

# THE IMPACT OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COLLABORATION ON TEACHER AND TEAM DEVELOPMENT

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## Dedication

This work is dedicated to those who have been unwavering in their dedication to me. First to my husband, Stephen: Your strength of soul and character make me believe in the incredible power of the human spirit. Your constant support and resolute belief in me has enabled me to find strength, motivation, and confidence when sometimes there was none. I am thankful to walk through life with you, and blessed to have you as my husband. To our children, Hannah and Landon: I cannot measure the blessings you are to me. You make me want to be a better human every day because you deserve nothing less. I hope you learn that hard work, sacrifice, and endurance are necessary for anything worthwhile in life, and that you recognize the value and importance of education. To my mother: your example, guidance, and unconditional love have been constant sources of inspiration in my life and continue to give me direction. You were my first, and most important, teacher.

I am blessed beyond measure to be surrounded by your love, knowing I have, in you, blessings others will never know. You have lifted me up more times than I can count, and your inspiration has guided me in this process and in life, in general.

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*I'm not a teacher: only a fellow traveler of whom you asked the way.  
I pointed ahead - ahead of myself as well as you.*

— George Bernard Shaw

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine teacher perceptions on the contributions of professional learning communities (PLCs) to teacher development and team development. Research and data assert that PLCs are a vehicle through which to affect school improvement, building student achievement. Attributes and characteristics of PLCs are documented in literature; however, little research or data is available on how PLCs affect teachers or teams therein through the collaborative processes PLCs implement. Through interviews and focus groups, the researcher gathered data from 15 participants in one middle Georgia secondary school. The respondents discussed their perceptions on how their PLC experiences have contributed to their individual teacher and their whole team's development. Participants represented content teams within the four academic departments (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies), which have PLCs implemented for collaborative learning. Findings indicated that teachers recognized positive and negative impacts of PLCs on their teacher and team development in the following categories: impact on growth and change, impact on learning, and socialization and culture. Respondents additionally made observations about other teams within their departments and about the school's PLC processes, as a whole. Overall, the study concluded that PLCs influence teacher and team development, with socialization and culture being vital to the outcomes for teachers and teams.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

With public concern over education sparked by the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, from the National Commission on Excellence in Education, American education reformers embarked on various attempts at school reform in response to increasing demands for changes in the educational system (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, Many, & Mattos, 2016; 1998; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Senge, 2006; Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, Smith, & Dutton, 2012). Due to movements such as the Excellence Movement in the 1980s and the Restructuring Movement in the 1990s, fragmented reform efforts in schools produced little to no improvement (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier, 2008). According to DuFour et al. (2016), education reform endeavors, while research-based, failed to make significant improvements in student achievement. The processes used in reform models typically had no effect on instructional quality and levels of achievement because educators focused more on workshops or programs instead of student assessments (Schmoker, 2011).

Similarly, the role of professional learning in education evolved as expectations for teachers and student outcomes evolved. As professional responsibilities of educators continued to expand, the role of professional learning was vital in building the overall school's capacity and success. Meeting the individualized professional development needs of all teachers was a challenge for school leaders (Mitchell, 2013; Owen, 2014; Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Lüdtke, & Baumert, 2011; Timperley, 2011a, 2011b). Further, school leaders had to develop professional learning relevance and application for teachers, providing professional stretches that improved all teachers' practice.

The balance between institutional needs to meet student growth and achievement targets and individual teacher needs to develop staff capacity proved to be a tenuous one for

school leaders, who recognized the need to continually develop teachers across career stages was key to school and student successes (Bruce, Esmonde, Ross, Dookie, & Beatty, 2010; Gallimore, Ermeling, Saunders, & Goldenberg, 2009; Mullen & Schunk, 2010; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Parylo & Zepeda, 2015; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008; Voelkel, 2011; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, & Garet, 2008; Zepeda, 2013). More school systems moved towards professional development goal setting and collaborative models to individualize professional learning, especially in alignment with teacher career stages and team structures, promoting on-going teacher growth (Zepeda, 2013).

Affecting professional learning in recent years, the perception of a school organization as a learning organization influenced school reformers (DuFour et al., 2016; Senge, 2006; Senge et al., 2012). Although changing any aspect of school structure can be difficult, many school improvement initiatives focused on the restructuring of school culture to improve teaching and student achievement (DuFour et al., 2016; Senge, 2006; Senge et al., 2012). Rooted in the business sector and based on Senge's (2006) theory that when members of an organization learn, the entire organization learns, the professional learning community (PLC) model was integrated into the realm of education.

In Georgia, the newly structured professional learning alignment to Teacher Keys evaluation individualized professional learning, and focused on increased collaboration and application; these changes were intended to translate to better professional practices, teacher retention, and teacher development (Woods, 2016). As such, the implementation of PLCs became vital to professional development and to improving student learning. The use of PLCs as a vehicle through which teachers built individual and team capacity that influenced student growth continued to be examined as more school utilized the model. Thus, the

researcher proposed to study the impact of PLCs and collaboration in secondary education on teacher and team development.

### Statement of the Problem

Educational professionals faced continued growing accountability for preparing all students for college or the career force so that they might be successful in an increasingly complex and competitive global economy. Workforce demands changed, and it was more and more evident in society that in order to participate in a global economy, students needed at least some post-secondary education or training. A report by Carnevale, Smith, and Strohl (2010) emphasized this need, projecting that by 2018, 63% of all jobs in the United States and 90% of new jobs in emerging fields would require post-secondary training.

Preparing students for post-secondary success—both in their work and as citizens—was a long-standing core mission of public education. As a result, there was increasing pressure at the local, state, and national levels to identify what school-based factors had the most influence over student achievement. A growing body of research supported the claim that teacher quality mattered more to student achievement than any other school-related factor. Furthermore, numerous researchers found that teacher quality had long-lasting and cumulative effects on student learning. Thus, there was increased attention from educators, policy makers, and researchers concerning identifying and engaging in the most effective structures that advanced teacher quality.

New educational reforms in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act in 2001 brought questions concerning teacher quality, teacher improvement, teacher performance, and teacher accountability to the forefront as educator responsibilities increased to prepare all students for increasingly rigorous assessment measures, academic standards, and college and career readiness. In particular, professional development structures and processes that

offered evidence for increasing teacher quality by substantively increasing teachers' professional knowledge and skills became a greater area of focus.

Consequently, school systems were constantly seeking to improve the quality of their teachers and their educators to develop higher levels of efficacy, which influenced greater student mastery. Traditional structures of professional development focused on removing the educator from the classroom or school environment to acquire knowledge in activities that were isolated from day to day teaching. The evolution from teacher training to professional development to professional learning was one of urgency to support the continually growing needs of schools, students, and communities. What was once called "training" fit the factory model of schools. The concept's terminology then moved to the idiom "development", which removed the individual's responsibility, as "being developed" was something performed on the teacher.

In education, professional development often supposed that all educators needed was to develop. The top issues in professional development were individual development, individualizing staff development, continuing education for administrators, funding sources, and laboratory training risks and results. This method treated educators as individual, passive recipients of information, and school systems expected little or no change in practice. Such development activities were episodic and unconnected to a shared, systematic purpose based in data and achievement, and produced inadequate results for educators and students. Moving towards a more unified and cohesive process of professional learning became more relevant for influencing teacher development in meaningful ways and supporting student learning. As such, a unified sense of goal setting and systematic



improvement planning was necessary to meet the demands set forth for systems, schools, school leaders, and teachers by educational reform accountability legislation.

One such structure that had the potential to increase teacher quality and improve student learning was professional learning communities (PLCs), including teacher collaboration (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Blank, 2013; Bruce, et al., 2010; Demonte, 2013; DuFour, et al., 2016; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Kane, et al., 2011; Khan, 2012; Lomos, et al., 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Prelli, 2016; Richardson, 2007; Timperley, 2011b; Vescio, et al., 2008; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008; Wei, et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2013). PLCs gained popularity as a means of effective professional development to support teacher growth and to enhance student achievement; the promise of PLCs led many educators to adopt the PLC model of professional learning and its implications on school culture as a means for professional development to support on-going teacher improvement and development (Bruce et al., 2010; DuFour et al., 2016; Learning Forward, 2011; Mullen & Schunk, 2010; Vescio et al., 2008; Wei et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2013). A PLC, according to DuFour et al. (2016), was “an on-going process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 10).

While the processes and intents in the PLC framework were touted as keys to teacher and student improvement, there were barriers that schools encountered. More and more school leaders claimed to operate as professional learning communities. However, this identity was often in name only - in the structure of meetings, the concept of a program, or the sharing of common readings; a PLC culture was driven by a focus on learning, a collaborative culture with collective responsibility, and a results-oriented mindset. The

collaborative element of the PLC process was also a key on which many schools struggled to capitalize. The essential aspect of any learning community was a continued focus on student learning and achievement, realized when groups of teachers work collaboratively to accomplish an accepted set of goals; it was common practice to promote teacher collaboration in a PLC environment. Although research suggested teachers benefited from working in such a collaborative way, research findings also suggested that accomplishing this a higher level of collaboration with regular frequency among teachers was often an arduous task.

There were a number of studies that also supported the use of professional development activities to benefit teachers' acquisition of knowledge, and that PLCs were a worthwhile model of professional development for promoting student achievement. However, a paucity in the literature existed regarding how teachers acquired knowledge and built individual capacity and team capacity through collaboration while participating in PLCs. Therefore, the researcher proposed to study how collaboration influenced teacher and team development.

### Purpose of the Study

The implementation of professional learning goal setting and collaborative structures to build teacher capacity was a new practice in Georgia. While collaborative structures have been in many school settings for some time, there were limited studies on the use of PLCs and their impact on teacher and team development. With high stakes attached to school improvement measures, the PLC model became a popularly acknowledged method to build teacher quality in order to increase student achievement (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Blank, 2013; Bruce, et al., 2010; Demonte, 2013; DuFour, et al., 2016; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Kane, et al., 2011; Khan, 2012; Lomos, et al., 2011; Opfer &

Pedder, 2011; Prelli, 2016; Richardson, 2007; Timperley, 2011b; Vescio, et al., 2008; Wayne, et al., 2008; Wei, et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2013). Consequently, new ways of thinking about how professional learning was implemented, how it was evaluated, and how it was improved were needed so PLC implementation was more effective.

Researchers identify factors that combine to form a PLC: a focus on learning, a collaborative culture, collective responsibility, reciprocal accountability, and a results-orientation (Bruce et al., 2010; DuFour et al., 2016; Leaning Forward, 2011; Marzano et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2010; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Zepeda, 2013). PLCs are promoted as a recommended school improvement measure (Battersby & Verdi, 2015; Blank, 2013; Bruce, et al., 2010; Demonte, 2013; DuFour, et al., 2016; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Ingersoll & Merrill, 2010; Kane, et al., 2011; Khan, 2012; Lomos, et al., 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Prelli, 2016; Richardson, 2007; Timperley, 2011b; Vescio, et al., 2008; Wayne, et al., 2008; Wei, et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2013). Despite the existence of practitioner enthusiasm for implementing PLCs, there was a pervasive lack of depth in understanding the precise mechanisms that function to make this model a viable vehicle for improvement and how its implementation affects teacher development to best improve student achievement. This study intended to partially fill this gap in understanding, providing evidence for recommendations for leaders on more effective implementation and monitoring of PLCs as school improvement measures.

An additional intent of the study was located in its focus at the high school level. Much of the research on PLCs is centered around elementary or middle school settings, as those settings have traditionally aligned themselves more easily to the teaming structures and teaming approaches necessary to implement a PLC effectively (Lomos & Bosker, 2011; Richardson, 2007; Sayers, 2013; Schlichter, 2015; Vescio, et al., 2008; Voelkel, 2011; Wei,

et al., 2010; Zepeda, 2013). Consequently, there was a need for more research on PLCs at the high school level due to the unique nature of high school teachers and school structures. Research specific to this level would provide deeper understanding of how PLCs could be more effectively implemented and monitored to obtain the expected outcome of student achievement through teacher development.

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of PLCs and collaboration in secondary education on teacher and team development. This study sought to explore teacher perceptions of their individual and team experiences in collaborative settings, how these collaborative structures have been structured and utilized, and how said collaboration and goal setting impacted teacher and team development and achievement. Using teacher perceptions to evaluate the implementation of collaboration and professional learning community (PLC) structures and supports informed leadership in evaluating their roles to best build teacher capacity and collaboration effectiveness. This study's findings can guide leaders in PLC refinement to meet teacher needs, support teacher growth, and affect greater student outcomes in the future, while adding to research on professional learning, collaboration, and teacher growth.

## Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Research Conceptual Framework

