC would be challenging. Therefore, selling the PLC concept or getting other teachers to buy in could be problematic, and the expansion of membership could be limited.

Change in Practice

Based on what teachers said, getting teachers to change their practice is a difficult task, especially when they are accustomed to certain approaches and routines. Even though teachers recognized the benefits of the PLC, they had difficulties breaking old habits and there were no significant changes observed or reported. One teacher commented that change at this point would affect the students, because they were into a routine already. However, I also believe that this willingness to change is affected by the open-mindedness of the teachers.

Although, in the end, some teachers made positive comments about their changes in practice, one teacher was not optimistic. When asked about changes in his teaching practice, Geoff responded by saying “Not to any great extent, unfortunately and sadly, so that I have not changed much in terms of how I approach the lesson. I guess there are things that are set already” (I3:Geoff;15). He elaborated as follows:

I have not really tried to put what we discussed into motion with my work as yet. I am saying “as yet” and I guess it’s just the way the term has been running and the things that I have set already. I have not tried to incorporate, I have not really tried to adjust to anything. I wouldn’t say that there has been much of a change in that area because a lot of what I have shared, and what has been shared, are things that I have discussed before and these are the same opinions I have held for a while. (I3:Geoff;135)

Changes in teaching practice at this point posed a challenge because many teachers were used to their own ways of teaching and hence did not see a need to change what they were doing. This also reflected their desire not to create more work for themselves, which was perceived by the teachers as a potential risk of making changes.

Some of the challenges described by participants suggest reasons why other teachers may not buy into the concept of a professional learning community. The reported challenges reflect the teachers' decisions to attend meetings and to participate meaningfully. Teachers also had to make personal choices about their level of dedication and commitment as well as their attitudes towards collaboration. Indirect challenges to initiating a PLC arose from the negative effects of poor student attitudes towards learning and from the differences between belongers and immigrants. The next section considers the socio-cultural challenges that these teachers faced.

Socio-Cultural Challenges

The socio-cultural aspects of initiating this PLC proved to be particularly challenging. Teachers in the core group encountered many problems related to other teachers, students, or administration. The school's culture and its effects on teachers' and students' attitudes were perceived as major challenges. This culture seemed to be woven into many other aspects of the school, thus providing complex and inter-related challenges.

As noted, there is overlap among the challenges identified. Based on the data, it appeared that the poor attitudes of students deter teachers from wanting to commit to teaching them. Attitudes of teachers included isolated teaching and unfriendliness towards colleagues from other departments. Other contributing factors were related to the physical layout and departmental divisions.

School Culture

School culture includes attitudes of both teachers and students and, to some extent, reflects the society as a whole. Other factors affected by the school's culture were

the whole-school approach on some of the policies and the manner in which issues were dealt with at the school. Part of the school's culture mirrored the lack of respect that teachers receive in this community. There seemed to be a correlation between this lack of respect and the low level of parental involvement in their children's education. One teacher provided evidence of this:

I find it a little difficult to separate the school's culture from the culture of the society. . . . I think we have a situation where not enough of a high value is placed on education and, therefore, teachers are not respected as they should be. I think it's from every level, whether you are talking about students, or parents, or department of education, to the government in general. Because there is not a premium on getting an education, it becomes difficult to teach students who see you as the enemy in their way as opposed to someone offering help or guidance.
(I4:Kolin;95/101)

Based on what these participants said, it seems fair to say that the school's culture is reflective of the wider community. Other teachers also indicated that the teachers in that school were not respected and, in many cases, they saw this as a reflection of attitudes displayed by parents in the home. Khyle said:

If we [as parents] don't value education, our children will not value education and especially in a situation like this, I think too many students don't see the value of education because they see where they can make it without a good education and that to me is a hindrance to learning. . . . I have seen this over and over again, the students whose parents come in and check on their performance and keep abreast of what's going on are usually those parents who see the values of education. (M10:Khyle;3)

There seemed to be a correlation between those parents who value education and their level of involvement in the school.

Based on the data gathered about this school's culture, students appeared to display poor attitudes, especially with regards to their work. They do not value hard work and they seemed to have tunnel vision with respect to what they should learn, in that they do not think globally but tend to think more locally and have little desire to extend their knowledge of the world. They appeared to be passive learners who do not take responsibility for their own learning. The students seemed to expect to be spoon-fed with information and to believe that it is the teachers' job to tell them what they need to know.

Teachers' attitudes seem to be related to the division among locals and expatriates. Other factors affecting this attitude include the teacher's motivation for teaching and the isolation that is practiced within the school. The next section considers the issue of isolation in more detail.

When asked if the school's culture would affect the creation of a PLC, all the teachers said "yes" and gave a range of reasons that included the lack of camaraderie and the challenge of generating interest in teachers. A few teachers spoke about the motivation of other teachers in the school, suggesting that some teachers are not genuine in the sense that they want to collect a pay cheque and have vacation time but they do not want to teach, nor do they have the students' best interests at heart. Some said that teachers do not want to give up their time for collaboration unless they are compensated. For collaboration to be effective, teachers need to want to collaborate, and that seemed to be lacking in this school.

The tendency to see every issue in the school from the perspective of immigrants and non-immigrants was a unique challenge to initiating a PLC. Although the PLC might be seen to have benefits, because it was seen as a foreign approach, other teachers would be unlikely to buy into it. This attitude is also reflective of the society as a whole. This division made it difficult for the expatriate teachers to want to share their ideas with their local colleagues for fear they would be told to “go back home” with their ideas. The school’s culture posed a major challenge to initiating a PLC of teachers.

Isolation

Teachers felt isolated because of the physical layout of the school and the school schedule. The manner in which the departments are physically separated made it challenging to find a common ground to meet and discuss ideas of teaching and learning or to socialize with colleagues. Separate staffrooms for all departments seemed to contribute to this feeling of isolation and this led to more segregation among staff members. The main staffroom is underutilized because teachers find it more convenient to stay within their departments and among their departmental colleagues. Perhaps the lack of resources in the main staffroom also contributes to the underutilization of this space.

The isolated setting made it difficult for teachers from various departments to collaborate or to have meaningful discussions about teaching and learning. It makes it difficult to discuss curricula, ways of reducing re-teaching of the same material, or even how to use a constructivist approach to teaching common topics within several curricula. Informal chatting is also reduced because of the physical separation of teachers, who appeared to have become accustomed to teachers working individually and in isolation. A first-year teacher noted this separation among departments while

other teachers spoke about the lack of communication among teachers from different departments. One teacher mentioned that when she said hello to some teachers, they did not even respond. This gave further indication of the level of isolation among the various departments within the school.

Isolation led inevitably to a lack of camaraderie among the teachers in the school. Teachers seemed less inclined to meet with teachers from the other departments because they did not have social connections and the level of communication between the departments was low. If the two participating departments were not meeting for this study, the likelihood of their meeting otherwise was slim. They admitted that this type of isolation at the school is perpetuated by poor teacher attitudes and the separate locations of departments. With limited or no communication, opportunities for collaboration were greatly reduced.

Collective Learning

Staff meetings seemed to be a topic of concern for both teachers and administration. Ideally, these meetings could provide an opportunity for collective learning among staff members. However, teachers reported several problems with staff meetings, including difficulties with the structure and the lack of protocol at the meetings. Teachers also considered the staff meetings to be a waste of their time as they did not feel that they learned anything or developed professionally by attending them. Teachers reported dissatisfaction with staff meetings that lacked professionalism. Kolin said that “I can’t stand some of the meetings that we have. We go all around, and we have no conclusions or solutions” (M4:Kolin;229). Katie said that if she had to evaluate the staff meetings, she would say “they lack professionalism” (M4:Katie;237). Another teacher said, “We do have staff meetings once per month but most of it is spent on

administration lecturing rather than us learning anything of real value” (I1:Khyle,121).

These teachers considered the general staff meetings to be a waste of time:

The same thing [administration] sends out on e-mail, it’s the same thing in staff meeting; the same person who puts up his or her hand to discuss the same thing every staff meeting. The same set of people every staff meeting and when you come to sharing about the children or classes, it’s only complaints.

(M10:Katie,225)

Jamie also described how unprofessional and unproductive the last staff meeting had been:

We are not reaching for a particular goal. . . Basically, the last staff meeting, everybody was in there arguing and sharing their issues in their classrooms. It was more personal. That’s why I like a small little community like this where you can get to vent and at the same time you are learning something.

(I2:Jamie;173)

Staff meetings appeared to be dysfunctional and lack direction. As such, the participants had suggestions for making their staff meetings more productive by creating situations to discuss more about learning and teaching. One teacher suggested that if what was occurring in the PLC of teachers were done during the time allotted for staff meetings, it would improve those meetings and generate more professional development among the teachers. Another teacher suggested that guest speakers could come in and talk to the staff members. Khyle suggested that the time be used to find out more about what is going on in the classrooms and what is going on with specific difficult students so that teachers are more aware of who they have to deal with. Katie

suggested that the time be used for departments to meet and discuss how they can teach the students by showing the relationships that exist between the subject areas:

I think we waste time at general staff meeting where we should be having department and inter-department meetings to show how relevant each subject is to each other and to show subject integration. So that when the children leave geography, they are running to math to learn something that is linking geography to math. [Then they] leave geography and go to business and the children say it's the same thing we do in business. (M10:Katie;21)

During the meeting with administration, I found that they too voiced concerns and dissatisfaction with the staff meetings. I suggested changes to improve that time by integrating more professional development of teachers and finding more innovations to enhance learning in the school.

The teachers experienced several socio-cultural challenges. The school's culture seemed to hinder the development of a PLC of teachers in this school. The isolated teaching within this school would also negatively affect the initiation of a PLC because of the departmental divisions. By virtue of the isolated teaching, collaboration was severely diminished. The lack of collective learning and professional development in staff meetings added to the complexities and challenges of initiating the professional learning community of teachers.

Personal Analysis of the Challenges

As an experienced teacher and one who taught at this school for a decade, I have also included my voice in the data and, in some cases, presented my reflections during the meetings and interviews to show my understanding of what was taking place. I also analyzed my own experiences to identify similarities and differences from when I taught at the school. I report on my personal analysis here to indicate what my experiences were and what I perceived to be happening with the group. I find it important to make this contribution here because I too experienced many challenges.

Absences by several teachers were a significant challenge for me. When there were fewer people in attendance, there was less sharing of ideas and fewer solutions to problems because there were fewer individuals to make contributions to the group. Despite many reminders of meetings and many promises made by teachers, attendance was always a challenge. I provided snacks for the teachers to ensure they had something to eat after a long day of classes. Although teachers did not directly report that family obligations come first in this culture, it seems important to highlight this cultural norm. As a teacher in this system for 10 years, I know that parents in this community are, first and foremost, concerned with their family and its welfare. For example, children in this culture rely on their family, primarily their parents, to take them to school and to collect them at the end of the day. The only students who travel to school by bus are the high school students and, there again, some parents drive their children to and from school on a daily basis. Many times, teachers have to take time off to be with their sick children and this is not questioned by the administrators of the school or by senior personnel within the community.

Although I did not want to address the division among the staff along immigration lines, because of political implications, I feel I must do so because these teachers are clearly affected by it. Because of the divide along immigration lines, the participants in the study were sceptical about talking to other teachers about the PLC. They felt that the local teachers would not respond favourably to the PLC because it would be viewed as foreign. They also felt that they must follow certain unwritten rules to be accepted in this community. A clearer picture emerges from my experiences recruiting participants. The invitation to participate in this study went through one of the assistant principals of the school, and she thought it best to send the invitation through the staff e-mail list. Only eight teachers responded to the invitation. Some of the teachers heard about the study through colleagues or in conversation with me but did not seem to have received the e-mail. Interestingly, all but one of the volunteers was an expatriate, and the one local teacher left the group prematurely for personal reasons. Nonetheless, the group of expatriate teachers continued to meet regularly. These teachers have always sensed a division between the local and foreign teachers. This was evident in the cliques that had formed throughout the school. The locals tended to congregate in specific areas while the foreigners tended to congregate elsewhere on the campus. Although departmental divides existed in some cases, a further division appeared along immigration lines. As a result, there was more segregation within departments, thus making the school more divided.

My biggest challenge as a researcher was to keep the teachers interested in the PLC of teachers. I had to make sure I had activities and ideas to share with them. I also had to try to show them the benefits of PLC. Furthermore, it was challenging for me to make sure that I asked the right questions at the right time to help keep the teachers

stimulated and interested. I struggled initially with getting all the members involved, as the younger and newer teachers were not participating. As time went on, their participation did increase.

Unfortunately, after I left the school these teachers failed to meet again as a PLC despite their words of encouragement to me prior to my departure. When I asked why they did not meet, one teacher responded to my questions and indicated that they needed a leader, such as myself, to be able to continue. This was disturbing to me because I had tried early in the research to put the responsibilities on the teachers by having them facilitate meetings on their own. I also thought there were two teachers who could be potential leaders in my absence, but they did not take on the role of leader after I left the school. That was unfortunate because these teachers were innovative and seemed willing to experiment as well as to share ideas, resources, and techniques.

Summary

The participants identified many challenges to initiating a professional learning community, and the responses from the final interviews provide a summary. In the final interviews, the teachers were asked what they thought were challenges for this PLC. Their responses varied, but the timing of the meetings was a significant problem for several teachers. One teacher saw it as an issue of time commitment (I4:Skye). Attendance was also another challenge and two of the teachers labelled it as most challenging. The teachers with the consistent attendance were the teachers who had no families or whose children were adults and did not require constant care. In addition, these teachers were not the primary chauffeur in their family.

Another major factor was teachers' professional commitment. Matt said the lack of participation was a problem as well, and one teacher said people have to be open-minded and receptive to change. Khyle stated that "the major challenge may have been getting the right persons together and getting commitment, that would have been the biggest challenge" (I4;Khyle;9). Kolin saw the most challenging aspect as getting people interested in the group. Another challenge was conflicts with other school activities, which affected three of the planned meetings of this group. The second scheduled meeting was cancelled due to parent-teacher meetings after school and another meeting was cut short due to an unannounced territory-wide educational lecture in the afternoon session on a school day. Yet this core group of teachers displayed a high level of dedication and commitment by rushing back to school after the lecture to continue their discussion of ideas about teaching and learning. The final meeting was postponed by two days because of torrential rains. The teachers willingly attended the meeting that Friday and made contributions to the discussions.

One proposed solution to the problem of time conflicts was to make the administration aware of meetings so that, if conflicts arose, times could be negotiated. Oddly, one teacher indicated finding space as a minor challenge. I disagreed with this because the classroom used for this study was air conditioned and quite comfortable. The classroom was not located centrally on the campus, thus reducing the level of distractions, and the windows were situated such that they did not allow for outside distractions. The chairs were comfortable and we were able to put them in a circular arrangement so that we could all see each other's faces and there was no hierarchy in the seating arrangements. There was a marker board for use in meetings or presentations and there was adequate space for demonstrations.

This chapter has considered the challenges that teachers faced as well as some anticipated challenges to initiating a PLC of teachers. The many challenges are categorized as logistical, personal, and socio-cultural to capture the types of issues the teachers faced. Initiating a PLC of teachers in a site such as this was challenging for all involved. Despite the many challenges, the participants also reported many benefits of the PLC, and Chapter 7 reports the perceived benefits of a PLC of teachers.

CHAPTER 7

Benefits of a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

Participating teachers reported many benefits from their experiences during the 12 weeks of collaboration, and this chapter describes and interprets the various benefits the participants experienced in the professional learning community. The benefits are described in terms of practical aspects, social aspects, and positive changes made by teachers. The practical aspects of teaching and learning included saving time with subject integration, sharing ideas and approaches, providing a sense of direction, and professional development. The social aspects of teaching and learning included a venue for sharing their concerns and frustrations, a level of comfort, and increased socialization among teachers. A final indicator of the benefits for teachers involved the positive changes in their attitudes and teaching practice.

Practical Aspects of Teaching and Learning

In the interviews and meetings, teachers described a major benefit of the PLC as saving time, especially through sharing ideas, techniques, and worksheets. Teachers also came to realize that by integrating topics from geography and science, they would not need to risk boring their students by re-teaching material that had already been taught well in another course. The PLC was seen as professional development for teaching and learning and thus was appreciated by these teachers.

Saving Time

The cry of many teachers is that there is never enough time to do their work with students and adequately address the many topics within the curriculum. When asked about benefits, teachers indicated that saving time was a huge potential benefit for them. One teacher said: "If we coordinate our activities together, then we can save a lot of time and move more smoothly" (I3:Geoff;49). One way to save time is to share the workload, perhaps by collaborating in the preparation of student worksheets. Geoff described this process:

You have to prepare a worksheet every week and there are seven of us in the department and all seven of us will prepare a different worksheet. We could just switch around worksheets and then it's once in seven weeks to prepare.

(I3:Geoff;189)

On several occasions, teachers talked about "reinventing the wheel" as a way in which teachers waste time by re-teaching the same topics in different subject areas. If teachers collaborated and became more aware of who was teaching what, there would be no need to waste time through re-teaching. In our fourth session, Matt spoke about saving time through this collaboration and creativity: "That can help in terms of assessment, you assess one way and we another way, so we are not re-inventing the wheel. If we both ask them the same questions, they are not learning anything" (M4:Matt;107). He added: "Another thing, that might cut back on boredom too. Some kids knowing the information might be bored to death, we just did this in geography, why do we have to do this again [in science]?" (M4:Matt;135).

Teachers often work alone and do a lot more work by themselves than they would if they collaborated. In an interview, Geoff spoke about the impact the PLC had

on him as a teacher: "I guess it has allowed me to see that we really waste a lot of time" (I3:Geoff;181). When I asked what he meant, he replied:

Doing our stuff in isolation. It's really a waste of time to be doing the same thing. It's like re-inventing the wheel that has already been turning. . . .

[Beginning teachers] complain there isn't much for a teacher, not much pay, or time. Time is a major thing when you go home and you have family time. I feel badly sometimes that I am doing stuff related to school but maybe I won't have to do all of that if I were working with two or three other people. (I3:Geoff;185)

Wasted time for teachers affects their personal lives as it interferes with family time.

This was apparent in Geoff's previous statement about wasting time by teaching material that has been taught in other courses.

The benefit of saving time through collaboration in a PLC of teachers was triangulated by comparing the comments made by the teachers in the weekly group meetings with those made in their individual interviews. Katie stated that through subject integration and collaboration, time will be "cut down and reduced" (M4:Katie;42). In the same meeting, Geoff suggested that: "teachers complain a lot about being over worked and burned out, maybe because we are just duplicating. If we just share, you know a lot of duplication will be cut out. We are working double and triple when it's not necessary" (M4:Geoff;87). Later, Kolin shared the same sentiments: "You don't have to duplicate" (M4:Kolin;99) and this was reinforced by Geoff who said: "and you save time" (M4:Geoff;101). Clearly, saving time was seen as a major benefit by these teachers.

There were other time-saving benefits, especially for the geography department, by allowing the science teachers to teach specific topics. Teachers would gain time to

teach other topics and possibly teach them in greater depth. Kolin, a geography teacher, explained this process:

If science does plate tectonics, that's one less topic we have to teach. It would save time and allow us to go into some other things in depth. There are some concepts we have to fly over, even though the students don't properly understand them. We can spend more time on them, and I see that as being more efficient. (M4:Kolin;103)

Over the 12 weeks, the teachers continued to identify potential ways of saving time. In another discussion about reduced duplication and curricular overlap, one teacher noted that because they teach volcanoes and earthquakes in second form geography class, "by the time [students] get to fifth form, science doesn't really have to teach [volcanoes and earthquakes]. They can re-assess or review what we would have covered already" (M8:Kolin;67). Through subject integration, the teachers could see many benefits, including saving time and resources (Matt). Teachers in this group would welcome anything that would save them time, as time is a scarce commodity in this school, as in most schools. However, the constraints of completing the syllabus for the CXC external examinations also contribute to the necessity to maximize use of time.

Completing the syllabus on time was always an issue in the school. In addition, meeting the many internally imposed deadlines for testing and assessment posed another restriction, especially for the science teachers. In support of the syllabus completion challenge, a science teacher said:

We know we have this much time to complete the syllabus and that's always the concern. The point is that this topic is going to take me 3 weeks to cover, but if geography is doing the same thing and we do it right, it will take me a week and

a half because geography already covered the first week and a half. Then we can finish the syllabus. (M4:Geoff;105)

Subject Integration and Saving Time

One other way of saving time involved subject integration and overlap of content between the syllabi. If teachers avoid re-teaching topics, time could be saved. However, this would require some collaborative planning by the teachers involved. This matter was raised in the individual interviews. Matt said that the PLC “shows how subjects can be integrated to save time, that’s one of the major advantages, major benefits. Also, team teaching could be utilized more effectively on a regular basis where topics and the information have a positive correlation” (I3:Matt;3). Kolin commented that “for one thing, if we could work together, we can sit down and actually do some more of [the planning sessions], we can save some time and take some strain and stress off the students by avoiding repetition of content” (I3:Kolin;9).

In addition, teachers mentioned the benefits of the PLC through subject integration as a way of creating more enlightening experiences for them. Kyle felt enlightened by the PLC discussions, seeing both reduced work for teachers and better learning for students:

This has been good, enlightening. I have been seeing where it’s possible to make the work less complicated and more interesting. For instance, there are certain topics that we have examined where we have noticed that working as a team, working with the science teachers, we could decrease our workload and also find more meaningful ways of putting across the information. (I2:Kyle;3)

Similarly, this sharing of work across subject areas would mean reducing each teacher’s workload somewhat. Geoff highlighted this possibility:

For one thing, I think it has been, I would say an eye-opener, especially when we look at the possibilities of sharing the work with another department and cutting everybody's workload basically. Because in the teaching service we always have too much or so we say. Sometimes we do too much because we are not doing it right. We are working hard but not smart. (I2:Geoff;3)

Thus it can be seen that on this topic, there was a possibility of beneficial subject integration with the hopes of saving time through sharing workloads.

Sharing Ideas and Approaches

Another benefit involved the various approaches, techniques and ideas shared within the group. In the PLC forum for teachers to discuss and share ideas about teaching and learning, the idea of sharing was highlighted throughout the 12 weeks. The PLC provided help to those who needed it, while allowing others to share knowledge and experiences with their colleagues. This sharing of ideas and techniques motivated some teachers by providing a sense of worth in the school. Geoff spoke of the positive effects of sharing with others:

[For] the person that you seek that help from, you are motivating that person: "I have some usefulness around here, I can actually assist another person." That person becomes motivated and gets better; perhaps they feel that their thing is needed. So the entire body would grow, both the one seeking and the one from whom it was sought. (I3:Geoff;93)

Teachers also noted that sharing ideas collectively provided more options for teachers to use in different teaching or learning situations. Thus they were contributing to a pool of ideas and approaches to enhance their classrooms. In the meeting with the administrators, Matt explained to Khyle that he might know of limited ways to deal

with a student, but if there are more teachers, they too can contribute to the pool of ideas on how to deal with that student.

Furthermore, the PLC seemed to motivate teachers to be learners again and to share ideas to create that level of professional discussion that is necessary for some teachers. As Geoff said, he needed that “escape” and needed to discuss education on a professional level and learn what others were doing. He seemed motivated to try new things in the classroom to help the students:

I have also developed a little more of a drive to want to read a little more and to want to speak a little more with someone else. . . . As we go through it, after the first few weeks, I really want to see this [PLC] moving ahead. I think that has been one of the areas that has helped me to open up a little more in terms of wanting to speak about it and to share the ideas with others and even within ourselves. With or without you, Ms. Yamraj, I would want to see this thing go on. I think it has pushed me to that point where I have become a little more passionate in that sense. That’s the benefit. (M12:Geoff;333)

Teachers highlighted the opportunity to bounce ideas off each other as another benefit of participating in a PLC of teachers. This bouncing of ideas provided immediate feedback that allowed teachers to try new things and to think more about their approaches. It also provided some information about specific students and their learning styles that will help teachers to tailor their teaching to incorporate many learning styles and techniques to help more of their students. In describing the benefits of collaboration in the PLC, Matt said:

So that’s where the collaborative approach could give us different methods, more current methods, because there are some people on the cutting edge of

education. There are others like me who might be a little in the dark, so if you could bounce ideas of how to approach instruction to suit the kids that you are working with, then implementing such a program might work. (M4:Matt;183)

When I asked Geoff what he would like to see changed in the group, he responded by saying “Nothing. I think you set it up well and I like the idea of giving individuals the opportunity to present. Again, like I said, new ideas will bounce from each person” (I2:Geoff;35). He liked the fact that each teacher facilitated a meeting and their approaches were all different. When I asked in a later interview about the benefits from the PLC, Geoff said:

The fact that we can bounce ideas off of each other, I think it’s opening my own mind to new ideas, but also I know that there are others that you can rely on as a source of additional help knowing that I have not approached the geography department formally, knowing that avenue is there. [I can] go there and chat with Katie or any of the others. (I3:Geoff;5)

The experiences shared were not limited to experiences at the school. Some teachers shared their practice from previous schools. Many conversations reflected this sharing of ideas, even when teachers were presenting to the group. Some participants explained that in previous schools they met regularly in groups with a common interest, whether by subject or grade, to discuss the curriculum and teaching. These were positive practices that they shared with this PLC group. In the first meeting, teachers were sharing their experiences about collaboration with each other and Katie said:

But in my country, just before I came here, once per month, all the teachers teaching the same subjects in a region . . . all the geography teachers would meet, all the science teachers would meet, all the primary teachers who teach primary 1

would meet and then they just sit and chat and discuss things and a little snack is provided for them and their travel is paid, and you get a lot out of those sessions because everybody knows what they are doing. In [this school], we are meeting deadlines, and in one weekend we have a million deadlines. (M1:Katie;186)

Jamie, also a teacher who had come from another school, talked about cross-departmental planning sessions for teams of teachers at her previous school:

Coming from [the USA], we have that same thing. We had to work across the board. In the states we were set up as teams. It would have five teachers to a team, like mathematics, science, geography and so forth and so on. And that was actually coming from administration, we *had* to do it. (M1:Jamie;308)

In addition to discussing collaboration in other schools, teachers shared practical ideas from their time in other schools. This sharing of success stories showed what had worked for these teachers in the past. Geoff shared the following experience with the group:

I used to teach geography and we built weather stations. They could use lots of things from home, cups to make the rain gauge, anemometer to measure the wind speed and so on. If you have to do topography, we would make a clay model that was a whole lot better than reading a flat book. It was easier with the contour lines. I find many students would benefit a lot more with the practical. (M3:Geoff;17)

Katie, a veteran teacher, shared many stories about her teaching experiences prior to coming to this school. Her experience in one school dominated the experiences she shared with the group. She had many positive things to say about the level of professionalism and camaraderie at a private school where she had taught. Katie

highlighted their routine and the need for a space to talk and share ideas with colleagues. These features are similar to those that were being fostered in this PLC, especially the space to share with colleagues. She described her experiences:

I say [staff meetings at this school] lack professionalism; thank the Lord I was teaching at a catholic school in [my country] and it was my best ever in teaching. They were so professional, everyday at 10:30 they had pastry and a cup of coffee or drink and you can take what you wanted, speak to staff members and in no time you have people asking questions. (M4:Katie;245)

And the staffroom had the biggest table that I have ever seen at any high school. It took up most of the staffroom, but most of the teachers could sit around it and then you had seats on the sides. . . . In those little get-togethers [every morning] we talked and shared ideas too. (M10:Katie;145)

Katie summarized the benefits of saving time; she said that when “people share ideas, activities, common things that can reduce their workload rather than Geoff planning something and you plan something and everybody plan something differently. We all come together and we do it” (M4:Katie;259).

Understanding others' perspectives. In addition to sharing ideas, the teachers displayed a high degree of understanding of each other's perspectives and built upon one another's ideas. For example, Katie talked about using pertinent vocabulary words at the beginning of teaching a topic:

What I do, and I found that it works very effectively, every time I introduce a topic, let's say the marine environment, I will pull all the possible words. My classes know there is a dictionary for each topic and I will go through all the

objectives with them and find all the words that they need to know.

(M7:Katie;11)

To expand on Katie's approach, Matt continued with his experiences in his classroom and said "what would be utilized a lot more, because I tried it in my class the last time. I had them construct sentences from those words that display some sort of factual information related to the topic" (M7:Matt;13). He proceeded to explain by providing an example that he had completed with a group of students:

For example, we were doing the digestive system and my key words were given to groups and each group was going to construct a sentence based on that word they were given. The sentences were analyzed for structure and the content and meaning. It gives them two things: 1) it develops their vocabulary, and 2) it gives them understanding of what the word really means. It's not a matter of putting the word on the wall and they must be able to use it in context.

(M7:Matt;17)

Creativity. Teachers indicated that creativity is a feature of sharing ideas in this PLC of teachers. This creativity is present in both teachers and students, and it affects both practice and discipline in their classrooms. Matt said:

Another thing that would come out [of the PLC] is creativity in teaching the topic. For instance, by just sitting and collaborating we could come up with different ideas of how to teach a topic. One group might teach for mastery, so that when they come to science, we don't have to do too much or vice-versa. That can help in terms of assessment, you assess one way and we another way, so we are not re-inventing the wheel. (M5:Matt;107)

Later in the meeting he also talked about creative and more innovative ways of disciplining students when different teachers contribute ideas of how to deal with certain students:

I think there are different ways of dealing with kids [who seemed troubled]. I am saying that through this collaborative effort, we could learn creative ways of correcting discipline problems in the class without destroying anybody's kids in the process, instead of using the old-school, played-out methods. (M5:Matt;197)

Lessening teaching loads. One of the teachers had a strong conviction about the benefits of sharing work and its advantages, especially that of lightening their teaching loads. She hoped that her teachers would work together to help each other with their teaching techniques. To summarize the potential power of sharing ideas and techniques, thus saving of time and reducing work, Katie said in a meeting:

You see, Matt, I want to get to that level, where a head can make a big difference in the lives of the teachers they supervise. I realize my weakness as a teacher and my despair; what I am a trying to do is work with my teachers so that they can feel good about being a teacher. Trying to have people share ideas, activities, common things that can reduce their workload rather than Geoff planning something and you plan something and everybody plan something differently.

We all come together and we do it. (M4:Katie;259)

One of the frequently mentioned goals was reducing teachers' workload in order to improve students' learning.

Sense of Direction

The geography department, the smaller of the two departments in the study, indicated that they have regular weekly planning sessions with their new head of

department. These planning meetings were occurring while these teachers were also members of the PLC. The new head and two of her teachers, half the members of the department, were members of the PLC. At one point, they were explaining to the group that collaboration was beneficial because it provided a sense of direction for their teaching. The following is an excerpt from a meeting where Khyle shared his departmental experiences with the PLC group and others responded:

Khyle: I find that since Katie has been head, we have been meeting at least once per week and basically, most times when we meet, you leave there knowing exactly what you are going to do for the rest of the week. That's like my planning session. When we meet, I know exactly where I am getting the stuff from and what I am going to teach.

Geoff: There is nothing wrong with that.

Khyle: You leave there with the points and knowing what you are going to teach.

Kolin: And you have planned the lesson.

Yamraj: And you have one less thing to do later and you know where you are headed once you step into the classroom.

Kolin: But on that, I see this as the biggest benefit of collaborating, you don't have to duplicate.

Geoff: And you save time. (M4:89-101)

As mentioned before, unit tests are given at the same time to all students at a particular level. Based on the interactions among the teachers about this collaboration, there appeared to be practical benefit to collaborating with colleagues regarding the topics taught because this allows teachers to cover the same topics in the same time span to help their students prepare for the departmental unit tests.

Professional Development

All the teachers in this group indicated that they considered the PLC to be a type of professional development. When asked if they saw this PLC as professional development, they all responded positively. They all provided evidence to support this conclusion and many reported the benefits of this type of professional development. They also noted how different it was from previous professional development they have experienced. Kyle said he “definitely” saw it as professional development and went on to say:

First of all, it is professional development with a difference that is really opening up our eyes to knowledge and how knowledge is received and how knowledge is passed on, skills also. For instance, in [our] PLC, we are concentrating more on a multi-disciplinary approach to teaching which I think the world is embracing, instead of just taking out a subject and putting it by itself and teaching the students. That part of [teaching] the subjects apart from other subjects, we are moving away from. We are more now concentrating on integrating the information and this is one of the ways in which we can develop and strengthen the whole teaching profession. (I2:Kyle;123)

One of the first-year teachers indicated having benefited from this PLC as professional development and explained how it was different than her past experiences in that it was more personal. Skye said:

Here it's professional development in that it is beneficial to our trade and what we are doing. It's different in that it's less formal. The professional development that I am usually exposed to is like it's a lesson. You listen and you have no

input into what's being said. It's a lot of externally imposed [ideas] and you are there because you are told to be there. (I2:Skye;204)

Her first-year colleague, Jamie commented that her experiences in the PLC were similar to her past experiences in North America because they had involved small-group professional development and not the whole school. She acknowledged that the PLC was also a form of professional development for her and she welcomed it because she had not experienced any professional development in this school prior to the PLC. When asked about professional development, Jamie expressed her dissatisfaction with professional development in this school because she had not experienced any form of professional development, but she said that she liked the small group in this PLC and the opportunity it provided to voice her concerns while learning something about teaching and learning.

When asked if our meetings were a form of professional development, Geoff said "yes" and explained how it is different from his past professional development experiences:

Most times what you have is the entire staff at a workshop or something. There are those who take the workshop seriously or go to the workshop because they are told to do so. When you have so many people, the area that you tend to go into, let's say classroom management, there are so many discussions on classroom management that you can't shut up. But with this we are a small group to begin with. I think we can deal better with our needs. Not everybody may have the kind of situation in their classroom that they want to sit for an entire week. What they would really like to know, beginning with a small group, individual needs are met. (I2:Geoff;128)

Matt's response provided a precise summary of the teachers' feelings about the benefits of the PLC as professional development. He reported positive results when asked about this PLC as professional development, and he emphasized the importance of having relevant issues addressed within this professional development forum. In addition, the voluntary nature of this PLC was more appealing to Matt and a few of the other teachers. If this PLC had been mandated, it seems unlikely that attendance and participation would have matched the quality of discussions reported here. The following is an excerpt from that interview with Matt:

Yamraj: Do you see this whole PLC as a professional development forum?

Matt: It is! It's not just, I think it is better this way.

Yamraj: How is it better or different from the professional development you've received in the past?

Matt: In the past, it was more passive. You just sit and listen to somebody talk all day about their experience. You never get a chance to share your experiences. To me [our PLC is] more sharing and it's more realistic. It's people who are in the battlefield with you right here, right now, rather than someone who is in a school 1,000 miles away who cannot relate to what we have. Let's say I tell a teacher from another school from another country that we have a problem here, but that problem might be non-existent in their school. Here we go through the same problems and we see almost the same kids and it makes it a little more meaningful. You know the people, you feel comfortable, you [are more] free in terms of the language, you don't try to be uptight about the language. You are a bit more free with the people that you know.

Yamraj: And the types of issues that you have to deal with are more what you want?

Matt: More relevant, right. You get to pick the issues that you want.

Yamraj: So it is not externally imposed.

Matt: Right. It's not mandatory either. You know, when you tell someone they have to do something, that's when they become rebellious. I feel obligated to come, but it's not mandatory that I come. I come because it's what is happening, I am not forced to come. So it's a little different. (I2:Matt; 172/186)

When asked about this PLC as professional development, Katie, the veteran teacher in the group, responded with a resounding "of course!" She then explained how this was different from her past professional development experiences and highlighted the small group as beneficial because it was relevant to both subject areas represented:

Sometimes you go to professional development sessions and, especially when they have the national ones where all the schools meet, it's not so effective because more or less the topics are general and then you sit there with everybody. When we do it at the school level, we request what we want to do. Doing it at this level, we know it's confined to science and geography. (I2:Katie;134)

Furthermore, when asked if our meetings were about her own issues, she responded positively. Kolin responded similarly to the same question:

Yes, it is different in that for me it's more personal, applicable to my situation. It is not something over my head or general or may be specific to a different situation. What we are doing here is stuff that I can actually apply in my classroom. (I2:Kolin;135)

Based on these responses, relevance to their own issues seemed to be an important feature of professional development. These teachers seemed to embrace the PLC as productive professional development.

This section has described some of the practical benefits of this PLC. Saving time through subject integration and sharing work was seen as a major benefit. Sharing ideas provided a pool of ideas for teachers to choose from. It also allowed for creativity and illustrated how these participants can understand each other's perspectives and build upon what their colleagues said. These teachers also appreciated the sense of direction through group planning. The PLC was perceived as personalized professional development because it provided relevant issues and allowed for all the participants to voice concerns and to learn from their colleagues.

Social Aspects of Teaching and Learning

Benefits of the PLC also involved social aspects of teaching and learning. The teachers referred frequently to the socializing aspect of getting to know other teachers from their own department and another department within the school. During the meetings, teachers felt a level of comfort in realizing that they were not alone in some of their experiences and they reported feeling less isolated and more "normal." One aspect that all the teachers voiced was that the PLC provided a forum for expressing their concerns and frustrations related to the quality of education in the school.

Getting to Know Other Teachers

While discussing the weekly sessions in an interview, Skye, a first-year science teacher, made these comments:

We know we are going to come here after school and talk and that's been nice. It's nice to meet other teachers. I already knew Katie, I knew Kolin, I knew Khyle, but we never had prolonged conversations, especially not with Kolin, but Khyle I have spoken to before. But it's been nice getting to know other teachers in other departments. (I2:Skye;132)

In another interview, she said that she does not get that feeling of comfort from staff meetings but she gets it from the PLC meetings.

Matt also indicated a feeling of comfort with being in the PLC, partly because there are people you know: "You know the people, you feel comfortable" (I2:Matt;78) and you speak freely in terms of the language because there is no need to be uptight about the language. This is because "you are a bit more free with the people that you know" (I2:Matt;178). All the teachers indicated that they got to know one another more. One head of department reported that she was pleased that some of her staff were members of the PLC and noted it provided another way for them to share ideas and to discuss teaching and learning. It also provided a forum for her to get to know them better, and the same was true for the teachers in the science department. Similar sentiments were shared by teachers from the science department.

Not Feeling Alone

The participants indicated on various occasions that they were comforted by knowing that they were not alone in what they felt emotionally. In like manner, their experiences at the school were not isolated to them as individuals. Kolin said in an interview that one of the benefits of this PLC is that "there is a sense that you are not alone with the problems that you face in the classroom and on the job" (I3:Kolin;5).

When asked about changes in his level of isolation at the school, Matt stated, "I'm not

the only one" (I2:Matt;102). Similarly, Jamie, a first-year teacher, also expressed feelings that she was not the only teacher going through the same emotions. In her words, "there are other teachers following in the same footsteps" (I2:Jamie;49).

Skye, also a first-year teacher, said in her final interview that being in the PLC had helped reduce her level of isolation: "I don't feel as isolated and I realize that I am not the only one with certain problems. And that's what I enjoy about the group because it's really nice to have that" (I4:Skye;156). Feeling that there are others who experience the same problems provided teachers with a sense of comfort. As Skye said: "It's helped me with my attitudes, because everything I am feeling is normal. It's been a very positive experience" (I2:Skye;161). When asked about changes in perceptions about the PLC or teaching and learning, Kolin replied:

I learned that some of the challenges, some of the things that I see as challenges are actually shared by other teachers. That's a comfort actually, because sometimes you feel odd. [Here I am] part of the community and all of us come up against the same problems. (I2:Kolin;39)

Teachers Sharing Concerns and Frustrations

In retrospect, most of the PLC meetings provided a forum for teachers to discuss their concerns and frustrations about teaching and learning at the school. Collectively, they expressed needs to share their frustrations in a comfortable environment, such as our weekly meetings. Some teachers reported this type of sharing as a benefit of the PLC.

In his third interview, Matt was asked: "How has the PLC affected you as a teacher?" (I3:Yamraj;131). His response was: "It has been good for me, it gives me an avenue to vent and to get the ideas from veteran and seasoned teachers" (I3:Matt;133).

In her third interview, Katie stated the benefits of venting, particularly in the absence of action in the school: "It's a good thing because even if we cannot do anything about what's happening around the place, all the diversions, all the negative vibes, it still means that you can talk about it" (I3:Katie;75). In her second interview, when asked about her perceptions of the PLC, Jamie responded by saying: "I looked at it as a way for teachers bringing our ideas together, helping each other out, and in a sense it gives you a time to vent" (I2:Jamie;41).

In another interview with Jamie, I asked about how the PLC affected her as teacher and she replied:

How I look at this group is that we are going outside of the norm, in a sense, and sharing our ideas and venting. You know this is a venting process, what we are going through and what we would like to see happen in the near future.

Actually, I think this group is good, because when we have staff meetings, we don't come to conclusions. . . How this group is now, again sharing ideas, venting, we started off small but we can see we are going to something bigger because administration has come in now. It's like going someplace.

(I3:Jamie;148)

Another first-year teacher, Skye, also talked about sharing frustrations, but in a controlled environment: "We do talk about our beefs and complaints, but we don't take it to that level where it becomes silly and you talk about this one isolated incident that could go on" (I3:Skye;80). Based on these comments, teachers apparently felt satisfied with this forum to express their concerns and frustrations with teaching at this school.

In the final meeting, questions were asked to ascertain the teachers' opinions about the group. This was meant to be an evaluative process reviewing the group over

the 12 weeks. When asked about what the motivation was to join and remain in the group, an uncertified teacher who was in the process of becoming certified to teach replied as follows:

It presented an opportunity to share on a professional level and, because I am not a trained teacher, I figured I could learn something from the association with people who have been trained in the field of education. Like most of the others, it provided an opportunity to vent frustrations. (M11:Kolin;21)

Similarly, Matt reported many benefits, including a forum to vent frustrations: “[I liked] the ability to collaborate and share ideas, learn different techniques, different classroom management strategies, and it provided an avenue for us to vent our frustrations” (M11:Matt;13). Later in the same meeting, Katie said: “We spoke freely on any issue and we vented our anger quite a few times” (M11:Katie;25).

Thus the participants clearly seemed to benefit on a social level. They got to know their colleagues better and the PLC provided a forum for them to express their concerns and issues. During this getting to know one another and this venting process, it seemed that teachers realized they shared similar concerns, and they did not feel alone. They expressed feelings of comfort about not being the only one to have the same experiences at the school. The next section of this chapter describes the participants’ changes in attitudes and teaching practice.

Changes in Attitudes and Teaching Practice

Analysis of the data revealed a number of the changes these teachers experienced in the PLC. These changes provided some indication of growth among the teachers, resulting in a shift in attitudes and practices to create better classrooms for both students

and teachers. Not surprisingly, changes in attitude and changes in teaching practice appeared to be related. Changes in beliefs and changes in practices tend to go hand in hand. However, not all changes in attitude meant changes in practice, at least not immediately.

A rather abstract change seemed to occur among all the participants. Examples would include a heightened level of motivation and being more conscientious about their teaching. Some of the teachers were still in the thinking phase and had not moved on to any changes in their classrooms. Most of these abstract changes were mentioned early in the research; near the end of the study, Kyle said:

So far [the PLC] is mostly affecting the way I think and, at this point, I am getting ready to implement. I am mostly going through the thought processes at this point. Well, in terms of my own learning, it has motivated me to learn more, to be more open, to take from elsewhere and to learn new things and techniques . . . more open to what's out there. (I3:Kyle;84/95)

When asked about changes in her teaching practice, Katie replied: "As a matter of fact, I am more conscious now with my teaching" (I2:Katie;69). In a later interview she again pointed out her heightened consciousness with reference to subject integration: "I am more conscious about what I teach [in geography] in relation to what is taught in the sciences. I have become much more conscious and I make reference to that all the time" (I3:Katie;27). She elaborated on this statement by showing subject integration with science topics that she taught in her geography classes, as in this practical example:

I am looking for that connection [between geography and science]. I keep on targeting science because it's the same thing you are doing in your science. Why would rocks dissolve? Because the water is so powerful or because you have

certain minerals that can be dissolved by water. The first thing that comes to your mind is sodium chloride. Any rocks with rock salt will dissolve. What will absorb water and why? I am looking at the science aspect of it. (I4:Katie;122)

As mentioned before, there seemed to be a link between attitudes and practice.

In some cases, this change in attitude did lead to changes in practice. For example, teachers reported a change in their practice to include more student-centred teaching and activities. Teachers claimed that, although the ideas discussed were not new, they had previously allowed their teaching to become stagnant. One teacher termed his attitude towards teaching as “self-preservation,” where he just wanted to make it through the day and leave. Collectively, teachers indicated that they experienced a new level of rejuvenation with respect to their teaching. When asked if the PLC had changed their teaching practice in any way, teachers provided the following evidence:

This PLC has indeed changed the way I practice. Like I was saying in previous interviews, a lot of what was said here is not new to me. Some of them were things that I had practiced earlier, but, like Geoff, I found that the system didn't readily lend itself to some of the ideas I had. So I had switched into a mode of self-preservation. To me it was keep the students occupied and hope that the time runs out quickly so that they could go their way. I am ashamed to say I had gone into that mode and [the PLC] revived the real drive for teaching in me.

This is one thing that was done. I am again willing to go the extra mile in the classroom and really take time and teach instead of having students record notes and define words and so on. (M11:Kolin;323)

This renewed vigour was also highlighted in an interview with Kolin:

Like I said, a renewed, I am afraid to use the word, vigour, a renewed desire to bring life to my classes. To use more hands-on methods of teaching, hands-on for the students, make the students participate, learn by doing instead of just giving notes and having them regurgitate. (I4:Kolin;85)

Similarly, Geoff reported becoming discouraged in this school but he too experienced this sense of renewal:

Just like Kolin, as far as settling down into a mode and just staying there, this PLC has allowed me to pull out of that spiral and one of the other things too is that I have come to the point where the PLC has helped me to focus a little less on just covering content and dealing a little more with more students and even the students' issues. That is where I see myself changed in that sense.

(M11:Geoff;333)

The changes Matt experienced were about students' assessment and timely feedback. He also mentioned that his level of patience with his students had improved. In our final meeting, Matt also spoke about how his practice shifted to a more student-centred approach:

The PLC has also changed the way I try to assess kids in terms [of feedback]; I learned from Katie that giving back papers immediately [is helpful]. I knew that before, but I never really practiced it but I have been trying to do that. Little things that I have picked up in here, classroom management issues, how to deal with the students, I have become a little more patient in terms of ignoring and leaving things alone and sharing a little laughter here and there. Just be a little

less tense in the classroom, so I have learned quite a few things here, if I were to go on I might need about three more tapes. (M12;Matt:335)

Matt's student-centred approach to teaching also changed in terms of how he could try to involve his students more and have them take more responsibility for their own learning:

We could have the kids build their own charts and have them make posters and change our way of assessing. That's another thing I would like to see too. Give them more hands-on. I am not saying throw the paper-and-pen test through the door, because that is what will be used to ultimately evaluate them. It's sad. You just use different methods of assessment to tap into their skills.

(M11:Matt;301)

To be able to have students take more responsibility for their learning, the teacher should also realize that he or she needs to relinquish some control and allow for more student exploration. In an interview, Matt talked about giving up some control to his students:

In terms of being not so uptight, I am uptight in the classroom, I tend to dominate, but I [now] let the kids have more freedom in the classroom, freedom with limitations. That's from the motivation session. I don't know if my dominating was a turn off for the kids. I want to see what good that will do for me, along with other ways of motivating kids. (I4:Matt;119)

Creating student-centred classrooms requires thought about one's teaching practice and an examination of how to make lessons more interesting for the students. Kyle also expressed the shift towards more student-centred classrooms:

[The PLC] caused me to focus more on managing students and examining how they learn. I am thinking about new techniques and trying to make my lessons more interesting, more meaningful, and more relevant, and I try to see that the students may need to be taught in different ways. Basically, it had me looking more into different ways of reaching the children. I think sometimes we are so busy, just going through the days and trying to get the syllabus completed, that we don't stop to look at things like how students learn in terms of those who are more visual, those who do better at hearing, touching. So the PLC helped me to take a closer look at all these things and to stop, think, and move on.

(M12:Khyle;343)

When asked if he had made changes in teaching practice, Khyle said "yes" and his example suggested a constructivist approach to teaching topics that were covered in science classes:

I have a second form, and I was looking at something with them and they pointed out to me that they were doing it in science. I am happy that they pointed it out to me. I didn't realize they were doing such things in science, but then based on what we did at our meetings; I realized that we can use all this information and work together for the benefit of the students. That knowledge helped me to optimize the information that they had already received.

(I2:Khyle;87)

He further qualified this example and attributed it to the PLC by saying:

Usually, I would not have paid much attention to that, but because we are looking at this in the PLC, I had to look more keenly at the whole matter because

this is one of the things that we are focusing on, so I could not just skim over that information [from the students]. (I2:Khyle; 91)

In another meeting, about one month later, Khyle mentioned using what the students learned in science to build on in geography class. Although his classroom was not well equipped for technology, it was something that he considered seriously in his class. Khyle's examples illustrate that some teachers were making changes based on our discussion of building on what students already know or have learned in other subjects and of avoiding re-teaching when possible. As reported earlier in this chapter, this approach saves teaching time as well.

When asked about benefits of the PLC, Kolin said:

Another [benefit] is that a number of techniques that I had abandoned because I was discouraged, I have been motivated to re-visit and apply them in my classroom because they could be effective teaching methods and they require some more effort, yes, but the benefits are there. There are benefits [to the students of the PLC of teachers]. (I3:Kolin;5)

Kolin also mentioned in his interview some of the things he had changed to refocus on a more student-centred teaching practice. He also developed trust between the teacher and the students with something as simple as taking the students outside again after having stopped that practice because of "bad" experiences. He went on to say that, although there are still challenges, "most of the students, the majority start to feel like you care. You are brave enough to take them outside" (Kolin;3;19). He said that he had "tried to become more student-friendly" and experiences in the PLC have helped him to "get back to the stage where I really like teaching; where I want to teach" (I3:Kolin;93).

Thus the participants reported several significant changes in their attitudes towards teaching and in their personal practice. There was a clear shift to more student-centred practices with a deliberate attempt to build upon knowledge from other subjects. The overall comments about changes in practice were positive, and it was heartening to hear so many members of the PLC report a rekindled enthusiasm for teaching.

Personal Analysis of the Benefits

Despite the many challenges reported in the previous chapter, I did have some high moments as the person facilitating this professional learning community. One point that stands out is the fact that the teachers were committed and willing to give of their time after school. Although we did not have perfect attendance in many cases, I had at least five teachers at most Wednesday meetings. What excited me more was the fact that the teachers were leaving the meetings and were still dialoguing about teaching and learning. There were days when we went over the hour allotted but the contributions seemed endless at the time.

There was one Wednesday afternoon that is still vivid in my mind. We were late returning from a lecture that Wednesday afternoon, but we all car-pooled and hustled back to the campus to meet. We lost some time, but the teachers still participated in the discussions that afternoon and we stayed past 4:30 p.m. The level of energy in the room was high that day and teachers talked about the relationship between their own attitudes and learning by the students in the school.

I was pleased that each teacher was willing to facilitate a session and have their voice be heard in this group of teacher learners. I also admired the many approaches

used to facilitate a session. Each session after the first two was facilitated by different teachers and each session was unique. We had handouts with discussions in a few sessions. We had activities from some teachers and, in one case, an elaborate PowerPoint presentation about using technology in the classroom and teaching. Teachers were taught how to use presentations in the classroom to guide students and how to use Excel to keep and calculate students' grades. This session went well as each teacher had a laptop to work with while Geoff facilitated the session. Although there were varying levels of computer literacy, teachers managed to take something away that afternoon. In the participant-facilitated sessions, each teacher seemed to use an approach that made them comfortable and they knew they could stimulate learning in the group.

Also interesting were the diverse topics chosen by each participant. These topics seemed to reflect their personal passions or concerns at the school and their views of teaching and learning. The topics were clearly relevant to these teachers. Matt spoke about assessment and that was something he made evident that he was passionate about. Geoff was very interested in technology. Kolin and Khyle discussed issues of attitude and learning because they thought that the attitudes displayed by students determined how much and how well they learned. Katie was an advocate of collaboration and tried with her department to meet regularly to do lesson planning. Skye, a first year teacher, was concerned that the students were not motivated, so she presented on the topic of motivation. But she also presented on literacy because she thought the students were not literate enough in science class and overall in their school work.

The PLC group also allowed me to get to know some of the teachers whom I did not know prior to this study. Although it was fascinating to hear some of the issues raised by my colleagues, it was particularly interesting to hear from the new teachers. The experiences they shared were personal and I was pleased to see the level of trust that developed within the group. Although the time was short, these teachers managed to develop trust and share many personal experiences. I also felt a sense of belonging in this setting because I was able to assist some teachers with writing and typing tests for classes. I also assisted one teacher with writing a proposal for equipment to enhance teaching and learning.

Overall, I felt that I had accomplished something valuable and productive with these teachers. I was happy about their reactions to the group and to the meetings. I was pleased to see what was working in such a short period of time with this group of teachers. They seemed motivated to dialogue about teaching and learning as well as to share their school experiences. I was impressed that these teachers did not know about PLCs in any formal way, yet they managed to display many characteristics of a PLC. They collaborated on many levels and I was impressed with the teaching session. There was constructive feedback as well as discussions about how to teach volcanoes and earthquakes to the students. Another productive session was the planning session on the water cycle. Despite the late start that day, the four teachers managed to devise a concrete product that they agreed upon as a unit of work for the upcoming year.

I also observed changes in the way the teachers were thinking about approaching their work. They wanted to collaborate more within and across departments, in part to reduce their workloads to make time for other issues. One geography teacher particularly impressed me with the growth and changes that I observed. Kolin had

moved from his “self-preservation” mode into describing himself as a renewed teacher who was willing to take risks with his students and to make the classroom exciting again. Geoff too had started to think more about collaboration and having more dialogue about teaching and learning. I was pleased with the projections that members of the group had for themselves once I left at the end of the term. The next chapter reports their plans for the PLC group.

I close this section with a summary by Katie, the veteran teacher in the study, to show how she eloquently summarised the overall experiences and benefits for the teachers in the PLC:

The meetings gave us an opportunity to reflect, refuel, and share ideas about our teaching, students we have to teach, and share teaching methods. We have seen and identified areas where we can collaborate on a professional level and it more or less helped us to understand that our problems are not isolated. We all share the same problems and we share the same glory too, but like I’ve said before, it’s a nice small group, we spoke freely on any issue and we vented our anger quite a few times. I was glad when administration came in and we can collectively say that they have supported what has been done and we look forward to their support. And I hope that other people, not just department heads, buy the idea and try to work with it, because my thing as a teacher, every so often we forget that word professional, we lack that professionalism and this is one way we can show professionalism, we are all teachers. Sometimes we do forget, we do have some people who, because they are teaching science, feel they are more brilliant, or their subject area is more important. “I am a musician and my subject area is more important.” Collaboration will teach us that, as professionals, if we want to

foster effective teaching and learning, we need to operate in that professional learning community as professionals. There is breakdown because of a lack of professionalism. As an older teacher, I am benefiting from all these young people. (M11:Katie;25)

Summary

This chapter has illustrated a range of benefits associated with this professional learning community, as reported by the participants. They reported that saving time through collaboration and proper planning may allow teachers to find time to teach other topics in greater detail. The teachers also reported the benefits of sharing ideas and techniques. They collected many suggestions from the group that allowed them to have a pool of new ideas when teaching or dealing with management issues in the classroom. It was clear in the meetings that these teachers understood the perspectives of their colleagues and that they were able to build upon what other teachers said. The participants reported that the PLC was a personal professional development forum and they enjoyed the topics being discussed in a small-group setting. They appreciated the fact that the topics were professionally relevant and not externally imposed or mandated by higher authorities.

On the social side of teaching, these teachers enjoyed getting to know each other, especially teachers who were not in their own department. What they also found comforting was the fact that they did not feel as isolated after working in the PLC and they did not feel that they were the only ones experiencing some of the emotions they felt. The PLC meetings also provided an important venue for these teachers to express their concerns about teaching at this school. This was important because there are no

other venues to allow for such sharing of perspectives. Once problems and concerns were described, the members of the group also tried to find solutions to their problems.

Some of the changes in attitudes seemed incredible within this group of teachers, and some attitudinal changes led to changes in practice. There was a clear shift towards more student-centred classrooms and lessons. Assessment considerations were explored to ensure that students got feedback about their work in a more timely fashion. Teachers made their classrooms more student friendly by encouraging more student autonomy in the classroom. Considering the relatively short 12-week period, the teachers reported an interesting array of positive changes in their classrooms as a result of what was shared and learned in the professional learning community.

CHAPTER 8

Future of the Professional Learning Community of Teachers

This final chapter of data analysis reports the direction in which these teachers hoped to take their learning community. The previous chapters have reported what were necessary to initiate this professional learning community, the features of the PLC in the context of the school, what the teachers perceived as the challenges of initiating the PLC, and their perceptions of the benefits of their time together.

The teachers expressed four main goals for the future for the group. Firstly, they wanted to expand the membership of the group. Secondly, they wanted to have space and time allocated to meet regularly within the school timetable. Thirdly, these teachers wanted to engage in cross-disciplinary planning and then work as partners to provide the best learning experiences for their students. Finally, they identified the need for a leader of the group.

Although the future prospect of the PLC was not a research question formulated at the outset of the study, it seems important to include it here because it shows how the teachers were thinking. Their sense of the future also demonstrates the growth within the group and changes in attitudes over the 12-week period. These thoughts about the PLC's future arise from their experiences and from the knowledge they shared in the group. These projections highlight solutions and, to some extent, the proactive nature of some of the teachers. The data in this chapter demonstrate that this core of teachers

would like to continue the group after my departure, in anticipation of reaping further rewards and benefits from this nascent learning community.

Increasing the Group's Membership

In both interviews and meetings, the teachers reported the need to expand the membership of the PLC by inviting other teachers from their own departments as well as teachers from other departments in the school. They suggested ways of recruiting other teachers and provided some criteria for new members. The teachers also shared the vision that they thought should be embraced by new members. Several examples illustrate how these teachers took initiatives for the future success of the group.

Although they expressed the need to expand the membership of the PLC, the teachers indicated that the small size of the group seemed ideal for several reasons. This study took place over one term and provided time for each teacher to present or lead the discussion for one session, thus providing a voice for each teacher. When asked about possibilities of expanding membership to other teachers, Matt responded:

I like how it went for the time we had, we didn't have 1 year, or 6 months, we had 12 weeks. The 12 weeks meant that we wanted each person to have a say or a chance to speak because this is a rare opportunity for us to speak out publicly about our frustrations or whatever. If we had 24 people in this group, I don't think that we would have enough time for everyone to contribute meaningfully or to lead a session. As it is, I think the group was perfect. If we were to continue for another term, we could double up at least, we would have had our opportunity already and the new people would get their chance to say what they

have to say. I don't think we were at the stage where we had that time to increase membership. (M11:Matt;95)

In support of the group's initial membership, Matt acknowledged that they were in the infancy stage but suggested future projections:

Before I came [to this group], I didn't know what a PLC was. We are now in a state of infancy and developing, and now we have evolved into a little core group. For us to introduce other people [to the PLC] would have taken too long to reach to this point. If we had more people in the group and everybody would have come along at a different place. Membership if we were to continue for a term, at least, we would try to increase the membership, but we are still in the infancy stage and I think we have just enough people. (M11:Matt;105)

Despite his satisfaction with the group's size, Matt suggested that the group was not diverse enough: "The big picture is to get somebody from every department involved" (M10:Matt;9). He wanted to expand beyond the science and geography departments:

There are no limits in the school. So far we have been geography and science. I think if we add social studies, physical education, math, English, history, all of them can be incorporated and integrated into the curriculum where teachers feel a little at ease. Where they don't have to re-invent the wheel and re-teach information and their kids will be less confused because different teachers teach differently. (I3:Matt;17)

The teachers wanted to include other departments, especially the math and English departments. They reported that it was necessary to show the links between subject areas, as mentioned in the chapter on initiating a professional learning

community. There is content overlap among the subjects and teachers should take advantage of that to reinforce the same concept across subjects and to show the relevance of these concepts. Furthermore, teachers can extend concepts taught in other subject areas using a constructivist approach to teaching.

When asked about continuing the PLC, Matt responded by saying that the group should include all the departments. A representative from each department, such as the head of department, could go back to the respective departments and share the information with their teachers. Matt also reported that he wanted to sit in on other teachers' classes as a way to share personal practice with his colleagues. Skye wanted to have more solutions and more implementation of solutions that would make a difference in the school and in her classroom.

Another reason to expand membership was to increase the number of ideas and teaching techniques shared. Having more teachers was important because having more people within the group might mean that more ideas and solutions would be suggested. Matt suggested this when talking about getting help from others to deal with one student:

What I wanted to say is that you might run out of ideas on how to deal with one student. But if you have at least another 30 or 40 people who may have had some success with that student, you could find ideas as to how they deal with that student. (M10:Matt,75)

The teachers felt that they had made considerable progress as a learning community within the school. They saw themselves as the core teachers and hoped to expand the membership with others by sharing their vision:

We have a small group of enthusiastic teachers sold on the idea, and my feeling here is that everybody feels that they should try to spread this out and bring more people on board and get more people to catch the vision. . . We have the potential and it's now up to us, as a core, to take this to the wider school community. (M11:Kolin;111)

On several occasions this group of teachers referred to itself as a core group. This indicated that they were the crux of this learning community and their goal was to recruit other members of staff in hope that they too would become enthusiastic about sharing teaching and learning ideas and experiences. Kolin referred to the group this way and to its responsibility to recruit others. He reported that the vision must be shared to expand the PLC's membership. Once membership was increased, then the new people would have a chance to lead sessions and to voice their concerns or to share their thoughts about teaching and learning with the group.

Teachers Taking Initiative

The theme of teachers taking initiative helps to illustrate where these teachers wanted to go with the PLC and how some teachers were thinking. They wanted to see the school improve by teachers taking ownership of their own professional development and acknowledging the need to make things happen as part of their vision for the group.

Throughout the study, some teachers were thinking about the future of the PLC and about creating initiatives for themselves and the group. These initiatives and suggestions provided a sense of direction for the group's progress. Despite the demands of their busy schedules, Geoff suggested that teachers need to find the time to collaborate with colleagues:

If we see a need and we really want it, we have to create it. I believe we very

often recognize the need and we know what we want but for some reason we don't create and sometimes it's not hurting hard enough and we whine about it. If we have from 8 a.m. to 3:15 p.m. and we have to rush to complete the syllabus and we see a need for ourselves, we have to create it somehow. (M1:Geoff;228)

Geoff's convictions about collaborating were consistent over the 12 weeks and he indicated his personal support for continuing the PLC. Geoff's growth was illustrated by his drive towards maintaining dialogue about teaching and learning with his colleagues. He also indicated that there was no need to wait for time allotted by administration; instead, they should continue to make the time as this group had done thus far. In the final meeting, he spoke about meeting in the next term to collaborate. Geoff wanted to maintain camaraderie with his colleagues in this PLC:

What I would personally do next term is to hang around more and talk more with my colleagues from the other departments, especially geography. I always had, I still have, a place in my heart for geography. You might find me over here more often and even within the department. Someone like Matt, I think I want to hang out [with] more often so that we can throw stuff at each other, in a professional way that is. These are the things that I want to do and what I'd like to see happen after putting in this 11 or 12 weeks; I would like to see us here with or without Yamraj, that we take this thing on and we set it in motion. I do not want us to wait until, as much as our administration is sold on the idea, I do not want us to wait on them to timetable us and to do stuff like that. I think we should start putting stuff in place and getting serious. (M11:Geoff;183)

Matt, another science teacher, also had a plan of action for recruiting other teachers for the upcoming term:

We could start by empowering other people, so for the first couple weeks of next term, our aim should be to sell the idea to other people and then we schedule a meeting and see what comes out of it. The first 2 weeks, we could take a break or try to get people to come, and then the next week we could schedule a meeting to hear what's up. From there on, we can use the tell-a-friend-to-tell-a-friend method to get people to join the group. (M11:Matt;185)

Recruitment Procedures

These teachers also spoke about how they would increase the membership of the group. Several teachers talked about introducing the PLC in a general staff meeting. Kyle suggested that "one of the ways you could [attract more teachers] is at a staff meeting, you could put forward the idea and allow the others to see the persons who are being experimented on . . . and then hear from us" (I1:Khyle;139). Teachers indicated that the administrators should be instrumental in inviting other teachers into the PLC. Kyle said:

I would hope that administration would sell the idea and invite people to see what's happening with the PLC and to experiment I would like administration to throw out the idea and then see who would be interested, then we as members could sell the idea too. We may start small but it can grow from there. If we get two, three, four other persons, then we move on from there. (I4:Khyle;29-32)

Geoff was also in support of administration recruiting other teachers to join the group. He also stressed getting heads of department on board and then having them get

other teachers in their respective departments involved. Similarly, Kolin wanted the heads of departments involved in recruiting other teachers. The following excerpt presents a sequence of suggested events to recruit additional members:

Yamraj: How would you suggest that we get more teachers?

Kolin: May be we could make it an initiative at the subject levels, for example, if we make it official that geography will collaborate with science and we work it that way. Then we work during school time, because a lot of people have activities after school, that is classes or so on, that they would want to go to after school.

Yamraj: So you would want to see the group bigger and more people from the two departments and not just the core group that we have now.

Kolin: Right.

Yamraj: And not necessarily integrating more subject areas?

Kolin: Personally, I think it would be best to have people from all the areas. I mean, even with the two departments, it would be more fruitful if we would have more people, more input.

Yamraj: But how would we attract those other people? For the core group now, what would you suggest?

Kolin: Outside of the core?

Yamraj: Yes, outside of the few of us now.

Kolin: I am not sure. Like I said earlier, it would probably be easier for people to come if the timing was different, if it were during school time. If we could make a decision at the head of department level, for example, let us see where we can

collaborate? That's what we've been focusing on so far, collaboration between two departments. We could do it more top down.

Yamraj: So we'll have the heads meeting and then the two groups.

Kolin: Yeah. (I2:Kolin;49-71)

Other teachers suggested different ways to recruit new teachers. Matt said that he would be "sneaky" and do it through lunch meetings. He would talk about the learning community and convince people to join. Katie, Jamie, and Skye would prefer to talk to other teachers one-to-one about the group to show them the benefits with the intent of interesting them in the PLC and subsequently getting them to join. Skye stressed recruiting the people whom you know and who can contribute to the group, as well as, extending to other departments beyond the two currently involved.

Criteria for Future Members

Although teachers suggested criteria for new members, one teacher highlighted the characteristics that currently exist in the group. These characteristics should also be sought when selecting prospective members of the PLC. Kyle talked about this group's high level of enthusiasm, excitement, and willingness to learn. He said "we are on the right track" (I2:Khyle;107).

When asked about who to invite to join the PLC, the teachers were clear that invited teachers should have specific characteristics. Matt described new members in the following terms:

People who are open-minded and who are willing to learn or share, that's the basic key elements of a member in the PLC. Willing to share your ideas and willing to be receptive to other people's ideas . . . Trust is necessary too, because there are some sensitive issues to be discussed and some teachers might express

their feelings or anger on an issue and then it goes back to administration and that can destroy the whole PLC. There must be an element of trust in there.

(I4:Matt;42/46)

Matt's description identified many of the same criteria that other teachers suggested.

New members must not be excuse makers or mediocre teachers who are not motivated and passionate about teaching. Katie added that "we need people who are receptive, not people who will say, 'oh but so and so and oh but so and so'" (I1:Katie;101). Kolin said that invited teachers must also display a high level of passion for teaching.

Other Stakeholders

In addition to the teachers, Kolin wanted to include parents as important stakeholders in the PLC. From the beginning of the study, he had been an advocate of including parents. He was convinced that having their support would make the PLC successful and fruitful for the school and, more importantly, the students:

I would like to see us reach out to parents, get parents more involved in this whole PLC. We have the stakeholders and not just the teachers and the students. Parents play a vital role and I would like for us to get some parents on board, beginning with the ones who are willing, who are already there. And create a core that can later spread to others because, if the parents see the teachers as the enemy, if we could change that culture, if we could change that perception, then we can achieve a lot. (M11:Kolin;187)

Kolin wanted parents to be aware of what the PLC was about and what we were doing in the school. That awareness should have positive effects on the students' learning as well.

Unfortunately, the expansion of the group was minimal during the 12 weeks of data collection. At the second to last meeting, when the administration was invited to the PLC to hear about what transpired with the group of collaborating teachers, Matt invited a colleague from the mathematics department. As the only other teacher who was invited to any of the meetings, this teacher seemed impressed with what transpired in that meeting and about what was taking place in our learning community. In his exit comments he said:

I was very pleased with the discussion and the group in general. I would be very interested in joining the group to learn and share my experiences with the group. I would also encourage the other members of my department to attend the meetings. (EC:Jack;1)

Apparently, other participants were not comfortable enough to invite a colleague.

The participants described themselves as the core of the PLC and they described how they would expand membership across the school. They provided specific criteria for new members, such as people who are trustworthy and would share their vision of productive conversation and collaboration. One teacher also wanted to have parents join the PLC, with a view to breaking down existing gaps between parents' and teachers' aspirations for the work of the school.

Time and Space to Meet

Upon realizing the benefits of a PLC, these teachers wanted to have time allocated within the school's regular timetable to create officially recognized time and space for collaboration in their learning community. Kolin said "I would like to see is a slot timetabled into the school's program to allow us to continue the collaboration and, of course, we are talking about reaching a wider, numerical growth with the group, increasing membership" (M11:Kolin;173). From the first meeting, teachers said they wanted to meet during the school day. Betty said, "You might want to talk to administration to have time fit into the timetable during the school day" (M1:Betty;260) to dialogue about teaching and learning.

Teachers indicated that once they had the group functioning well, they would not meet as often. They indicated they would go from meeting once per week to once every two weeks to update the other members. Geoff said that "as [the PLC] develops, I don't think we would have to meet once per week" (I3:Geoff;169). Kolin agreed by saying "I don't think it is necessary to meet once per week beyond the initial set-up stages, once you know where you are going. We won't need to meet as frequently." (I3:Kolin;107). When I asked how they would determine that point when the frequency of the meetings should decrease, Geoff responded:

When we make it a habit of interacting with each other, not only during the meetings, but during our teaching sessions. When it becomes part of us. . . .
When we say "come over to my class" and "go to another person's class looking for ideas and giving feedback." When this becomes part of us, then we are maturing; we understand that. The once-per-week meeting will not be

discussing what we ought to be doing, but to see where can we go and how can we improve. (I3:Geoff;173/177)

And Kolin said, "I guess you would know. When you find that in meetings you really don't have anything much to talk about. You know that you are on stream, so you meet less frequently just to report" (I3:Kolin;113). Contrary to Geoff and Kolin, Matt thought it was necessary to meet weekly and explained why. He said that the group would need to meet "every week, because in 2 weeks, it would take too much time to discuss what happened in those 2 weeks and things will be fresh in our minds [if we meet weekly]" (I3:Matt;165).

Participants suggested that the time allocated should be used for more than dialoguing about teaching and should include more professional development opportunities as well. Although teachers saw the PLC as personalized professional development, they wanted to have more workshops to increase the collective learning within the group:

[The PLC] shouldn't be limited to just sitting and talking. It could be different things; you have teacher workshops, you are refreshing yourself for one day. We can have activities to keep the unity within the school body because one of the PLC's main aims is to keep unity within the school body, instead of coming every time and you deal with this stuff, you could find other things to do. It's more like a social setting, it's not every time you will deal with stuff that happens at school. You could forget those troubles and you come back feeling refreshed. It is an avenue for greater things, not just professional sharing, but socializing too. To me, this school seems so divided and, if we could get back that unity within the school or even professionally, things will take off. If Katie and

everybody are cool, we will share ideas, so it's not just about getting the professional part of it, it's bringing back the social, because we all work in a social setting here. (M11:Matt;179)

With these words, Matt provided a concise description of how the PLC might function in the future. He emphasized the necessity of socializing as a part of collaborating with colleagues. These teachers have also justified why they need time in the school day to meet and share ideas. The next section considers the need to plan across subject areas.

Planning based on Syllabi

As highlighted in the chapter focused on initiating a PLC, these teachers wanted to make clear the overlap between various subject areas. They thought it was imperative for teachers to plan together to be able to teach in a manner that allowed for proper subject integration. Geoff said:

I think that we still need to identify more of the areas where our subjects cross. We did it in plate tectonics, but if we can see or look for more areas, then we would see more of a need. As a past geography teacher, I know there are many more areas in common with geography and science; therefore, I can see that we really need to do this thing. But if I was not exposed to geography, I might be thinking, that it is just one area. (I3:Geoff;193)

Matt also explained why we should develop both curricula simultaneously, emphasizing that it is important to show the links. Matt said, "You could marry the two curricula and look for similarities and have them clear cut so that from then you could plan out where you want to go" (M4:Matt;6). Early planning was on his agenda as he explained: "What we could do, before we start teaching the topics, let's say next school

year, when things are fresh. Next term we could plan and correlate them.” Kolin emphasized the need for a “plan before the outline [for the school year]” (M5;458/460).

Geoff suggested a specific topic to plan for the upcoming term:

The first thing is to identify the common areas within the syllabi. Next term, if anything can be merged in some way, let us suppose we are doing something on the terrestrial environment and if some of the concepts are covered during that time in geography, then we [in science] can already identify with that. This way, by the time next term comes around, which is not too far away, we can start doing some stuff together. (I2:Geoff;80)

These teachers had clear and specific ideas about what they wanted to see happen with the group in the next term and school year with respect to identify areas of overlap in the syllabi of the various subjects taught in the school.

Leadership

Unfortunately but perhaps not surprisingly, the group failed to meet after I left the research site. One reason suggested by two teachers was the lack of leadership within the group. Apparently, they needed a leader to mediate and get the group together. Leadership was one of the elements necessary for initiating a PLC and, clearly, the leader must be present from the initiating through to the sustaining stages of such a group.

Although the participants were pleased by the support of the administration, they knew that they themselves had to be active within the group. They wanted the administrators to be aware of what they were doing and to provide resources as necessary. However, they did not want to rely on the administration to attend or initiate

group meetings and this approach seemed to function quite well while I was present. As teachers indicated early in the study, they felt more open to talk about more issues without the administrators being present. Matt said, "I would feel rather uncomfortable saying anything around administration" (I2:Matt;60).

When asked if I stopped leading the group too soon by allowing the other teachers to lead a session, Geoff said, "I don't think you ever stopped leading anyway. I think your method was different than what somebody else might use" (M11:Geoff;281). Matt and Kolin agreed with Geoff. These teachers appreciated the shared leadership and my attempts to ensure that I did not dominate the sessions. They seemed to enjoy the flexibility to share in their own way with their colleagues, while addressing common concerns and issues. Matt reported that "one thing I like is that you leave the floor open, you are not dominating. That's a problem I would have, if the facilitator was dominating the floor" (I2:Matt;163). Skye also commented on the peer leadership of meetings: "It's been good. It was beneficial because everybody had a different way of doing the topics as well" (M11:Skye;109).

Apparently, learning from each other seemed to be powerful because of the relevance to their situations at this school. This was evident in a comment by Kolin:

There is something to be said about learning from your peers as against learning [from] outside professionals. You get the impression that these people are from someplace else, but [it's different] when it's people who share your experiences and are speaking from the same perspective. It's easier to accept, I find, if you feel it's coming from the teachers. This peer learning is good. (M11:Kolin;307)

It seems that the shared leadership was well accepted by the group and Geoff thought it might continue in my absence. He was optimistic that the group would continue and

outlined his plans to meet to discuss more about teaching and learning but not lamenting on the negative behaviours of students:

I think we take it from here. I think so, we will. I am very optimistic that we would pull through with something, even if it doesn't go beyond geography and science. I definitely will be one of those who would be trying to get my head to buy in. I mean our relationship is one that we can talk openly and freely with each other. That is where I think we should start and once it starts there, then what have something we can discuss on the departmental level. I don't want to have a 5-minute meeting to hear that the students are this and that or not performing. What can we do to alleviate the problem? We rarely go there. The only control we have is of ourselves. I cannot control you. We can have bright ideas, have PTA and so on, but you cannot change any person outside of yourself. So if they can see that and figure, any little thing I can do about me. It may work, it may not work, but at least there was an attempt to see some kind of change. (I4:Geoff;56)

Despite some optimism that the group would continue after I left, two teachers were not sure that would be the case. Katie reported that she was uncertain about the fate of the group after I left and doubted that they would continue to meet. Skye shared the same sentiments and felt the group would not meet without me because I was seen as the leader of the group.

Katie, the veteran geography teacher, provided an overall picture of what she experienced in this group and what she would like the PLC to be:

I am of the feeling that all of us here are empowered to an extent; the degree will vary from individual to individual, based on the weeks we have had together. I

know that if we can come together as a professional group and we can thrash out, after sharing ideas, thoughts, experiences, a lot of problems can be eliminated, partially or wholly. We can have much more support for each other and we can have more effective teaching, but it all comes back to you. How committed you are to being part of a group to promote something for the good of everybody and I am not just seeing that we are going to set up a PLC. We have to get people with that mindset who are willing to work, based on what a PLC is. Like Yamraj said, teachers are empowered. I am a person who loves to share ideas. Sometimes I won't even ask, I will run across with a piece of paper with something on it to all the teachers because I feel it will work and it can help somebody. We need to be more open, we need to behave like teachers. I feel hurt when I hear the problems Matt is having. When you see enthusiastic people, full of energy, you want to tap into them; you want to support that person and their ideas, even if you don't think it's the best, work on it with them to see the best in it. (M11:Katie;205)

Summary

This chapter describes where the participants hoped this group would go after the initial 12 weeks. Their goals were to expand membership by inviting open-minded colleagues who were willing to share ideas and techniques and to invite other departments to join their nascent learning community. The participants also wanted administration to allocate time and space for them to meet and collaborate within the school day. This planning should include early planning of similar topics across subject areas to make teaching smoother across subjects. In addition, they wanted to have a

leader to guide them and keep them collaborating over time. These teachers wanted to make this collaboration a regular occurrence where they can observe each other and continue their conversations about teaching and learning.

This chapter and the previous four chapters have analyzed the data in terms of five themes related to the study's initial questions. Analysis of data allows us to understand and interpret the experiences of these teachers who participated in an effort to create a professional learning community of teachers within one school. The chapters describe what was necessary to initiate a PLC and the challenges and benefits of participation in a PLC of teachers as well as the key features of a PLC. This chapter completes the analysis by reporting what the teachers hoped to see in the future of their group. The next chapter concludes the study with discussion of the themes, presentation of the major findings, as well as practical and theoretical implications arising from this study.

CHAPTER 9

Discussion and Conclusions

This final chapter presents discussion and conclusions of the study. I begin by responding to the research questions posed at the outset. This chapter also summarizes implications for teachers, administrators, and schools wishing to initiate a PLC of teachers. I conclude the chapter with suggestions for further research.

Answers to Research Questions

In chapters 4 through 8, I have reported the major themes that emerged from analysis of the data, an analysis that began with open coding using software for qualitative analysis. In this opening section of chapter 9, I use these themes to provide responses to the seven research questions posed in Chapter 1.

Question 1: What do teachers perceive as a professional learning community?

The participants in this professional learning community had perceptions of what a PLC should look like and how it should operate. The participants expected the PLC to feature collaboration among teachers as well as sharing of teaching practices. The main goal for the teachers was to improve their teaching practice. In addition to improving practice, these teachers focused on how to improve learning for their students and better meet the students' needs. In Chapter 8, Katie provided a detailed summary of features of a PLC.

During the study, the teachers actively shared their practice and experiences to help their colleagues. They demonstrated an atmosphere of trust and comfort that enabled them to ask for guidance with respect to issues such as classroom management and discipline. They perceived the PLC as a forum for finding solutions to problems they faced in the school as well as a venue for expressing their concerns about teaching and learning.

Question 2: What do teachers perceive as challenges in initiating a professional learning community of teachers?

Analysis of the data reveals that these teachers perceived many challenges in setting up a PLC of teachers. They reported some of the challenges that they faced and anticipated challenges that could arise over time. The participants experienced difficulty with the timing of the group meetings because we met after school and they strongly suggested a time within the school's timetable. The time after school conflicted with family and other obligations. Meeting after school was chosen because there were no common periods in which all the participants were available at the same time.

Finding time to meet was also an issue because of the school's many demands on teachers' time. The teachers reported many deadlines and rules to be followed and, as a result, little time was available to meet to collaborate with their colleagues about teaching and learning. The school timetable was such that the teachers found it difficult to have the same period free to collaborate or observe their colleagues' classes.

Curricula were implemented without considering the extent of overlap between subjects and ways that teachers might work together to address curriculum expectations. In addition, teachers were not able to show students the links between the

different subject areas. Teachers also reported using time in a less than optimal way because they had to plan for lessons and assessments that might have already been addressed in another subject. Planning a lesson on a topic that had been taught already meant that the teachers teaching that topic for the second time could have been doing something more constructive, such as planning for another topic or building links and extending applications.

The physical layout of the school tended to discourage collaboration among the teachers. The buildings and departments were spread out across a large campus and they were generally grouped in areas by subject department, as described in Chapter 3. All the science teachers were in the same vicinity and all the technical teachers were in their own area. Because the campus had many separate buildings, some teachers did not find it easy to walk across the campus to meet with other teachers. This seemed to create several schools within a school, according to discipline. Teachers were isolated and tended not to socialize with teachers from other departments. To perpetuate the divisions by department, each department had its own staffroom, thus encouraging a sense of isolation from teachers in the other departments. These structural features were a challenge to bringing the teachers together.

There were also significant personal challenges to initiating a PLC of teachers. These challenges included student and teacher attitudes, inconsistent attendance by teachers, a lack of dedication and commitment, and a low level of participation by teachers. The participants reported that some of the teachers in the core group were not as dedicated as others and expressed concerns that other teachers in the school might not be dedicated to a PLC if it were to expand. Other teachers might not be committed enough to attend meetings regularly. For effective collaboration, and to ensure teachers

are all working towards the same goals, attendance should be regular and punctual. Some teachers attended the PLC but their participation was minimal, which may have been caused by these teachers needing to get to know the others in the group. As time progressed, participation by all teachers increased. The participants indicated that selling a PLC to the other teachers in that school would be difficult because of poor attitudes towards learning and reluctance to accept ideas that did not originate with them. Some teachers in the school did not seem to push themselves very hard and some teachers in the PLC thought others were not motivated to teach, but rather wanted to collect a pay cheque and leave the campus as soon as the bell rang at the end of the day.

The school's culture seemed to play an important role in influencing whether a PLC of teachers would survive. The division among teachers along immigration lines was challenging for these teachers given that all members of the PLC were expatriates. This made it difficult for them to talk to teachers who were born in the country about the PLC and its activities. Some teachers frowned on what the PLC teachers were doing by collaborating about teaching and learning. Teachers in the PLC also reported that the lack of camaraderie within the school made it difficult for them to invite others to join and suggested that this would have a negative impact on effective collaboration among all the teachers of the school.

Staff meetings were viewed as a potential forum for collective learning but these meetings failed as a place for teachers to learn. The participants thought that the school, as a whole, did not provide enough opportunities for collective learning and that the lack of such opportunities would hinder the progress of the school unless staff meetings were restructured to include more professional development and sharing of ideas and techniques.

Most of the challenges were congruent with what the research has already shown, yet some abstract ideas were provided as challenges to initiating this group of teachers. For example, teachers' commitment to teaching and learning was one of the challenges that the teachers identified in this study. Teacher dedication and commitment cannot be measured and is not easily identifiable. Although one can assume that the actions taken display some level of teacher dedication, it is difficult to ascertain what commitment may mean in any particular case.

Question 3: What does shared vision among the teachers in a beginning professional learning community look like?

The shared vision of the school generally might be judged as weak but the professional learning community managed to develop its own shared vision over the course of its meetings. Although the teachers did not seem to identify with the school's vision, they could see where they all wanted to go with the PLC. They wanted to have teachers create more and better learning opportunities for their students. These teachers were meeting to improve their teaching practice and to learn how to motivate their students. In the process, they too were motivated to create more hands-on learning experiences for their students.

Another part of their shared vision involved greater integration of teaching subjects to reduce the duplication and time that was wasted by preparation of similar worksheets by several people in one or more departments. They wanted to share teaching ideas and techniques as well as the workload by breaking down the tasks that they had to do. Through the sharing of ideas, teachers were hoping to have a pool of ideas to draw from for future teaching.

The shared vision of this PLC of teachers seemed to be motivated by a desire to enhance students' learning. To enhance learning for their students, these teachers strove to improve their teaching through subject integration, team work, cooperation, and collaboration with colleagues. With a focus on student learning, these teachers wanted to create more student-centred classrooms, thereby providing students with more opportunities to learn while raising the overall standard of education.

Question 4: How do the teachers begin to exhibit collective learning in the initiation phase of a professional learning community?

These teachers exhibited collective learning during all of the meetings in the PLC. Initially, I was the facilitator in the meetings. In the first meeting, participants dialogued about issues but I described what the expectations were for the group and what the research was about. The second meeting involved a discussion about classroom management and discipline, a topic suggested by a few teachers in their interviews as a topic for discussion. The first-year teacher asked many questions related to classroom management and the other teachers willingly answered her questions.

From the third group meeting onwards, each teacher had an opportunity to facilitate a session individually. They did various presentations that ranged from discussions about collaborating in groups to discussions about attitude and learning in the students. There was a PowerPoint presentation on using technology in the classroom and in teaching. We also had two planning and teaching sessions where the teachers looked at the geography and science syllabi and planned several objectives for work. This was beneficial as the objectives were decided on and the teachers discussed how they would approach each objective. They discussed a detailed description of

building a working model of the water cycle and developed the idea of one assessment for the two subject areas. This joint planning seemed to be what the teachers wanted because they praised that session and said that they left that session with something more concrete than other sessions, which engaged them in more abstract thinking.

There was a teaching session on volcanoes and earthquakes. A volunteer from each department taught on that topic and others were given a chance to provide feedback to the teachers who taught. During this session, teachers experienced different approaches by the teachers from the two departments. The younger science teacher highlighted the use of technology, such as online video clips and animated movements of tectonic plates shifting, to bring the world into the classroom, and the other teachers were very impressed by this suggestion. The older geography teacher relied more on lecturing, with a video to summarize. Following presentations by the two teachers, the group provided feedback about the lesson and examined through discussion the different approaches to the same objectives on one topic. These early signs of collective learning contributed to a positive attitude within the group.

Question 5: What does shared personal practice among the teachers in a beginning professional learning community look like?

When I arrived at the school, shared personal practice was rare. The only people who did any classroom observations were the heads of department who observed for evaluation purposes. In the meetings, shared professional practice was displayed through dialogue about teaching and learning. Teachers shared techniques as well as ways of disciplining students. They shared what did and did not work for them in their classes. The teachers also shared experiences from previous schools and how they

learned from those experiences. As mentioned in the benefits chapter, many experiences, both positive and negative, were also shared among the teachers in the PLC. The future of the learning community also included many avenues of exploration for teaching and learning.

Unfortunately, during the 12 weeks of data collection, these teachers did not invite their colleagues to observe them nor were they invited to others' classrooms. The participants did not meet to discuss students' work or create tests. Outside of the PLC meetings, it was difficult to say what shared personal practice might look like at this school because it was not the norm. Although the group's members said that they were willing to have people observe them, they did not invite others to observe their teaching to provide feedback. They said they would like to observe others' classrooms but they did not make any efforts to do so. Outside the formal meetings, no teacher initiatives enabled me to collect data on shared personal practice of these teachers.

The teachers did project that in the next term they wanted to team teach with their colleagues. They also said that they wanted to observe others' classrooms and be observed by their colleagues. One teacher suggested that he would like to conduct mini-workshops with his colleagues to share technology, resources, and assessments based on the new science curriculum.

Question 6: What are some of the critical features of initiating a professional learning community of teachers?

The teachers reported on the features they thought were important in initiating a professional learning community. Teachers must see that there is a need for a PLC and, in this case, teachers wanted to find solutions to some of the real problems they were

facing in daily practice. The teachers sought greater subject integration to alleviate teaching the same topics more than once to the same students, thereby making better use of their time. They also saw planning between departments as important. The participants seemed to benefit from the planning and teaching sessions that the PLC conducted. These sessions were characterized by high energy and enthusiastic discussions about the learning opportunities for students. The teachers shared many ideas about their approaches to teaching and how they could share the work within the two departments by creating links between the two subjects of geography and science.

Participants indicated that they needed some specific arrangements in place, such as time to meet to collaborate and share ideas about teaching and learning. They wanted time within the regular school timetable to avoid conflicts between the PLC and after-school obligations to the school and to their families. Although space was not a problem for this group, space could have become an issue if the group expanded to include teachers from other departments. This group was particularly fortunate, in my opinion, because the large room the PLC used was air conditioned, making it comfortable and reducing noise and distractions, and the furniture could easily be shifted to suit various activities.

There were interpersonal and social elements that were necessary to initiate this PLC of teachers. These included the support of administration and other stakeholders, such as parents. The PLC also needed a leader to facilitate meetings and provide guidance. Administrative support would be necessary for the group to be provided the time to meet during the school day. Administrators would be responsible for allocating money if costs were associated with the PLC. Administrators need to be aware of what is occurring within the PLC in case there are initiatives that require their help and

support. Parental support, in contrast, was seen as important to help students understand that there is a partnership between the school and the home that can enhance learning experiences in school.

To initiate a PLC of teachers requires an appropriate attitude. Teachers must be motivated and committed to the vision of helping students to succeed. They can do this by trying to improve their own teaching and learning. Teachers who want to initiate a PLC of teachers must be willing to share and be receptive to others' sharing their ideas and techniques as well. These teachers should not be afraid to ask for help when they need it. It should not be seen as a sign of weakness but as a sign of camaraderie and professional commitment. In summary, teachers must be willing to be continuous learners.

Question 7: What benefits do teachers perceive in initiating a professional learning community of teachers?

These teachers reported many benefits to participating in the professional learning community. They perceived that saving time through subject integration was a big benefit. Sharing ideas and techniques was also seen as beneficial because the meetings provided teachers with more ideas to choose from when dealing with issues in the classroom. When the teachers shared their personal experiences, others could see new ways of handling situations. Through discussions, these teachers were able to provide a sense of direction as to where they wanted to go.

Professional development was a major benefit in the view of these teachers, because the school did not provide many opportunities for professional development. The PLC provided many professional development opportunities; each meeting was a

learning experience that allowed teachers to grow professionally. Teachers also reported that the PLC was a personalized learning opportunity because it addressed issues that were relevant to this particular group of teachers.

Effective planning sessions provided teachers with a sense of direction to map out further development of their teaching and other professional activities. This map helped teachers to see the overlaps of content between subjects and to realize that similar topics in different subjects did not need to be taught twice. By reducing repetition, they hoped to make better use of their time.

On a social level, teachers got to know each other better. Some teachers had never spoken to each other before the PLC was initiated. Because of the interactions with colleagues in the PLC, the teachers reported less loneliness and a reduction in their level of professional isolation. They realized that they were not the only teachers experiencing specific emotions and problems, and this was comforting. They were able to share many concerns and frustrations with each other.

Most of the teachers experienced changes in attitudes and embraced new practices. These included being more open-minded and more willing to experiment in their classes. The PLC teachers also worked to make their teaching practice more student-centred. Group meetings and discussions made the teachers more conscious of their teaching and of how they taught their students. Several teachers reported that, through participation in the PLC, they discovered a renewed vigour for teaching. Thus there were a number of professional benefits arising from the early meetings of this professional learning community.

Connections to Previous Research

This section discusses the findings from the analysis of the data. The group of participating teachers displayed a number of recognized characteristics of a professional learning community, as reported in previous research. These included shared practice, collective learning, and collaboration about teaching and learning. This study focuses on the complexities and challenges of initiating a PLC of teachers in one school in the English-speaking Caribbean. Despite the reported challenges of initiating a PLC of teachers, the participants reported benefits in being involved in such a community.

Characteristics of a Professional Learning Community

Collaboration was a major factor in this professional learning community. Huffman and Hipp (2003) reported that teachers in a PLC plan collaboratively, solve problems, and improve learning opportunities. These teachers planned collectively on two occasions within the group. They designed a unit of work on the water cycle, including a shared assessment of building a working model of the water cycle. They also conducted a teaching session with feedback for the teachers who taught the same unit of work. They also discussed a range of relevant professional issues and identified several solutions. The teachers discussed assessment at length and realized why some forms of assessment were not possible in this school, for reasons that included a lack of resources. They concluded the assessment meeting by saying that they were not addressing their students' various learning styles. As a result, they were disadvantaging the students who do not perform well on pen-and-paper tests, which was the main mode of assessment at the school.

Through collaboration and dialogue about teaching and learning, the teachers began to change their teaching practice. As reported in the benefits chapter, many of

their practices became more student-centred, with the obvious aim of improving students' learning. One teacher reported taking his students out of the classroom into the school grounds to create more authentic learning experiences. Overall, the teachers became more aware of how their students learned.

Trust, another characteristic of a PLC, was also established in this group. Teachers reported that there had to be a significant level of trust to be able to discuss some of the sensitive issues they explored in their meetings. Mutual trust, respect, and support are characteristics of a PLC, according to Bolam et al. (2005). Bryk et al. (1999) also reported that social trust among faculty members is a strong facilitator in PLCs. These teachers were able to talk about many topics, including problems arising from their status as immigrants to the island. Mutual trust and respect are essential for the participants in a PLC to share their significant professional concerns (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Louis et al., 1995).

By sharing leadership of the group, each teacher was able to facilitate a weekly session of personal interest that the other teachers seemed to appreciate. Encouraging the teachers to choose their own topics of discussions enabled them to direct their own learning in the group. This practice of becoming more independent learners could also be transferred to their students. One of the goals for these teachers was to have students become more self-directed and independent learners. This was a trait of authentic pedagogy in the study on restructuring schools reported by Louis et al. (1996).

These teachers also considered themselves to be continuous learners. They supported each other as learners (Hord, 2003) and they were open to learning new ideas and techniques from their colleagues. They shared new information as they received it and they considered each PLC meeting to be a learning experience. Early in the study

the teachers all claimed to be learners and open to new innovations in education. This was displayed as they shared new information about teaching and learning and some of the teachers acted on that advice in their classrooms.

Before the professional learning community was initiated, the geography department, the smaller of the two departments, was already meeting regularly to plan units of work. Similarly, the group of teachers in the PLC met regularly to discuss more about teaching and learning. Because we faced challenges with meeting after school, the teachers suggested having time within the school day to collaborate, plan lessons, and share more techniques with their colleagues. Teachers need this time together to plan and to focus on their goals (Little, 2003; Louis et al., 1996).

One PLC characteristic that did not seem to materialize at this school involves the sharing of personal practice or the deprivatization of practice. These teachers said that they wanted to do more classroom observations and provide feedback but they never followed through. Although they did not observe each other teaching, there was one group session in which two teachers, one from science and one from geography, taught a short unit on volcanoes and the other teachers provided feedback about the two teaching approaches, from science and geography perspectives. Here they shared personal practice on a limited level and it might have been more beneficial if they had actually observed each other in the classroom with their students.

This group of participants had many different skills and strengths with regards to their knowledge of teaching. Some teachers specialized in content areas and others had strengths in teaching strategies or technology in the classroom. The collective knowledge of the group exceeded that of any one teacher (Grossman et al., 2001); as a result, the meetings were significant learning experiences for the teachers. The diversity

of skills and strengths was reflected in the different approaches the teachers used when they facilitated PLC meetings.

Throughout the term collective learning was occurring through the many discussions and dialogues about teaching and learning successes some teachers experienced in their classrooms. This meant that they were dialoguing about best practices in the classroom and this is a feature of effective PLCs in previous studies (Chapman, 2000). These teachers shared a vision to improve their teaching practice, so sharing best practices was an ideal avenue to try to achieve that vision. Teachers were able to discuss what was successful and why it was successful. This type of conversation provided teachers with multiple ways to approach teaching their students.

Challenges for this Professional Learning Community

The study considers both benefits and challenges of initiating a PLC of teachers in one school. One of the challenges that Bolam and his colleagues (2005) faced was resistance to change, and this was apparent in this PLC as well. When we discussed the expansion of membership, the teachers were reluctant to talk about the PLC with their colleagues. They also reported that some teachers would not buy in, partly because they do not like change.

The school's culture was found to be a challenge to initiating a PLC of teachers, and this is consistent with reports in the literature. Leo and Cowan (2000) reported that poor school culture and a lack of trust and collaboration were all barriers to creating a PLC. The school's culture described by the participants indicated that both students and teachers often displayed poor attitudes towards teaching and learning. Changing the school's culture would require major effort by all teachers and administrators. The small core group of teachers in the PLC could not change the culture of the school by

itself. As one of the teachers observed, the school's culture reflects the society's culture, which means there need to be changes in attitudes from people outside of the school as well.

Another challenge the group faced was the physical separation of the teachers. The school was spread out and, as Glazer and his colleagues (2004) reported, regular meetings in the same area facilitate collaboration. Kruse et al. (1995) also reported that when teachers are close to each other, then the opportunities for observations and conversations about teaching and student learning increases. The physical layout of the school seemed to hinder collaboration across departments. The school functioned as many other high schools in that it seemed to have several smaller schools within a school. This resulted from the departmentalized layout and physical segregation of the teachers. This was also evident in the participants' comments about the challenges of getting the departments to meet, a result consistent with findings from studies by Louis and Marks (1994), Louis et al. (1995), and Bolam et al. (2005). They too reported that high schools tended to be made up of many small PLCs because of the departmental structure. This was one reason why the staff did not function well as a whole-school PLC.

Benefits of this Professional Learning Community

One benefit that the participants reported was that the PLC was a personalized form of professional development because it addressed many issues that were relevant to this particular group of teachers. They considered it a learning experience and appreciated the fact that they were interactive and not being "talked at." Some of the teachers welcomed this professional development because it provided many opportunities for sharing ideas and for collaboration. More importantly, it provided

professional dialogue about teaching and learning and ways to enhance the learning experiences of their students. Furthermore, this PLC illustrated that these teachers could take initiative with respect to their own professional learning by selecting the various topics that were discussed in each of the sessions.

The PLC seemed to enhance socialization among the teachers and reduce isolation. It has been argued in the literature that a PLC reduces isolation among teachers (Little, 1987; Fullan, 1991). This group's members reported that they were not as isolated as they had been prior to joining the PLC, and they did not feel alone in many of their concerns. They thought they were alone until they learned that other teachers in the group shared the same concerns, and this provided a sense of comfort. In addition, they were able to express their frustrations and concerns about the school in the PLC.

The PLC context also provided a place for teachers to get to know other teachers they might not have otherwise spoken with. Participants were able to dialogue about teaching and learning as they came to understand others' perspectives on teaching and learning. The teachers shared personal experiences about their classrooms and thereby learned more about how their colleagues dealt with particular classroom situations.

There are many benefits as well as challenges in initiating a PLC of teachers. This group demonstrated that its members could function as a learning community for a short period of time because it displayed features that were common to other PLCs. The failure to meet after the initial 12 weeks confirms that a leader must be present to ensure that the group continues to meet. These teachers seemed to respond better to a leader who was familiar with the school but was not in a position to create power struggles with them at the school. As a former teacher at the school, I was familiar with the school's culture and thus I was able to relate quickly and directly to their issues. As a

former teacher turned researcher, I was not in a position to create power struggles because I was not in a position of authority over them.

The participants discussed several issues and shared many experiences and ideas in the meetings and in their interviews. When they were asked to document specific situations by writing about classroom successes and failures or anything they had tried in their classrooms, they were more reluctant. This was evident in the collected data for the study. There were large amounts of dialogue data from interviews and meetings, but there was very little in the journals and exit comments. These teachers preferred to talk rather than write about their concerns, issues, problems, successes or teaching practice. A few of the male teachers indicated it might have been a “gender thing,” implying that men do not like to write about their experiences. The female teachers also indicated that they do not like to write and gave that as their reason for minimal documentation of their teaching. One teacher simply and honestly said that he was too lazy to write in a journal.

Evolution of a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

To illustrate the evolution of this learning community of teachers, I compared two meetings, the second and the ninth. The second meeting was early in the study, but not the first. The ninth meeting was the last session that was facilitated by a teacher in the group.

The comparison of these meetings considered several dimensions: the facilitator, the attendance and participation, the topic chosen, the overall attitudes of the teachers, and the results. At the outset I facilitated the meetings, including the second meeting. The topics discussed were ones suggested by the teachers in the first round of individual

interviews. I spoke a fair amount more in this meeting than in ninth meeting, which was facilitated by Khyle and Kolin. Their topic was student attitude and how it affects their learning.

The attendance was lower in the second meeting, with four teachers, than in the ninth meeting, where six attended. The second meeting was dominated by Katie and Matt, while the most questions were asked by Skye, the first-year teacher who was most concerned with classroom management and discipline issues. In the ninth meeting, all the teachers were contributing and participating. Although Khyle began with a long introduction, all the teachers spoke to the topic, and no one teacher dominated the meeting. Despite the fact that the second meeting lasted longer than the ninth, the amount of interaction was greater in the ninth meeting. The ninth meeting was shorter than usual due to a required lecture earlier that afternoon that had ran over time. When the teachers were leaving the meeting, they were still talking about attitudes and the impact of student attitudes on learning.

The topics in both meetings were chosen by the teachers. The second meeting dealt with a problem in the classroom and a teacher's need for specific solutions to immediate problems. The topic in the ninth meeting encompassed many more issues and focused more on a big-picture problem at the school, as the teachers examined parental and societal involvement and its impact on the school and student learning. The teachers dialogued about how attitude affects many aspects of teaching and learning and why they need to work to involve parents more with their children's education and possibly with their professional learning community.

The approaches to the meetings were also different. The meeting that I facilitated was structured more around tasks that I wanted them to complete, such as the

free writing exercise that was discontinued after this meeting because the teachers were not receptive to it. In that meeting I explained the events that I had planned, and I brought teachers back on task when we deviated from the topic at hand. In the ninth meeting, teachers did not write but they talked, as they preferred to do when it came to considering teaching and learning issues. In the second meeting, teachers provided advice on what to do to control classes and what worked for them, but in the ninth meeting, more abstract issues were discussed, such as the effect of parental involvement on student learning and the ways that poor student attitudes may hinder learning. The teachers also discussed the passive learning that was plaguing the school and how that affected students' ability to function outside the classroom.

During the 12 weeks at the research site, the teachers took significant responsibility for their own learning. In addition, there was more participation over time while at the school, and this may be attributed to the growing level of trust among the participants. The teachers shared the leadership without question and they selected topics relevant to them and the school. Overall, there were shifts in attitude, participation, and meeting outcomes. The teachers dialogued more about teaching and learning and they made plans to continue into the next term and school year.

Complexities of Initiating a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

The complexities in this study must be extrapolated through reading of the analyzed data, for the complexities are not as obvious as the challenges and benefits of initiating a professional learning community. These complexities are associated primarily with the challenges of initiating a PLC of teachers. Complexities identified include the level of collaboration in the school as a result of this PLC initiative and this

“new” practice that was started. Other complexities that arose included the inadequate planning of work across the subject areas in the school, the divide between teachers along immigration lines, and the effect of student and administration attitudes on teaching and learning in this school.

The teachers in the school were not accustomed to collaboration within their departments or across departments. Although there were a few teachers who sought advice from their colleagues, it was not the norm in this school. The geography department had recently started a weekly planning session that seemed to be successful. However, it was not an easy task to get two departments in the same place at the same time to discuss teaching science and geography. These teachers saw the benefits of collaboration once they started to talk about their content areas and examined the syllabi. It took time for these teachers to approach their practice by integrating what was learned in the other subjects and to be able to build upon previous knowledge from other classes.

Collaboration required space and time to dialogue about teaching and learning. These teachers were eager to share their experiences about both the successes and failures in their teaching over the years. The newer teachers, who were also new to this school and island environment, were particularly eager to hear about teaching practices that did and did not work.

Another complexity involved the immigration issues that these and other expatriate teachers faced. Both the students and some teachers displayed negative attitudes towards the foreigners. For fear of being told to go back home with their innovative ideas, these teachers opted to remain silent about what the PLC was doing. The treatment they encountered at the school appeared to be restricting them in several

ways and they were often times criticized for their ideas. This was a concern that disturbed the participants because it arose in many PLC meetings and in one meeting it was explored in some depth.

The problems of immigration went beyond the staff into the student body. These teachers faced many problems with the students because they were not “from here.” The students showed less respect for the teachers who were not from this country and they were open about their comments towards the expatriate teachers. This inevitably discouraged the teachers in this fledgling professional learning community.

Poor student attitude also complicated initiating this PLC. The teachers were not motivated to teach students who showed disrespect and who did not value education. It was a battle for teachers to convince students of the importance of education and what they were teaching. Students had developed a passive learning style in which teachers were forced to spoon-feed them with information while ignoring application to life and teaching for good citizenship.

Despite the reported benefits of the PLC, these teachers did not continue to meet after I left the school. Was it necessary for them to stop meeting once I left and then realize for themselves that they needed to re-organize and meet on their own without any outside influence? Perhaps they had to initiate their own learning community after finding their own leader within the school. Is this an inevitable part of the evolution of a PLC in a school that was not functioning as a learning community with high levels of collaboration?

Conclusions

Based on the published characteristics of professional learning communities, I conclude that while I was at the research site, the group of participants functioned much like a PLC because they had a shared vision for their students and their teaching. They all sought to improve their teaching and to improve their students' learning experiences. They collaborated about teaching and learning by sharing ideas and techniques with each other. In addition, the participants learned collectively in this group by sharing ideas and discussing issues common to the group. These teachers sought knowledge from their colleagues by asking for help as they dialogued about teaching and learning. They also planned together based on the two syllabi in their subject areas of geography and science. They left that session with something concrete about how to teach a small unit of work about the water cycle. There was also a teaching session in which the teachers provided feedback about approaches to teaching the same topic in the two subject areas. The participants discussed who should teach which part of the unit and how the other subject area might build upon that to create links in the topic for the students. They shared the leadership by taking turns facilitating a session on a topic of interest.

Another theme woven through the data was relevance, which was important to these teachers, both in their teaching practice with their students and in what they wanted to learn professionally. This was evident in their discussion topics in the PLC meetings. Many teachers indicated that they have to relate what is taught in the classroom to real-life situations to help students make sense of what was being taught. They often dialogued about issues and concerns they thought were relevant to their situations at the school.

The group of teachers in this PLC seemed to reach the first stage of building a teacher community, in terms of the work reported by Grossman et al. (2001). Grossman and her colleagues described the first stage, the initiation stage of community development, as one in which the staff shares leadership and information, seeks new knowledge, dialogues, and commits to goals. These characteristics were clearly present in this PLC of teachers. The group dialogued at every meeting and shared many experiences and ideas over the 12-week term. They incorporated sessions in which teachers learned new things and made a commitment to getting one unit of work planned between the two departments.

Uniqueness of the Study

This study is unique in its attempt to initiate a PLC starting at the teaching level rather than at the administrative level. In previous studies of professional learning communities, the initiative almost always came from the administrative level. Through dialogue and sharing ideas, these teachers became empowered and thought they could make a difference in their own teaching practice. These teachers did not rely on administrative support or resources to function as a professional learning community. Instead, they met on a weekly basis and involved the administrators in the eleventh week by inviting them to a meeting to show them what they were discussing and to explain the perceived benefits of a professional learning community.

The study was voluntary and not mandated by the administration. These teachers were not compelled to attend the meetings but did so on their own motivation to improve their teaching and enhance their students' learning. All the teachers were from two departments in the school, one of which is the department in which the researcher taught for 10 years prior to departing for graduate studies 4 years ago. Prior

to this study, the school did not display high levels of collaboration and displayed no characteristics associated with a professional learning community.

This study is also unique in its efforts to explore the concept of a professional learning community in a different cultural context such as the English-speaking Caribbean. This study shows that the structures and activities of a professional learning community can be extended into other cultural contexts and confirms that doing so inevitably reveals complexities associated with the local culture.

Practical and Theoretical Implications of the Study

The findings in this study have implications for practitioners, including both teachers and administrators. There are also implications for other schools with similar features as well as theoretical implications.

Implications for Teachers

Teachers who participated in the PLC benefited from this study by building trust within the group and sharing their successful practices and as well as their grievances with the current school system. Members also developed a sense of camaraderie that led to more socialization across departments, something that was not common at the school. Teachers saved time by reducing repetitive teaching of information that had already been taught in different subject areas. They also found that teachers can save time by sharing worksheets and splitting up the work of planning.

Teachers need leadership in order to achieve these benefits. This leadership may emerge from the group, but if teachers cannot find a leader in their midst, they may not attain these benefits without a facilitator from outside of their school.

Implications for Administrators

Administrators can benefit by having their teachers develop levels of trust in sharing their practice and by teachers' increasing and enhancing their teaching practice to benefit the students of the school, with associated possibilities for improving the students' learning and scores on tests. Administrators may not be ideal facilitators, themselves, as their presence may limit open discussions, but they may be able to identify external facilitators using the information in this study.

Administrators who are made aware of challenges teachers face may have some power to make changes to reduce problems associated with initiating a PLC of teachers. Administrators can benefit by having their own staff conduct workshops and other professional development exercises. Furthermore, by sharing the leadership in the school, principals can delegate more work to senior teachers who may be responsible for other teachers in the school. Eventually, teachers may become more self-directed in their professional learning.

Implications for other Schools

Other schools may benefit if they see the improvement in both teaching and learning at this school and make appropriate efforts to transfer that improvement to their school. Students may benefit from the various teaching techniques learned by the teachers and from the fact that teachers work together for their benefit. Teaching topics in greater depth may also be possible as a result of coordination between departments.

By examining what is necessary to initiate a PLC of teachers and the challenges experienced by this group of teachers, other schools may be able to overcome some of the challenges of initiating a professional learning community with a view to improving

teaching and learning. They too can use their own teachers as resource persons to promote more teaching techniques and share ideas with their colleagues.

Theoretical Implications

Many studies of professional learning communities have been conducted in recent years, yet these studies have focused primarily on schools that had been restructured or were already operating as professional learning communities. They probed into what was being done with a view to better understanding the characteristics of a professional learning community. This study adds to the research by looking at initiation of a professional learning community within one school that possessed none of the characteristics associated with a professional learning community. This study also provides research in an under-represented area of the world and in a culture different from the USA, Canada, the United Kingdom and other more familiar English-speaking contexts. This study is dynamic in that it shows significant growth and changes in attitudes over the term by the teachers, with associated changes in their classroom practice. It is not the static representation of a professional learning community that appears in many other studies.

Suggestions for Further Research

In an ideal world, I would have preferred to conduct a longitudinal study over 3 to 5 years to be able to further define the challenges of developing a professional learning community and to develop guidelines for sustaining such a group of teachers. This would allow me to develop guidelines or a model for developing a professional learning community in a school that shows no such characteristics at the outset .

Several questions arise as I consider the possibilities for a longitudinal study: How does the core group of teachers recruit other members? How do new members respond to the existing community's norms for sharing perspectives on teaching and learning? How does the core group welcome new members? What experiences do the new members report? How do new members make the transition into the community of professional learners? I would also like to study the classroom level and gather direct evidence of the effects of a professional learning community on teaching practice. Giving voice to the students would also be of interest if this study was conducted over 3 to 5 years. How would students perceive learning in a school in which the teachers collaborate across subject areas? How would students describe their classroom experiences in a school that functions as a professional learning community?

Another important element that I would want to explore is the issue of having more departments represented in a professional learning community to show the benefits and challenges of attempting to integrate all departments within a school. The cross-disciplinary planning might be time consuming but it might also reveal more overlap within various curriculum documents as well as ways in which teachers can collaborate to enact more active and student-centred teaching approaches.

Concluding Summary

This dissertation has gathered extensive data that have been analyzed to respond to the seven research questions presented at the outset of the study. Chapter 1 provides an introduction to the study, while Chapter 2 reviews literature on professional learning communities, and Chapter 3 describes the research design. Chapters 4 through 8 report analysis of the data gathered to address the research questions. Chapter 4 analyzes data about initiating a professional learning community of teachers. Chapter 5 describes the features of the professional learning community of teachers in the school selected for data collection. Chapter 6 describes the challenges teachers experienced in this school and the challenges of initiating a professional learning community of teachers. Chapter 7 describes the range of benefits the teachers experienced while initiating a professional learning community, while Chapter 8 documents the future plans of the participants for the group. This final chapter draws broad conclusions about the data and suggests implications for both teachers and administrators as well as for future research.

Based on the findings in this study, it is possible and productive to initiate a PLC of teachers in a school. A significant element of the success of this nascent professional learning community appeared to be the willingness of the participants to share ideas and techniques to make better use of their time as they worked to improve the quality of their students' learning.

There were features that these teachers thought were necessary to initiate a professional learning community of teachers. Although these teachers experienced benefits from this professional learning community, they also faced challenges. Many of the challenges were problems they faced in the school that could hinder the proper functioning of a professional learning community. Despite the challenges, these

teachers met for the entire term and seemed quite pleased with the results. One unfortunate aspect of this study was the inability of the group to find a leader to enable the group to continue after my departure at the conclusion of data collection. The 12-week period of meetings was not sufficient to generate an enduring change in a school culture that had long been characterized by teacher isolation and by differences in perspective based on the extent of one's personal roots in the local culture and community.

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APPENDIX A

Journal Entry Questions #1

First Journal Entry Questions:

(To be given in first group meeting)

1. What do you think a PLC is?
2. What is learning to you? Elaborate please
3. What is teaching to you? Elaborate please.
4. Do you think teacher learning is linked to student learning? How? Why or why not?

APPENDIX B

Sample Questions from Last Group Meeting

Questions for Last Meeting:-

1. What has been your motivation for joining and staying in this teacher PLC?
2. How would you evaluate this PLC as far as
 - a. getting teachers together to share their practice?
 - b. integrating subject areas?
 - c. increasing membership?
 - d. creating a core group of teachers who could create a larger PLC within this school?
3. How do you see a PLC working within this school?
4. If this PLC should continue into next term, what will you do or want to see happen?
5. Do you feel that we are a community of learners?
6. Do you think I stopped “leading” too soon? How has the peer leading been for you?
7. Did the PLC influence your instruction or classroom practice in anyway?

Journal Entry:-

*Write a letter to the administration to explain to them why creating time within the time table is imperative to have teachers meet regularly as a learning community.

APPENDIX C

Letter of Information to Teachers

LETTER OF INFORMATION

The Challenges and Complexities of Initiating a Professional Learning Community of Teachers

I am inviting you to participate in research aimed at initiating a professional learning community (PLC) of teachers at the . The ultimate goals of my research are to better understand what is necessary to initiate a PLC of teachers in schools and to document any shift in teachers' perceptions about teaching and learning. I am currently pursuing my studies at the Faculty of Education, Queen's University. This research has been cleared by the Queen's University General Research Ethics Board, the Department of Education, and your principal. If you agree, please sign the attached consent form and return it to the school secretary by December 10th, 2006.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are one of the more teacher centered professional development strategies to improve student achievement and learning. Recent research has shown that in PLC schools, teachers increase collegiality and collaboration among staff as they work together to resolve issues and improve their practice. Teachers prepare and plan lessons together as well as observe each other and provide feedback. In addition, teachers examine and adapt practices to reflect student needs. Another fundamental effect of collegiality in PLCs in schools is the reduction of isolation in schools.

In this part of the research, I wish to document the experiences of teachers in initiating a PLC. To do this, I plan to conduct 11 group meetings and four individual interviews over the 12 week period. I am requesting that you participate in all of the group meetings and individual interviews. The group meetings will involve 6 to 10 teachers and one interviewer (myself, and I will lead the initial group discussions).

The group meetings will be conducted at a convenient time for all participants in an agreed upon location. The group meetings will be audio-taped and should last about 1-1 ½ hours. You are requested not to discuss the content of the group's discussions outside of the group. Each individual interview should last about 1 hour and will be audio-taped. The taped interviews will be transcribed, and then the tape will be destroyed two years after the research has ended. None of the data will contain your name or the identity of your place of work. The place of work will be identified using general terms and a pseudonym only. The researcher will take the necessary measures to ensure confidentiality. Data will be secured in a locked office.

Participants are also requested to make two journal weekly entries, one of which will be the free-writing at the beginning of group meetings. Suggestions for other entries will be available by providing prompts to begin entries. Journals will be collected the week before each individual interview and at the end of the study. The journals will be returned to the participants. At the end of group meetings, participants are expected to complete exit comments to assist in guiding subsequent meetings and interviews. Guiding questions will be used as prompts for these exercises. Quotations from meetings, interviews, or journal entries may be used with the participants consent.

I do not foresee risks in your participation in this research. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are not obliged to answer any questions you find objectionable, and you are assured that no information collected will be reported to anyone who is in authority over you. You are free to withdraw from the study without reason at any point.

This research may result in publications of various types, including journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, books, and instructional materials for schools. A pseudonym will replace your name on all data that you provide to protect your identity. If the data are made available to other researchers for secondary analysis, your identity will never be disclosed.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact Jasmattie Yamraj at or e-mail 4jy4@qlink.queensu.ca or Dr. Tom Russell at (613) 533-3024 and e-mail russellt@educ.queensu.ca. For questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofré, (613) 533-6210, or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson at (613) 533-6081, email stevensj@post.queensu.ca.

Sincerely,

Jasmattie Yamraj

APPENDIX D

Consent Forms for Teachers

CONSENT FORM

I have read and retained and copy of the letter of information concerning the study *The Challenges and Complexities of Initiating a Professional Learning Community of Teachers* and agree to participate in the study. All questions have been explained to my satisfaction. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study.

I understand that my participation will take the form of 11 weekly group meetings and four individual interviews. I have been informed that the meetings will be approximately 1- 1½ hours and interviews about one hour in length. I understand that the group meetings and interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. I understand that I am expected to write two weekly journal entries and make exit comments at group meetings. Permission to use quotes will be sought from participants. Quotations may derive from journal entries, group meetings, or individual interviews.

I understand that there are no known risks, discomforts or inconveniences associated with participation in the research study. I understand that confidentiality will be protected by appropriate storage and access of data as well as the use of pseudonyms. I have been notified that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any point during the study and request removal of all or part of my data, without any consequences to the study. I understand to maintain the confidentiality of the members of the group; I should not discuss the content of our group discussions with people outside this group.

I am aware that I can contact Jasmattie Yamraj at _____ or e-mail 4jy4@qmlink.queensu.ca if I have questions about this research or her supervisor Dr. Tom Russell at Queen's University, Faculty of Education at (613)533-3024 or by e-mail at russellt@educ.queensu.ca. I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Dr. Rosa Bruno-Jofré at (613) 533-6210, or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081, e-mail joanstevenson@queensu.ca.

Please sign this consent form and return it to the secretary at the front office by 10th December, 2006.

I HAVE READ AND UNDERSTOOD THIS CONSENT FORM AND I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

Name participant: (please print)

Signature of participant:

Date:

Please write your e-mail or postal address at the bottom of this sheet if you wish to receive a copy of the results of this study.

APPENDIX E

Sample Interview Transcript

Interview # 3 with Matt

Mar 13, 2007

Yamraj: Mr. Myers I just want to see how things are going with you and the PLC. What benefits have you seen thus far from the PLC?

Matt: Shows how subjects can be integrated to save time, that's one of the major advantages, major benefits. Also team teaching could be utilized more effectively and on a more regular basis where topics, the information has a positive correlation.

Yamraj: How has the planning and teaching session been for you? What did you leave these meetings with? A feeling of, a sense of?

Matt: A sense of hope that we could actually work together for the betterment of education where, its going to save time because one of the topics that we cover in depth in science is basically done in geography, so if could liaise and cooperate on that aspect, it will save a whole lot of time and we can use that time for other things. That can add more dynamics to the subject.

Yamraj: Well you mentioned time and you mentioned hope. Hope with regards to?

Matt: Finally getting integration, being an integral part of the school.

Yamraj: But where do you see a group like this going as far as subject integration?

Matt: There are no limits in the school. So far we have been geography and science, I think if we add social studies, physical education, math, English, history, all of them can be incorporate and integrated into the curriculum where teachers feel a little at ease. Where they don't have to re-invent the wheel and re-teach information and their kids will be less confused because different teacher teach differently. And you could also eliminate the confusion of content. Where one teacher might teach one thing here and she taught it wrong and another teacher has to clean that up.

Yamraj: Has your teaching practice changed any since the beginning of the term? If it has, please give an example.

Matt: I tried harder to make the connections between different subjects.

Yamraj: Was there anything that was suggested that you tried or wanted to try?

Matt: Yes, Ms. Sami suggested that you give feedback immediately to the kids. You have graded assignments passed back in a decent time frame. That is something that I am trying to do. In the past I was delinquent in returning assignments and so on.

Yamraj: The next question doesn't apply to you because you have never missed meetings and I would like to say thank you for your commitment. I am hoping that you get more benefits from the group.

Matt: I must say thank you from allowing me to be in the group because to me, it's more of a privilege.

Yamraj: But it was voluntary.

Matt: It's still a privilege. Thanks for the invitation.

Yamraj: Next week we want to invite administration, please tell me what you want to see on the agenda. What would you like for us to discuss? Any ideas, thoughts? We can come back to it since it's a question that requires some thought.

Matt: Administration, we need support.

Yamraj: Support, in what respect?

Matt: In all respects. In terms of letting them know exactly what we as teachers need. This whole school day. We need more professional workshops, we need more materials, we need more staff enrichment, not just wait until the beginning of the term and then you forget us. It should be on a continuous basis, keep us focused and enlightened to what's happening. Education is dynamic and it's changing and sometimes we are not abreast of what's happening. If they have to force it on us, just within the constraint of time, I won't mind it. Another thing they need to do is review the length of the days. To me the afternoons are wasted time.

Yamraj: So you want use to discuss length of school, support and more professional development on a regular basis instead of the beginning of the school year.

Matt: We are talking local, regional, international. Even in you could send one representative and have them report back to the staff.

Yamraj: Would you say there is shared vision among the PLC? I know we discussed it the first week based on the school but even though we brought it up we never really came up with a shared vision. Why do you suppose we didn't do that?

Matt: Why didn't we do it? I think maybe at first, the comfort level was not there. When we sat down and discuss, we have the same vision but does everyone have the same drive?

Yamraj: That's an interesting question.

Matt: The excuses that we make all the time. Coming up in the PLC, we have more issues, and no solutions. No thinking out of the box in terms of solving these problems. It's not that we are not creative, it is years of experiences. Some people are hesitant to

suggest any solutions to problems that we have. We have problems but we keep debating and we are not coming up with creative solutions hardly ever we come up with solutions.

Yamraj: That being said, for the meeting next Wednesday, if you think you could prepare something on what you think our vision should be as far as a core group of teachers in a learning community.

Matt: On the top of my head, the vision we should have. Basically, providing students with every opportunity, when I say every opportunity, go out of the way, the little extras to make education a little to raise the standards of education in [this country] through integration, cooperation, team work, anything to suggest that we work together. The vision should be something like that, it's just togetherness. If you see the barriers, the disconnects in the school, most departments are so self-centered and they exist as a department and they don't see the big picture of the school. So team work, cooperation, integration, anything to suggest that there is some linking some web for the betterment of education. That's the only vision. Ultimately anything we do is for the kids.

Yamraj: Do you think this group is displaying or has displayed shared/ collective learning? Please give examples?

Matt: We have. For instance, we both recognize the use of technology in the class. Where I utilized it and showed them how to use it.

Yamraj: So, the use of technology is something that you shared. Now as far as collective learning, we did have a session on technology but in your session that you did last week you talked about using it to teach. Well your portion of the session, I think the geography teachers were quite pleased because the comments they made. They liked your use of technology and they realized the need for it in the classroom more.

Yamraj: So you would say we have displayed collective learning as far as technology. Would that be the only way in which we shoed collective learning?

Matt: No. Linking, we also, everybody came to the conclusion that linking content to real life situation makes it a more interesting and relevant and easier for the kids to understand. Another thing that came out is that first we have to control the within our classrooms, we have to look at the big picture, but that begins in the classroom in terms of classroom management, control and motivation. Everybody agreed that motivation of the kids was very important.

Yamraj: Yes, it seems to be problematic, but we can't seem to come up with a solution.

Matt: What I am saying, we can't come up with a solution to change attitudes in [this country]. And I don't know how we could do that, that has to change on some other level, but within our classrooms we could try to empower the kids and hope that they

generalize. Basically, take the positive attitudes from one classroom throughout the school and the real world too.

Yamraj: You mentioned starting in your own classroom, have you been teaching lessons such that you were making it as relevant as possible. Do you use technology more so now in the classroom to try to have students more aware of what's there or is it ways in which you would reinforce what you teach?

Matt: From time to time I use technology, my 2nd formers, they are not part of the pilot program that's a program that I am doing now. They have a lot of technology but my 2nd form is not a part of that, but I still use the computers and projector, use different medium with them

Yamraj: And the purpose of bringing in the technology and different media is to do what?

Matt: It is to get them more interested and then to expose them to different, science is dynamic, some things are changing and to keep them abreast of what's happening and to teach them to research on the computer to solve problems and different things.

Yamraj: Have you invited any one to your classroom?

Matt: No.

Yamraj: Have you been invited?

Matt: No.

Yamraj: How have you shared your practice over the last 9 or 10 weeks?

Matt: Informal.

Yamraj: Informal, give me an example.

Matt: When I chat with colleagues outside of the group.

Yamraj: How has their response been though?

Matt: He was pretty impressed because he was supposed to be a part of the group. He has family obligations. Also Ms. Sami, I have spoken to her. I think it is better like that you don't have to rehearse, whatever comes out comes out and there is no pressure.

Yamraj: And you are very open. But the people that you talk to seem to be people who you have a trusting type relationship with.

Matt: Yes, that is what I was getting at. I might not feel comfortable with everyone because I know I am young with age and experience. I don't want to be reminded of that. It makes me reserved when people are rude about it. The people that I speak to are willing to listen and they can understand where I am coming from.

Yamraj: Why didn't you invite anybody into your classroom?

Matt: Same reason, you have to find people you are comfortable with are members of the group and scheduling and so on.

Yamraj: Essentially, I want to find out if your teaching practice has changed. You said you were reminded of things that you know from before such as timely feedback, rather the impact of this PLC on your teaching practice.

Matt: It's more of a reinforcement for me. Because what comes out of it, I am currently enrolled in the teaching certificate program at the college, so it's just reinforcing what I have been learning and to show how it can me a little more practical, in the college, we could match it to content, incorporate and subject integration, but through the PLC I have a more practical approach. Myself and people from geography can collaborate, it still can be done even if we don't get to use it in the classroom.

Yamraj: So this subject integration was not something common before?

Matt: No it was not. It was mentioned but it was not there in practice and you didn't pay much attention to it. Now I am always looking to ensure that I have something on subject integration within the lesson.

Yamraj: So that's another change or impact. Also is there has been any change in your attitudes, commitment to teaching and learning?

Matt: Commitment, yes, attitudes towards teaching – slight change in attitude because

Yamraj: Change how?

Matt: In terms of being not so uptight. I am uptight in the classroom, I tend to dominate, but I let the kids have more freedom in the classroom; freedom with limitations. That's form the motivation session. I don't know if my dominating was a turn off for the kids. I want to see what good that will do for me, along with other ways of motivating kids.

Yamraj: And the level of commitment? Both teaching and learning.

Matt: Learning, I want to do as much as I can, ultimately, a few years from now, I want to see myself in a position where I can make a bigger difference. Because if I touch 30 kids, but if I touch 30 teachers, they will touch like 3000 kids in their lifetimes. I want to educate teachers.

Yamraj: How has the PLC impacted on you as a teacher?

Matt: Man, it has been good for me, it gives me an avenue to vent and to get the ideas from veteran and seasoned teachers. Those that are in-between as well and those that are just starting. So I am getting the whole package in terms of experience.

Yamraj: At some point you might be able the ones with less experience, likewise you look to the ones that have more experience. It's a passing on.

Matt: It also gives me an avenue for my promotion of technology in education. I think it's very important that we do that despite the limitations. It would make a difference if utilized properly. Geography is such a dynamic subject. You have tons of resources online and they were not aware of it. I tried to make them more aware to make their lessons a bit more interesting.

Yamraj: Are you pleased with the way the group has been running?

Matt: Yes, the food has been good. Well, that's part of the group. The thing that I have the most reservations about is the attendance; I would like to see the attendance improved. And that some people would be a little more open. With time, it would happen, but we might run out of time. I would have loved to see how the group incorporate other subjects, at least

Yamraj: When would we be able to do that? And how? At what point? We are pretty young, and heard about it before but how would you select volunteers? When would be the right time?

Matt: Now is the right time, we have seen the links between geography and science. We have the links there. If we could have had a session where we could incorporate all the different subjects in one lesson, just to show that link.

Yamraj: You have to realize it's a process, a timely process.

Matt: Yes. It's a time consuming process. That's the problem; teachers don't have enough time on their hands.

Yamraj: But that's always been the cry.

Matt: But a PLC takes a lot of commitment, and to be committed to something after school when you already had this whole experience of dealing with kids from 9 in the morning to 3 in the afternoon, it's tough. And some people have to pick up their kids. It takes away.

Yamraj: But in the last set of interviews, I asked about the timing and most people said yes.

Matt: For me it works well.

Yamraj: Actually everyone except one person said the timing was good because they don't have that constraint of having to rush to class. So that if we run on.

Matt: This PLC should be an integral part of the school scheduling. You would work within the school time, from 1:30 to 3:30; allow us to choose the things we want to do but it must be organized where nobody comes to it to get away.

Yamraj: If we were to continue this from now on, would you want to meet once a week or once every 2 weeks? Once you have established a good working relationship.

Matt: Every week. Because 2 weeks, it would take too much time to discuss what happened in 2 weeks and things will be fresh in our minds.

Yamraj: So what do you think out next step should be?

Matt: That would be great if we could get more people involved.

Yamraj: Would you do that before meeting with administration?

Matt: Let use deal with administration first and make them aware.

Yamraj: Well, next week we want to have administration, do you think I should invite all the administrators?

Matt: No.

Yamraj: Who should I invite then?

Matt: Principal and academic.

Yamraj: Thank you for your time.

Matt: O.K.

APPENDIX F

Sample Group Meeting Transcript

Group Meeting: March 30, 2008

Yamraj: All right, let's begin. What has been your motivation for joining and staying in this teacher PLC? I am going to ask general questions and then everyone should say something.

Katie: Can I answer first?

Yamraj: Go ahead.

Katie: Snacks and food.

Yamraj: Anything else besides that? Nothing else? Is this the consensus?

Matt: The ability to collaborate and share ideas, learn different techniques, different classroom management strategies and it provided an avenue for us to vent our frustrations.

Yamraj: So that's your motivation for staying in?

Matt: Makes you feel at home a little bit, that's one of the motivation. That's one of the benefits too.

Geoff: Mine is an extension of what Myers is saying because I really needed that escape, I have basically found myself finding my escape, I needed something different and I needed that recharge and we were sharing ideas that would help me to grow at the same time it could help me in my work. Sometimes when you are talking about colours of people's shoes and clothes, it's not going to help me or the students. So I needed that escape.

Kolin: Initially I joined as a favour to a friend, my head of department, but it presented an opportunity to share on a professional level and because I am not a trained teacher, I figure I could learn something with the association with people who have been trained in the field of education, like most of the others it provided an opportunity to vent frustrations.

Khyle: Provide a course of relaxation, not to mention the snacks. Those were great, I learned quite a few new things and the interaction was good. I look forward to continuing some work in this area. That's it for me.

Katie: The meetings to me, they gave us an opportunity to reflect, refuel, and share ideas about or teaching, students we have to teach, share teaching methods. We have seen and identified areas where we can collaborate on a professional level and it more or less helped us to understand that our problems are not isolated, we all share the same problems and we share the same glory too, but like I've said before, it's a nice small group, we spoke freely on any issue and we vented our anger quite a few times. I was glad when administration came in and we can collectively say that they have supported

what has been done and we look forward to their support. And I hope that other people, not just department heads, buy the idea and try to work with it, because my thing as a teacher, ever so often we forget that word professionalism, we lack that professionalism and this is one way we can show professionalism, we are all teachers. Sometimes we do forget, we do have some people because they are teaching science they are more brilliant, or their subject area is more important. I am a musician and my subject area is more important. Collaboration will teach us that. As professionals, if we want to foster effective teaching/ learning we need to operate in that professional learning community as professionals. There is break down because of a lack of professionalism. As an older teacher, I am benefiting from all these young people.

Yamraj: How would you evaluate this PLC as far as getting teachers together to share their practice? How have we been doing would you say?

Matt: I think we have done a fairly good job but we could've done more, but I guess starting out like this we didn't want to. Personally for me, I didn't want to bring in people and they are not, they don't have the same vision as us. It was a young program, if it had grown too big, it would have become too impersonal and we wouldn't have gotten to share because we had volunteers and we were open to criticism and new ideas and so on. So I guess we have the right core of people to start the program. The time span that we had it was perfect in terms of number because in terms to sharing, everybody had that opportunity to lead and share. If the group was like 20 strong, because you only had 12 weeks in the term, so 8 people would have been deprived of that opportunity, so with the timing we had, I think the group was perfect for the time that we had and it was not impersonal. I was hoping that if we continue with the group we could incorporate more people since we have a better understanding about the PLC, because I can't invite them if I don't know what the group is about to give them some background information. So now I feel more empowered to recruit people to join the PLC.

Yamraj: How would you rate or rank the sharing of practice? At this point how would you evaluate getting the teachers together to share their practice? How well you thought we were sharing practice?

Kolin: I think we did pretty well, probably because like Matt said, it was a small group and there wasn't this feeling on unanimity and your idea was your idea and you were able to relate on a personal level because of the size of the group. And for some reason we seemed to have gelled. I think we did pretty well in terms of bring people together and willingly share and borrow ideas.

Yamraj: Any more thoughts?

Khyle: I think we did a pretty good job.

Yamraj: And you were satisfied? Ms. Katie?

Katie: I admired the way most of the sessions went whether they were ad hoc or planned, I think I was amazed of how some of the sessions went. I would call Matt a pro, but when Kolin and Khyle did their session, I was impressed with them, even Skye. Just talking things over, put an ease on your mind, I had that feeling at the beginning, Skye was apprehensive to speak and things like that but by the time we were finished he become one of us, he has changed. I would see at the beginning where Geoff didn't want to speak and eventually we got him to speak and be a part of the group fully. What disappointed me was when I told that at senior staff meeting when [the principal] asked me to say in a nutshell what we have been doing.

Matt: Well not to cut you off, I think it was a good idea, for Ms. Yamraj that too much was not mentioned of it. For the simple reason, I didn't want, personally, I felt that people might feel it is Ms. Yamraj who brought this idea into the school and look now we have to do it. Let [the principal] sit and think about it and think it through before she introduce it to the school because everybody might not appreciate the fact that Ms. Yamraj came up with that idea. It's not about credit now, [the principal] knows the people that she is dealing with and they are very reluctant to adapt to changes. I was hoping that she didn't say much, I don't want people to feel that Ms. Yamraj brought this idea to the school and now we have to go and do it, you understand what I am saying.

Katie: Well, that's what I was coming to next.

Matt: My bad.

Katie: No, good that you said it, it's not me alone who is thinking along those lines. But she was very tactful in bringing it up out of a book and then she said a whole big section was on collaboration. Then she said Ms. Yamraj and a small group of teachers working on, but my disappointment was nobody got excited about it.

Khyle: I guess because they don't know about it.

Matt: I guess they don't understand.

Khyle: They didn't get enough to get excited about it.

Katie: No, no, my thing is since I have been a young teacher, I get excited about anything that will promote my teaching that will make teaching easier, that will make teaching/learning more effective. And I think you have that same excitement within you.

Yamraj: But in the staff meeting, considering it came after all the highlights of the trip to California, I would understand it being downplayed simply because, people were on a high about that trip.

Matt: They were?

Yamraj: Well, I was a little bit excited.

Matt: Generally do you feel that?

Khyle: I wasn't focused on what was said.

Katie: I wasn't excited, the reason I wasn't excited, I have been to four conferences and what they are talking about I have experienced it. And you are so hyped up and energized. Remember they talked about free books; we brought back stuff for every single person for every single person in that church. My thing is not just talking, they must see it for real.

Yamraj: I think it is something that everyone should have experienced but it was too few people considering the size of the staff, but I was hoping that they would say as a professional development, the beginning of next term, each person will facilitate something that they learned. They all went to different sessions, so they all learned something different. Why can't they bring that back and share. That is my problem. That was the most sharing I have ever seen in this school. To me, and maybe it's different since I left. People have been going on workshops for years. That is the most sharing of people going on workshops, my problem is that people are sent on workshops and the rest of us are in the dark and you never hear about it.

Kolin: You never hear about it.

Yamraj: I always felt if you go away and learn something that you should come back and share with others in the school.

Katie: With my catechist conference I report to [the principal]. I always learn something new and that's not all.

Matt: It's a hype. Yes, it sounds good, but when it comes to implementing things you learn, because if it doesn't work for you today, you give up. And that's a problem that we have here in this school, people give up too easily.

Katie: When [the principal] talked about the program, my idea was that a least one or two persons should have approached you and said how can we be a part of this? All of us have problems in the classroom, but I would have reached out and asked how can I join the group.

Yamraj: But everybody is different. Let's move on now. How would you evaluate the PLC as far as integrating subject areas? I think it should be a group consensus on this question.

Kolin: Great potential.

Matt: In terms of technology resources we could share resources. The same methods of presentation to supplement teaching. It has great potential as Kolin said. Even if we

could continue this, the thing is the people in the decision making positions, if I were the head of science I would have done it wholeheartedly. Grab up the full geography department and we meet every 2 weeks and we collaborate. It's getting the people who are in the positions to run with the idea.

Yamraj: So we have agreed that integrating subject areas has been phenomenal.

Geoff: As Matt was saying if he was head of department, he would try to get the entire department on board, is that what you are trying to say? I still see it as my duty; I am supposed to sell that idea to the head of department and to the other members of department. I do not how much my head is aware of what's happening as far as this PLC is concerned. I am going to do my best to sell the idea to her and the rest of the department.

Yamraj: That goes into the next question, as far as increasing membership. Clearly, you feel you can contribute to increasing membership by letting the head know and the others in the department. But so far, how would you evaluate us as a group and expanding membership?

Matt: I would neutral to that because I like how it went for the time we had, we didn't have 1 year, or 6 months, we had 12 weeks. And 12 weeks meant that we wanted each person to have had a say or had the chance to speak. Because this is a rare opportunity for us to speak out publicly about our frustrations or whatever. If we had 24 people in this group, I don't think that we would have enough time for everyone to contribute meaningfully or to lead a session. I think as it is, I think the group was perfect. If we were to continue for another term, we could double up at least, we would have had our opportunity already and the new people would get their chance to say what they have to say. I don't think we were at, that point where we had that time to increase membership.

Yamraj: Considering the time constraints, we were still at the stage of getting to know each other and we got to know each other quite a bit but we felt we weren't we were in the creeping stages and we are not able to walk up and bring people along with use yet.

Matt: Right.

Yamraj: And I didn't feel we had enough in place.

Geoff: As a matter of fact, I didn't see it as really a PLC that actually started, I saw it as we just throwing across ideas and then starting to think shall we then form a PLC out of that. I didn't see the need for increasing membership.

Matt: Right, before I came here, I didn't know what a PLC was. We are now in a state of infancy and developing and now we have evolved into a little core group so introduce other people would have taken too long to reach to this point. If we had more people in the group and everybody would have come along at a different place. Membership if we

were to continue for a term, at least, we would try to increase the membership, but we are still in the infancy stage and I think we have just enough people.

Geoff: I think so too.

Yamraj: And that seems to be the consensus. How would you say we did as far as, well actually I think we answered this already. How would you say we did as far as creating a core group of teachers who could create a larger PLC within this school? I think somebody mentioned earlier that it was a good core.

Kolin: We have a small group of enthusiastic teachers, sold on the idea and my feeling here is that everybody feels that this should try to spread this out and bring more people on board and get more people to catch the vision. I think we have created the core and now it's up to us. We have the potential and it's now up to us as a core to take this to the wider school community.

Matt: I think Katie will have a good avenue to speak about stuff like this when she goes to cabinet meetings because once you touch the heads, you know they have the power to basically convince their staff members.

Katie: Actually, [the principal] has bought the idea, she loves the idea, she has been talking about it for years, [an assistant principal] has been talking about changing the school's culture. With all these nice ideas, the hardest thing you have if you want to share this idea is having the teachers buy into the idea. We all know that it will call for commitment and we know that means giving up your time and a lot of us are not prepared to give up that time.

Geoff: What if we share ourselves in the sense that you Katie, you have a meeting with your geography teachers and the three of us from science be part of that meeting where we could share our ideas and show where we can collaborate and the same thing with science, when science call a meeting, Betty is head for now and she too is sold on the idea. So we are talking early next term, getting the science and geography teachers together come across so we could really show them that it is not a one-sided thing with a few science teachers that want to do this thing, but both departments are willing to work with each other. If we start off with these two departments.

Matt: We have the perfect avenue in science for this collaboration, the environmental club. Where geography teachers and science teachers meet on environmental issues, that's part of the PLC right there.

Katie: That's what I have been talking about, in my 33 years of teaching, I felt like a real professional at this one catholic school with 15 fathers. I felt like a professional because we all respected each other, regardless of what you taught, who you are or where you came from. And we have a problem with people in this profession right now. Who are not willing to share, not willing to see you as a professional or a part of bigger picture with the same common goal.

Matt: I understand where you are coming from.

Katie: And that in itself lacks professionalism and if we do not behave like professional with the same commitment, we are not only pulling ourselves back it's going to reflect in the way we impart knowledge to the children.

Matt: To reinforce what Katie is saying, I think this community, country and school is divided too along the lines of immigration. To me people, honestly, I don't feel comfortable most of the time. I go around like I am comfortable, but I don't feel comfortable because you are trying to make a genuine difference and you met with this blockade because it's imported, you need to go back where you are from to make that contribution. If where you are from was so much different, why didn't you stay? That kind of attitude and it's very disheartening and we are all here for the same purpose. When we act like this, we are not damaging Ms. Yamraj, the teachers are not the ones playing the price and the little minds that we are nurturing are paying the price for it. If we could just forget where we are from and see ourselves as teaches, that would go a long way.

Yamraj: Don't you think we could rise above that though?

Matt: We can, but teachers have to change.

Katie: That's what I am going to tell you. When I came here 18 years ago, I had to deal with that problem, because you remember once students and teachers see you as [foreign teacher], once you have straight hair. Whatever ground work was set by [a foreign teacher], that was how everybody else, that's how they perceived all [foreign teachers] to be, so when I came, I remember the assistant resource manager. I said "fire" and he said "fiore." We had a problem with pronunciation. I had to really sell myself, I had to make myself a good teacher, that I will teach and what I test is based on what I teach. When they get their feedback, they see that I pass, so then I was hearing Katie is not a [foreign teacher], she is one of us now. It's hard to

Matt: That's what I am saying, we need the attitude change with the adults. We don't have little children teaching here the last time I checked. Even the people in the decision making process, they don't want to invest too much in foreign labour, but at the same time are you going to allow the school system to crumble when that system depends on foreigners?

Geoff: If I should ask, what percentage of the staff is made up of ex-pats?

Matt: About 60%.

Kolin: When I first came here it was close to 80%.

Geoff: If we talking 60%, we are talking about the majority, I am saying, yes these attitudes are there, if we can rise above that. I think if we really put ourselves out, the system would have to change.

Matt: But then, we are, the thing is, no matter what we try to do, we will still be seen as a minority even if we are the majority in numbers, If we don't have that force up there, that will speak up for us, because we could be meeting here every day trying to better ourselves in the classroom. It must be a collective thing, we can't have 75% on board because what the 25% is going to do is defeat basically. Because we are dealing with children, we want them to generalize their behaviours. Let's say Kolin, is a part of the PLC and he is getting his kids to do what he is supposed to do, I am not a part and I am doing my own thing in the classroom, it's pure confusion.

Kolin: At the same time though, it boils down to how we market this thing. If we could reach the people that matter and get them to catch the vision and see what we are seeing, then they can pass it on to the people, because there are people who will not listen to us, but listen to those other people, they will bring them on board, we could take this forward.

Matt: Great point.

Geoff: There are people, [locals] who would like to see this thing go forward.

Yamraj: The next question was how do you see a PLC working within this school? And you kind of went straight into that question without me asking. Now I am picking up that attitudes would be a hindrance, meaning that people may not want to buy in however, if we tap into the right resources, we can influence such that this PLC can take off. So it can work, you just have to figure out how to sell it and have people buy into it. And so once you have buy in, you would see more things happening, right?

Geoff: I think too, as we have some people coming back from that conference now is a good time to sell this idea to them. I am sure they have heard of this type of collaboration.

Matt: It's true. Great point again.

Geoff: While they are on a high.

Yamraj: While we can tap into that.

Katie: While the five of them were talking about that, apart from the teachers union, we need to have a local professional group too, not just a union. We need to have a group that will meet at a professional level to share ideas. We talking about joining a professional group from the states, but we need our own local group.

Matt: Culturally relevant.

Katie: We need our own local high school professional group. And then we could ask the other five and a few of us from this group to join, then we can bring together ideas and share.

Matt: We could take it further than that, outside the school. We can collaborate with other PLCs, I hope if we could get the idea to the other schools and then we could we tap into their easy of doing things and it may not be applicable but we could take certain things. For instance, the idea of separating males and females, how does it work? As a PLC, you came back and you share your ideas. It can go far, starting locally and then spill out to other schools in the territory.

Yamraj: That was my intention to get there, eventually. But I am not sure how and how soon we are going to get there, but I don't think it's something that will happen too soon. If this PLC should continue into next term, what will you do or want to see happen?

Kolin: One of the things I would like to see is a slot timetabled into the school's program to allow us to continue the collaboration and of course we are talking about reaching a wider, numerical growth with the group, increasing membership.

Khyle: As you mentioned that, we may be could ask for every Friday from 1 to 3:15.

Kolin: Well that's what I mean, meeting during the school day, personally meeting after school is a challenge for me. I suspect it's that way for all of us. But if you say every 2 weeks or once a month, but you put it into the timetable. Teachers meet and share.

Matt: It shouldn't be limited to just sitting and talking. It could be different things, you can have teacher workshops and you are refreshing yourself for one day. We can have activities to keep the unity within the school body because a PLC, one of the main aims is to keep unity within the school body, instead of coming every time and you deal with this stuff, you could find other things to do. It's more like a social setting, it's not every time you will deal with stuff that happen at school, you could forget those troubles and you come back and feel refreshed. It is an avenue for greater things, not just professional sharing, but socializing too. To me, this school seems so divided and if we could get back that unity within the school or even professionally, things will take off. If Katie and everybody is cool, we will share ideas, so it's not just about getting the professional part of it, it's bringing back ht social. Because we all work in a social setting here.

Kolin: It's almost impossible to have one without the other; people operating together as professional without some kind of social boding.

Geoff: While I am in agreement with what you all have said, and these are some of the things I would like to see happen. What I would personally do next term is to hang around more and talk more with my colleagues from the other departments, especially geography. I always had, I still have a place in my heart for geography. You might find me over here more often and even within the department. Someone like Matt, I think I want to hang out more often so that we can throw stuff at each other, in a professional way that is (laughing). These are the things that I want to do and what I'd like to see happen after putting in this 11 or 12 weeks, I would like to see us here with or without Ms. Yamraj, that we take this thing on and we set it in motion. I do not want us to wait until, as much as our administrators are sold on the idea, I do not want us to wait on

them to timetable us and to do stuff like that. I think we should start putting stuff in place and getting serious.

Matt: We could start by empowering other people. So for the first couple weeks of next term, our aim should be to sell the idea to other people and then we schedule a meeting and see what comes out of it. The first 2 weeks, we could take a break or try and get people to come and then the next week we could schedule a meeting to hear what's up. From there on, we can use the tell-a-friend-to-tell-a-friend method to get people to join the group.

Kolin: I would like to see us reach out to parents, get parents more involved in this whole PLC. We have the stakeholders and not just the teachers and the students. Parents play a vital role and I would like for us to get some parents on board. Beginning with the ones who are willing, who are already there. And create a core that can later spread to others because if, the parents see the teachers as the enemy, if we could change that culture, if we could change that perception then we can achieve a lot.

Yamraj: I agree, if you've noticed, I have hardly said and the research says a lot. I avoid it because it is somewhat applicable, but in this group, being in the exploratory phase I want us to figure what's what and not to keep you in the dark. Let's see how it works, what's going to come out from what you think what seems to working or not, but the research has shown (laugh) that all the stakeholders need to play a role and parents play an high role in the most successful PLC schools. You need the parental support, you get it financially, raising funds, they make sure the kids are on track and they play a vital role. So does the Ministry or Department or school boards or whatever in whatever country you are discussing as well as the teachers, but what I personally what I like about the group so far is that we have realized as teachers we need to be empowered and we can empower ourselves because we didn't rely on administration to impose anything on us and we invited them later after we realized that we had a lot to share with each other and that's something that I want the group to see and build on. To help to realize that your colleagues as well as yourselves can contribute a whole lot to your learning and teaching and we need to realize that we need to be continuous learners as well. When you forget you are a learner, I think you give up on your professional position as a teacher.

Kolin: Oh man, you just answered the next question. Do you feel that we are a community of learners? I agree with you, you can't teach without learning and I don't mean learn from an external source and then bring it on the students. The teacher-learner relationship is a 2-way street and just as much as you give to the students, you can get back from them. I personally have learned a whole lot. For example, the cardinal points: N, S, W, and E, I had no way of remembering them, I learned from the students that it spells W E. I never internalized some mnemonic for learning that. And there are a number of other things I can list. And we have to willing as teachers to recognize that we don't know everything and we don't have to know everything and we just have to keep an open mind.

Matt: Right, but to get to that point we have to give up some control, when I say control I mean the domination in the classroom because you can't get ideas from a child if that child is not allowed to speak. Some teachers, because there are some students that complain they don't get a chance to speak in class at all whether they contributing or not. Sometimes, admin values your classroom management on the quietness of your class. A quiet classroom is by no means a proper learning environment because it's really passive because the children will sit back and suck up information as you tell them.

Kolin: Silence has its place.

Matt: Silence has its place, but by no means is it a measure of your classroom learning and management. Because it could be out of sheer fear that the kids don't say anything. I might be guilty of that.

Kolin: Or boredom.

Matt: But the thing is that we as teachers need to be more facilitators of learning and not givers of information. There are some things the kids will not know at all, but if we could tap into whatever little they might have, for instance when we doing science, we talk about evaporation. The kids might see steam rising from a pot, but they may not have recognized it was evaporation, (little form 1 kids) taking place. That whole experience that they have to get them to understand what evaporation is about, if you build on those experiences, it makes our teaching a whole lot easier. We are just building on what they already know. They are constructing knowledge based on what they have, the foundation that they have. By no means a child is a blank slate and often we think a child don't know anything about you are going to talk about. No matter how difficult you think the topic might be, you will find some way to get the kids to relate it to the kids. Like friction, I asked them what it was. I kept asking about why do you throw oil in the engine? Why when you have a new pair of shoes, it wears down like that? I asked them why when you pour oil on the floor, you slip. Then I tell them that is because of friction. They will forever remember what friction is. Energy, they relate the different types of energy to a fight and these are things they are familiar with. Pull back you had, it's potential, move your fist forward, it's kinetic and when you hit someone it makes a sound, so it's sound energy. They can see the changes. They didn't know the names of energy but to relate it to something they are familiar with makes it easier. Those are the things that we need to share with each other as professionals. Somebody might give them these long meaningless meanings and they don't understand it and a person might just link it to real life situations and they can recreate it in their own definitions for these same terms.

Geoff: Something that I have found out in relation to what you said, it's like you want to take them here and they are here, but what they have acquired, they may have some misconceptions. So they are confused. We can't assume they know nothing. I have learned that we need to give them a little credit and they are worth something and they know something.

Katie: I am of the feeling that all of us here at the [school], we are empowered to an extent, the degree with vary from individual to individual, based on the weeks we have had together. I know if we can come together as a professional group we can thrash out, after sharing ideas, thoughts, experiences, and problems can be eliminated if not partially or wholly. We can have much more support for each other and we can have more effective teaching but it all comes back to you. How committed are you going to be as part of a group to promote something for the good of everybody and I am not just seeing that we are going to set up a PLC. We have to get people with that mindset who are willing to work based on what a PLC is. Like Ms. Yamraj said, teachers are empowered. It comes back to a little learning is a bad thing. I am a person who loves to share ideas. Sometimes I won't even ask, I will run across with a piece of paper with something on it to all the teachers because I feel it will work and it can help somebody. We need to be more open, we need to behave like teachers. I feel hurt when I hear the problems Matt is having. When you see enthusiastic people, full of energy, you want to tap into it, you want to support that person and their ideas, even if you don't think it's the best, work on it with them to see the best in it.

Matt: What I am saying Katie, we speak as if the whole school has the education system of the [country] at heart and I could say boldly, that is not the case. You understand.

Katie: A lot of people are just here teaching for money you know.

Matt: Yes, and that's the sad part. I mean in any situation you would find people like that. To me, it's too rampant here in this school.

Katie: You remember what I told [the principal], any other part of the world and they are gone. They would've been in jail.

Matt: You could see it, since I have been here. You could see the people who want to do things and then you could see the foot draggers in the system. It's sad that stuff has to go on like that. It's just some people don't care, how do you get them to care? I am not going to point fingers and say that I am a perfect person, but it's the truth. There are some people who just don't care, how are we going to get those people to open their eyes? And people who don't have education at heart, they are holding the system hostage. Too many of them - they are here to work off their time that they owe to government and not to teach.

Geoff: We also have to understand that a person may have degree in science or some other subject area and they may not necessarily be trained in the teaching profession. True they have some knowledge of the content, they know what's in the book. Teaching is a bit different, sometimes you have drop the science and teach the students. Forget about what I had on the lesson plan and start talking to the student.

Yamraj: And on a social level sometimes, you need to tie into that avenue. I think a lot of us forget we are training the whole student and training them to be good citizens of the world and some think they are there to teach them content for a test. I feel that is where we have lost most of the people.

Geoff: Well, that is exactly it because I could tell you I am sure in my department, my grades are perhaps the worst. But that is not a reflection of the teacher. But I am saying, I am almost sure that you will find other students with better grades, but my students may still know a lot more than those students.

Matt: But the thing is in this system, your worth is measured in how your kids perform and it's sad. It's terrible.

Yamraj: I don't think the grades of students determine the worth of a teacher or even the student. I know there are kids who just don't do well on a test or conditions could have been that your best friend was sick on the day the test was given. That doesn't mean the child does not know. It could be a flawed test. Being here for the last term, I have seen some very good questions that were unnecessarily thrown out and some tests that were passed that were poorly written with instructions that could not be followed. There are many variables when it comes to grades, it could be a poorly written test, a very good test, the person was testing the objective directly or they miss them completely. So there are many factors that contribute to grade why I don't think equating grade to a person as a teacher or showing their worth is fair.

Kolin: I agree.

Yamraj: And it doesn't determine learning either because not everyone can take a test and if I am an oral person and writing is not my thing, a written test which is 99% of the assessments in the school will not necessarily reflect what I know but yet I can come to you and say everything.

Geoff: Yes, that's why you need to alternative tests.

Yamraj: By giving an alternative assessment, you mean not pen and paper.

Geoff: Precisely.

Yamraj: A teacher made quiz is not an alternative assessment.

Geoff: Getting back to what was said about teachers and being trained as a teacher. When you go through a teacher training program, you see things differently. I started teaching before I was trained and it's a completely different world altogether. How many of us at the school are trained teachers?

Yamraj: The majority of the local teachers are not. I too was untrained for several years and I thought I did fairly well, however, the training enhanced my work and it made me aware of a lot more things.

Kolin: What is vital is that passion for teaching and that passion for learning. I started teaching, I thought that, the truth is that I was almost forced into teaching. I needed a way to support myself while I was going through university. There was a vacancy for a

part-time untrained teacher, I took it and I found that I liked it. But when I got into the classroom, I realized that knowing the content and delivering it were two different things so I started to teach myself how to teach and then I embarked on a new course of study, psychology, I am selecting as much as possible, courses that are relevant to teaching so that I did organizational behaviour and classroom management and educational psychology. You are right; you see things from a whole different view point, because you are going to find teachers who are trained in methodology and so on who are still not delivering well in the classroom. It's a passion that is important and not just the training while training is vital, it is not the only thing.

Yamraj: And it's not and I think delivery like you said is very, very important because I know a lot of people who cannot bring it to the level of the students.

Kolin: Sometimes, in some teachers, it's a gift I think. I think some teachers, it's a gift. If you are for teaching, don't teach.

Matt: What Geoff and Kolin said about once you start getting that different perspective in terms of training, we start doing things a little different. My eyes for testing in terms of picking up errors in the test have been opened since I started this program. I would take a test and take a question and say it's flawed. Some people would ask why it's flawed, especially the multiple choice. If the question creates any perception and makes a right guess, it's not a good question. And as far as the classroom practice, assessment methods, we use to use the word assessment blindly here until I know what it really meant. I am not, I've corrected the way in which I use it but I have seen people who are trained and they still use it the same way.

Kolin: So alternative assessment is a make-up test? (teachers laugh)

Matt: The thing is, in the terms in which it's used, it is anything else that is not a quiz or a test or a lab. You could give homework and that's alternative. That program has made me a little more critical in terms of, and I am talking about constructive criticism. Case in point, Geoff was writing a quiz. When he was creating the question, and I said I like the question but you could re-phrase it. He was open to it and then he changed it. And that's the same question that caused the confusion. I said we could move it from a knowledge question to a higher level question. And he was open to that type of constructive criticism? That's the problem I have here and I am working with some people right now and they are really set in their ways. Through the PLC we could start to get them to drop their ego a little bit and start putting education first and start adapting ideas from different people.

Yamraj: Any other comments about that?

Kolin: In terms of the learning thing, a small experience, I had no idea that there was a method to setting multiple choice questions. I thought you gave 3 or 4 options that were incorrect and 1 correct one, that was it. And the students must be able to identify the correct one, until reading a book on assessment. I learned there was a method that thought went into setting a multiple choice test. As teachers we have to keep learning,

dynamics are changing, the world is changing and we have to keep learning to stay abreast or catch up.

Geoff: You know, I had a similar experience with my first years. When I committed what I call my education sins. I thought when you set a multiple choice question, you have to put three things that had to confuse the student. I didn't know better. I thought you had to be very good to get that one. It's a riddle you have to solve.

Yamraj: I think we did answer the question that we do feel like we are a community of learners. I think we have accepted that. Do you think I stopped "leading" too soon? From the third meeting I handed over to Matt.

Matt: Good timing.

Yamraj: I only led for the first two meetings. I just want to get your feelings on if you think I stopped too soon. I don't think that I fully withdrew because I still made comments throughout but I tried to withdraw as much as possible so that you could control your own learning.

Matt: You did a good job because it's the same point I was making about learners. We never knew anything about PLC before. Here you come in everyday and speak to us and we suck up everything.

Khyle: Or sleeping.

Matt: Why not get us involved? Although we didn't fully understand, we had an idea, it's the same thing. You built on the prior knowledge that we had. We didn't know what a PLC was, such a fancy term, but we knew what collaboration was all about.

Kolin: This is the same, this is an idea we want to introduce to our classes as well, instead of us standing in front of our classes and pontificating, you get the students involved and you offer your guidance and you facilitate learning instead of stuffing information.

Matt: Instead of sitting passive and biting their nails.

Kolin: So I think, once you had gotten us on stream.

Matt: You did a great job of it.

Geoff: I don't think your question is correct, I don't think you ever stopped leading anyway. (teachers laughing). I think your method was different than what somebody else might use.

Matt: Right.

Kolin: That's true.

Yamraj: Well, it went from leading the sessions to being a background facilitator. I was intending to be more of a resource person as well, but that didn't quite work out but I don't get enough resources for you and I didn't have many myself.

Matt: Well what we had we made use of and the biggest resources we had were people.

Yamraj: Yes.

Matt: And ideas. And people with big mouths and good hearts.

Yamraj: Ok, I am taking it that the peer leading was really good then? The fact that each one of you facilitated a session, what did you get from that?

Matt: I got, I was able to, I hope I was able to open eyes in terms of technology in education and that you don't misuse and abuse the technology. Geography is an exciting subject and I'd like to come over here sometime, and it's on record, I am going to say it again, I would love to come over here and teach. It's something that has to do with a lot of visuals and hands on, so if you could get activities for hands on and more visual people. You are not going to throw the audio learners outside, but stuff, you are going to tap into every learning style. You know the kinaesthetic, visual, audio, through the technology in the classroom you could be able to tap into all those learners. I hope Katie embarks on a project to get a lot of technology up here in geography. Go beyond the laptops and projector, get media charts and so on too. Up to date charts, let the kids build their own charts.

Kolin: You didn't come to my room.

Matt: We could have the kids build their own charts and have them make posters and change our way of assessing. That's another thing I would like to see too. Give them more hands on experiences. I am not saying throw the paper and pen test through the door, because that is what will be used to ultimately evaluate them. It's sad. You just use different methods of assessment to tap into their skills.

Yamraj: So Geoff, how has the peer learning been for you? What did you get when the others facilitated or when you facilitated?

Geoff: For one thing, it really helped me to want to do more in terms of how I do things because like I said, I need an escape and if I don't get it I become stagnant. I feel that sometimes I can become stagnant too quickly. I found myself settling down in a one way of doing things. So, the sessions where my peers were presenting I could recognize their method and it would click to me, what about going back to that. It was difficult for me knowing the system from which I came to this school. I had gotten frustrated because where I think I could go I realize it was blocked. I will just block myself as well. But I appreciated the way the sessions were conducted and I think I learned quite a bit.

Kolin: Before we move on, there is something to be said about learning from your peers as against learning [from] outside professionals. You get the impression that these people are from someplace but [it's different] when it's people who share your experiences and speaking from the same perspective. It's easier to accept I find if you feel it's coming from the teachers. This peer learning is good.

Matt: The same thing with the kids, keep it culturally relevant, don't use something too far away that they can't relate to. We can relate to each other, let's say we had somebody from the US here, I bet you everybody will run out to that group to listen to what they have to say but can we relate their experience to our own environment? If Kolin has something to say, I'll prefer to listen to what Kolin has to say because he is right here.

Geoff: But not just because he is right here, the person coming from the US could read the book the night before. It's not like they are practicing anything in their own system, but when we sit in a forum like this I don't have a book in front of me. I am just saying what is in here.

Kolin: Or trying to sell me a book. (teachers laugh) Because when they bring these facilitators, you always hear "You can read this in my book and I have a few copies here with me."

Geoff: They still get paid.

Yamraj: How has it been for you Khyle?

Khyle: It has been pretty good. Matt has got me thinking more about how to use technology in the classroom. Geoff has shown me that I could put myself up on the blackboard with a big smile (teachers laugh). These are some little ideas that came about, maybe if it wasn't the PLC then I would not have thought about such ideas. So getting together as a group, it's really good, we as teachers, professionals I think there are lots of ideas out there and we could make use of these ideas all the time especially because of the fact that we are teachers. We are always supposed to be learning.

Yamraj: The last question before I give you your homework, (teachers laugh) did the PLC influence your instruction or classroom practice in any way?

Kolin: Let me go first because I am going to have to run. This PLC has indeed changed the way I practice. Like I was saying in previous interviews, a lot of what was said here is not new to me. Some of it was things that I had practiced earlier, but like Geoff, I found that the system didn't readily lend itself to some of the ideas I had. So, I had switched into a mode of self preservation. To me it was keep the students occupied and hope that the times runs out quick so that they could go their way. I am ashamed to say, I had gone into that mode and this here revived the real drive for teaching in me. This is one thing that was done. I am, again willing to go the extra mile in the classroom and really take time and teach instead of having students record notes and define words and so on.

Yamraj: I just to make a comment, especially with him. Based on the interviews that I have conducted, when I compare my first interview with Kolin to the last interview with him, I can honestly see actually I can feel the difference. I can see the change in his attitudes, I can feel it. It's like when you have this flower trying to opening up, I can feel that he is blooming. I can feel that he wanted to make a change and a difference. He seems so rejuvenated.

Geoff: What type of flower? (teachers laughing)

Yamraj: I can't tell yet.

Kolin: The male ones (laugh).

Geoff: Yes, just like Kolin, as far as settling down into a mode and just staying there, this PLC has allowed me to pull out of that spiral and one of the other things too, is that I have come to the point where I, the PLC has helped me to focus a little less on just covering content and dealing a little more with more students and even the student's issues that I where I see myself changed in that sense. I have also developed a little more of a drive to want to read a little more and to want to speak a little more with someone else. I recall that one of the things that I may have mentioned, but I had said that I don't find myself as much of a leader even with this PLC. As we go through it, after the few weeks, I really want to see this thing moving ahead. I think that has been one of the areas that has helped me to open up a little more in terms of wanting to speak about it and to share the ideas with others and even within ourselves, with or without you, Ms. Yamraj, I would want to see this thing go on. I think it has pushed me to that point where I have become a little more passionate in that sense. That's the benefits.

Matt: For me basically, I tried to look more for subject integration because that is one of the things I was looking for. I wanted to see how I can integrate it with other subjects or parts that they are doing at the time. Ok, not just geography, but social studies, whatever is relevant. It has also changed the way I try to assess kids in terms; I learned from Katie that giving back papers immediately, I knew that before, but I never really practiced it but I have been trying to do that. Little things that I have picked up in here, classroom management issues, how to deal with the students, I have become a little more patient in terms of ignoring and leaving things alone and sharing a little laughter here and there. Just be a little less tense in the classroom, so I have learned quite a few things here, if I were to go on I might need about three more tapes.

Yamraj: O.K. Khyle, did the PLC influence you in any way?

Khyle: Yes it did.

Yamraj: How?

Khyle: It caused me to focus more on managing students and examining how they learn, I am thinking about new techniques and trying to make my lessons more interesting, more meaningful, and more relevant. And to try to see that the students may need to be

taught in different ways. Basically it had me looking more into different ways of reaching the children. I think sometimes we are so busy just going through the days and trying to get the syllabus completed that we don't stop to look at things like how students learn in terms of those who are more visual, those who do better at hearing, touching. So the PLC helped me to take a closer look at all these things and to stop, think and move on.

Yamraj: Ok Katie, you are just in time. Did the PLC influence you classroom practice in any way?

Katie: You asked me that question sometime before.

Yamraj: Something similar, yes. This is the final question and we are answering it as a group.

Katie: Yes. I am more conscious now of certain topics when I teach, especially to the science students.

Yamraj: Because of the content integration?

Katie: Yes. And I try to pick from them what they have done already. Especially when we do erosion by solution and so on.

Yamraj: Ok, perfect, thank you.

Homework (Journal Entry):

*Write a letter to the administration to explain to them why creating time within the time table is imperative to have teachers meet regularly as a learning community.