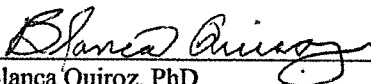
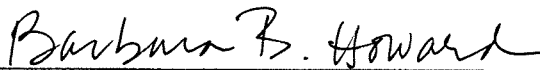


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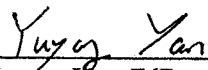
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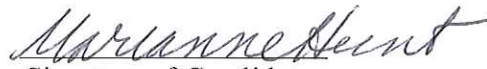
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COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH TO READING TO LEARN ACROSS CONTENT
AREAS

by

Marianne Hunt

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Education
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this mixed-method case study is to determine the effect that a grade-wide literacy intervention program implemented through a professional learning community (PLC) has on the motivation, literacy identity, and performance of a cohort of sixth-grade students at a middle school in Norwalk, California. In this study, team of sixth-grade teachers who had adopted the principles of DuFour and Fullan (2013) as well as Fullan and Quinn (2015) sought to create a PLC that could lead to positive change in school culture and literacy rates across the curriculum. The study was guided by the following questions: What does a grade-wide literacy focused PLC intervention to support sixth-grade students' literacy look like at the systemic level? What is the impact of a literacy-focused PLC project on grade-wide reading comprehension, students' literacy practices, and students' confidence as readers? How does this PLC effort change the school system and its leaders' and students' buy-in? The researcher analyzed pre and post student and staff surveys as well as meeting agendas, notes, and correspondences to describe the process of implementing a cohesive grade-level PLC and determine the impact that it had on literacy practices and the culture of the school. Ethnographic notes revealed that the teachers made a collective decision to focus on literacy across the curriculum. They collaborated regularly and used data to inform their decisions and the course of their intervention. The researcher compared pre and post i-Ready scores to measure growth in reading comprehension. At the beginning of the year, 103 students were reading below the fourth-grade level (based on i-Ready scores). At the end of the year, there was a significant decrease of 18.4% to 84 students. Surveys and reflections revealed that the project had a positive impact on relationships between teachers and students as students reported feeling supported and cared for by their teachers. There was an increase in the students' positive literacy practices and

their confidence as readers. The effort had an effect on the wider school culture as other grade-level teams agreed to adopt some of the practices of the sixth-grade team.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

How do you improve student achievement in an underperforming school? What do you focus on? Where do you begin? Each school has to answer these questions in its own way, keeping in mind its own unique set of circumstances. The realization becoming prevalent is that the systems that have been in place in education have not served the needs of all students and, as a result, they lack competency in many of the areas necessary to navigate higher education and the world beyond. Schools are churning out many young people who are ill equipped to handle the challenges of life.

In recent years, many schools have turned to systemic interventions like professional learning communities (PLCs) as a way to address the needs of their varied student populations in the unique culture of their school. Recognizing that the system as a whole must change and that a different approach is needed is at the heart of PLCs. Long have teachers labored in isolation in their own classrooms, without giving much thought to what was happening in the school beyond their walls. That paradigm no longer suits the needs of contemporary students, as illustrated by the declining literacy rates, especially among the nation's poor (Chall et al., 1990; Mamedova & Pawlowski, 2019). Schools are finding more success when they develop a systems approach and work in unison to improve student learning. When teachers and administrators work collaboratively, they are more likely to improve student achievement (DuFour, 2007).

Fullan (2010) stated that PLCs are not merely a collegial group of teachers, but rather educators who dig deeply into student learning and engage in disciplined inquiry into their individual and collective practice with an aim of continuous improvement. When the collaboration focused on student learning is embedded in the culture of the school, it leads to improved student achievement as well as increased confidence among the staff to solve problems

in more effective ways (DuFour et al., 2004). It is important for school personnel to begin by accurately assessing the current situation and identifying common goals so that they can determine a pathway between the two (Fullan & Quinn, 2015; Senge, 2012). Fullan and Quinn (2015) stated that unifying the various elements of the school in a focused direction and creating a collaborative culture that produces strong groups with mutual accountability are vital to deepening the learning of students. Strong PLCs have the power to make the lasting, meaningful change that is necessary to meet the needs of students. Such change is not without strife as it challenges long-held assumptions and expectations that have been embedded in a school's culture for a long time; thus, conflict is to be expected (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).

Adopting the principles of a professional learning community is not the same as adopting a program. Developing a PLC is a process that changes all aspects of a system and a process that gives every person within the system an opportunity to be an agent of change. As the educators become organized and focused, the students naturally follow as they receive a consistent message of urgency from all the adults they encounter and engage with coherent systems that give them the tools to address their needs. Moreover, teachers benefit when they hone their skills by engaging in productive PLCs. They work with their colleagues to reflect on their practice and assess whether or not it is successful in aiding their students to attain set goals. The continuous reflection leads to a refinement of practice that makes the most of resources and time in order to create the conditions needed for sustainable change. Through PLCs, a school can take an overloaded and fragmented staff and optimize its engagement with its student body, thereby transforming it into a focused and coherent system dedicated to student achievement (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). As a collaborative culture takes hold, leaders who guide the school's efforts in

raising the bar for instructional practice and student success over time will emerge at every level of the organization.

Statement of the Problem

Many students entering middle school in the sixth grade do not have the literacy skills needed to make sense of the texts that they encounter as they progress through secondary education (Chall et al., 1990). In middle school, students need to extract information from more challenging and more varied texts. Clearly, strong reading skills are imperative if students are to make meaning of them (Stevens, 2014). However, secondary teachers are rarely trained to teach literacy, so the reading skills and strategies that students need are not taught or reinforced beyond the language arts classroom (Clark, 2006). Low literacy has become a serious problem for the United States. According to Mamedova and Pawlowski (2019), 21% of American adults cannot make even low-level inferences from their reading.

Language arts is only one class; other content area classes demand skills in different genres of written expression. Content area teachers are an underused resource that, if mobilized effectively, could have a substantial impact on the literacy rates of students and, by extension, on their learning. A coordinated effort on teachers' part to explicitly teach literacy strategies and skills will help students successfully transition from primary to secondary school.

Mancilla-Martinez et al. (2011) demonstrated in their longitudinal study that reading comprehension growth slows dramatically in adolescence, especially among language-minority learners. The deceleration of growth is attributed to the students' inability to gain knowledge from sophisticated texts, and the authors contended that a deficit in either linguistic comprehension or word decoding will impede comprehension. They concluded by stating that the instruction that students get in middle school is insufficient for supporting comprehension

growth. Curwen et al. (2010) and Stevens (2014) stressed the importance of teachers delivering explicit literacy instruction in content areas. Each text should be approached with a plan and discussion of purpose followed throughout by teachers engaging in metacognition, explaining to the students how their brains make sense of the text and when and where they will encounter such a text again. As experts in their field, teachers are well suited to teach their students how to unpack the texts that they encounter in the classroom.

Schoenbach et al. (2010) also connected explicit literacy instruction in content areas to student achievement. Through an analysis of several quantitative as well as qualitative studies, they determined that student gains were most profound when teachers leveraged the social, personal, cognitive, and knowledge-building aspects of classroom life in order to build a community that supports reading development. In this way, they made the teachers' and students' reading processes and knowledge visible to one another, leading to rich conversations using academic language. Meanwhile, through directed classroom observations, Ness (2009) discovered that less than 10% of classroom time is dedicated to comprehension instruction, with most of that using only one strategy of discourse: question-and-answer evaluation. Through a review of audiotaped classroom observations and a deep analysis of their transcripts, Robertson (2013) determined that a teacher could become more purposeful and effective in literacy instruction.

In the incoming sixth-grade class at Walton Middle School in 2018–2019, for example, 97 of 180 students scored below the fourth-grade level on a diagnostic reading assessment. Although the students at Walton are at or below the third-grade level, direct reading instruction is minimal in sixth grade. This means that the students lack the means to gain information through their reading just when it becomes most necessary for them to do so. Even students who have

tested at grade level often struggle with much of the content in their texts. Students who do not develop the skills necessary to access texts of various complexities and genres have limited opportunities. This problem is evident by their performance on standardized testing. Currently, few students reach proficiency at every level. For students attending urban schools, literacy rates are especially low. They fail to achieve academically, and this failure makes them dependent on others to navigate many areas of life (Chall et al., 1990; Mamedova & Pawlowski, 2019). Sixth grade is also a pivotal time. It is the first year of middle school and the first-time students rotate through classes with different teachers. These changes, along with the developmental challenges of puberty, can be a source of stress and anxiety. Poor literacy skills exacerbate these challenges as students strive to make sense of different teachers and subjects with little or no support.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to determine the effect that a grade-wide literacy intervention program implemented through a PLC has on the motivation, literacy identity, and performance of a cohort of sixth-grade students at a middle school in Norwalk, California. The deficits of the incoming sixth-grade students have been too much for a single teacher to address. A community effort is needed whereby all members of that community are engaged in the effort to improve literacy skills across all content areas and for all students. The PLC approach is likely to engage the sixth-grade teachers and students in a real cultural shift. According to the principles of a PLC, teachers must work together to assess the current situation regarding literacy by analyzing data and formulating a plan. They must commit to a process of continuous improvement that focuses on student achievement. Lippy (2011) determined in their analysis of PLCs in 12 middle schools that, through collaboration on decision-making and instructional practice, teachers can have a significant impact on student achievement.

Significance of the Study

The intervention in this study is unique in that it requires teachers to plan together across disciplines and look for opportunities to teach common strategies designed to help students gain access to sophisticated, discipline-specific texts. They will also be required to address vocabulary development in a coordinated way. Snow et al. (2009) demonstrated that sixth- to eighth-grade students make significant gains in academic language development if there is cross-content area vocabulary intervention. Furthermore, students' families are part of the community and play a vital role in implementing the solution. The parents of low performing students must be made aware of the problem of low literacy, including its relationship to learning, the teachers' plan to address it, and their own responsibility to support the school's efforts. They must be kept abreast of progress their child makes as well as informed of any hindrances to their child's learning.

Ultimately, the change must occur within each student. However, children are not learning in a vacuum; they are socialized to values and goals. Teachers and guardians have an obligation to give students the support and expertise needed to provide opportunities, but ultimately it is the students who must accept the challenge. In short it will take an "all hands-on deck" approach with all parties doing their part to establish a school-wide culture of literacy. This study is the evaluation of such an approach—namely, the implementation of a reading intervention through a PLC project.

Inspiring students to become active participants in their literacy development is key to long-term growth. Clarke (2006) demonstrated that making literacy a pillar of school culture has a positive effect on students' motivation to read and improves their perception of themselves as readers. Engaging students in honest discussions about where they are as readers and assisting them in setting goals will lead to more independent reading.

Research Questions

The secondary data collected as part of the learning community at this school was used to answer the following research questions:

1. What does a grade-wide literacy focused PLC intervention to support sixth-grade students' literacy look like at the systemic level?
2. What is the impact of a literacy-focused PLC project on grade-wide reading comprehension, students' literacy practices, and students' confidence as readers?
3. How does this PLC effort change the school system and its leaders' and students' buy-in?

Theoretical Framework

The proposed intervention is based on DuFour and Fullan's (2013) theoretical framework. PLCs first build upon a shared vision—that of ensuring the academic excellence of all students by obtaining a collective commitment from all teachers to raise the literacy levels of every student on the sixth-grade roster. It establishes a collaborative culture by dividing teachers into interdisciplinary teams based upon complementary subject matters, such as math with science and social studies with language arts. These interdisciplinary teams share preparation periods. The teams agree to meet once a week and engage in collective inquiry, during which time they use data to assess the current reality and look for opportunities to reinforce best practices across the curriculum. The planned intervention is action oriented, and the teachers will learn by doing as they try research-based strategies and evaluate them for effectiveness based on data. The teachers are dedicated to a commitment of continuous improvement rather than a new program, and their efforts will be evaluated based on results, which is the hallmark of effective PLCs. The intervention itself is an attempt to establish a coherent system, with the teachers,

parents, administrators, and students committed to something larger than themselves as they pursue deep mutual learning goals. Clarity of purpose has been established with all school officials by understanding the primary goals of improving reading and writing skills in all subject areas. The close examination of the current data will help the team build shared knowledge about the current state of affairs as well as establish a baseline from which to proceed. The weekly meeting of interdisciplinary teams will open lines of communication so that they can clarify and refine the vision as they go. They have committed to have what DuFour and Fullan (2013, p. 66) “critical conversations” about student achievement, where they gather facts, listen to one another’s concerns in order to seek common ground, and build shared knowledge so that they may determine how best to meet all students’ needs, whether it is by providing extra support or offering enrichment opportunities.

In true PLC fashion, the team has incorporated within the intervention the long-term goal of raising students’ reading abilities to grade level. They have also established the short-term action steps of getting books in their students’ hands, carving out time for sustained silent reading, and meeting with parents to establish communication protocols and support behaviors. As DuFour and Fullan (2013) explained, it is important that a PLC work while keeping the end and beginning in mind, with a flexibility to modify the middle as new data and experiences dictate. The proposed intervention has put the necessary ingredients in place for an effective PLC among the sixth-grade teachers; they have established what Lippy (2011) described as the non-negotiable elements of a shared vision among professionals with trusting relationships, accompanied by a supportive administration. Once students, parents, teachers, administrators, and support staff have a common understanding of the current reality regarding literacy, they can work in concert toward a common goal of improvement.

Using a Professional Learning Community to Address Literacy Needs

This study will be formulated within the framework of PLCs. It documents the construction and maintenance of a PLC at a selected middle school in order to address low literacy and explore the practical viability of such a process to determine whether or not such a process is sustainable. There needs to be a cultural shift in the community of the school itself, and effective PLCs need to play a central role if dramatic gains in performance are to be achieved. The school is only as good as the people within it. In order for the educators to feel competent as instruments of change, they need to develop their capacity to be so (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).

The problem of poor literacy skills is all too common, with more than half of the incoming sixth-grade students falling three or more years behind expected reading skills (see Tables 1. 1 and 2. 1). The reasons are many, and each student has a unique set of challenges. The very complex nature of the problem demands a solution that uses the effort and expertise of all those involved with the students. DuFour and Fullan (2013) emphasized that teachers must work together to meet students' needs in a targeted and effective way, focusing their efforts on student achievement. A professional learning community to marshal and focus these efforts is needed (DuFour & Fullan 2013).

Definition of Terms

Professional Learning Community (PLC): According to *The Glossary of Education Reform* website (<https://www.edglossary.org/>), a PLC is a group of educators who meet regularly, share expertise, and work collaboratively to improve teaching skills and the academic performance of students.

i-Ready: i-Ready is an integrated blended learning program that connects assessment data to personalized learning and teacher-led instruction.

Assignment Completion Time (ACT): The researcher established a dedicated hour after school three days a week where students could work on their homework or incomplete classwork in a safe, quiet environment. Any students who failed to turn in three or more assignments were required to take “ACTion” by coming after school to catch up on their work.

Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID): According to Alexandra Pannoni and Josh Moody (2019), AVID is a nonprofit college-readiness program designed to help students develop the skills they need to be successful in college. The program places special emphasis on growing writing, critical thinking, teamwork, organization, and reading skills.

Focused Note-Taking: This AVID method of taking notes gives the students an opportunity to revisit, revise, and synthesize the content and concepts in their notes.

Academic Discourse: Academic discourse is dialogue that uses language and a format that promotes a high level of communication in the classroom. The discourse can range from peer-to-peer discussion to whole-class discussion. It can take on many forms: metacognition, presentations, debate, listening, writing, and critiquing of other’s work. By engaging in academic discourse, students learn to be conversant with academic vocabulary and are enabled to acquire complex concepts in various specialized areas of knowledge.

Metacognition: Metacognition is the awareness and understanding of one's own thought processes. Strategies that reveal a learner's thoughts about his or her own thinking and learning are metacognitive. Metacognition is an essential part of the learning process, but does not come naturally to students. Teachers must help them monitor how they plan tasks, how they acquire learning, and how they evaluate their own progress (Fisher et al., 2016).

California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP): CAASPP is a standardized exam to evaluate student progress administered by the state of California at the end of the academic year.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) 2002: NCLB is an update of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which scaled up the federal role in holding schools accountable for student outcomes.

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 2015: ESSA is another updating of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that addressed some of the difficulties encountered by schools in their attempts to accommodate the NCLB.

National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP): NAEP is a congressionally mandated assessment that measures what U.S. students know and can do in various subjects across the nation, states, and some urban districts. It is also known as the Nation's Report Card.

Limitations

The primary limitation to this study is the sample size. The sixth-grade class begins with only 180 students, and we can reasonably expect that we will lose some of these students through attrition.

The number of assessment tools is necessarily limited. The study will rely on i-Ready assessments three times a year, pre and post surveys of students' attitudes and practices

regarding literacy, PLC meeting notes and agendas, and teacher' reflections and debriefing interviews.

Because this is a qualitative case study with a small sample size, any conclusions cannot be applied to other schools, which will have their own unique cultures.

Summary

Student literacy skills have been in decline for some time. Current systems in place have not responded to the needs of our children. These children are being matriculated upwards without having the requisite reading skills to unpack the meaning of the wide variety of texts and materials they will encounter in secondary education. It is clear that language arts teachers alone cannot impart these necessary skills. To further compound the problem, most teachers in other content areas are not properly prepared to teach the skills students need within their respective disciplines.

The solution must be a systemic one that comes from all elements of the schoolwide culture. All stakeholders within the school must work collaboratively and systematically to address the problem. Because each community is unique and has its own distinct, often evolving, sets of problems, the answer is to establish a professional learning community (PLC). This community needs to be composed of administrators and teachers from across the curriculum who are prepared to meet the needs of each student under their instruction.

For students to improve, they must be convinced to buy in to the importance and urgency of their development of a wide-ranging literacy. Without improved literacy, students' options for success will be severely limited. This buy-in needs to be encouraged by everyone—administrators, teachers, and the students' guardians.

The PLC is most effective when everyone within it feels empowered to be an agent of cultural change. PLCs work to develop a process rather than a program. Improvement comes when everyone feels comfortable giving input and developing innovative responses to problems. Leadership can arise from anywhere within the community. Administrators who invest in the process and see themselves as team members willing to allow this leadership to develop are essential to the success of the PLC.

The purpose of this study is to determine how effective a PLC can become by meeting regularly to develop purposeful strategies and evaluate the effectiveness of ongoing practices. They must work together to assess the current situation regarding literacy by analyzing data and formulating a plan. Furthermore, the parents of low performing students must be made cognizant of the problem of low literacy. They need to understand literacy's importance to learning. They need to be aware of the teachers' plan to address the problem as well as their own responsibility to support the school's efforts. They must be kept abreast of the progress their child makes and mindful of any hindrances to their child's learning.

Teachers of all disciplines will work to develop literacy. They will coordinate vocabulary instruction across content classes. Through conferencing, teachers will engage students in honest discussions about where they are as readers and assist them in setting goals that will lead to more independent reading. This study is the evaluation of such an approach—namely, the implementation of a reading intervention through a PLC project.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Need for School Reform

Over the last three decades, public education has come under great scrutiny as educators, politicians, and ordinary citizens have become aware of and concerned about the lack of academic progress of K–12 population. Legislative efforts have been made to put into place expectations of learning as well as mechanisms of accountability. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) 2002 and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) 2015 are attempts to ensure the success of all students by implementing accountability measures for schools. Legislation, while mandating achievement gains, gives schools little direction on how best to achieve the sought-after goals. Those goals have proven to be elusive. For example, based on data from test scores for fourth- and eighth-grade students from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), Thomas Dee and Brian Jacob (2011) concluded that there was no evidence that NCLB increased reading achievement in either fourth or eighth grade (p. 37). Dee and Jacob found only a very weak correlation between the money spent on schools and higher student achievement. Reforms have tended to target setting standards—what subject and content are to be mastered at each level. None of these programmatic changes focus on how these new expectations are to be met by teachers and students with very diverse needs. The grade or even the years of schooling a student has had is not a good indicator of his/her knowledge or academic achievement. The problem is that reformers assume that each academic year translates into a comparable increase in the students' relevant skills (Hanushek et al., 2016). The reforms ignore “variations in major factors in students' learning, i.e., the quality of the student's home, community, school, teachers, and many other factors” (Hanushek et al., 2016, p. 18). Additionally, school reform often fails to consider the specific needs of individual schools. The culture of each school is unique and so is

its needs. Addressing reform with a one-size-fits-all solution has shown to be ineffective. Reforms must be local and specific to the particular school. Research evaluations of local approaches to school reform has shown that systemic reform, if implemented successfully at the school and community level, can lead to achievement gains (DuFour & Fullan, 2013; Senge, 2012). The professional learning community (PLC) can combine both bottom-up and top-down approaches to integrate all parts of the school community into a coherent system with the strength and flexibility needed to address the myriad concerns that plague troubled schools (DuFour & Fullan, 2013).

PLC Elements

The PLC model has been shown to be effective in addressing the low levels of student achievement. Kruse et al. (2009) as well as Newman and Wehlage (1995) agreed that fostering a sense of collective responsibility from all levels of the school community is key in reaching high levels of student achievement. These concepts were built upon by DuFour and Eaker (1998) in their groundbreaking work *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. In this book they not only discussed what PLCs are and why they are effective, but also presented practical ways that educators in the field could implement them and leverage them to maximize students' success. The user-friendly nature of this theoretical work helped to catapult the concepts of PLC to a large number of schools and educators. DuFour (2004) further clarified notions of this approach in his article "What is a Professional Learning Community?" He delineated three main ideas that drive the focus of a PLC. The first is to ensure that all students learn. Educators that work in highly effective PLCs address the needs of all their students, regardless of achievement levels. They are guided in this endeavor by three questions: What do we want students to learn? How will we know if they have

mastered it? How will we respond if they struggle or fail to master a skill or concept? The second driving force of a PLC is to create a culture of collaboration. The old paradigm of teachers teaching in isolation has to give way to a new way of approaching instruction. Among the collaboration elements that Kruse et al. (2009) identified as crucial to increased achievement are the development of reflective dialogue, in which members of the community discuss the situations and challenges they face in order to develop a collaboration among teachers, and a shared set of norms. The purpose of collaboration is not just to develop shared understanding of problems they face, but also to “produce materials and activities that improve instruction, curriculum, and assessments” (p. 160) in the pursuit of shared goals. Kruse et al. admitted that the path to consensus through collaboration is not always a smooth one. PLCs should not expect that disagreements would never occur. Managing conflict is a central way in which teachers establish community boundaries and, in the end, determines the school’s potential for learning and change. Conflict is a significant aspect of any community. How teachers manage conflicts, whether they suppress or embrace their differences, defines the community borders and ultimately the potential for organizational learning and change. Conflict is sure to arise during periods of great change and can be a determining factor in the successful implementation of an effective PLC (Achinstein, 2002). When teachers work together, their combined knowledge and wisdom have a more profound impact on student growth and development than when they work alone. The third driver of PLCs is an unwavering focus on student achievement (DuFour, 2004). They must come together at regular intervals to discuss student achievement data and use that data to drive instructional practices (Abbott & Wren, 2016).

Cohesiveness through Collaboration: The Glue that Binds PLC Forces

At the heart of the concept of PLCs is the notion of community and collaboration. Stoll et al. (2006) as well as Servage (2008) emphasized that mutually supportive relationships and shared norms are key characteristics of effective PLCs. By establishing a collaborative culture, teachers can help to develop interpersonal and caring relationships that will permeate the lives of their students leading to higher academic achievement. In a case study, Graham (2007) demonstrated the importance of building a sense of team community. It is through the trust and security of relationships within the community that substantive conversations occur—conversations that center on student achievement data, instructional strategies, and assessment practices, all of which lead to improved teaching and learning. Deep, meaningful collaborative conversations help teachers develop a sense of clarity and purpose behind their work (Graham, 2007; Wells & Feun, 2012). When the members of a community deliberate on the information and data they possess and contemplate their implications, they form collective remedies and distribute responsibilities among team members with mutual accountability. The dialogue becomes the vehicle that bridges the gap between individual and organizational learning (Senge, 2012). As McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) discovered when teachers participate in effective PLCs, they develop a sense of empowerment and influence as they build a common language with their peers, develop standards of practice, and create shared knowledge (Graham, 2007; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Servage, 2008; Stoll et al., 2006).

There is a significant difference between a community of teachers and a group of teachers sitting together in a meeting. Meeting regularly to develop teaching and learning goals and sharing the responsibility of achieving them is the hallmark of a highly effective PLC (Richmond & Manokore, 2011). It is not enough to recognize that teams of teachers need to meet regularly if

they are to effect change. Systems need to be put in place that ensure that the crucial element of time is provided to develop common goals and strategies and review common assessments to plan modifications.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Collaboration and Coherence

In their literature review, Stoll et al. (2006) identified critical features present in effective PLCs. There is more to it than simple collaboration, although that is a central tenant. Creating a shared vision built on common values is an important first step in creating an effective PLC. All parties within the PLC must take collective responsibility in the advancement of student learning and regularly reflect on their practice. At the heart of successful systems reform is the idea of building both individual and collective capacity. Richmond and Manokore (2011) analyzed teacher talk during PLC meetings as part of a 5-year project. After transcribing and analyzing dozens of PLC meeting notes, they too observed several common practices among PLCs that have a significant positive impact on student achievement versus those that have little or none. One of the key features is that PLC participants are dedicated to collaboration as a means to deepen their practice. Teachers involved in positive PLC experiences develop a level of trust among their colleagues that allows them to readily share ideas and concerns without fear of ridicule. This willingness to be vulnerable leads to greater collective problem-solving abilities and a sound support system when things become difficult. The members not only support one another, but they also hold one another accountable in both formal and informal ways. Teachers in this study reported that support and collegiality grew as the PLC process developed, which led to a greater confidence in their content knowledge as well as their practice. The final concern that repeatedly arose in teacher conversations was that of sustainability. Issues regarding the

longevity of systems, or the plans to ensure that any reform would last over time were discussed by Stoll et al. (2006) as well as Richmond and Manokore (2011). A case study by Mintrop and Charles (2017) came to similar conclusions. They also illustrated how critical it is to establish systems that support teacher collaboration during the critical beginnings of the PLC development process. They followed a grade-level group of teachers working in an urban middle school as they worked as a team to address the needs of their students. The qualitative case study analyzed meeting notes and teacher reflections in an effort to discover how they, as professional educators, faced challenges collectively. The team's goal was to work together in order to address behavioral issues that had confounded the school culture for some time. The team set aside 90 minutes to collaborate as a PLC per week; however, they often drew from this time to deal with other issues. They did not develop vision or mission statements, and they let personality conflicts interfere with the development of systems that would lead to sustainable change. They failed to establish the clarity that DuFour and Fullen (2013) stated was so important when embarking on a school-wide system of change—namely, clarity on the status of their current situation and clarity on the path on which they intended to proceed. The authors found that the team consistently lagged behind their problems as conflicts went unresolved and consensus could only be achieved on superficial issues. The collective spirit that is needed to lead low performing, traumatized schools to competency is often lacking in the very schools that need it the most due to high teacher turnover (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). This study showed how important a sense of cohesion and shared purpose are to making lasting change by illustrating what happens when they are absent.

Cooper et al. (2015) echoed these findings with their embedded case study of 11 teacher leader teams from three urban schools. These researchers sought to determine how participation

in teacher teams changed the practice of individual teachers and what structural forces helped or impeded the formation of effective teams. They videotaped the participant teachers during professional development sessions and mentor conversations and had them write reflections after viewing the videos. The reflections were analyzed for indications that led to instructional change. To understand the forces that helped or hindered the formation of teams, the researchers conducted, transcribed, and interpreted in-depth interviews with 34 teachers. They found that teacher leaders must use targeted, direct, and strategic efforts in order to produce broad-based instructional change. Effective teams need to establish a sense of urgency and a coherent vision of what they wish to accomplish. The authors also advocated not only providing teachers the rationale for discussion-based teaching, but also assessing that understanding among the participants. They encouraged participants to increase their capacity to understand by becoming mindful of what they know and how they came to know it.

These studies made it clear to our team that we had to have a clear vision of our goals and a well-articulated set of core strategies for accomplishing said goals. To that end, the team committed to pedagogical techniques that would be effective across all the curriculum. We also agreed to present a united front to all students, parents, and administration.

Cohesive and Concrete Goals for Consistency

Ronfeldt et al. (2015) looked at how teacher teams affect student achievement by analyzing survey and test data from 9,000 teachers in 336 schools over a 2-year period. They discovered, not surprisingly, that the greater the coherence among the teams regarding goals and instructional strategies, the greater the student achievement. This study noted that, in order for meaningful change to take place, teachers need a better understanding of organizational change as well as a set of strategies to help them effect change among faculty members. However, the

authors determined that they could not draw a causal link between degree of collaboration and standardized student test scores.

Lippy (2011) wanted to know how varying levels of consistency of PLC implementation affected student achievement. They used the Professional Learning Community Assessment–Revised (PLCA–R) survey to measure levels of consistency. They administered it to 196 teachers from 12 schools following a district initiative to implement PLCs in all schools. They found a wide array of levels of implementation among the various schools. The dimensions of a PLC that were the most highly integrated across the schools were that of shared vision and values as well as supportive relationships. Teachers reported that they and their colleagues adhered to a common vision that guided their work. They also reported that they felt that their co-workers supported them with understanding and respect. However, it appears that that mutual respect did not translate into an increase in the sharing of their personal practice, which was one of the least-integrated dimensions of PLCs across the schools in the study. This is of some concern as the sharing of practice is a key factor in getting teachers out of their silos and into a more collaborative framework (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). Another dimension that Lippy (2011) noted as a cause for concern was lack of supportive conditions regarding structures. When structures are not in place that make the collaboration process convenient and efficient, the entire effort is in peril. A high level of commitment and dedication from members of a PLC can only be sustained if they are certain that the resources they need to carry out their interventions are available. Like this study, the current study connects student achievement with collaborative practices.

Process and Vertical Cohesion

Wells and Feun (2012) also looked at the process of implementing PLC concepts and practices. They followed eight middle schools from two different districts as they began to develop PLCs. They too discovered that the level and consistency of implementation varied across districts as well as across schools within the same district. They administered a survey with both a Likert scale and open-ended questions to the teachers and administrators involved in the study in order to get both quantitative as well as qualitative data. The results revealed that one district in the study had a significantly higher rate of quality of implementation on several factors of PLC. It demonstrated more supportive and shared leadership among the faculty of three of its four schools. Time was factored in the weekly routines for consistent collaboration, which led to what the researchers called a greater expression of “collective creativity” (p. 241) in designing lessons and analyzing student work. Teachers in these schools reported a continuous cycle of examining student work in order to refine their practice. The supportive conditions set in place by the administration resulted in a greater buy-in from staff with a higher level of commitment as reflected in the Likert portion of the survey. The schools in the other district reported very low levels of administrative support and not surprisingly very low levels of trust in the process among teacher respondents. The qualitative portion of the survey revealed some common themes. Teachers in the less successful district knew that their efforts to establish working PLCs were failing. They cited unclear expectations, a lack of time provided by administrators, and a lack of enthusiasm among their peers as reasons why. Their open-ended answers gave insights into the importance of administrative support to these efforts as the lack of it had a systemic effect on the morale and dedication of the teachers who were tasked with carrying out the work. In contrast, the teachers in the three successful schools reported that their

administration put in place time and resources to support their efforts. They provided time for collaboration and money for resources that teachers deemed necessary. Teachers were given greater autonomy to make decisions regarding instructional practice and student intervention, and as such they were free to focus intently on improving student achievement. Once again, this study found that the schools that were successful at developing a collaborative culture improved working conditions; teachers in these schools felt more supported. However, the study did not address whether or not this improved morale among the teachers led to higher student test scores.

Cohesion between Goals and Community

The relationship among a school's staff, its students, and their families can have a profound effect on student achievement and school culture. PLCs that are effective in leading change efforts begin by establishing a sense of urgency and developing and communicating a coherent vision of where their efforts are aimed (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). The decision to use the power of PLCs to raise student achievement and change negative attitudes toward reading is just the beginning. The literacy proficiency gap is not the result of the individual's failure; it is a community failure that must be addressed at the same level. Fullan and Quinn (2015) emphasized the need for coherence starting with focusing the direction of the parties involved and creating a collaborative culture. In this study, the goal of raising literacy levels in students across the board must be elevated to a moral imperative if it is to provide the glue necessary to maintain a program that provides a clear path to improving learning for all students (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Spanneut, 2010). PLCs necessarily create opportunities for participants to work through aspects of the challenges they will face and develop ways to measure success. DuFour and Fullan (2013) pointed out that making lasting cultural change in a school requires the challenging of deeply held assumptions, which is bound to cause conflict. They further

emphasized that building relationships with everyone involved, even those who disagree, will go a long way in dealing with conflict as it arises. Listening to the concerns of skeptics and understanding their perspective help mediate issues in a more timely and equitable way.

Choosing the Common Goal

Once a PLC has been established, it has to do what Fullan and Quinn (2015) described as focusing direction. The best way to find the goals on which to focus is to find a catalyst of change. It could be behavior, school climate, or an academic skill (e.g., literacy). The important characteristic is that it has the potential to create generative change across the school. To agree on a common goal, the community needs to take an honest assessment of the current reality and decide upon a course of action that will benefit the students. Literacy development can be a suitable focus for a PLC. As many researchers (D'Ardenne et al., 2013) have agreed, if difficulties in literacy development are not addressed early on, then they will lead to troubles that persist into adulthood. The difficulties that the struggling reader experience will permeate all aspects of his or her life and may lead to economic failure (Graves et al., 2011). In many inner-city schools, literacy development is woeful, and leaving it to the language arts teacher alone is neither fair nor practical. The effort requires teachers across all academic disciplines to take an active part in the literacy development of every student. As Schoenbach et al. (2010) pointed out, the responsibility of teaching students how to read, write, speak, and think critically about complex texts should no longer fall solely on the language arts teacher.

Content teachers, however, have not been prepared to teach reading as part of their instruction and may not even view it as a viable way for their students to learn (Ness, 2009). Allaying their fears of ill preparedness is a necessary part of the challenge of instituting a cross-curricular literacy program grade-wide. Ness (2009) emphasized the importance of engaging the

content teachers because their students will encounter more complex informational texts as they advance through high school. Subject matter teachers, being experts in their fields, are obliged to give their students the means and strategies they will need in order to be effective readers within their discipline. Each course, after all, requires students to read, write about, and understand the content in unique ways (Wolsey & Faust, 2013).

Strategies to Improve Literacy

Deciding on instructional strategies that have the potential for generative success is one of the recommendations for implementing an effective PLC. Hattie (2009), in the book *Visible Learning: A synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*, found that endeavoring to increase academic discourse was a highly effective strategy. Fostering speaking and listening skills can have a profound effect on literacy development (Hattie, 2009). Students who are offered several opportunities to take part in active academic discourse throughout their day acquire language skills at a much faster rate than those students who engage in little or no robust discussions in their core classrooms (Rhodes et al., 2009). Having the systems in place that give PLCs the autonomy to select the strategies that they choose to focus on leads to an increase in their coordination of instructional strategies, which will lead to lasting cultural change. PLCs comprised of teachers who have a firm understanding of organizational change can drive reform efforts among their peers through assertive leadership focused on a clear vision. An administration that allows teacher teams to decide what changes are needed as well as how those changes are to be implemented is critical for the development of effective teams that can sustain the vagaries of reform in troubled schools (Cooper et al., 2015; Graham, 2007; Rhodes et al., 2009).

Changing the Culture: Motivation

Literacy development has to be a central feature of a school culture. It is particularly important in middle school, when the interest in and practice of reading declines. For students with persistent reading difficulties, the decline is especially sharp during this period (Neugebauer, 2014). As students move beyond elementary school into middle and high school, their direct literacy instruction will often times be limited to their language arts class. Instruction in core subjects will presuppose that they have the requisite reading skills that they need in order to access the complex and varying texts that they will encounter in all their classes. Low motivation on the part of students combined with less and less direct instruction in school leads inevitably to chronically low literacy rates for the long term (Neugebauer, 2014).

In an effort to assess motivations to read, Neugebauer (2014) followed 119 fifth-grade students from two elementary schools in the northeast of the United States. Over the course of a 10-day period, the children were asked to fill out a daily reading motivation log. Prior to and after the 2 weeks of logging their motivations, the students were given a questionnaire to measure their motivations for reading. The researcher was trying to determine if the daily reflection on how they felt about reading and their competency in doing it led to an increase in intrinsic motivation to read. She discovered that students' motivation to read varied with task and context. They were more motivated to read outside of school when they perceived that understanding the text that they were presented had a practical purpose and that understanding it was more meaningful. They reported that, outside of school, they were more likely to re-read passages, ask questions, and mentally summarize texts in an effort to comprehend what they were reading. In-school reading by contrast was characterized by simply hunting for the answers to text-specific questions. When comparing motivation to results on standardized tests,

Neugebauer found that highly motivated struggling readers perform worse on such tests than unmotivated struggling readers. This highlights the need not only for motivational interventions, but also for direct literacy instruction far into secondary school. Merely increasing students' motivation to read will do no good if they are not given the tools to access higher-level texts. Increasing students' motivation to read is necessary, but it must be coupled with thoughtful literacy instruction if it is to lead to an increase in student achievement.

A student's motivation to learn is greatly influenced by the social environment of the classroom. Ryan and Patrick (2001) surveyed 233 seventh- and eighth-grade students regarding several dimensions of classroom environment and its relationship to their motivation to learn math. The study encompassed three midwestern middle schools with students from 30 different math classes taught by 15 different teachers. Not surprisingly, the authors found that a positive classroom environment was highly correlated to an increase in motivation to learn. The surveys revealed that, when students believed that their teacher cared for them, they were more likely to self-regulate their learning and less likely to engage in disruptive behavior. Furthermore, when students were encouraged to interact and collaborate with their peers on schoolwork, their confidence and self-efficacy in learning new material increased. The increase in discussions between students did not lead to an increase in disruptive and off-task behaviors. To the contrary, when students felt free to engage with other students regarding academic matters, the off-task behaviors were actually reduced, and students were more engaged in academic inquiry. Another dimension of classroom culture that Ryan and Patrick (2001) found had an influence on students' motivation was the development of a climate of mutual respect and social harmony. This, they found, had the most profound effect on academic efficacy and self-regulation of schoolwork. They discovered a correlation between a student's confidence to learn and a classroom

environment where the student felt safe to share ideas, struggles, and questions without being embarrassed or teased. The final dimension of classroom environment that the authors discovered had an effect on student confidence was that of competition. When students perceived that they were being compared to other students, they developed a view of their peers as rivals. In cases where this was the prevailing feeling, there was a decline in the students' confidence to learn new material. An interesting conclusion of this study was that classroom environments that promote positive interactions between students had a more profound effect on students' perceptions of their teacher than on their opinion of working with peers. In other words, students' view of a classroom's social environment was unrelated to their feelings about the other students.

Defining the Common Goal: Characteristics of Good Literacy Instruction

Langer (2001) sought to identify the characteristics of good literacy instruction in her 5-year study. She conducted observations and interviews of 44 teachers from 25 middle and high schools across four states. Each school was followed for a two-year period in an effort to determine if high-performing schools differed from their less successful counterparts in reading and writing instruction. After analyzing her data, she discovered that high-performing schools differed in their approach to literacy instruction in some key areas. First, their approach to skills instruction was systematic. Literacy skills were coordinated across the curriculum and incorporated in all subject matters in all classes. In the lower-performing schools, such skills were taught primarily in the language arts classes, and there was a lack of consistency as to which skills were prioritized across schools. Test preparation in the more successful schools was integrated into the curriculum and regular lessons, while in the under-performing schools, it was separate from the daily instruction and limited to periods just prior to high-stakes testing. The

third characteristic of high-performing schools, according to Langer, is that they make overt connections among knowledge, skills, and ideas across lessons, classes, and grades as well as across in-school and out-of-school applications. The less successful institutions tend to isolate content and skills instruction within a class lesson. Another feature of successful literacy instruction is the explicit teaching of strategies for thinking and doing. Successful schools provide direct instruction across the curriculum for planning, organizing, completing, and reflecting upon content and activities while less successful schools pay little to no attention to imparting such strategies to their students. When a learning goal is met in a highly successful school, the teachers go beyond it to provide students with opportunities to deepen and expand their understanding of the topic rather than simply moving on to an unrelated activity as they so often do in lower-achieving schools. Finally, the classroom organization typical of schools with high literacy rates lends itself to collaboration and cooperation between students and encourages them to develop trusting relationships with peers so that they have more opportunities for thoughtful inquiry of the concepts. In less successful schools, the learning is focused more on getting the work done rather than on achieving a deeper understanding of the material.

Increasing reading comprehension requires the implementation of instructional practices that have been demonstrated to be effective. Ciullo et al. (2016) sought to determine how often teachers used evidence-based practices in their instruction. The authors observed and recorded the instruction of 15 teachers from three different middle schools at three separate times during a school year. They were concerned with how research-based literacy strategies were incorporated in their response to intervention. They discovered that the most commonly used strategies had to do with foundational knowledge and skills (oral reading fluency and writing for audience and purpose) as well as methods of decoding and comprehending different genres of texts. The

second most commonly used group of instructional practices had to do with the comprehension of fictional texts, such as identifying elements of the plot, character development, and the point of view of the author. Finally, some teachers minimally demonstrated using strategies that improved vocabulary development and word study. The least observed strategies had to do with media literacy, silent reading, and the writing of narrative and persuasive texts. One of the high impact strategies that was rarely observed in this study was summarization after reading. Explicit vocabulary instruction and the use of graphic organizers were surprisingly rare in this study—two areas that have been shown to be highly effective.

Faggella-Luby and Wardwell (2011) examined the secondary literacy intervention provided to at-risk fifth graders in an urban school district. They followed five middle school teachers and 86 students who scored below grade level on the Degrees of Reading Progress screening test. The students were placed in small groups of no more than 12 and given one of three types of supplementary literacy instruction for two to three days a week in 30-minute sessions. The first type of intervention given was embedded story structure instruction, which is a scripted curriculum that focuses on the strategies of self-questioning, story structure analysis, and summarization. The second option for intervention was traditional intervention with reading specialists who focused on mini lessons that addressed specific student needs according to students' assessment results. The third intervention was a simple 30 minutes of sustained silent reading (SSR). The interventions lasted for the first two quarters of the school year. After 18 weeks of intervention, students were given a cloze test, a strategy-use test, and a comprehension test, and the findings are somewhat interesting. The scripted curriculum had a minimally bigger effect on student achievement than did the instruction given by the literacy teachers. The SSR treatment also had a positive effect on student performance. The study highlights the importance

of purpose-driven, intensive, tier-two instructions for struggling readers and that daily independent reading practice should be incorporated into instructional practice.

Williams (2014) also stressed the importance of daily reading practice in her article promoting ways in which teachers can get students to engage in sustained silent reading. She emphasized the need to make a large and wide-ranging inventory of books available to the students. Books have to be appropriate to students' reading ability as well as their interests. Time must be allocated for the express purpose of reading for enjoyment, without the stress of added tests or book reports.

It is especially important for educators to provide sound, research-based instruction to language minority learners. As students move from elementary school to middle and high school, their reading comprehension slows; this is particularly true of English learners (Mancilla-Martinez et al., 2011). Mancilla-Martinez et al. (2011) conducted a longitudinal study that followed a cohort of fifth-grade language minority students through the seventh grade, testing them at four points during that time. They based their research on the simple view of reading, which states that both linguistic comprehension and word reading performance are essential to reading comprehension. They found that, as with native English speakers, language minority students experience a dramatic slowing in reading comprehension during early adolescence. They also noted that word reading success is a precursor to reading comprehension. The slowing growth curve in the middle school years makes it difficult for English learners to access the information in various text types. These studies suggest that focusing on reading in this population could be the most needed and generative intervention as 98% of the students are English language learners (ELLs).

Generative Skill: Vocabulary Instruction

As early as 1989, Stephen Krashen extolled the benefits of reading as a means to gain vocabulary knowledge. In his extensive review of research regarding second language acquisition, he adhered to the input hypothesis, which states that we acquire language by understanding messages. When a second language learner experiences success in both understanding and conveying messages, he or she will internalize the rules and form of the new language. Krashen contended that comprehensible input in the form of reading is essential in learning a new language. Through his review of the research, he found that students who reported freer reading performed better on vocabulary tests and that it was a significant predictor of several measures of reading, writing, and grammar (Krashen, 1989). He advocated for setting aside several minutes a day for independent reading, with no book reports or tests associated with it. He did not suggest that purposeful and deliberate spelling and vocabulary instruction be eliminated from instruction, only that it be supplemented with daily independent free reading practice in order to achieve gains in reading comprehension.

Elleman et al. (2019) reviewed the results of 17 studies dedicated to vocabulary development. A rich and diverse vocabulary helps students to better understand a wide variety and complexity of texts, and it helps them to communicate more effectively in both the spoken and written form. After a close analysis of the findings of the studies, they concluded that intentional vocabulary instruction and the morphological analysis of words are a part of literacy instruction and that students should be afforded many opportunities to practice using new vocabulary in class discussions as well as in writing.

Snow et al. (2009) found some success with vocabulary development in their quasi-experimental study with a program called Word Generation. They followed five middle and K-8

schools for a 24-week period, during which they implemented the Word Generation program and administered a vocabulary assessment to the participant schools and non-participant schools in order to compare findings. The program essentially gave direct instruction of vocabulary words that can be used across content areas as well as several opportunities for students to encounter these specific words in various types of texts. The participating teachers also made sure that students had opportunities to use the words in both discussions and writing. Teachers reported that they believed that students were more engaged in the vocabulary if they saw it in a text that they were interested in reading. The post vocabulary tests showed that the students who took part in the program scored better on the posttest than students from schools that did not. The program appeared to help language minority students to a greater degree than it did native English speakers. The study highlighted the need for students to have direct and explicit vocabulary instruction across disciplines.

In their study, Swanson et al. (2017) showed that vocabulary knowledge is a predictor of reading comprehension; therefore, content teachers must consistently engage in explicit vocabulary instruction that gives their students a variety of words from a range of disciplines. They must provide opportunities for students to have multiple exposures to key words and practice using them effectively in conversation and writing. If students fail to develop rich, varied vocabularies, then they will have chronically low reading abilities and limited comprehension. Secondary teachers can help their students make gains in comprehension by coordinating vocabulary instruction across content classes and establishing a classroom culture that encourages experimentation with words and rewards the use of partially known words (Snow et al., 2009). A vocabulary intervention of this type could greatly impact the population in

the school in the current study because they are mostly ELL students and cross-content instruction lends itself perfectly for this PLC project.

Literacy in Content Areas

The problem and potential with focusing on reading skills are that, if reading skills are low, it has an impact across all areas; similarly, if reading skills improve, it would impact all content areas. Content area teachers can be an important asset in raising literacy scores school-wide, as demonstrated in Snow et al. (2009). They provided opportunities for students to interact with a wide variety of informational texts. By explicitly teaching literacy strategies in content areas such as science, mathematics, and social studies, teachers can help their students to access the content in their disciplines in a deeper way (Wolsey & Faust, 2013). Subject matter teachers often feel that they are not qualified to teach literacy, nor do they believe that it is their responsibility. Both of these are false notions. Each subject matter requires students to read and understand different types of texts, and they look to their content teachers as having the expertise to navigate these texts and extract meaning from them. Content teachers have the literacy skills to read and understand the texts in their curriculum; they just have to convey those skills to their students. Taking responsibility for the literacy of students is the responsibility of all teachers, not just the language arts teachers. Literacy has to be taught across all subject matters as reading comprehension is necessary for learning in all subjects. Ness (2009) sought to find out how frequently content teachers explicitly taught reading strategies and which strategies they employed the most. As part of her mixed-method study, she followed eight teachers—four middle school and four high school—for 3 consecutive years. The study observed the instruction of 782 students by video recording several 30-minute lessons for a total of 2,400 minutes of instructional time. She observed and analyzed the tapes to determine how often direct literacy

instruction occurred in science and social studies classes. She looked for eight strategies: comprehension monitoring (a student is taught to become aware of his/her own understanding during reading); cooperative learning (students work in cooperative groups to read texts of various complexities); the use of graphic organizers; analysis of story structure (students learn to probe fictional texts regarding plot, character, setting, etc.); question answering (answer text-specific questions); question generation (students learn to ask who, what, where, when, and how questions about non-fictional texts); summarization; and multiple strategy instruction. This study illustrated the need for increased focus on content literacy. The 600 minutes observed from the middle school teachers only revealed 60 minutes, or 10%, dedicated to comprehension instruction. According to Ness, social studies teachers engaged in comprehension instruction to a higher degree than science teachers did. She also discovered that high school content teachers rarely, if ever, engaged in the teaching of literacy instruction. On the few occasions in which they did, it was limited to question answering with a few incidences of summarization observed.

Curwen et al. (2010) looked at the contribution that content teachers made to literacy instruction by way of the read–write cycle (RWC). They followed 18 teachers from 10 elementary schools for a three-year period. There were 1,024 students that were observed in this longitudinal study. The read–write cycle is a process that helps students connect what they read in various texts to their own experiences and guides them through a writing piece that demonstrates a synthesis of the information that they have absorbed. The cycle begins with the connect phase, during which the students preview a text and make connections with their prior knowledge. They then move on to the organize phase, during which they engage in text analysis using graphic organizers and think-alouds to make sense of the text. The next phase is the reflect phase, during which time they engage in metacognition and self-monitoring to refine their

thinking. Finally, they engage in the extend phase of the cycle, during which they edit and revise their writing. The RWC was used because it incorporates instructional strategies that integrate literacy instruction with disciplinary knowledge. Data were collected through teachers' interviews after the end of the three-year period. They reported that students engaged in more reflection on the choices they made in the decisions regarding the strategies that they would use to aid them in their learning and writing. They also reported that their students demonstrated more enthusiasm in their content learning and an increase in their higher-order thinking skills. By implementing common literacy practices across all subject matters, students began to see their learning as interconnected rather than as individual segments across their day. Teachers also reported that, as they developed an awareness of their own practice or metacognition, they began to see their students recall their own thinking as they encountered difficult texts.

Academic Discourse

Developing speaking and listening skills is important to increase reading comprehension. Fisher and Frey (2014) summarized research findings regarding listening and speaking skills and their relationship to students' achievement in literacy development. Children of all ages are able to listen to and speak of more complex ideas than they are able to read and write about. By incorporating opportunities for students to discuss ideas in each of their content classes, they will build a foundation in critical thinking and problem-solving skills that will help them when it comes to struggling with complex texts. The authors contended that teachers should dedicate 50% of their instructional time to having their students engage in collaborative conversations with their peers.

Summary

In this chapter, I have presented a summary of PLCs as a vehicle of systemic change that takes into consideration the needs of the community at the local level. The crucial elements of PLCs were presented as well as evidence that supports the success of each of the components of this approach. I have also discussed the declining achievement of middle school students in literacy and vocabulary development and the need for literacy instruction across the curriculum. This problem is particularly relevant to the population in this study, as these learners are significantly below average in reading skills, which has impacted their learning across all content areas. The research evidence on literacy skills that are relevant and more promising for this school's case study was also presented. These skills are likely to be discussed as common goals in this PLC. The rationale for this study is also identified within the context of PLCs. The next chapter will identify the mechanism by which the PLC model will be implemented at the school site following the recommendations identified in this literature review and the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 1.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study is a PLC intervention at the sixth-grade level using principles put forth by DuFour and Fullan (2013) as well as by Fullan and Quinn (2015). In this chapter, the mixed-methods case study design, the process of implementation, and the impact of the intervention are documented for research duplication. The process of implementation is described organizing it according to the PLC components within the context of the target school. This chapter delineates the design of this study. The outcome of this study was measured by comparing several assessments from the beginning to the end of the year of the study at several levels (i.e., students, teachers). The components for efficacy in the goal set (literacy) for this PLC were defined in previous research as described in Chapter 2, and those components guided the organization of the methodology as follows: defining the professional learning community, providing mechanisms for creating coherence and clarity, and establishing clear goals and sustaining focus on continuous improvement. The research questions addressed here are as follows:

RQ1. What does a grade-wide literacy focused PLC intervention to support sixth-grade students' literacy look like at the systemic level?

RQ2. What is the impact of a literacy-focused PLC project on grade-wide reading comprehension, students' literacy practices, and students' confidence as readers?

RQ3. How does this PLC effort change the school system and the leaders' and students' buy-in?

Setting: Challenges and Current Capacity to Meet Them

The PLC intervention implemented employed several of the features that Fullan and Quinn (2015) deemed necessary to create a collaborative culture. All members involved pledged

to commit to implementing the intervention that we, as a collective team, deemed necessary. Recognizing that we needed to tailor our solutions to our school's context and culture, we worked with one another to develop new solutions for chronic difficulties. First, we needed to consider our current challenges as well as our current capacity to meet them. The majority (56.3%) of our students read two, three, or four years below grade level and lack the skills, motivation, or confidence to learn across contents.

Taking stock of the current capacity to address these challenges is the first necessary step to proceed with a coherent plan. All teachers recognized that poor reading skills were preventing students from learning in all subjects; however, most subject matter teachers felt that they lacked the ability to teach literacy skills. They were unaccustomed to delivering literacy instruction and, in some cases, were insecure about their expertise to do so. Unfortunately, it is not part of current practice to include direct literacy instruction as part of core subject matter classes. Second, testing alone cannot identify all of the difficulties students must overcome. Although reading comprehension is of paramount concern, the current reality suggests that poor reading skills are exacerbated by a general underdevelopment of study and organizational skills. Therefore, i-Ready data did not show the entire picture. The situation demanded more than the differentiation of classroom instruction for vulnerable students, such as English learners and special education students. Sixth graders entering middle school come from several different elementary schools, and each has had a unique set of teachers and educational experiences to that point. Understanding and addressing each student's particular situation is necessary to form and execute a plan that will lead to meaningful gains. In this project, this was achieved through one-on-one conferencing with students.

The PLC Process

Programs alone cannot turn an institution around without changing the culture of the institution. PLCs operate as a long-term process rather than as a program. A program, no matter how good, does not have the flexibility to meet the needs of large numbers of students. Programs need to be implemented with little flexibility in order for them to achieve the gains that they profess, making them less able to adapt to realities of their context. A highly functioning PLC has the ability to meet the needs of all students because by its very nature it is tailored to the circumstances under which it operates. A PLC has the agility to change and modify instruction and practices based on constant data analysis. Because a professional learning community functions not as a program but rather as a process, it can serve as a mechanism for deep cultural change.

The project at hand sought to begin the process of developing collective responsibility for student achievement in the school culture. Some elements of the project addressed cultural needs while some were geared for academics, specifically literacy across content areas. By committing to putting into place systems to address the needs of our students, my colleagues and I demonstrated an orientation of action. We dove right in and tried research-based strategies that have proven effective. We did not expect the process of implementing an effective PLC to be easy or smooth. Our dedication to meeting weekly to share and analyze student work led to a deeper reflection upon and refinement of our pedagogical practice.

Description of the Intervention: Challenges and Proposed Solutions

The main components of the intervention were to increase students' independent reading and conference with a core teacher on a regular basis. The conferencing piece of the intervention was designed to build the student–teacher relationship and student accountability and to inform

us of students' progress to adapt to their individual needs. This individualized plan had the potential to increase good reading habits, build confidence within each student, and ultimately lead to success by learning skills, practicing, and boosting their identity as readers. During these meetings, we also encouraged students to take responsibility for their own education and advancement, increasing self-efficacy. Conferences took place during sustained silent reading time, when most of the class was reading independently and the teacher could quietly conference with a small set of students, one at a time. Although very brief, lasting no more than 5 to 10 minutes in duration, they were a consistent check-in with each individual student. They gave teachers the time to discuss the unique challenges facing each student. They provided opportunities for students to learn how to make long- and short-term goals. Discussion topics included i-Ready lessons and benchmark scores, discussions of books the students were reading, and any other matter that the teacher and student thought appropriate. Teachers took notes, which were used as data to learn about students' literacy practices and students' confidence as readers.

Changing a Culture: Barriers and Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles

Any intervention that will lead to dramatic advances in student achievement must address cultural as well as logistical issues. According to the Mamedova and Pawlowski (2019), 43 million American adults, two thirds of whom are native born, have low literacy skills. Additionally, reading as a pastime among those who are literate is in decline. Books are competing with an increasing menu of entertainment and informational options for many people who simply are not in the habit of reading. Schools face this issue of chronic low skills, and its impact are demoralizing at all levels.

We sought to avoid the common pitfalls that may come with the implementation of a newly formed PLC. DuFour and Fullan (2013) described four barriers that impede the effective

implementation of a workable PLC. According to the research, the primary obstacle PLCs face is the tendency of people to see PLCs as a quick fix to chronic problems; however, we understood it to be a long-term process geared toward a profound change in culture. It is about developing relationships with various people, analyzing and reevaluating our professional practices, and putting into place the processes necessary to address the needs of our students in practical terms within the context of the school day.

The second problem that plagues new practitioners of PLCs is the failure to grasp what it takes to get the deep organizational cooperation that is needed to develop a strong cohesive PLC. The administration played a crucial role in fostering this vital cooperation. The administration, being a key player in the PLC process, committed to several actions to ensure success. First, they provided time for the teachers to meet and plan. They committed to designing a schedule in which cross-curricular teams shared a common prep period. Administrators provided substitute coverage for three planning days as well as relinquished administrative time during staff meetings on alternate Wednesdays. Minutes and notes from these meetings were used as data to measure the collaboration and cultural change. Administrators provided funds to boost class libraries and purchase materials that the team determined were necessary to carry out the needed intervention. The most important support that any administration can provide a burgeoning PLC is trust. Trusting the experiences and insights of teachers to know what their students require and to allow them to try new things in order to meet their students' needs is vital to a highly functional PLC.

The third stumbling block is that potential PLC members do not attend to the commonplace conditions that will lead to a smoother adoption of the PLC. Providing time within the school day for frequent meeting and constant reflection on practices and processes helped the

team to address problems that arise. The fourth concern with which PLC members must contend is the integration of all the other school and district programs into their PLC practices. The obligations mandated from higher-ups did not go away during this implementation, but working together allowed the PLC team to incorporate these extraneous mandates into their daily practice more effectively.

PLC Team and Process

The PLC was conducted at Walton Middle School in Norwalk, California, and included sixth-grade students, teachers, and their families. The core group that comprised the PLC leaders for this study consisted of all four teachers assigned to the sixth-grade roster. To protect the privacy of the participants in this study, all names are pseudonyms, as is the name of the school and the administrator. I am the sixth-grade science teacher, and this PLC was composed of Susan Walters, the math teacher; Helena Wayne, the social studies teacher; and Bonita Juarez, the language arts teacher. Mary Bromfield, the intervention teacher, and Donald Blake, the AVID teacher, worked closely with the core teachers. We all agreed that our first obligation was to deliver quality instruction in our subject area; beyond that, we would collaborate to focus our instruction and attention on the goals of this PLC. We participated in a process to effectively implement the PLCs as recommended by DuFour and Fullan (2013).

Step 1: Communication is Key to Create and Maintain Collaboration

Communication among the various school communities is essential to achieve a common goal; we must set up convenient platforms by which we can disseminate information, discuss concerns as they arise, and celebrate victories. For this purpose, a sixth-grade text group was established, which included the four core teachers, the resource specialist program (RSP) teachers who serve the students on the sixth-grade roster, and the intervention teacher who takes

care of testing of students. A reminder system was set up to allow teachers to text parents and easily notify them of upcoming events and expectations. Handwritten postcards were sent to the parents of students in each of the teachers' homeroom classes to serve as a welcome to the new school year and an introduction to the teacher and expectations.

Step 2: Setting a Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

A common goal is crucial to ensure systemic professional engagement. Any goal that successfully drives the purpose, direction, commitments, targets, and timelines of the community must be student oriented. In the weeks before the advent of the school year, the principal and teachers within the PLC met to discuss first steps in developing a grade-wide plan for intervention. We then shared our mission with the rest of the community: to increase the literacy rates among sixth-grade students using three measures. First, they set the goal to help all students achieve beyond the expected one-year growth in literacy scores on i-Ready diagnostic assessments administered in the final month of the school year. The second goal was to foster a positive reading identity and sense of self-efficacy within each student that was measured by a pre and post survey by creating a school climate where literacy is attended to, celebrated, and enjoyed by all members of this community. Finally, a community-wide campaign known as "break the four" was launched to improve understanding that being able to read at a fourth-grade level or beyond is necessary to achieve proficiency across subjects. We also ensured buy-in for a small number of specific strategies as Fullan and Quinn (2015) recommended engaging the students themselves, their families, and the wider school culture in the same endeavor.

Step 3: Implementation of Plan of Action

After getting the stakeholders focusing in the same direction, each member took on collective and individual commitments to achieve these goals. An example of a collective

commitment was that each core teacher designated 30 minutes, once a week, to independent reading for his or her students. During independent reading time, each member also took a cohort of students with whom to conference individually once a week. An example of an individual commitment was that I would open my room after school 3 days a week to provide students with assignment completion time (ACT).

To involve the community at the collective level, the team members were committed to participating in cross-curricular teams that met once a week and to engage in parent conferences together. Mrs. Walters set up the reminder system for parents' meetings. Mr. Blake and I agreed to meet with small groups of parents of students who fell below the fourth-grade reading level. Mr. Blake was also fluent in Spanish, which helped in explaining to Spanish-speaking parents the problems of low literacy for their children's learning and how they could support their child in improving his or her reading at home. Mr. Blake and I scheduled and conducted all of the small group parent meetings by the end of September. Mrs. Juarez and Mrs. Walters, being the language arts and math teachers, organized and disseminated the i-Ready data as needed with parents and other teachers.

The PLC approach provided the sixth-grade team the wherewithal to assess their current reality, customize solutions to their own needs, and anticipate future planning needs. Survey data were analyzed to determine if the systems put in place as a part of the PLC process led to stronger literacy identities within their students or not. Together, informed by assessments' outcomes, the core teachers periodically checked on both short- and long-term goals with specific targets.

In assessing their current reality, the PLC decided that students needed to get their own books. The first goal was to get independent reading books to each of the students within the first

week of school and to establish a grade-wide expectation that students were to have a book with them at all times as part of our school culture. A baseline of reading and math abilities was established by administering i-Ready diagnostic assessments in August, followed by benchmark assessments to measure growth in both December and May, as usual.

Step 4: Building Coherence through Vertical and Horizontal Alignment

Although the sixth-grade teachers were the primary driving force to implement the PLC practices grade-wide, they were not the only staff members who participated. The administration played a vital role. The principal, Dr. Joan Fanci, agreed to support the sixth-grade teachers in incorporating PLC principles into their practice. She provided two days with substitute coverage so that the teachers had the opportunity to collaborate for an extended period. She supported extra pay for time spent after or before school for meetings. She pledged to not call on the team's teachers to cover other classes during the days that the cross-curricular teams met during their prep period. She also relinquished time at administrative staff meetings so that the team could meet. This commitment by the administration to finding time for the teachers to collaborate in a meaningful way allowed the teachers to focus on students' progress. The resulting schedule allowed teachers to analyze student work samples and formative assessments in order to refine their instruction and make decisions that would lead to greater student achievement. The principal also committed to supporting the project by purchasing the needed materials. She authorized the purchase of student notebooks for science and social studies. This helped the team in their commitment to teaching the skill of note-taking. It was also determined that the inventory of independent reading books needed to be greatly expanded. She allocated \$300 to each teacher to establish or bolster classroom libraries.

Beyond the core group of teachers that worked on first-tier instruction, there were also other teachers that participated in supporting roles in different ways. The intervention teacher, Mary Bromfield, worked to analyze student achievement from both Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) and i-Ready tests. Furthermore, she considered core teachers' insights to determine which students needed to be tested for learning disabilities and what interventions would best serve each individual student.

The media tech, Aaron Stack, supported the project by encouraging literacy. He coordinated the Scholastic book fair and worked with Scholastic to find ways to add to the school's inventory of independent reading books in an economical way. He organized a book donation system in which students were able to donate books that they had finished reading in exchange for a small prize. The secretary, Katherine Manser, committed to supporting the project as well. She played an important role in communicating with parents. She called parents whenever needed and provided Spanish language support whenever necessary.

Step 5: Foreseen Challenges to Build a Collaborative Culture with a Focus on Students' Needs

Several challenges faced the research team in their effort to implement a systems approach to increasing literacy among sixth-grade students. The sheer magnitude of the students' deficiencies presented the first problem: 87% of students were at least one year below grade level in reading as measured by the first i-Ready diagnostic. The team decided that, as the fourth grade is the crucial level at which students change from learning to read to reading to learn, they should focus their efforts on improving reading scores to at least a fourth-grade level. The importance of that goal was evident in the numbers: A stunning 56.3% (103 out of 183) of students were three or more years behind in reading comprehension. With such a large swath of

students so far behind, planning instruction became difficult, as the teachers had to choose goals and how to measure success.

Changing the mindset of students who have fallen so far behind took significant effort. There had to be an emphasis on celebrating success and being resilient to setbacks in order to instill a sense of perseverance within the students. The very thing that makes the PLC model so suited to school reform is also the thing that presents it with the most pressing challenges, that being the need for people of various backgrounds and dispositions to work together. Whenever people engage in a project together, they bring opinions and perspectives that may compliment or conflict with the opinions and perspectives of their peers. An effective PLC is one where the members feel safe to express their views and come to consensus and resolve conflicts. Another significant challenge was the willingness to take a critical look at past and current practices and be willing to let them go if they no longer served the needs of the students. Time management is a perennial challenge. The decision of the cross-curricular teams to meet weekly on their prep period was an attempt to mitigate this challenge.

We team members further considered both the internal and external factors that represented additional challenges. Internally we had control of our classrooms and instruction; however, the administration provided only limited collaboration time. We knew that we had to make the most of our collaborative time by organizing ourselves into cross-curricular teams that met during our prep period at least once a week. As the math and science teachers shared a common prep period, they became a team; the same was true of the language arts and social studies teachers. We were committed to meeting once a week to plan and, based on the review of students' work samples, revise instruction. We established collaboration across subjects. For example, because 30 minutes of math instruction were set aside for reading each week, as the

science teacher, I agreed to take on some of the math standards that might have been neglected due to the reduction in instructional minutes. During this time, we also discussed students' issues and looked for opportunities to reinforce content knowledge and literacy skills.

External factors that could affect the success or failure of our program included the parents of our students. Even if the school was successful in implementing all steps of this PLC, if parents did not support the students at home, we would not be able to have a significant impact. By having small-group parent meetings for those students who had fallen two or more years behind in reading, we were including the parents in the solution. We were ensuring that all stakeholders were informed as to the extent and seriousness of the problem, the steps being taken by us, the teachers, and the support that parents were expected to provide in the home. Finally, one of the secondary effects of this effort was the message that were sending to students, administration, and parents about how—by working as a PLC and speaking with one loud voice—literacy would become a priority and be addressed by everyone.

Focus of the Intervention

Four Literacy Skills

After doing research on best practices, we decided to focus our teaching on high-yield instructional practices that could be used across all of our courses. For that, we looked at Fisher et al.'s (2016) findings. In their work *Visible Learning*, they analyzed and synthesized thousands of studies to determine which pedagogical practices led to higher student achievement. We settled on four that Fisher et al. (2016) deemed to have a high impact: note-taking, summarizing, metacognition, and academic discourse.

Note-taking involves writing down the key points of a lecture, a lab, or a reading. It is a key study skill that is known to increase comprehension. The school, as a whole, has adopted the

AVID style of focused note-taking as a practice across the curriculum, so it made perfect sense that we direct our attention to this practice in a more focused way. We determined to do more with student notes than merely have students write down key points of instruction. Fisher and associates (2016) determined that taking class notes has an effect size of 0.59. This is the most powerful impact; however, this effect gets even higher by revisiting the notes on several occasions to organize and transform them in various ways in order to develop a true understanding of the material. By doing this, the effect size on comprehension soars to 0.85 (Fisher et al., 2016). My colleagues and I committed to teaching our students how to take notes and reflect upon what information should be noted and what may be left out. Furthermore, students should be taught to ask questions that will clarify ambiguities, fill omissions, or explore ramifications in order to lead to deeper learning.

Summarizing, the second strategy we agreed upon, goes hand in hand with note-taking. Teaching students to conceptualize what they are learning in the broad outlines of a well-reasoned summary was expected to lead to deeper comprehension. When students stop and summarize texts, discussions, and lab results, they are engaging in a review process that evaluates what they are learning and where there are gaps in their understanding (Fisher et al., 2016). The proposed intervention included having the teachers incorporate summarizing into their regular instruction as both a formative and summative assessment.

The third high-impact strategy that we decided upon as a group was metacognition. This requires the ability of teachers to observe their own thinking when approaching various texts and to teach students how to make sense of the material. Each subject matter has its own types of texts that require various strategies to make sense of them. Each teacher is an expert reader in his or her own subject. When teachers show their students how they think by explaining how they

approach each type of text, they give students the tools to monitor their own learning. Part of being metacognitively aware is to learn how to ask questions as they read, engage in discussions, and conduct laboratory activities. Using and teaching metacognitive strategies can have an effect size on comprehension as high as 0.69 according to Fisher et al. (2016).

The final strategy that we agreed to implement in our daily practice was to have our students engage in academic discourse. Building literacy includes reading, writing, listening, and speaking. When students incorporate all four of these aspects into their learning, they will invariably make gains in reading comprehension. A major push from the district office is for students, especially English learners, to engage in academic discourse on a daily basis. Fisher and his associates (2016) confirmed that this is a wise choice as effective classroom discussion employed on a regular basis has an effect size of 0.82. By agreeing to implement high-yield strategies in our instruction across the curriculum, we gained precision in our pedagogy and created the capacity within our students to achieve at a higher level.

Parental Involvement

The overall goal of the intervention was to increase the reading levels of the sixth-grade students beyond a single year's growth within the school year. To do this, the students and their families must be a part of the solution. As sixth grade is the students' first year of middle school, there can be no assumption that either the students or their guardians were aware of the students' current reading ability. Therefore, small-group meetings with parents of students who scored below the fourth-grade reading level (more than one year below grade level) were scheduled. The sessions were limited to only 10 students and their parents. Spanish language support was provided. Attending one of these sessions was mandatory for students falling more than two years behind as measured on the i-Ready diagnostic given in the first weeks of school. During

the meeting, parents were informed of their child's reading level and why it is important to make significant gains during the upcoming year. They were informed of our plan to help their children make those critical gains and the part that they themselves would play in that effort. They were trained on how to access their child's Power School account so that they could monitor their progress regarding grades, assignments, and assessments. They were also taught how to log into i-Ready in both reading and math and asked to ensure that their children completed two lessons in each subject every week. Moreover, they were asked to reinforce the expectation that their children would read every night. The purpose of the parent meetings was twofold: to inform the parents of the status of their children and to establish a sense of urgency that inspired the families to take part in the solution. By giving the parents specific tasks and tools to monitor progress, the PLC hoped to employ the parents to a greater degree in the advancement of their children's academics. By getting the parents' cooperation, the students would get a consistent message that literacy is important and that there was no time to waste in ensuring its acquisition. Having the parents and teachers in unison, however important that may be, does no good if students themselves do not work hard to improve their own academic skills.

Changing the Culture at the Students' Level

The ultimate goal was for the students to take full responsibility for their learning. Many of the students in the study had no experience succeeding in school and lacked the organizational skills necessary to navigate secondary school with any degree of proficiency. To provide guidance for each student, a system of student-teacher conferences were held. The roster was divided up among the four core teachers, and a weekly meeting was scheduled so that every student met with his or her conference teacher once a week. During the conferences, the student could discuss the book he or she was reading. The meeting challenged the student to make

weekly goals regarding the reading, i-Ready lessons, missing assignments, and any other concern that either the student or the teacher deemed important. The conference teacher also served as a point of contact between the staff, the student, and the parents.

A short-term goal was to obtain independent reading books for every student by the end of the first week of instruction. Getting the children to the library needed to be factored into the first week's schedule. To get the results that teachers seek in literacy development, the students needed to become well-versed in cycles of inquiry. As stated earlier, we created opportunities to analyze student work in order to refine this practice.

The students had to have a clear sense of both where they stood and what they wished to achieve. They needed direction from their teachers and parents on how to navigate the pathway between their current status and their ultimate goal. Along the way they had to be able to determine if they were on the right track, which required regularly celebrating small achievements and successes. Beyond the biannual awards assemblies that coincided with the semester report cards, there were celebrations for students who made significant gains on their i-Ready diagnostic assessments. Parties were given for students who "break the four," meaning that they had gone from scoring below the fourth grade in reading to fourth grade or higher. The sixth-grade team determined that the fourth grade was a significant turning point as the students turned from merely learning to read to the critical skill of being able to read to learn. Students were further celebrated at the end of the year if they met their i-Ready stretch goals, which indicated a degree of growth well beyond a single year's gains. Celebrating gains, both large and small, helped students to be cognizant of their progress and served as a motivation to continue with the struggle to improve in their reading comprehension.

The PLC came to the consensus that, if students did not read at home, then the school was obligated to provide them time in school to read. The very act of reading had not been developed in many of the incoming sixth-grade students, and we realized that this was a critical first step. A plan was devised whereby each one of the core teachers would take one day a week and provide 30 minutes of independent reading. I took two days for silent reading. The 30-minute time period not only gave the students time to practice their reading, but also gave us the opportunity to conduct our conferences. The expectation that every student was required to have an independent reading book was established at the very beginning of the school year. We agreed to hold this time sacred and not let other academic pressures interfere with it. The math teacher measured the students' stamina by timing how long each class as a whole could stay focused on reading before one or more students' eyes began to wander.

Using Data to Inform Decisions

I studied the implementation and impact of the PLC process by using secondary data from the school's records. I also used agendas from sixth-grade staff meetings to describe the issues that were addressed formally, notes from cross-curricular team meetings, and a survey of the team members of the PLC. By doing so, I was able to use the descriptive data to document the process of implementing PLC practices, the successes and challenges that could occur as the year unfolded, and the decisions made in the best interests of the students. In their survey, selected staff members submitted reflections on the experience of working as a PLC and the impact they felt it had on school culture and student achievement.

A Commitment to Continuous Improvement

DuFour (2004) described the PLC as a process rather than a program—a process that is constantly in refinement. My colleagues and I recognized this fact and put into place the systems

that would lead to continuous improvement. By working in cross-curricular teams and meeting weekly during our prep periods, we evaluated the effectiveness of our instruction by analyzing student work samples. As Fullan and Quinn (2015) asserted, it is not about working out every nuance of a journey but rather about setting the overall direction and establishing a culture that enables innovation and growth in that direction. We committed to engaging in cycles of inquiry in which we administered a common assessment after having taught a skill or concept.

Afterwards, we evaluated students' work to determine whether or not our students had mastered it. These data were utilized to answer the research question. This process was guided by the four questions that are the hallmark of effective PLCs, as discussed next.

What Do We Want Our Students to Learn?

We agreed upon the knowledge and skills our sixth-grade students must acquire before the end of the school year and delivered the instruction needed for students to master them within that time frame. Summary writing, metacognitive awareness, note-taking, and academic language were agreed upon as the necessary skills taught across the curriculum.

How Will They Know If Their Students Have Mastered the Desired Skill or Concept?

By meeting frequently and comparing students' work samples, we could determine which students mastered these skills and which students needed further instruction.

How Will We Respond When Students Do Not Master the Skill or Concept?

We developed and put into practice systems that supported student learning that respond to students' changing needs, whether it be further instruction or tutoring support for individual students.

How Will We Challenge Students Who Master the Skills and Concepts to Further Their Learning?

We challenged students who were reading at a sixth-grade level to choose independent reading books that were at or above the level of their reading competency.

Results Orientation

We anticipated that our attitudes and practices would change as well. The trust built up through respectful, focused collaboration allowed us to challenge assumptions about past practices and their efficacy. Analyzing student work samples and formative assessments with colleagues led to a refinement of practice and a willingness to take risks. Our confidence and enjoyment of our practice expanded as we developed supportive, trustworthy relationships with all the stakeholders.

By organizing ourselves into a PLC, we increased the likelihood that we would see gains in literacy levels as well as improvement in the school culture. i-Ready scores were expected to grow more than a single year by the end of the project year. These improvements, in turn, would lead to a marked improvement in the students' attitude toward reading and its importance. In addition, I expected to see an increase in the confidence that students had in themselves as readers. Students' attitudes toward reading and their self-confidence as readers were measured in the survey administered at the beginning and end of the school year. The PLC designed a series of systems and interventions that met the unique needs of every student. We engaged the students, their families, and the wider school community in a course of action that led to higher academic achievement. We expected to see greater parent awareness of their children's progress and greater parent support in the school's efforts to increase literacy rates. We established both long- and short-term goals and developed a series of actions to achieve them. The long-term goal

was to increase literacy rates, which required thoughtful and effective instruction across the curriculum and over the course of the year.

Data Collection and Analysis Plan

Table 1. 1

Methods of Data Collection and Analysis

Research Questions	Constructs or Variables	Source of Measures	Analysis
1. What does a grade-wide literacy focused PLC intervention to support sixth-grade students' literacy look like at the systemic level?	Descriptive data on all of the components of the implementation of the PLC during the 2018–2019 year	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings' records and minutes • Teachers' records • Interviews with selected teachers and administrator • Reflection notes • School-level intervention components, school climate survey, administration support, library support financial investment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tables of frequencies of meetings' attendance (teacher teams, student–teachers, and parent–teachers) • Themes' analysis from notes, interviews, and reflections • Descriptive statistics on achievement outcomes and students' surveys
2. What is the impact of a literacy-focused PLC project on grade-wide reading comprehension, students' literacy practices, and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Level of PLC implementation at the student level • i-Ready • PLC strategy improvement (summarizing, note-taking, metacognitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reports from teacher–student conferences • i-Ready scores • Notes on strategies from conferencing teachers and subject teachers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The total score on the level of implementation was used to predict the change in students' i-Ready reading comprehension score using regression analysis • Role of separate components of the PLC on

students' confidence as readers?	awareness, and academic language) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy practices • Students' confidence or self-efficacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literacy practice records from conference teachers and parents • Change in scores from the pre and post intervention survey 	the students' literacy practices and self-confidence were investigated by running bivariate Pearson correlations
3.How does this PLC effort change the school system and its leaders' and students' buy-in?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School system change or school climate • Collaboration • Cohesion • Buy-in 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School climate survey • Interviews with selected teachers, administrators, and staff • Teachers' notes and reflections • Level of investment at the administration level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The change in school climate survey was compared pre and post implementation • Theme analysis guided by PLC definitions of collaboration and cohesion was used to describe changes in these parameters • A description of the investment from the perspective of the administrator was presented

Ethical Considerations

The important ethical concerns were three-fold. Students' identity had to be protected, so student names were replaced by numbers on all data and remarks. Improving students' attitudes vis-a-vis reading and literacy was the goal, so the PLC teachers must first do no harm. Care had to be taken that any criticism or assessment of students' capabilities was constructive and encouraging. Our approach and tone was pitched in such a way that we were not demeaning or

destructive to the confidence of our charges. Finally, when meeting with the families of students, we were sensitive to the limitations and cultural differences of each family. As much as possible, we were mindful of the economic restrictions and emotional entanglements that complicated the lives of many of the families.

Summary

In this chapter I have described the implementation and evaluation of the proposed PLC in an urban school in southern California. With this case study at the school level, I documented and explored the implementation of a literacy intervention through the PLC. I have described the components of the intervention and proposed a plan to analyze the data in a way that would answer the research questions proposed. The validity and reliability of the findings were established by triangulating data across the several sources, and validations of the interpretations were available through the team's meetings and discussions. Chapter 4 presents the findings of this study and describes the analysis utilized to answer each question in more detail.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to learn about the development of a literacy-focused PLC at the school level as well as its impact on the attitudes, self-efficacy, and academic achievement (i-Ready scores) of a cohort of sixth-grade students at an urban middle school over the course of a school year (2018–2019). The implementation was described in Chapter 3, which was the secondary goal of the study. The main goal was to change the culture of the school through the organization of a school-wide PLC in collaboration with the community.

In this chapter, I present descriptive data on the PLC development, the analysis of its progress and the outcomes, as well as the answers to the research questions. The demographic information of the school as well as the background of participants in the PLC is shown first. Information about the variables is discussed next. Finally, analysis and results for each research question are presented last.

1. What does a grade-wide literacy focused PLC intervention to support sixth-grade students' literacy look like at the systemic level?
2. What is the impact of a literacy-focused PLC project on grade-wide reading comprehension, students' literacy practices, and students' confidence as readers?
3. How does this PLC effort change the school system and its leaders' and students' buy-in?

Chapter 5 presents a reflection and interpretation of these findings.

Descriptive Statistics

The demographic information of the school website indicates that 93% of students in this school qualify for free or reduced-priced lunches, and 18.7% of them are ELLs. Moreover, a large proportion of the students have an IEP. Demographic information about the sixth-grade

students that were part of the PLC is presented here, with i-Ready scores at the beginning and end of the PLC year (see Table 2. 1).

Table 2. 1

i-Ready for Sixth Graders in the School, Pre and Post Scores

Grade level by points	Point spread	# of students pre	# of students post
Kindergarten	0–418	7	3
1st	419–473	23	20
2nd	474–495	23	14
3rd	496–541	50	47
Total number of students 3 or more years behind		103	84
4 th	542–565	29	39
5 th	566–597	27	28
6 th	598–653	24	32

Table 3. 1*i-Ready for Sixth Graders in the School, Pre and Post Scores by Percentage*

Grade level by points	Point spread	% of students pre	% of students post
Kindergarten	0–418	3.8%	1.6%
1st	419–473	12.6%	10.9%
2nd	474–495	12.6%	7.7%
3rd	496–541	27.3%	25.7%
Total number of students 3 or more years behind		56.3%	45.9%
4th	542–565	15.5%	21.3%
5th	566–597	14.8%	15.3%
6th	598–653	13.1%	17.5%

At the beginning of the year, 103 students were reading below the fourth-grade level (based on i-Ready scores). At the end of the year, there was a significant 18.4% decrease to 84 students. A breakdown of the number of students at each reading level helps us appreciate the improvement of students with the most serious delay. At the end of the program, the number of students below fourth-grade reading competence had decreased by 19 students, with a commensurate increase in students at or above fourth-grade competence.

To answer the first research question, “What does a grade-wide literacy focused PLC intervention to support sixth grade students’ literacy look like at the systemic level?”, I analyzed a variety of ethnographic notes, including meeting minutes, memos, and teachers’ reflections. In order to provide an accurate description of the development of a literacy-focused grade-level

PLC, I broke the process down into the following themes: consensus building, communication, common strategies, and planning time. This PLC is based on DuFour and Fullan's (2013) theoretical framework, and the intervention will be described following this structure.

Building Consensus

Building consensus among the team members required a great deal of thoughtful analysis of the current reality regarding literacy. An inventory of the resources available to meet the challenges presented by current circumstances also had to be created. The first step in the process of confronting the problem of widespread low literacy rates at the school under study actually occurred the year prior to the intervention. Walton Middle School had undergone a rather dramatic decline in enrollment and, as a result, lost a teacher. With the departure of that teacher, I and another colleague were then assigned the entire sixth-grade roster of students. It was through this challenge that we decided we needed a grade-wide approach. The other teacher was unfortunately relocated to another school site, leaving me alone to proceed with the idea of implementing PLC practices within the sixth-grade team. I developed the outline of a plan to address the literacy practices of incoming sixth-grade students and called a meeting to introduce the plan to all of my colleagues teaching sixth grade. On August 6, 2018, I met with all of the sixth-grade teachers as well as the intervention teacher and presented a plan to address the literacy needs of the incoming students. According to DuFour and Fullan (2013), if there was to be a grade-wide level approach, then the teachers of that grade would have to agree on shared priorities and practices. This was the goal of the first meeting: to introduce the rationale for a systems approach to the problem of literacy and to discuss exactly what priorities and practices we would agree to adopt.

Sustained Silent Reading

The plan included time set aside each day for sustained silent reading (SSR). This proposal was met with skepticism as represented by Ms. Wayne's comment: "I will give it one semester. If I do not believe that there is any benefit, then the second semester I will not continue to participate." To which I replied, "Fair enough." Eventually, each of the four core subject teachers pledged to take one day a week to include 30 minutes of SSR in their classes. Ms. Wayne was out with a serious injury for the entire first semester. When she returned, the SSR routine had been well established and she consented to continue with it for the remainder of the year. She grew to support the effort enthusiastically, especially after the teacher–student conference piece was put into place.

Student Conferences

During one of the planning days at the beginning of the second semester, we divided up the students in order to implement the student conferences. We each took a group of students into conference with their SSR period once per week for 30 minutes. Each of us ended up with a caseload that amounted to six to eight students per class period, whom we pledged to advise while our classes read silently. The conferences focused on the books that the students were reading at the time as well as their assignment completion and i-Ready lessons. A form was generated to keep account of the student's goals in order to monitor progress. The first iteration of the conference form included a checklist of actions that the student and teacher would go through in order to review the student's current reading ability and the Lexile™ level of books that would best suit the student's needs (see Table 4. 1). It also included items that ensured that the students kept track of the books that they had read, the i-Ready lessons that they had completed, and weekly goals.

Table 4. 1*Literacy Conference Checklist*

Literacy Conference checklist		(Name of student)		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Read a passage aloud to teacher 2. Review book choices at lexile.com (student Lexile™ score) 3. Review reading log for LA class 4. Record books read for LA class 5. GPA grade check on PowerSchool 6. Action Plan – reading and i-Ready goals 7. i-Ready lessons completed 				
Date	IRR	IRM	Book/pg.	Weekly goal
	(i-Ready reading)	(i-Ready math)		
8.				

Surprisingly these conferences were met with enthusiasm by the students. It was quite common for students to seek out their conference teacher if they were absent on their conference day and update their form themselves. New students were assigned a conference teacher as they were enrolled. When the conference sheet was filled, the teachers discussed changes that they wished to see on the conference sheet for the next meeting and wrote notes. After revision of the process, it was determined that they wanted to add a place to indicate the number of missing assignments that the students had and a more explicit weekly goal. These changes were made, and a new form was developed (see Table 5. 1). The revised form concentrated only on reviewing the current status and performance of the student; the list of instructions was not thought to be necessary on every checklist. These reports were shared with the parents during parent conferences.

Table 5. 1*Revised Conference Checklist*

Literacy Conference					
Date	IRR (i-Ready reading)	IRM (i-Ready math)	Book/pg.	Missing assign.	Weekly goal

We also reached consensus to use the i-Ready reading program to measure students' growth, because it was already purchased and used by the district. Furthermore, the students were familiar with it. The language arts and math teachers scheduled the initial diagnostic assessments for the first full week of school to collect a baseline measure. Students who required more than a week to complete the i-Ready diagnostic were allowed to finish the process during their social studies and science classes in order to minimize the impact on their language arts and math instruction. The outcome of the initial assessment is presented in Table 5. 1. Based on our own professional experience we expected to see many of the students underperforming; however, we were not prepared to see how extensive the lack of literacy truly was. The problem was a daunting one. The size of the problem that the data presented to us challenged us to sort out carefully what our short-term and long-term goals truly were. In the short term we believed it was of paramount importance to get books into the students' hands. Our long-term goal was to develop in them literacy skills that would take them through their entire academic careers.

Celebrations

The team agreed that it was important to celebrate student growth and achievement as an engagement strategy to engender enthusiasm within each student and build a culture of success. We agreed that it was the students themselves who had to do the actual work and that they

needed a lot of encouragement because many of them had had very little success in school; consequently, their confidence was very low. Celebration benchmarks were created to encourage growth in i-Ready scores, including “breaking the four” and reaching their stretch goal at the end of the year. Within the year of the study, celebrations were also held for reading 10, 15, 20, and 25 books. Parents were invited to attend when their students’ achievements in grades, citizenship, and attendance were recognized during the end-of-the-semester assemblies. The number of students celebrated is outlined in Table 6. 1.

Table 6. 1

Number of Students Celebrated

# of students	Breaking the four	Stretch goal at the end of the year	Number of books read
183	18	25	10–14 books = 50
			15–19 books = 39
			20–24 books = 34
			25+ books = 11

Building a Culture in the Community

An increased sense of community grew during the time of the intervention. As suggested by Graham (2007), this was a vital precursor to having the reflective conversations that will lead to student growth. We agreed it was important to present a united front to the students and their families as well as to the rest of the school staff. We reinforced one another in conveying the message that they were a community of learners and that literacy was a priority. This was accomplished by keeping the SSR period sacred; the time was never sacrificed for other duties or

projects. We developed a common routine of greeting one another's substitute teachers and offering them our support with difficult students or logistical issues at the school. We held our parent-teacher conferences in the same room at the same time in order to facilitate open communication among the parents, students, and teachers. Finally, we sent reminder messages in unison to keep parents informed of upcoming events at the school.

Coming to a consensus on implementing common practices across the curriculum to build a culture was difficult at first. As each teacher taught a different subject, it was difficult to come to agreement on which teaching strategies would be effective across all subject matters. However, after reading Fisher et al.'s (2016) *Visible Learning*, in which the authors reviewed thousands of research papers, we determined that would implement four strategies that would have a great impact on our students' achievement. Furthermore, these strategies could be implemented in our classrooms regardless of subject matter. The team settled on the following strategies: We taught our students how to take notes and write effective summaries. We showed them how to make their own thinking visible as they navigated complex texts through metacognition. We pointed out things within texts that led our students to greater understanding, and we provided our students with opportunities for academic discourse within class assignments.

Time to Plan and Evaluate Student Work

A supportive administration is essential because they may have to advocate for planning days and supplemental hours with extra pay. Time for teachers to get together to thoughtfully plan instruction and evaluate student progress has to be built into the day. As the science and math teachers shared the same prep period, they agreed to meet during their prep once a week to discuss opportunities to reinforce important standards in each of their classes. The language arts

and social studies teachers likewise shared a prep period, and they too agreed to meet once a week. The social studies teacher, Ms. Wayne, had recently sustained an injury that required surgery and was out for the entire first semester; substitute teachers could not be required to meet during their prep period, so we agreed to begin our meetings after the return of Ms. Wayne.

The math and science teachers were able to meet weekly at the beginning of the first semester. It was during these meetings that they looked for opportunities to do what they called “cross-pollinate.” This was a plan to actively look for opportunities to reinforce one another’s content in each of their classes. As the math teacher noted, “If I am going to give up a day of math instruction, then you have to take on some of the math standards that I may not get to.” I, as the science teacher, taught the students how to determine the volume of three-dimensional figures as well as measures of central tendency: mean, median, mode, and range within the content of science. The students took notes on these topics in their science classes but then used those science notes often during their math classes.

During these weekly meetings, we compared student work samples, which we used as formative assessments. We focused particularly on our students’ progress in summary writing by comparing students’ summary writing between the two classes. Unfortunately, these weekly meetings became fewer and fewer as the year got underway. There was a shortage of substitute teachers district-wide that was especially acute at the research school site. That resulted in teachers being obligated to cover one another’s classes during their prep times. The math and science teachers each averaged covering classes during their prep periods two to three times a week. This interfered with meeting during that time, and it became obvious that meeting regularly during their prep period was unrealistic. It just did not provide the opportunity to assess student work in any meaningful way. The time had to come from elsewhere. Staying after school

without compensation was also not realistic as two of the four core teachers had small children at home and had to make a swift departure after work. The administration granted the team three days of planning, during which they had substitute coverage in order to plan with one another all day. On those days, however, they had specific issues to iron out, mostly to do with i-Ready assessments and review. Thus, this solution did not work for the formative assessment of students and the planning of cross-pollination.

Communication

For a community to work well and achieve its goals, there needs to be clear communication between the participants. A group text was established with the core sixth-grade teachers, the intervention teacher, and the AVID teacher. It was thought that daily communicating through email was too cumbersome and that a group text was more immediate and convenient. Concerns that arose with students were first introduced to the team through text messages for discussion. Each teacher provided insights to the team about their own experiences with that student and, in that way, a common approach was taken in each of their classes. If a teacher suggested that a student perhaps needed testing for RSP services, the intervention teacher researched the child's cumulative folder to see what the child's history might have been. It was through this approach that the teachers discovered that, of the six students who had participated in bilingual education in elementary school, four had scored three or more years behind in reading comprehension. As the year progressed, the RSP teacher as well as the counselor assigned to the sixth-grade students were added to the text group. The intervention teacher, in particular, was very helpful as part of the text communication. She took it upon herself to research student histories as concerns came to light. She then arranged for testing, when appropriate. She kept the teachers abreast concerning students who were receiving special

education services or had special circumstances, such as foster care or homelessness. This quick-and-easy method of communication proved convenient and effective, considering that two of the teachers had small children at home and could not stay for lengthy meetings. We never went more than a day or two without touching base.

Parental Cooperation

Parent participation is important to achieving the kind of growth needed in this school. The intervention and AVID teachers committed to providing Spanish language support for the meetings planned for the parents of students who fell below the fourth grade in reading. The intervention teacher pledged to support the team in any way that she could, without really knowing how she would fit into the program. Handwritten postcards of introduction were mailed out to the parents of each sixth-grade student as a way to engage the parents and seek their support for the team's efforts to work with their children. After the initial i-Ready diagnosis in early September, a list was compiled of students who fell below the fourth grade in reading comprehension (see Table 7. 1). There were 103 students on this list. The researcher and the AVID teacher met with small groups of these students and their parents.

Table 7. 1*Parent Meeting for Students Who Scored Below the Fourth Grade on i-Ready Diagnostics*

Date and time	Number of parents in attendance
September 17	
4:00–4:45	10
5:00–5:45	8
September 18	
4:00–4:45	9
5:00–5:45	8
7:00–7:45	8
September 20	
4:00–4:45	9
5:00–5:54	8
September 24	
4:00–4:45	7
5:00–5:45	9
September 25	
4:00–4:45	8
5:00–5:45	9

Parents of 10 students had to be contacted by phone as they were unable to attend any of the meeting times offered. During meetings, the parents were appraised of the situation and its importance. They were then asked to support the efforts of the sixth-grade team in very specific

ways. They were asked to see to it that their child read every evening for 20 minutes. They were also given a brief training on the i-Ready program and how they can monitor their child's progress. Some of the parents were aware of their child's struggles with reading, but many were not. "Why was I not made aware of this before?" was a common refrain.

The analysis for Research Question 2 was a two-tailed paired *t*-test comparing the students' i-Ready literacy score changes between pre and post intervention to investigate the impact of this PLC project (see Table 8. 1).

Table 8. 1

Number of Sixth-grade Students at Each Literacy Level Before and After the PLC

	Pre	Post
K-3 rd	103	84
4th and above	80	98

The comparison between the pre and post score differences in i-Ready was performed by quartile to learn whether there was a differentiated impact based on students' baseline (see Table 9. 1).

Table 9. 1*Student Growth by Quartiles*

Quartile	<i>N</i>	Pre- test means	Post- test means	Mean difference	<i>p</i> - value	Null hypothesis: Diff = 0
Q1 < 25%	44	448.27	480.90	32.6	≤ 0.00094	Rejected
Q2 > 25% < 50%	42	509.14	518.64	9.5	≤ 0.041	Rejected
Q3 > 50% < 75%	64	553.56	561.73	8.17	< 0.04	Rejected
Q4 > 75%	33	610.06	609.94	-0.12	< 0.9795	Accepted
All students	183	528.24	541.06	12.81	< 0.03	Rejected

This analysis indicates that there is a significant growth on i-Ready literacy scores after the PLC was implemented. It also indicates that the PLC had a statistically significant and positive impact on the first three quartiles (Q1, Q2, and Q3) of the baseline levels. The intervention seemed to be more beneficial for the students in the first quartile, who started with the lowest levels of literacy scores, because they showed the largest growth (32.6 points). This is not surprising; it is expected that students who began with the lowest scores had more room for change than students who were already scoring at the grade level.

First, the significance between pre and post measures of literacy practices and students' confidence was analyzed using a paired *t*-test to compare the means (see Table 10. 1).

Table 10. 1*Growth in Students' Literacy Practice and Confidence*

	<i>N</i>	<i>p</i> - value	Mean difference	Null hypothesis
Literacy Practices	198	< 0.002	0.38	Rejected
Students' Confidence	198	< 0.037	0.45	Rejected

The *t*-test indicates that there was an increase in students' positive literacy practices and their confidence when comparing the means from the pre and post scores.

The association between i-Ready academic measures, students' literacy practices, and students' confidence as readers after the year of the intervention was analyzed using a Pearson linear correlation analysis (see Table 11. 1).

Table 11. 1*Correlation Coefficients*

	i-Ready total score	Students' literacy behaviors
Students' confidence	$r = -0.28$ $p \leq .001$	$r = -0.54$ $p \leq .0001$
Students' literacy behaviors	$r = .34$ $p \leq .05$	

The correlation between students' positive literacy behaviors is positively and significantly correlated to their i-Ready scores, with medium-size strength ($p = .34$). This was expected as the scale of positive literacy behaviors is closely relevant to literacy skills. This means that the higher their positive literacy behaviors were, the higher their i-Ready scores were. Surprisingly, the correlation between students' confidence and both i-Ready scores and students' literacy practices are in a negative direction, although both are statistically significant. These findings are surprising, as I expected the students' confidence as learners to be positively related to positive literacy skills and skills; however, other researchers have found similar results, with a negative association (Neugebauer, 2014).

To answer Research Question 3, "How does this PLC effort change the school system and the leaders' and students' buy-in to the community?", I administered and analyzed a survey for the teachers participating in the intervention. Of the six people surveyed, all responded. The respondents included the three core teachers, the intervention specialist, the special education teacher, and the AVID teacher. By the time the survey was sent out, the principal, Dr. Fanci, had been relocated to another school. The survey consisted of six 5-point Likert-style statements (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). This survey was used to get the participants' impression on key aspects of the program that indicate a change in school culture and student buy-in (see Figure 1. 1).

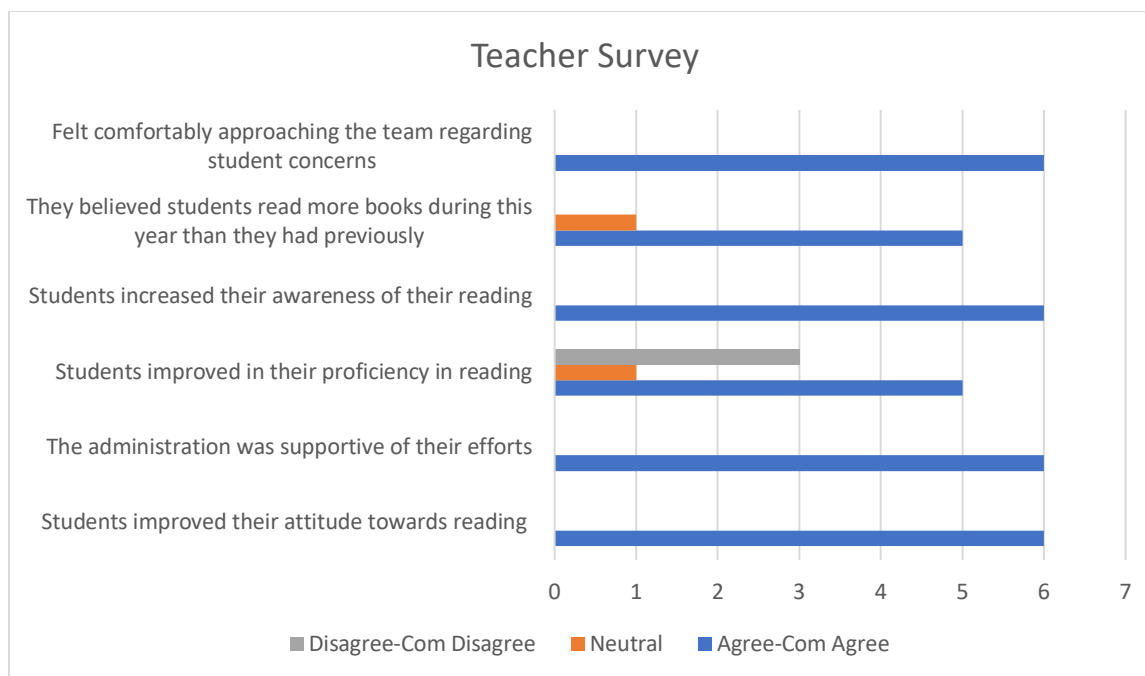


Figure 1. 1. *Teacher Survey Results*

When asked if students improved their attitude toward reading, all six teachers marked agree or strongly agree. All teachers also agreed or strongly agreed that they believed that the administration was supportive of their efforts. Five of the six teachers agreed that the students improved their proficiency in reading, while one teacher remained neutral on the point. They also all agreed that students increased their awareness of their reading, with five responding that they strongly agree and one with a simple agreement. When asked if they believed that students read more books during the intervention year than they had previously observed, five responded that they strongly agreed and one remained neutral on the point. Finally, when asked if they felt comfortable approaching the team regarding student concerns, they responded with a resounding 100% strongly agree.

Following the Likert-style questions, the survey included six open-ended questions. The first question asked about the impact the team approach had on their individual professional practice. The most common theme that arose from their answers was that of collaboration. Four

of the six respondents expressly mentioned that the team approach led to a greater willingness and success in collaborating with their colleagues. The special education teacher implied a similar response by saying that she felt like part of a team for the first time in a long time and that she felt more comfortable than ever before bringing her concerns to other grade-level teachers. Another theme that was prominent in their answers was that of relationships. For example, Mrs. Walters wrote that, “with respect to building relationships with students, our conferences helped us learn about them and show them that we think THEY matter. We value them, and in turn they opened up to us and were willing to trust us and TRY.” Ms. Wayne stated she believed that the “stronger relationships between student and teacher gave students greater academic success.” Finally, Mrs. Juarez remarked that “the relationships among teachers grew as the year unfolded and students became aware that their teachers were working closely together. I believe this gave the students a sense of security.” Again, four of the six teachers mentioned student relationships in their answers. There is a general consensus that the team approach to reading intervention helps teachers to build relationships with students on a deeper level and that the relationships between the teachers was one of trust and respect.

The second open-ended question asked the teachers to reflect upon how we could improve our program going forward. These responses were less uniform, with two respondents mentioning the importance of flexibility as an important feature of our success. They mentioned it in the context of allowing the program to evolve as we developed it further, to be open, for instance, to changing our primary form of assessment from i-Ready and to better coordinate our lesson plans as well as develop a common approach to vocabulary and writing. Mrs. Walters said that having common prep period is important so that there is an opportunity to touch base with our colleagues on a more frequent basis. The special education teacher remarked that grade-level

PLCs should take precedence over content-area PLCs at the middle school level. The common theme in these answers was the importance of working through issues to improve efficiency and impact on student learning.

When asked what impact the sixth-grade team's PLC had on the school as a whole, there was universal agreement. All six respondents spoke of the seventh- and eighth-grade teams following the lead of the sixth-grade intervention in one fashion or another. Mrs. Juarez wrote that "the sixth-grade team set the foundation for student expectations in the upper grades. Teachers could also see that communication and buy-in from the sixth grade team members [were] working, and they were trying (not to the same success) to be like the sixth-grade team." Mrs. Walters stated that:

our PLC inspired and motivated other teams at our school to do the same. They asked questions and had conversations within their own PLCs about how they could do something similar with their students. I think it helped other teams the power of working as a grade level PLC who prioritize student needs in reading in order to reach other goals in various contents.

These two answers were typical of all the team's responses.

They all mentioned that the other grade levels had begun to prioritize literacy and collaboration in an effort to affect student achievement. Both grade levels had set aside time for students to read as well as mechanisms for students to confer with teachers on a regular basis. Mary Bromfield, the intervention teacher, spoke of the empowering force that the team had on other teams to meet and develop their own systems to monitor student progress. The teachers involved in this study also came to complete agreement on their greatest success. They each responded that they believed that our greatest strength was in building relationships and

motivation through conferencing. As Ms. Wayne stated, “building relationships with students. Our conferences with students helped us learn about them and show them that we think THEY matter. We value them, and in turn they opened up to us and were willing to trust us and TRY.” Each respondent remarked that the short time that each student had with an individual teacher every week went a long way to creating a community that made the students feel safe and supported. Donald Blake was representative when he stated that the “greatest success was meeting with the individual students to check in on their progress ... being their cheerleader and celebrating their success.” Mrs. Walters said it best when she said students establish reading goals. We discussed what they were reading. Most importantly it allowed us to establish a closer personal connection to a group of students that we did not have before. According to Mrs.

Walters:

I believe our greatest success was the personal conferencing sessions we established with our students. It allowed us to share with them their own data and what this data actually meant to them academically. We helped students establish reading goals. We discussed what they were reading. Most importantly it allowed us to establish a closer personal connection to a group of students that we did not have before.

When talking about the impact that the intervention had on students, the teachers related some common themes as well. Three of the six teachers mentioned that they believed that the students felt cared for and valued as individuals. Two of them stated that they believed that the students understood that the teachers were working together to help them and that they had common expectations regarding behavior in class and reading expectations. One teacher reported that students appreciated the time set aside for reading, and another teacher appreciated that the

collaborative nature of the PLC made it possible to direct a student to the teacher who was most appropriate for addressing his or her academic issues.

Finally, the survey asked what the administration could do to nurture their PLC going forward. The answers came down to three things: time, resources, and support. The teachers repeatedly mentioned that they appreciated the time they had to meet in order to plan and evaluate student work. They also valued the time they were given to share with other grade-level staff what strategies they used that were successful and what failed as well as which obstacles were met and how they were overcome. They wanted the administration to support teachers in their efforts to dedicate time for students to read. Equally important, the teachers believed it was important to have time to meet with parents in order to convey concerns and enlist their support on behalf of their students.

Resources was another common theme. Repeatedly, the teachers stated that the administration should buy books. They believed that a good inventory of books was vital if a culture of literacy was to be established. They wanted a variety of books of different genres and Lexile™ levels as well as some Spanish language books for English learners. An example of aid given from outside the sixth grade came from the media technician, who organized a used book donation program in which students donated books that they had read and no longer wanted in exchange for early-to-lunch passes. We also instituted a program in which students who “broke the four” were rewarded by being allowed to choose a book from the Scholastic book catalogue for the administration to purchase, which the student would then donate to their class libraries. The student was entitled to write a blurb on a label that was inserted onto the fly leaf of the book that said who donated the book as well as a short comment from the donator on how they

enjoyed the book. This was done to encourage dialogue among the students regarding what they enjoyed reading and why.

These engagement efforts appeared to be effective. On the exit survey completed by the students, 79% reported that they had read more than 10 books throughout the year. The teacher surveys also indicated that there was widespread belief among students that they were cared for by their teachers and school staff and that this belief encouraged growth in their self-confidence and positive literacy practices. The student surveys provided evidence as 53.3% of them either agreed or totally agreed with the statement that they felt like they had a sense of belonging at their school, while 34% were neutral on the subject.

A school climate survey was conducted in the spring of 2019 that polled all sixth-through eighth-grade students; 51% of the school responded. Among respondents, 75% believed that the teachers were very supportive of their academic learning. The school-wide response appears more positive on this matter than the sixth-grade exit survey; only 62.2% of the respondents of the sixth-grade exit survey stated that they believed that the teachers were interested in their academic progress. Likewise, 57% of the students in the school climate survey felt that they had a sense of belonging at the school, while 53.3% of the sixth-grade exit survey said they had a feeling of acceptance at the school. Although the school-wide survey and the sixth-grade survey both demonstrated that the majority of students felt supported and at ease at the school, the sixth-grade exit survey results seemed to be slightly less favorable than those of the school-wide survey. This discrepancy may have several explanations. For example, one possible explanation is that the school-wide survey was answered by sixth- through eighth-grade students. The older students had more time to establish themselves at the school, building longer and deeper relationships. Also, the “sense of belonging” finding in the school-wide survey is an

amalgam of four specific questions: “I feel close to people at this school,” “I am happy to be at this school,” “I feel like I am part of this school,” and “The teachers at this school treat students fairly.” The sixth-grade exit survey only asked a single question: “I feel like I belong at Walton Middle School.” The vagueness of the sixth-grade survey question allowed the student to be less reflective when answering the question; the school-wide survey questions guided the students through a more thorough examination of their feelings regarding their experience at the school. Once again, the school-climate survey used an average of four questions to determine a 75% positive response for the students’ perception of the level of support for academic learning they received from the staff and faculty. Meanwhile, the sixth-grade survey asked that direct question only once. The sixth-grade exit survey focused more on the students’ sense of accomplishment with respect to academic learning than the support they received. Consequently, the results of the sixth-grade exit survey were more influenced by the students’ sense of confidence than their sense of support.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Summary of the Study

Chapter 4 presented an analysis of data concerning the implementation of a PLC at an urban middle school. A summary of the study as well as a discussion of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for further study are discussed in this chapter. The purpose of this study was to determine the effect that a grade-level PLC had on a cohort of sixth-grade students, their teachers, and their school. The study included a class of sixth-grade students at an urban middle school in Norwalk, California, and followed the educators involved with those students as they formed a professional learning community with the goal of improving students' literacy. Ethnographic notes, surveys, secondary data, and i-Ready scores were analyzed to answer the research questions.

In this chapter the discussion of the results of our analysis will be presented, and their relevance to previous research will be discussed. A reflection of the meaning of our findings is shared in this chapter, along with recommendations for practitioners and for future research. Some limitations and ethical issues relating to our findings are suggested here.

Discussion of Research Question 1

The first question was descriptive and was answered through qualitative data; therefore, meeting agendas and notes, sign-in sheets, text messages, emails, and teacher reflections were analyzed to describe the development of the PLC. The descriptive nature of the study fit well with other studies in the field that examined the effectiveness of PLCs. The analysis of meeting notes revealed that DuFour and Fullan's (2013) steps for successful PLC development were met in this study. The teachers in this PLC agreed upon the common goal of literacy development across all content classes, and they collaboratively decided on the steps to take throughout the

year to achieve this common goal. Agreeing upon a shared vision and working together for its fulfillment are essential elements in the development of an effective PLC, as demonstrated by DuFour and Fullan (2013) as well as Lippy (2011). The team recognized what DuFour and Fullan (2013) suggested—namely, that the nature of the problem of low literacy rates is fraught with complexities and stems from systemic causes, so the solution must use the expertise and cooperation of all members of the system regardless of discipline. It is evident from the first meetings that the team developed a sense of collective responsibility that Kruse et al. (2009) and Newman and Wehlage (1995) said was so critical. Days of SSR were determined, collective strategies were decided, testing scheduled, letters to parents were written and sent, and meetings were held. These activities developed that sense of accountability and the sense of community that Graham (2007), Kruse et al. (2009), and Stoll et al. (2006) recommended. They also led to serious and insightful conversations about students' work that supports higher student achievement. They determined early on to incorporate the following four key literacy strategies into their practice: academic discourse, metacognition, note-taking, and summary writing. These four practices were chosen based on scientific evidence that, according to Fisher et al. (2016), they increase student literacy rates. Furthermore, Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found that creating this greater coherence among teachers regarding instructional strategies led to higher student achievement. Rather than form a program, the results of my study derived from a process that took time (DuFour & Fullan, 2013). We were not able to create a perfect PLC in the first year; we discovered that we fell short in some stated goals. We were not able in that first year to develop a cross-curricular approach to vocabulary development that Snow et al. (2009) said was so important to effective literacy development. Although we garnered administrative support in

the allotment of planning time and the purchase of class libraries, we were unable to engage the administration in the development of priorities and practices as the PLC developed.

Discussion of Research Question 2

The second research question was answered through the analysis of quantitative data. To determine the effect of the intervention on student literacy scores, literacy practices, and confidence as a learner, i-Ready diagnostic tests were administered both at the beginning and the end of the year. I compared the results to determine any growth that students may have had. These test results were also compared to survey results to see if those who experienced growth were the same students who engaged in positive literacy practices and had confidence in themselves as readers. There was substantial growth among the students scoring in the lower three quartiles of the distribution (i.e., everyone who scored below the 75th percentile at the beginning of the year). This trend was encouraging as those were the students who were more in need of significant gains. The teachers, as revealed in their surveys, believed that their efforts had an impact on student reading and learning practices, which further reinforced their commitment to the PLC. They reported that they saw students read more books within the intervention year than they did in any other given year.

Unfortunately, there was little growth among the school's ELLs. Of the 34 students designated as ELLs, 22 increased their scores, but it was not enough of an increase to advance the reading level; 12 of the ELLs actually decreased their scores. This could be for several reasons, depending on their level. For a student who is a newcomer, there is little point in reading in the new language for an extended period of time. The research school site had a limited inventory of Spanish language books, so those students could not get the whole benefit of reading for pleasure. The students in the fourth quartile also did not make significant gains on the

i-Ready tests. Of the 33 students in Q4, 15 of the students' scores decreased while 17 increased (eight by less than 10 points). This is not surprising as they had less ground to make up, they came in reading at grade level, and they left doing the same.

The exit survey completed by the students as well as the teacher surveys indicated that there a widespread belief among the students that they were cared for by the teachers and school staff and that this belief encouraged growth in their self-confidence and positive literacy practices. The sense of community grew during the time of the intervention. As Graham (2007) suggested, this sense of community was a vital prerequisite for having the reflective conversations that lead to student growth.

The correlation between literacy practices and i-Ready scores indicates that there was a connection between literacy practices and higher test scores as measured. This is not surprising as the statements on the literacy practices, such as "when I find a word I don't understand I stop and check the context of the paragraph," refer to positive literacy behaviors that lead to better reading skills. Another correlation was run to see if there was a connection between students' perceptions of themselves as readers and their reading test scores. These findings were very surprising. There was a slight negative correlation between students' confidence in themselves as readers and their test scores. These negative correlations are consistent with those found in previous research. Neugebauer (2014) found in her study that highly confident poorly performing students did worse on standardized tests than their low confidence poorly performing counterparts. It is difficult to speculate as to why that may be so. It may be that confidence that is not based on the acquisition of skills disincentivizes the students from acquiring those very skills. It underscores the need for direct literacy instruction, especially in the middle school years, when interest in reading naturally declines just as the complexity of texts increases.

Discussion of Research Question 3

Once a functioning PLC has been established, it needs to be expanded. DuFour and Fullan (2013) argued that the PLC must push for systemic change in order for reform to be durable and adaptive to new circumstances. This requires a commitment in ever-widening circles of involvement. Grade-level teachers must care about what happens not only in their classroom, but also the classrooms of their fellow grade-level teachers. At Walton Middle School, all of the team members bought into the PLC process. Surveys were taken to measure the cultural change at the institutional level after implementing this PLC for one year. The qualitative data from teachers' surveys were used to study the impressions that teachers held as the year of intervention closed and the next year dawned. There were mostly positive impressions of the efficacy of the team approach to improving student achievement. It is evident that teachers agreed that working together is the best course of action for a school struggling with the low literacy rates that subsequently lead to poor learning. Through the PLC process, the content teachers recognized that they have a part to play in the development of reading and writing skills among their students as well as the important role they play in students' learning across all content areas. The surveys revealed an appreciation for the benefits of working together. All the teachers expressed, in one form or another, feeling supported and valued by their colleagues. The language arts teacher mentioned that the task of raising student achievement did not feel so daunting knowing that the other teachers on her team were working with her in a coordinated, professional way. As DuFour and Fullan (2013) maintained, "the process itself cultivates and deepens the sense of common purpose, mutual accountability, and collective efficacy of the group to achieve results never before attained" (p. 16). The surveys revealed an appreciation for the benefits of working together. Furthermore, DuFour and Fullan (2013) argued that grade-level

teachers must also care about what happens in the other grade levels. We saw this happen at Walton. The teachers' surveys revealed that the PLC intervention had an impact on the school beyond the sixth-grade teachers. The seventh- and eighth-grade teams each decided to implement a reading and conferencing program in their respective grade levels after witnessing the effort and success of the sixth-grade team. This enthusiasm came in spite of the fact that the school-wide response appeared more positive on the matter of students' sense of acceptance and support than the sixth-grade exit survey indicated. However, it should be noted that little more than half of the students answered the school-wide survey. Arguably, this outcome self-selected students who were more engaged and supportive of the school process to begin with. In addition, 91% of the students answered the sixth-grade exit survey; because this is almost all of the students involved in the PLC process, these numbers are more reflective of the real effects of the literacy effort.

However, not everyone fully bought in to the process. There were structural barriers that the team had to overcome or work around. Dr. Fanci, the principal of the school, said that she would support the PLC, but her support proved to be what DuFour and Fullan (2013, p. 38) would call "too loose" to be effective. For example, Dr. Fanci gave the team a sub day in order to divide the students up for our literacy conferences, and she provided the room next to her office in which to meet, but she never looked in to see what we were doing. She never asked any questions regarding what steps we were taking or what rationale we had for taking them. One thing the team had resolved to do was to meet once a week during our prep periods to coordinate with our teammates; unfortunately, these efforts were often undermined by our having to sub during our prep periods.

There is some hope going forward that this lack of involvement will not continue. The administration underwent a change as the study year concluded, and the incoming administration pledged to support the efforts of the grade-level teams to form effective PLCs focused on literacy development.

Conclusion

The PLC succeeded in elevating literacy skills in the bottom three quartiles of the student population because, to varying degrees, it developed collaboration among the four groups of stakeholders: the faculty and staff, the administration, the parents, and—most importantly—the students. This collaboration resulted in a sustained and integrated effort to improve reading across the curriculum. Students became more comfortable in class because they were convinced that what was happening in the classroom was being done with them and not to them. However, it is difficult to generalize how successful the approach in this particular study could be in other school settings. So much of the success in collaboration depends upon the qualities of the individual participants and their willingness to cooperate with one another.

Limitations

Going forward, I would change the pre and post surveys for the students so that they aligned better. It was difficult to quantify the changes because the questions on the pre surveys were not sufficiently similar to those on the post surveys with respect to the constructs of reading behaviors and the students' perceptions of themselves as readers. The surveys were not originally designed to assess the PLC program per se; they were part of the English teachers' routine practice. Also, I did not provide a pre survey for faculty, nor did I ask the parents to take a pre and post survey. In addition to being used to assess the success of the program, such parent surveys would help to establish the importance of literacy and the child's education in the home environment and identify

possible cultural obstacles to be addressed. I would also obtain the school-wide climate survey from the preceding year as well as the one for the exit year. Another change I would make is to use cumulative standardized state assessment tests like the California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) in addition to the i-Ready tests. The standardized state test would allow us to evaluate our performance with respect to other schools districtwide or statewide.

Implications for Practice

This study provided evidence that taking a team approach to literacy education improves students' achievement and the school culture for teachers. A PLC is an especially viable option for schools with chronically low reading levels. It may, in fact, be the only common-sense approach. Our PLC's singular focus on literacy, our frequent meetings to collaborate on monitoring students' progress, our frequent communication with students and their families, and our holding each other accountable by scheduling specific times together for establishing tasks and assessing outcomes sent a unified message that we were going to tackle this problem as a team. As the language arts teacher stated in her reflection at the close of the study year, "working as a team made the work seem doable and not so overwhelming." The goodwill generated among the team members went a long way to creating a collaborative culture that is essential to making real gains in literacy development. We also celebrated specific short-term goals to encourage students to invest in the process and move forward in developing their literacy. These efforts at communication and our celebration of gains went a long way in improving the teacher–student relationship.

Some of the lessons we learned in this school should illustrate important steps for other practitioners. The active role of the administration is key. We found that the improvement in the culture of our school was despite the administrator's attitude during this first year of PLC

implementation. The principal gave the team involved the time and resources that they requested, but she took no interest beyond that. She did not attend any meetings or engage in any discussions as to the actions that we took or their effectiveness. She conveyed the attitude that we could do what we felt was right on behalf of the students, but she did not engage with us in determining what was right in the first place or how to proceed. According to Senge (2012), successful educational leadership requires an understanding that the issues that face failing schools are complex and require solutions that draw upon all the talents of all members of the school community. Mobilizing school staff to tackle the issue of poor literacy required that the principal become the lead learner in an effort to find solutions that have a positive impact on students' achievement. She cannot be a mere bystander. She has to do what Senge describes as "find the hidden dynamics of a complex system" (p. 418) and to leverage its assets in such a way as to increase the likelihood that effective change will occur. The administration at our school, albeit willing to support the PLC financially with resources and time, remained too aloof to drive substantial and lasting change. She lacked the interest to develop the systems approach that Fullan and Quinn (2015) said was necessary for positive, lasting change. In order to lead a struggling school to better results, an administrator must take an active role within the PLCs on the campus. She must facilitate purposeful action and interaction among stakeholders. She should have a shared commitment with the teachers to the purpose and nature of the work that must be undertaken and be instrumental in clarifying the goals that they wish to achieve as well as the actions that will be taken to achieve them (Fullan & Quinn, 2015). That being said, it is also important to balance the need for administrative involvement with the need for the teachers to innovate and act independently. Hovering over the teachers and micromanaging will not create the collaborative culture that is desired. There must be a balance between push and pull in

developing the capacity of each staff member and the community as a whole to sustain focus and direction during the process of change. Raising student achievement in chronically struggling schools requires leadership that will employ a systems approach. Highly functional PLCs can play a part in needed systems reform.

Recommendations for Further Research

The aspect of the intervention that each of the teachers mentioned in their reflections as having a positive impact on student motivations and buy-in was the weekly student–teacher conferences. Although brief, the teachers believed that they were effective in building relationships between teachers and students that encouraged students to take an active role in their literacy development. The literature is scant on the subject of such conferences. With the prospect of it having a substantial effect on student achievement, it would be worthwhile to do further research in this area. We need to do additional studies on what a literacy mentoring program would look like. For example, in what ways did the weekly conferences reinforce or accelerate learning? How could the 5 minutes devoted to the conference be optimized? How can the administration help effectively make conferencing a school-wide practice? It would also be interesting to see more longitudinal studies that focus on school change via PLCs. Using the school-wide climate survey over subsequent years in addition to the individual grade-level exit surveys could give us a better view of the growing influence of the PLC. This study was merely a beginning, the first year in the development of a PLC. Following this, or any school implementing PLC practices, over several years would provide much-needed insights into how PLCs contribute to the development of a collaborative culture longitudinally.

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