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## Leadership Practices That Create a Sustainable Collaborative Community

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Leadership Practices That Create a Sustainable Collaborative Community

A Dissertation by

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School of Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

April 2017

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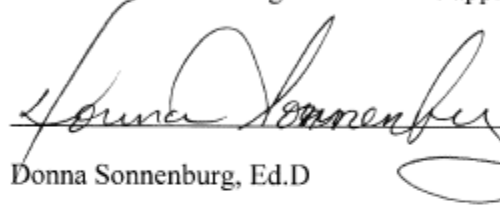
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## ABSTRACT

### Leadership Practices That Create a Sustainable Collaborative Community

by Regina Tillman

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the principal leadership practices perceived as supporting the development of professional learning communities and a sustainable collaborative culture. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to examine principal leadership practices school teachers in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community. This study contributed to the literature to understand the important leadership practices that support the implementation and sustainability of professional learning communities. The participants in the present study were elementary principals and teachers implementing professional learning communities in Antelope Valley elementary school districts. This study was designed using qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Principals participated in an initial demographic online questionnaire and face-to-face interviews and teachers participated in focus group discussions. Examination of the qualitative data indicated that principals and teachers perceive that the leadership practices of collaboration, having a clear focus, creating a data-driven environment, and developing accountability were the most important leadership practices needed in the implementation and sustainability of a collaborative community. Under the practice of collaboration, supporting teachers during the collaboration process was most important. Second, was the practice of having a clear focus, focusing on collective goals and building a clear purpose was most important. Third, was the practice of creating a data-driven environment, using student achievement data to improve teaching practices and student

learning was important. Last, was the practice of creating accountability, creating individual and group accountability for the goals and student achievement was important. This study data support the conclusion that the leadership practices of collaboration, having a clear focus, data-driven inquiry, and holding everyone accountable to the goals were needed in the development and sustainability of a collaborative school culture. Future research is advised. Recommendations include the study of the following: How principal collaboration supports the implementation of professional learning communities. What practice do superintendents and central office leaders perceive as important for developing and sustaining collaborative communities? Future research could be conducted on the actual classroom practices as a result of professional learning communities and the impact on student learning.

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Across the nation, school districts and school leaders are searching for various strategies and structures to improve schools and the culture of the school environment (Kline, Kuklis, & Zmuda, 2004). Educational organizations, both nationally and statewide, continue to analyze the role of the principal and their unparalleled position to impact teaching and student achievement (Fullan, 2008; Hord, 1997). It is commonly agreed that the practice of teacher collaboration for instructional purposes promotes student achievement (Sullivan, 2012). In *Learning by Doing* (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010), collaboration is described as members of a team working together to achieve common goals. However, effective teacher collaboration does not just happen; it is developed through skilled leadership. Principals have the opportunity to unite teachers and provide them with resources to work together as collaborative teams. Effective principals understand what is at stake and learn ways to work with teachers to develop a culture of collaborative improvement (Fullan, 2014). Yet, teacher collaboration is one area that can be difficult to implement when addressing the needs of today's school environment. Fullan (2014) reaffirms that, "success at the school level is a function of the work of principals, themselves acting as lead learners, who ensure that the group focuses on a small number of key elements."

Educational leaders of 21st Century organizations are faced with many modern organizational challenges. They have to be mindful of the various dynamics in their organization in order to bring about successful collaborative and cultural change. Fullan (2014) argued that a well-intentioned leader can get it all wrong if they are not focused on the right strategies to bring about change. School leaders had to address the various

challenges that organizations encounter when building strong collaborative teams.

Addressing these challenges can be worth the effort as collaboration in organizations increases success, and enables employees in the organization to develop leadership skills that foster a cooperative learning environment equipped to identify and solve problems.

Collaboration in an educational system remains a vastly limited practice and has become something that is least important to its stakeholders (Joyce, 2004). The traditional educational setting fosters the structure of teachers working in isolation; these structures continue to be customary in the educational system today. This isolated approach propagates an environment where teachers are professionally stifled which then leads to the stagnation of school improvement and reform. The traditional educational structures have created the practice of teachers working in isolation, making it impossible for principals to have an influence on changing this practice (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). School leaders must understand that they alone cannot execute the task of challenging this practice and changing this structure of teacher isolation. Leaders must work at building a strong collaborative environment where individuals trust each other and begin to function as high performing collaborative teams. The purpose of the collaborative process and team structures in the Professional Learning Community (PLC) is to change the traditional practices of schools (DuFour & Marzano 2011). The structures of the PLC assist principals working with smaller groups of teams rather than isolated individuals.

The principals' responsibilities are directly related to establishing successful PLCs in schools. In *School Leadership that Works*, the authors identified 21 leadership responsibilities that bring about successful collaborative change in organizations. These responsibilities, however, cannot be fulfilled alone. Thus, "If school leadership is the

responsibility of a leadership team within a school, as opposed to the principal acting as lone leader, all 21 responsibilities can be adequately addressed” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 99). Success in an organization requires a focus on making better decisions, creating a collaborative learning environment through a PLC, and building everyone’s capacity to lead. These structures assist leaders in moving their organization successfully through the 21st Century. DuFour and Marzano (2011) emphasize that “no single person has all of the knowledge, skills, expertise, and energy to fulfill each of the 21 leadership responsibilities. The need for creating a strong leadership team has been cited repeatedly in both educational and organizational research” (p. 56). Dufour and Mattos (2013) conclude that principals understand that leading change in their organization requires developing leaders within their organization to effectively lead PLC’s that will achieve goals and solve problems through collaboration. This process starts with principals developing effective leadership characteristics and understanding that they had to model what they want to see in others by practicing collaborative behavior. The authors advise that leaders have to create a decision-making process that is inclusive, and promotes an environment of collaboration among all members through the PLC process (DuFour & Mattos, 2013).

### **Background of the Study**

*“The achievements of an organization are the results of the combined effort of each individual.” Vince Lombardi (2016)*

In the last century, considerable changes have occurred in the leadership roles of elementary school principals (LaRocco, 2008). Twenty-first century principals must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to make transformational changes and not just be

satisfied with the regular changes within their organizations (Hord, 2004). One change that is significant in transforming organizations is building a culture of collaboration.

Sullivan (2012) agrees that building a culture of collaboration is critical and emphasizes:

One change that has permeated both the education and business is workplace collaboration. The business and education workplace in America for the past 100 years has been characterized as silos, independence, and “every person for themselves.” The 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace has had to adapt and change in order to remain profitable or viable. These changes have resulted in a new characterization such as problem solving, team playing, information literacy, collaboration, lifelong learning skills, self-managing teams, quality circles, and team-based organizations. (p. 7)

What leaders understand is that collaborative effort, rather than working in isolation, is what it takes to transform organizations into greatness (Collins & Collins, 2005). It is important to create an environment that values collaborative teams as the way to get things done. Leaders of change realize that in order to accomplish a collaborative teaching environment, they must involve all stakeholders in establishing the vision and developing a collaborative mindset (LaRocco, 2008). Research from Fullan (2003), Kline et al. (2004), and Wiseman (2008) confirm that when leaders let go of their power, turn that power into a shared leadership structure, and empower others through shared decision-making, they build a true culture of collaboration. Furthermore, DuFour et al. (2010), in *Learning by Doing*, report that the process of working in collaborative teams allows transformation to take hold in an organization when the leader empowers others, disperses leadership, and models collaboration and its practices.

The benefits of creating a collaborative community are numerous and exhaustive. DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) conclude that, “despite the over-whelming evidence of the benefits of a collaborative culture, the tradition of teacher isolation continues to pose a formidable barrier” (p. 18). DuFour and Marzano (2011) agree that “isolation and insulation are the expected conditions in too many schools, and that these conditions do not foster individual teacher growth and school improvement” (p. 50). Professional learning communities are a way for principals and teachers to work together and end the practice of teacher isolation. The isolation that permeates in school communities can be combated by the behaviors and practices that are learned in the professional learning community structure (Louis, 2006). Barth (as cited in Michelen, 2001) stated, “with collegial and collaborative conversations that break through this cycle of isolation, and foster a learning community of teachers, a school has the capacity to improve from within and establish the fertile ground for a professional learning community” (p. 3). McLaughlin and Talbert (2007) recognize that professional conversations are a challenge; however, they are necessary for teacher growth and school success.

A professional learning community provides a process that enables teachers and principals to work together and end the practice of teachers working in an isolated environment (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Roberts & Pruitt, 2009). Professional learning communities support structures and opportunities for teachers to share and reflect on practices, and play a role in the success of a school (Michelen, 2011, p. 8). These newly learned structures that teachers experience in a professional learning community assist in the elimination of the practice of isolation, and build a newly found collaborative community (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2002).

## **Collaboration and Culture**

Implementing collaborative practices in schools as a change initiative is a powerful way to bring about effective and long lasting changes in schools when principals and teachers understand that change is necessary to build a collaborative environment. R. Anderson (2012) states, “a key value in organizational development is the creation of healthy environments that promote collaboration rather than competition” (p. 44). Collaboration can bring about the cultural change that is needed for a school to achieve breakthrough results. D. Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010a), authors of *Beyond Change Management* recognize that in order for breakthrough results to occur in an organization, human potential has to be released. This is done by designing better change processes and empowering people to contribute more of their talents and desires. Michelen (2011) explains that group collaboration allows for the synthesis of different views and ideas about complex problems that cannot be done by a single individual person.

Cultural change is a difficult process for any organization to undertake, but it is the cornerstone for mindset and behavior change. DuPont (2009) agrees, “culture is hard to change because it is the accumulation of all that the organization believes in as it leads to stability and a predictable course of action. Culture is the essence that influences that group’s behavior” (p. 23). Culture impacts every aspect of an organization; it sets the tone that dictates the way things are done, it shapes peoples’ thoughts and actions, and it is reflective in the attitudes and beliefs of the organization (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010; D. Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010a; DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Muhammad, 2009; Reeves, 2009). Leaders of change understand that to



accomplish this, they must involve all stakeholders in establishing the vision and developing a collaborative mindset. Many researchers concur that when leaders let go of their power, turn that power into a shared leadership structure, and empower others through shared decision-making, they build a true culture of collaboration (Fullan, 2003; Kline et al., 2004; Wiseman, 2008). DuPont (2009) points out,

Effective school leaders can read and shape culture. They need to look for the deeper understanding of what is happening in the school. A leader needs to investigate and understand past, present, and future dreams and realities. The principal then needs to bring everyone on board to change the culture by sharing leadership. (p. 34)

R. Anderson (2012) notes that leaders that support an initiative for collaborative change must understand that this change will take some time, but with gradual change a new culture of values evolves. Leaders had to know the significance of creating an environment that values collaborative teams as the way to do things.

### **School Leadership Practices and Behaviors**

The cultural change of a school, where collaboration is the expectation, must be conducted by leaders who are consciously aware of the change process taking place in the organization. These leaders have to understand they must model the change they want to see (Carter, Prater, Jackson, & Marchant, 2009). D. Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010a) state that “walking the talk of change essentially means leading from the way of being that is aligned to, promotes, and demonstrates your desired culture. This aligns your individual behavior and mindset to the desired culture and models it into existence” (p. 182). Principals who focus on building collaborative teams, actively support these

teams, and model what they want to see in their staff will see the focus switch to student learning at high levels (Schmoker, 2006; Sullivan, 2012). Principals cannot expect teachers to make the changes to their behaviors and practices if they are not willing to change and reflect upon their own. DuFour and Marzano (2011) understand that “creating conditions to help others succeed is one of the highest duties of a leader. . . . They must build the capacity of educators to function as members of high performing collaborative teams” (p. 86). Sullivan (2012) noted, “When principals model collaboration or become an active participant in the process, teachers are more likely to also engage in the process” (p. 15). This type of modeling sets the cultural tone and norms that make breakthrough results a possibility for employee mindset and behavior change.

### **The Benefits of Professional Learning Community Structures and Characteristics**

The foundational principles in professional learning communities are centered on structures that are termed the “Three Big Ideas.” These structures, according to DuFour and Marzano (2011), profoundly affect a school’s culture and practices because teachers and principals work collaboratively to improve student learning. The essences of professional learning communities are captured in the following big ideas:

1. Focus on Learning: We accept learning as the fundamental purpose of our organization and, therefore, are willing to examine all practices in light of their impact on learning.
2. Collaborative Culture: We are committed to working together to achieve our collective purpose. We cultivate a collaborative culture through the development of high-performing teams.

3. Focus on Results: We assess our effectiveness based on the results rather than intentions. Individuals, teams, and schools seek relevant data and information and use that information to provide continuous improvement.

These foundational principles are accompanied by what DuFour et al. (2010) identify as six essential characteristics of a professional learning community, and they are deeply embedded in the process, e.g., (a) shared mission, vision, and values; (b) collective inquiry; (c) collaborative teams; (d) action orientation and experimentation; (e) continuous improvement; and (f) results orientation. Professional learning community structures and practices provide an opportunity for everyone in the learning environment the opportunity to improve the culture of the school. Through collaborative practices and school level commitment, all stakeholders have a profound influence on the transformation of the school. Wiseman (2008) shared the benefits of being in a professional learning community:

The benefits to the staff and students are plentiful, including a reduced isolation of teachers, collective commitment, and vast academic gains for students. Nurturing the characteristics of a PLC will assist school leaders, thus leading to the benefits described above and transforming school culture. (p. 29)

This form of school change occurs as a direct result of being in a professional learning community. Teachers that are working in professional learning communities learn to practice collaborative inquiry, share and reflect on practices, and focus on student success. “Over time, relationships around the collective work of colleagues enable a staff to address not only success, issues, and struggles across content areas, but shift the

teachers' experience of working in an isolated environment to one of support and collegiality" (Michelen, 2011, p. 50).

### **Sustainability**

There has been a limited amount of academic and scholarly research focused on understanding the degree of sustainability that has occurred or can be possible for professional learning communities. As Huffman, Hipp, Pankake, and Moller (2014) have discussed, there has been a minimal number of educational institutions that naturally demonstrate characteristics often seen in professional learning communities, because "the majority of school systems do not necessarily focus upon how operations are carried out and what the general outcomes are for their students" (p. 461). According to Strahan (2003), in order for a professional learning community to be unremitting, case studies must establish "data-directed dialogue," which includes decisive and channeled discussions that are "guided by formal assessment and informal observation," and associates "the ways adults and students cared for each other" (p. 127). Thus, when there is a common recognition between the professional educational environment and the young individuals they are aiming to teach, this allows for a smoother and more understanding transition in providing long-lasting and fervent knowledge for future generations.

### **Problem Statement**

The push for creating a collaborative culture in 21st century organizations rests on the shoulders of school leaders (Fullan, 2007; Wallace Foundation, 2008). Professional learning community structures among educators are becoming the tool to change leadership and teacher practices. The role of the principal in building a collaborative

culture is complex and challenging. Principals are charged with changing the school from an isolated workplace to a collaborative environment, while making sure teachers are supported in their efforts through the collaborative change process, and continue to grow as educational learners (Ketelle & Mesa, 2006). Regrettably, school leaders are not given the tools they need to be reflective learners in their own practice. Many professional learning communities fail because their leaders do not know the characteristics and behaviors they must model in order to change the cultures of their organizations.

The reason professional learning communities are not sustained in many schools across America is that the leader has not developed the behavior and mindset necessary to model the culture change they want to see in their organization (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; DuFour et al., 2008). Ackerman-Anderson and Anderson (2010) note that leaders must reflect on their own mindset and behavior, examine if the behavior is what is needed for their organization's transformational change to happen, and if it is not, they have to decide how to develop the necessary mindset and behavioral changes for transformational change to happen. Many school leaders are ill prepared for the daily realities of school leadership and lack the leadership skills to make changes in the school community (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2008). Professional learning communities are successful models for building a collaborative culture, but there is a gap in how principals' behaviors and leadership characteristics help to build and sustain this new culture (Dufour & Marzano, 2011).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the principal leadership practices perceived as supporting the development of a professional learning community

and a sustainable collaborative culture. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to examine principal leadership practices school teachers in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community.

### **Research Questions**

1. What practices do elementary school principals perceive as important for supporting the development of a professional learning community in Antelope Valley School Districts?
2. What leadership practices do elementary principals perceive as important to support a sustainable collaborative school culture in Antelope Valley School Districts?
3. What principal leadership practices do elementary school teachers perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community in Antelope Valley School Districts?

### **Significance of the Study**

Over the past two decades, the role of the principal has become more complex and the responsibilities have increased. Fullan (2014) states the “current concept of what principals should do is confusing, too narrow, too tedious, or impossible” (p. 6). Elementary principals continue the need to develop leadership skills around creating collaborative communities of teachers moving from the past decades of the classroom as an autonomous unit to working collectively (Fullan, 2014). Principals struggle with developing and sustaining collaborative cultures, which results in teachers working in isolation. Teacher isolation does not foster teacher growth, the sharing of best practices, or problem solving. The practice of working in isolation does not lend itself to the

dialogue teachers have regarding student achievement and identifying students' academic needs (Dufour & Marzano, 2011). Thus, this study is important because it may reveal practices that educational leaders can use to promote sustainable and collaborative communities. In addition, principals can examine this study to learn what practices and structures they need to implement PLC in their schools and thus implement the structures that build collaborative community practices. Moreover, this study could serve as a guide to help elementary school principals and teachers currently implementing professional learning communities to analyze their actions with the aim of improving existing practices.

This study will contribute to the body of knowledge by building on past research regarding professional learning communities. It will provide evidence of bridging the knowledge of the characteristics of PLC with the practices needed to embed the collaborative community in the school culture. Moreover, by examining the perceptions of elementary principals and teachers toward important leadership practices in creating a sustainable professional learning community, this study will also add to the literature. In addition, this research will provide schools in urban districts that are beginning to lay the groundwork for implementation of professional learning communities the information needed in building a professional learning environment, and creating highly functioning collaborative teams. Using the information to improve their leadership practices principals and teachers in urban schools can increase their capacity to create collaborative leaders and propel the transformation of their organization forward. They can also use this study to initiate collaborative change in their organization, increase the knowledge needed to be transformational leaders, and reflect on the practices and characteristics that

are necessary to create a collaborative sustainable culture. DuFour and Marzano (2011) state, “the willingness to be personally accountable for results reflects on the defining emotions of effective leaders – the belief in their ability to achieve their goals through their efforts”. Leaders do not ignore the problems in their organizations. They take the lead by using available resources and knowledge to solve them, and they model these strategies to build the desired culture they want to see. The culture of a school is the focal point for the entire school community. As collaboration becomes embedded in the culture, it becomes less focused on the principal and more focused how the entire staff learns from one another, and the practices they employ in their day-to-day work (Fullan, 2014).

### **Definition of Terms**

*Breakthrough results.* Breakthrough results were a level of achievement beyond what anyone even conceived in an organization (D. Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010a).

*Change initiative.* Actions and steps necessary to implement the transformational change process. These steps consist of planning, initiating, communicating, evaluating, and course correcting (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2009).

*Collaboration.* Collaboration refers to the opportunities for teachers and principals to interact with one another for the purpose of shared decision-making in school matters. Characteristics of collaboration include voluntary participation, and a belief that each individual’s contribution is valued and shared mutual goals are shared. Collaboration occurs when individual stakeholders come together and engage in an interactive process that leads to an action or decision (Michelen, 2011).



*Collective inquiry.* PLC teams collectively look at best practices in teaching and learning. They also inquire about their current practices and students' level of achievement. They attempt to arrive at a consensus on various questions by sharing knowledge rather than pooling opinions (DuFour & DuFour, 2014).

*Cultural change.* Culture change is a change in organizational systems. It touches individual mindset and behavior; relationship and team norms and work procedures; the organizational systems, structure, business processes, and technology; and how the organization services its clients (Ackerman-Anderson & Anderson, 2010).

*Deprivatizing.* Ways that educators, especially teachers, can begin to make the instructional practices and routines in their classrooms more open to collegial conversation and collective inquiry, or more public

*Leadership.* Leadership is a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow. The quality of this relationship that matters most when we are engaged in getting extraordinary things done. A leader-constituent relationship that is characterized by fear and distrust will never, ever produce anything of lasting value. A relationship characterized by mutual respect and confidence will overcome the greatest adversities and leave a legacy of significance (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

*Practices.* Actions developed in a collaborative community that educational leaders consciously choose to make daily and weekly to bring positive change and continuous improvement to their organization. (Fullan, 2014; Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

*Professional learning community (PLC).* Professional Learning Communities are educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve.

PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour & DuFour, 2014).

*School culture.* This comprises a set of norms, values, beliefs, rituals, ceremonies, symbols, and stories that make up the persona of the school. School culture is functional and it accurately describes how the unseen human factors of a school affect the day-to-day practices and behaviors within the school (Muhammad, 2009).

*Sustainable.* Sustainability refers to the ability of an organization to implement initial changes and, over time, continue with the long-term establishment of those changes becoming, embedded them in the school culture (Dufour & Dufour, 2014).

*Teacher workplace isolation.* Teacher isolation is a culture of professional isolation in K-12 schools across America. Teachers that work in isolation show little interest in making their teaching practices subject to analysis, discussion, or improvement. These conditions stifle teacher growth and school improvement (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

*Teams.* A team is a group of people that collaborate effectively, have a good understanding of one another's roles and responsibilities, and have clearly defined team objectives. They build trusts, have effective communication, and share the workload (DeRosa & Lepsinger, 2010).

*Transformational change.* Transformational change is a radical shift in all organizational systems and is so significant that it requires a shift in culture, behavior, and mindset to be implemented successfully (D. Anderson & Ackerman-Anderson, 2010c).

## **Delimitations**

The study is delimited to K-6 elementary principals and teachers who have been involved in implementing collaborative communities (PLCs) for 3 or more years in Antelope Valley area of Los Angeles County.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized around five chapters. Chapter 1 presented the introduction, background, a statement of the research problem, the purpose and significance of the study, the research questions, a list of definitions, and the delimitations to the study. Chapter 2 contains a conceptual framework or synthesis matrix, and a review of the literature in areas that are relevant to this study. Chapter 3 is a presentation of the methods and procedures undertaken in this study and is followed by Chapter 4, which organizes and reports the study's findings, including the presentation of relevant narratives and a comprehensive analysis and interpretation of data. Chapter 5 contained the summary, discussion, conclusions, recommendations, and implications for practice-based action, based on the results of the study.

## **CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

Chapter 2 presents a review of scholarly literature in the areas of professional learning communities in school reform, and looks at the practices of the school community in developing and sustaining a collaborative community. This chapter begins with the historical overview of professional learning communities. The second section reviews principals and teachers in professional learning communities. The third section reviews how the school community played a role in the development of professional learning communities. The literature review concludes with an examination of the benefits of professional learning communities at the elementary school level.

### **History of Professional Learning Communities**

As discussed by Wu, Wang, Yu, Lin, and Wu (2013), professional learning communities have existed since the last quarter of the 20th-century, particularly throughout the United States due to insufficient educational reforms. The goal during this time has been to encourage active participation between teachers and administrators, allowing them to place “special focus upon their own individual skills” and on how overarching decisions are created and enacted, thus enabling individual professionalism to combine with collective action (p. 245). This was initially established through the Excellence Movement, after the National Commission of Excellence in Education provided a report in 1983 that emphasized that there was a significant need across the United States, particularly concerning the availability of resources, quality of education, range of teacher commitments, and so on (Huffman et al., 2014, p. 449). Over the previous decades, scholars have placed more direct focus upon recognizing more complicated aspects of professional learning communities, particularly concerning

teaching and learning methods considered to be either evidential, circumstantial, or environmental (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 380). Today, professional development communities are based upon complexity theories that determine the melody of determinants that explain how educators learn the art of teaching and learning, and how this is utilized to convert that wisdom and understanding in way that promotes on-going student advancement (Avalos, 2011, p. 10).

Having this knowledge enables recognition that professional teaching methods are widely complex and varied among each teacher and subject. Thus, through individual concept and understandings (Opfer & Pedder, 2011, p. 380), it is difficult to identify them. This explains why there continues to be a continuous need for scholarly and professional studies surrounding the effectiveness of professional learning communities, including the study provided for this composition. In light of this, the following literature review uses scholarly sources from the previous decade, of which 85% are from 2010 to 2015, which cover the themes of principal professional development, teacher professional development, community professional development, technology in professional development, and elementary school professional learning communities. Together, they provide a concise overview of the various behaviors, understandings, and attributes that prevail today in national and international schools.

### **Principals Leadership**

The challenges leaders face today have been continuously changing. Education reform has generated many changes ranging from technology growth to changes in organizational culture spanning more than 25 years (Hartin-Iorio & Yeager, 2011). Leaders have to be ready for the complexity of the many changes that come with being an

educational leader. These changes have shaped the role of the school principal and require principals to go from being transactional leaders of the past to becoming the transformational leaders needed for the future (Marzano et al., 2005). This type of shift has demanded that leaders move from the former way of leadership to a strategic form of leadership that will create sustainable change that moves their organization to the next level. To understand fully this shift, it is important to understand the differences between transformational leaders and transactional leaders. Bass (2010) expands on Burns's (1978) theory and agrees that transformational leaders vastly improve organizations by inspiring, motivating, and stimulating others to produce creatively exceptional work beyond their expectations. In contrast, Burns (2010) states that transactional leaders produce a "give and take" working relationship wherein rewards foster productivity. Marzano et al. (2005) build on the work of Burns (1978) and state that, "transactional leadership is defined as trading one thing for another (quid pro quo), whereas transformational leadership is more focused on change." Transactional leadership works at maintaining the practices of the organization, achieving compliance, and task accomplishment from followers (Avolio & Yammarino, 2008). It takes transformational leadership to motivate and encourage staff to make the types of changes that will move an organization to the next level of progress (Warrilow, 2012).

Transformational leadership has specific behaviors that inspire and motivate others to change for the greater good of the organization. In His book *7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, Steven Covey emphasized,

The goal of transformational leadership is to "transform" people and organizations in a literal sense – to change them in mind and heart; enlarge vision,

insight, and understanding; clarify purposes; make behavior congruent with beliefs, principles, or values; and bring about changes that are permanent, self-perpetuating, and momentum building. (p. 287)

J. M. Burns (1978) first states that, “Transformational leadership occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to a higher level of motivation, performance, and morality” (p. 20).

Transformational leadership behaviors comprise into four dimensions. Bass and Avolio (1994) and Ruggieri (2009), describe these four dimensions as the four “I’s,” each, part representing a dimension of Burn’s 1985 theory, which characterizes the behaviors of transformational leadership: Idealized Influence; Inspirational Motivation; Intellectual Stimulation; and Individualized consideration.

The *Transformational Leadership Report* (2007) defines Idealized Influence is defined as the degree to which the leader behaves in admirable ways that cause followers to identify with the leader. Charismatic leaders display convictions, take stands and appeal to followers on an emotional level. This is about the leaders having a clear set of values and demonstrating them in every action, providing a role model for their followers. Building genuine trust between leaders and followers is a key factor. Leaders build trust between them and their followers on a solid moral and ethical foundation

Bass and Avolio (1994) explain that Inspirational Motivation is the degree to which the leader articulates a vision that is appealing and inspiring to followers. Leaders with inspirational motivation challenge followers with high standards, communicate optimism about future goals, and provide meaning for the task at hand. Followers need to have a strong sense of purpose if they are to be motivated to act. Purpose and meaning

provide the energy that drives a group forward. The visionary aspects of leadership are supported by communication skills that make the vision understandable, precise, powerful and engaging. The followers are willing to invest more effort in their tasks; they are encouraged and optimistic about the future and believe in their abilities.

The *Transformational Leadership Report* (2007) defined Intellectual Stimulation as the degree, to which the leader challenges assumptions, takes risks and solicits followers' ideas. Leaders with this trait stimulate and encourage creativity in their followers. The leader's vision provides the framework for followers to see how they connected to the leader, the organization, each other, and the goal. Once they have this big picture view and can operate free from convention, they can creatively overcome any obstacles in the way of the mission (p. 5).

Warrilow (2009) describes Individualized Consideration as the degree to which the leader attends to each individual follower's needs, acts as a mentor, or coach, and respects and appreciates for the individual's contribution to the team. This fulfills and enhances each individual team members' need for self-fulfillment, and self-worth - and in so doing inspires followers to further achieve and grow.

Transactional leaders cannot lead the change necessary to create a sustainable PLC. Transactional leadership style focuses on command and control with the expectation of conformity, but not commitment (Bass, 1997; Ruggieri, 2009). D. Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010b) stressed, "Leadership mindset and style set the overall tone for organizational culture and performance, including how change efforts are run. Command and control, the most common leadership style, does not work for transformational change" (p. 1). D. Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson (2010b) further



state, “command and control seldom leads to optimal results in any type of change” (p. 1). The reform efforts that bring about organization change require commitment (Senge, 1996). Transactional leadership can be effective but only in delivering the kind of change that comes from cooperation and compliance. It does little to increase the commitment need for transformational change (Avolio & Yammarino, 2008; Bass, 1990). Marzano et al. (2005) note that followers of transactional leaders do not take risk, do not demonstrate initiative, and work to maintain the status quo. The *Transformational Leadership Report* (2007) states that *transactional leadership* can encompass the following types of behavior:

1. Contingent reward: In contingent rewards, the transactional leader establishes clear roles and task requirements for subordinates; providing rewards upon completion of these tasks encourage their achievement. To influence behavior, the leader clarifies the assigned work and uses incentives to reward when expectations are met. This is an exchange relationship between leader and followers and the followers receive tangible rewards for the effort and performance (Avolio & Yammarino, 2008).

2. Management by exception—passive: To influence behavior, the leader uses correction or punishment as a response to unacceptable performance or deviation from the accepted standards. The leader does not intervene until the problem becomes serious and interferes with set goals. Active - To influence behavior, the leader actively monitors the work performed and uses corrective methods to ensure employees complete their assigned work to meet accepted standards. The leader monitors the work closely and uses criticism and negative reinforcement to point out mistakes and errors (Northouse, 2009).

3. Laissez-faire leadership: Laissez-faire leaders avoid attempting to influence their subordinates and shirk supervisory duties. They bury themselves in paperwork and avoid situations that preclude any possibility of confrontation. They leave too much responsibility with subordinates, set no clear goals, and do not help their group to make decisions. They tend to let things drift, since their main aim is stay on good terms with everyone (p. 19).

Principals that want to create sustainable change have to create a collaborative culture through the use of PLCs (Dufour & Mattos, 2013). Through the professional learning community structures, principals and teachers gain the knowledge and skills to create sustainable collaboration. According to Hipp and Huffman (2010), when principals and teachers work together collectively in a PLC they create sustainable culture change. Bass and Avolio (1994), Leithwood (1994), contend that transformational leadership behaviors are necessary for school principals to meet the challenges in the 21st century. Leaders have to create a shared vision for the organization, inspire others to lead, model the change they want to see, and understand the human dynamics of his organization. Dufour and Mattos (2013) and Senge (2006) call for a “shift” in leadership to build and support a community of leaders that can lead the change necessary in schools.

Research shows that principals cannot lead successful school change alone. Successful principals need the collaborative effort of educators in the school to lead a school toward the desired goal. Marzano et al. (2005) identify 21 categories of effective leadership responsibilities that have a positive influence on the success of a school. The researchers used meta-analysis techniques to form and develop the 21 leadership practices that they label as responsibilities. One person trying to bring about change

cannot shoulder these 21 responsibilities. Marzano et al. (2005) recognize that “if school leadership is the responsibility of a leadership team within a school as opposed to the principal acting as lone leader, all 21 responsibilities can be adequately addressed” (p. 99). In *Leaders of Learning*, places emphasis on professional learning communities as the vehicle that addresses these responsibilities. DuFour and Marzano (2011) and Marzano et al. (2005) show how 19 of the 21 responsibilities are naturally vital for collaborative teams that work within the professional learning community process, and they argue that through the professional learning process, principals and leaders are able to accomplish these 19 responsibilities. The 19 responsibilities are:

1. Providing affirmation and celebration of staff effort and achievement
2. Challenging the status quo as a change agent
3. Establishing processes to ensure effective communication throughout the school
4. Shaping the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constituent the school’s culture
5. Demonstrating flexibility in meeting the different needs of teams and being willing to make modifications to school procedures
6. Focusing on clear goals and relentlessly pursuing the school’s purpose and priorities
7. Articulating the ideals and beliefs that drive the day-to-day work of the school
8. Soliciting input from staff in the design and implementation of procedures and policies

9. Engaging staff in the ongoing review and discussion of the most promising practices for improving student learning
10. Participating in the design and implementation and curriculum, instruction, and assessment
11. Demonstrate interest in and knowledge of curriculum, instruction, and assessment
12. Creating processes to provide ongoing monitoring of the school practices and their effect on student learning
13. Creating the conditions that optimize school improvement efforts
14. Establish clear procedures and orderly routines
15. Serving as a spokesperson an advocate for the school and staff
16. Establishing a positive working relationship with each member of the staff
17. Providing teachers with resources, materials, and support to help them succeed at what they are being asked to do
18. Recognizing the undercurrents of the informal organization of the school and using that information to be proactive in addressing problems and concerns
19. Being visible throughout the school and having positive interactions with staff and students (pp. 52-53).

DuFour and Marzano (2011) further state, “only two of the twenty-one responsibilities...do not naturally have a home in the collaborative teams. Those two – contingent rewards and discipline - focus on the principal’s interactions with individuals” (p. 53). The structures in professional learning communities become the foundation that creates a collaborative learning environment where teachers and principals work together

to accomplish the 19 leadership responsibilities that Marzano, Water, and McNulty (2005) identify as practices.

### **Principals and Professional Learning Communities**

Wu et al. (2013) depict the vast importance of ensuring educational institutions get with a strong-willed and dedicated administrative staff that will ensure that the professional learning community is sufficiently managed, communications are clear, a supportive environment is established, and teachers are provided with all of the materials that are necessary for ensuring the best possible education (p. 253). For principals, this includes having the ability and expertise to establish and gradually improve their own and other individual's education and success through sustainable leadership, which according to Hargreaves and Fink (2003a),

Sustainable leadership matters, spreads and lasts. It is a shared responsibility, which unduly deplete human or financial resources. Rather, it and that cares for and avoids exerting negative damage on the surrounding educational and community environment. Sustainable leadership has an activist engagement with the forces that affect it, and builds an educational environment of organizational diversity that promotes cross-fertilization of good ideas and successful practices in communities of shared learning and development. (pp. 2-3)

In order for principals to be deemed effective, research conducted over the last three decades has identified the exact principal leadership responsibilities that have been most widely utilized by effective principals. Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2003) report the following conclusions related to principal leadership responsibilities in their former research concerning learning and education. First, the highest degree (30% or

more, in this case) of care usually focuses upon the amount of input that teachers may create and develop within the educational institution, a principal's willingness to change with growing innovations, awareness of how current and potential predicaments are dealt with, and stimulating teachers and staff about current behaviors and practices utilized in their school culture's professional learning community. Second, a moderate degree of care (20% or more, in this case) focuses usually upon responsibilities surrounding culture, order, discipline, resources, focus, knowledge of curriculum and instructional assessment, communication, outreach, affirmation, optimizer, ideologies and beliefs, evaluations, and general flexibility. Third, lower amounts of responsibility (less than 20%, in this case) on average pertains to leading and inspiring other school professionals towards new innovations, establishing understanding of teacher and staff relations, noticing individual accomplishments, ensuring quality transparency between students and teachers, and being undeniably involved in the development and implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessments (p. 4).

Dufour and Mattos (2013), former principals themselves, argue that the need for Professional Learning Communities is prevalent, because it allows principals to surpass the common pitfalls previously observed by other scholars. As noted by one scholar, principals continue to be fundamental in successfully sustaining any professional learning community, particularly through their "words and actions, how they generate teacher schedules and workloads, and whether or not they are inquisitive, thoughtful, and reflective in their own practices and what they see happening in their schools" (DeMatthews, 2014, p. 182). DuFour and Matto's method includes regular and overly extensive evaluation processes, inadequate time demands for fulfilling evaluation and

supervision requirements, insufficient understanding of all content areas, misrepresentation of individual teacher's instructional management practices, minimal control in individual practices, ineffective school performance indicators and sanctions, unnecessary merit pay, poor motivational strategies for professional teaching practices, and so on (pp. 34-37). According to Day and Sammons (2013), this in part is due to America's traditional educational methods, which have remained poorly effective compared to other nations. The authors state that educational leaders today are, "Influenced by this societal culture, principals there are often expected to take a strong, personal stand while teachers and parents tend to be more reluctant to engage in shared decision-making" (p. 36). Dufour and Mattos (2013) argue that principles can be more effective if a collaborative work environment, such as a professional learning community, can circumvent these common individual-based predicaments.

In the case of the PLC process, Dufour and Mattos (2013) stated, "If principals want to improve student achievement in their school, rather than focus on the individual inspection of *teaching*, they must focus on the collective analysis of evidence of student *learning*" (p. 38). In order to accomplish this, the collaborative educational team must ask the following questions:

1. "What knowledge, skills, and dispositions should all students acquire as a result of the unit we're about to teach?"
2. How much time will we devote to this unit?"
3. How will we gather evidence of student learning throughout the unit in our classrooms and its conclusion as a team?"

4. How can we use this evidence of learning to improve our individual practice and our team's collective capacity to help students learn, to intervene for students unable to demonstrate proficiency, and to enrich the learning for students who have demonstrated proficiency?" (p. 39)

When these correlating queries are sufficiently answered, then this will allow for a more thorough and effective analysis of how both individual teachers and the school as a whole may improve themselves to ensure that their students are receiving the best education. This will promote more empowered children and leaders that may ensure a brighter future for local communities and society overall, but only if principals are willing to make the strong commitment to establishing on-going change and if teachers are willing to positively push each other to achieving team objectives. Furthermore, it will change previously complex and extensive evaluation tools that focus on individual actions and abilities, in exchange for a broad-based evaluation of the school that emphasizes "we" rather than "I" in student and teacher observations.

One Chinese study delivered in 2014 by T. Wang and Kensler focused on school principals throughout ninety-four institutions that practiced some form of professional learning community, noting differences in age, school type, gender, community type, and varying behavioral practices. The data revealed that attitudes towards encouraging internal and external environmental awareness and social well-being was minimal at best, because teachers and administration did not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of how new curriculums could be added to daily practices (p. 18). The authors also found that "social pressures were heightened and overall supportive behavior was decreased if the importance of the knowledge, awareness and understanding was not made clear or



adequately supported financially by stakeholders as a whole” (p. 19). Thus, in order to ensure that principals and other school leaders are able to sustain professional development practices of any kind, they should participate in greater amounts of research and development with other educational locations, because it will further develop the number of effective and meaningful practices that take place on both a local and national level (p. 20).

Another international study based in Israel notes that school principals may also be limited for suburban and rural schools that work in less-competitive environments and, thus, may not have the same management capabilities and innovations that are available to larger districts. In order to combat this, Schechter (2012) recommends improvement in the treatment and education of teachers, which may also benefit the school environment as a whole and student achievement records; and to ensure willingness, commitment and accountability (pp. 722-723). This case study finds that the general perceptions of principals are the most effective in ensuring the success of professional learning communities, particularly because they are always directly involved in integrating new innovations, solving current and future predicaments, and keeping team collaborative efforts strong (p. 725). As noted by a number of the principals interviewed in the study:

Collaborative leadership also means including others in the learning, and consequently including them in decision-making... There are many ways to recruit people and encourage them. Of course, there are decisions that remain the principal’s exclusive domain, but there are also ways to present every issue. (p. 725)

Thus, the role of the principal is absolute key in determining the ultimate outcome, good or bad, of a professional learning community. This includes “Having high expectations for all,” as this is essential, “to closing the achievement gap between advantaged and less advantaged students” (Wallace Foundation, 2012, p. 5). Direct these standards should be directed towards the principals themselves, along with other administrative staff, teachers, students, and parents on a daily basis, because they promote “a healthy school environment” that is both “supportive” and “responsive” towards professional educational development as a whole (p. 6). However, limitations are sure to exist if principals take informal approaches to observing classroom effectiveness, particularly those who do not provide adequate or any feedback to teachers and staff following these leadership roles (p. 11).

The necessary need for short-term feedback efforts are essential, considering that, “achieving a sustainable future requires that individuals adopt different values, attitudes, habits, and behaviors,” which shape how an individual naturally teaches and how it affects the young students they are gradually molding (Frisk & Larson, 2011, Abstract). Furthermore, the authors note that teachers should consider this daily impact consistently, in a way that allows them to analyze and positively alter their natural – possibly negative or ineffective – behaviors that, in turn, can directly and powerfully influence or change the outcomes of their professional learning community (p. 4). This includes contributing an individual and collaborative focus that ensures that predicaments found within the educational community and individual institutions are approached with caution and perseverance, and opportunities are followed with enthusiasm and hard work. Fundamentally these ideologies can be then passed on to the students, which then creates

an evolving and persisting change in how leadership, community, education, and teaching are all approached as time evolves (p. 14).

### **Teachers and Professional Learning Communities**

The commitment of teachers in both an individual and group setting is highly essential when developing any form of professional learning community. Through an extensive analysis spanning 10 years of scholarly education-based articles that focus upon professional development for teachers, Avalos (2011) emphasizes that

Teacher professional learning is a complex process, which requires cognitive and emotional involvement of teachers individually and collectively, the capacity and willingness to examine where each one stands in terms of convictions and beliefs and the perusal and enactment of appropriate alternatives for improvement or change. (p. 10)

As noted by Strahan (2003) when teachers and administrators work together and share their educational philosophies, they inevitably incorporate their learned successes and failures in their principles of what promotes positive development, which together creates successful and long-lasting school environments (p. 130). One professional development model that has been suggested for teachers first allows them to rate their own professional teaching and learning abilities, and then allows them to learn and recognize how they may improve their current knowledge and abilities, by this means enhances the overall learning environment for them and their students (Stevenson, Brody, Dillon, & Wals, 2014, p. 341). The same composition discusses seven primary components of the professional learning experience that support teachers in becoming productive and effective members of their professional learning community:

1. Pacing instructional workshops,
2. Relevancy between workshops and teacher's lessons,
3. Relevant data for projects,
4. Conceptual introductions that layout what information should be analyzed and discussed,
5. Establishing support structures that ensure availability and accessibility of individual, technology-based, and somatic resources,
6. Requiring educators to possess school-owned laptops to ensure that they understand specific technology needs, and
7. Motivating teachers to participate in "either a university graduate-level course or state sponsored continuing education credit" (Stevenson et al., 2014, p. 341).

In addition, the school's principal and the administration must positively support teachers who need not only be educated in a melody of subjects and experiences, but also must provide adequate resources for achieving all educational goals, and be a muse filled with "compassion, joy, love, and kindness; and for sharing through their work what it can mean to be fully human. We can start to tell stories that help us learn and be and to learn to live well together in schools" (Cherkowski, 2012, p. 65).

These ideas are supported in Masuda, Ebersole, and Barrett's qualitative case study that notes that the 16 teachers interviewed within professional learning communities followed these same ideologies, which have shown to influence greater positivity, passion, willingness, and compassion in further developing their teaching characteristics and practices as cited in Williams, 2013, p. 6). Robbins and Aydede

(2009), describe this as an essential practice when paired with cognitive individualism, which has been shown to provide “a new meaning to the claim that groups of individuals co-create knowledge in the context of schools; namely, that professional knowledge is *enacted* in the teachers’ practices and actions” (as cited in Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012, p. 209). As discussed by Effeney and Davis (2013), it is difficult to achieve collaborative practices if they are not effectively implemented and sustained:

For pre-service teachers, both mastery and vicarious experiences rely on the provision of positive experiences either as part of the pre-service teacher’s course work, observations of experienced teachers in action or through mentored teaching experiences... While it is understood that effective EFS requires the understanding of a broad-range of trans-disciplinary concepts and themes, most pre-service teacher courses have limited or no core environmental or sustainability knowledge or pedagogy embedded in them. (p. 33)

As Lin (2013) notes, it is important that teachers produce a “reflective dialogue, shared values and vision, shared practice, collective learning and application of learning,” which has proven to be especially important throughout elementary and secondary education internationally (pp. 106-107). These studies demonstrate that in order for professional learning communities to be entirely effective, teachers must be willing not only learn how to teach, but also learn how to introduce sustainability efforts that ensure their methods can be utilized in both the short- and long-term. If this can be accomplished, it will create new discussions, ideas, and innovations that “offer a new possibility for enhancing teacher overall teaching effectiveness” (Lin, 2013, p. 108).

### **School Community and Involvement in the Professional Learning Community**

Thessin and Starr (2011) discuss that despite the collective action between principals and teachers within professional learning communities, this cannot be successfully implemented without the assistance of the local community and district leaders. This is particularly so for professional learning communities that are developed throughout all schools. However, they all require four major characteristics and actions by the district members: (a) teachers, principals and staff must be included in the general establishment and development of the professional learning community process; (b) teachers and principals must “embody professional development characteristics” and work as a collective group to achieve PLC objectives; (c) the district needs to demonstrate why the professional learning community process is “guaranteed to be effective” at improving educational standards and objectives; and (d) they need to support each educational institution based upon their individual needs for establishing or improving professional learning community development (p. 51). However, these actions cannot be fulfilled without the use of sustainable efforts, as discussed before, which Hargreaves and Fink (2003b) discusses in *The Phi Delta Kappan* as:

Sustainable improvement demands committed relationships, not fleeting infatuations. It is change for keeps and change for good. Sustainable improvement contributes to the growth and the good of everyone, instead of fostering the fortunes of the few at the expense of the rest. It does not promote model schools or magnet schools that divert scarce resources from the rest.

In order to achieve such collective and sustainable objectives, The New York City Community Schools Coalition (2013) suggests that professional development efforts need to establish a statewide policy approach that, built on a strong city-based community

foundation. The authors further believe this will allow for more effective PLC implementations, positive support for improving social and economic issues, encouragement for the development or improvement of educational accessibility and resources, encourages community partnerships, and “economic sustainability efforts that produce a symbiotic relationship” (pp. 6-10). Some form of steering committee that outlines, develops, teaches, and implements the professional learning community processes may also utilize these collective principles. Thessin and Starr (2011) encourage the use of templates, organizational plans, objective outlines, and other pre-ordained toolkits that can “easily allow teachers and administrators to work as a collective community” to produce effective educational change (p. 53).

In addition, to ensure that administrators and teachers have the necessary tools to produce and evaluate a professional learning community, local area members may utilize a Formative Assessment of Collaborative Teams (FACT) that ensures that structures and practices are addressed and student success rates are improved (Taylor, Hallam, Charlton, & Wall, 2013, p. 27). The FACT checklist demonstrates to stakeholders that school improvement is a long-term process that must be readily analyzed to ensure that conditions are met and that the correct tools are being used, thus providing a tangible form of accountability for teachers and administrators alike concerning their behaviors and actions within the professional learning community (pp. 30-31). Not only do these checklists and community actions initially establish the implementation process of professional learning communities, they also provide assurance for stakeholders that their time or monetary investments are going to good use and is producing effective results. However, the authors note that this does not distinguish the adequacy of training efforts

or teach educators how to evaluate their own practices, FACT only determines the on-going outcomes of team collaboration (p. 46). Such is vitally important, because collaborations that lack training efforts do not provide the strong leadership skills, adequate resources, or experience cannot establish an educational intuition that has the high potential for both longevity and effectiveness (Clift, Johnson, Holland, & Lou Veal, 1992, pp. 904-906).

O’Leary, Bingham, and Choi (2010) also describe and analyze how instructors may teach collaborative leadership to university students learning more advanced levels of public administration, because it may potentially positively influence individual structuring, development, implementation, and management of future professional learning communities. They emphasize the deepening importance of today’s educational leaders and their ability to not only utilize multiple types of disciplines; particularly as studies under public affairs and network, negotiation, emergency, and institutional theories; but also to have an understanding of “collaborative governance at the local, regional, state, national, and transnational levels” (p. 567). While this may not seem necessary when managing a single school or an entire district, given the relatively recent failures concerning academic achievements throughout the United States’ public schools, the need to make strong educational reforms through collaborative action has become increasingly prevalent (Officer, Grim, Medina, Bringle, & Foreman, 2013, p. 564). This is why some forms of higher education today are going beyond traditional methods of teaching leadership management, by delivering methods in which leaders of tomorrow are given “an environment and series of experiences combining both tacit and substantive knowledge to give leaders that competency” (O’Leary, Bingham, & Choi, 2010, p. 567).



This is intrinsically important in today's educational system, as principals and administrative staff must learn to not only work within their own professional learning community, but also within a collaborative community-based network that requires higher and differentiating skill sets that have not previously been necessary (pp. 568-569). This places some of the most essential focus on the education that principals, and teachers receive; and even more so upon the reality-based knowledge, behaviors and skill-sets that they develop throughout their higher studies.

Officer et al. (2013) also emphasize that the cooperative involvement of universities and other forms of higher education can also be extremely useful if started through equal opportunity partnerships with community K-12 schools. For while professional learning communities have become both necessary and sufficient for individual schools, they can also be expanded effectively beyond the local community. Day and Sammons (2013), best depict this by saying:

Distributed leadership can be seen as a form of concerted action which is about the additional dynamic that occurs when people work together or that is the product of joint agency...At the core of the capacity-building model, it has been argued, is distributed leadership, along with social cohesion and trust. Leadership, from this perspective, resides in the human potential available to be released within an organization. (pp. 35-36)

Furthermore, according to Bryk et al. (2010), education that is met with a greater span of the community is more likely to establish "a pipeline of educational attainment" that will help local and regional institutions alike in over-coming social and economic barriers to achieve short- and long-term educational goals as cited by Officer et al., 2013, pp. 564-

565). Particularly this includes the use of the five primary fundamental conditions that are essential to bettering and evaluating educational achievements: “collaborative leadership, instructional guidance, professional capacity, learning climate, and authentic parent/community engagement” (as cited in Officer et al., 2013, p. 565). Officer, Grim, Medina, Bringle, and Foreman’s study in 2000 presented results over a 10-year span. They find that their partnership between post-secondary and graduate-level educational communities was highly-successful and mutually-beneficial, because educational value was heightened, produced transformative PLC relationships, established and sustained high educational goals long-term, produced a warm and healthy school environment, and provided a strong contribution in making the community area “a great place to work and live” (pp. 569-570). The inclusion of the collaboration efforts among K-12 schools, universities, and colleges has inspired numerous “collective explorations” which have gradually “widened and deepened the cooperating teachers’ understanding of their work with the teacher candidates”; this not only produce exceptional future teachers, but also improve the community’s approach to all levels of education (Nielsen, Triggs, Clarke, & Collins, 2010, pp. 845-846).

### **Technology in the Professional Learning Community**

Since the turn of the 21st century, technological advances and the progression of internet-based developments have inevitably integrated themselves into educational institutions and their professional learning communities. Such has included technology-based pedagogy, which even more so encircles “small-group work or collaborative learning to deepen the way in which students engage with substantive concepts” (O’Leary, Bingham, & Choi, 2010, p. 567). Educational researchers, Bausmith and

Barry, often become the subject of discussed when reviewing the importance of pedagogical-based understanding, or combining collective learning with technology- or internet-based lessons. The authors have repeatedly argued that online video lessons are often beneficial for students who speak English as a second language, for those who present issues when developing problem solving skills, improving teacher practices, clarifying educational objectives in the classroom and as an institution, and recognizing the best locally collective instructional practices (Bausmith & Barry, 2011, p. 176). They also note that technology is an evolving practice that falls under “the notion that teachers need to have deep knowledge of both the content they are teaching and how students learn that content...,” and when teachers choose to train themselves in these new disciplines it increases the probability that students will be more successful in engaging in educational practices (p. 176). In turn, when technology is combined in the utilization of professional learning communities, principals and teachers are more likely to establish positive and effective institutional standards and outcomes.

On the other hand, G. L. Anderson and Herr (2011) argue that professional learning communities should not influence teachers to solely utilize technologically-based educational platforms, just as instructional videos placed on the inter-web, which may fit with Common Core State Standards but do not establish the necessary commitment and involvement that professional learning communities commonly require (p. 287). They contend that even though Bausmith and Barry (2011) work “to honor the professional and contextual knowledge of teachers as well as the integrity of the innovation,” their scholarly analyses still leave open-ended inquiries concerning why some educational institutions embody fewer professional learning characteristics than

others, or how “school structures and pedagogy” can be analyzed to understand what aspects are missing (p. 288). Based upon formal interviews with teachers participating in professional learning communities, Wu et al. (2013) agree that technology approaches and required practices to these new developments can be extremely difficult to establish and maintain, because “teachers or administrative staff are both eager and hesitant to incorporate new technical aspects to their curriculum out of fear of altering what they know and how they choose to educate others” (p. 251). This is especially so considering the addition of new and improved technological improvements not only alter the professional learning community as a whole, but it also may encourage a negative disposition among teachers who feel that these advances will make their work more obsolete.

However, as Signorelli and Reed (2011) point out, technological methods extend outside of the classroom as well, serving as educational tools for teachers themselves to connect them to their internal and external professional learning communities, namely the technological resource called *Learning 2.0*. One technology director in North Carolina emphasizes the development’s effectiveness and importance by stating that *Learning 2.0* embodies what is truly best about this new and different approach to learning-teamwork and community... Through the process of blogging itself, staff members experienced an online-community, but the added benefits of the program were the internal community building it provided both within branch locations and system wide. Through the learning and knowledge-exchanging process, self-proclaimed tech novices became experienced Learning 2.0 tutors to fellow staff. (p. 57)

In turn, their study found that through the use of technology, both in and outside the traditional classroom setting, teachers, administrators and staff members established greater confidence, knowledge, and understanding about their internal role as an educational provider; while also improving their creativity and social networking abilities with other members of their professional learning community (Signorelli & Reed, 2011, p. 57).

### **Elementary School Level and Professional Learning Communities**

In 2003, Strahan provided a glowing example of how Professional Learning Communities may be extremely beneficial at the elementary level for both students and the school's local community, through the North Carolina Lighthouse Project in 2000. With the use of data collected surrounding "demographics and achievement data, interviewing teachers and administrators, and observing lessons and meetings at each school," the surveyors were able to provide sufficient reports that allowed for stronger developments among the teachers, principals, and students, and thus drastically enhanced low income and minority student accomplishments (p. 127). Their studies found that out of the case studies developed around these three institutions, the elementary schools that were most effective focused upon consistent collaboration among teachers, as it allows them to heighten their instructional abilities and thus positively influence the number of successful students. This also encourages the establishment of a strong school culture and environment that ensures "short- and long-term social support" for both the students and teachers, particularly when parents and community members also collaborate on creating successful educational outcomes (p. 128). M. K. Burns and Gibbons (2013) also note that elementary and middle school teachers often perceive their primary obligations to be

consistently directed towards individual student development. But implemented studies have demonstrated that the use of grade-level team models that follow the same basic principles as professional learning communities tend to be more effective because teachers, staff and administration focusing on student collaboration methods (p. 64). In addition, successful elementary schools have equally been distinguished when professional culture's focus upon the ideologies of providing a sincere and compassionate environment that "constructs unwavering connections and fruitful erudition that is both significant and constructive in establishing passion, intrigue, and an understanding of the moral and collective aspects of knowledge" (Wu et al., 2013, p. 250).

However, in order for such to become attainable, the school's professional culture must be analyzed and then developed accordingly, paying particular attention to faults and misalignments that have previously prevented their education system from constructing an innovative and flourishing environment (Strahan, 2003, p. 129). According to a large 2011 study conducted by Lee, Zhang, and Yin on the development of professional learning communities in Hong Kong, "faults and misalignments among teachers and administration could include inconsistent commitments towards the school's mission statement among teachers, mistrust among professional colleagues, lack of passion among educators, and the inability to schedule informative meetings due to dramatic work-loads" (as cited in Wu et al., 2013, pp. 247- 250). Faults paired with social instabilities (e.g. poverty, starvation, malnutrition, violence, home instabilities, mental or physical illness, migrants, etc.) that their children face outside of the school walls, and that require the integration of new strategies, particularly professional learning communities, for overcoming the various predicaments that otherwise hinder "a child's

ability to come to school, ready to learn,” which in turn can also negatively impact the entirety of their educational experience (New York Community Schools Coalition, 2013, p. 3). However, if more case studies are developed that produce conceptual models and theories concerning collaborative leadership and school improvement, particularly in early learning education, then future implications could be further eliminated at a more influential rate (Heck & Hallinger, 2010, pp. 232-245). This could include teaching teachers to learn better in atmospheres that help open and emphasize their own individual strengths and weaknesses as educators, ensuring they have a keen understanding of their particular focus in study, encouraging them to be more active within both the school and throughout the community, and provide educational opportunities that provide exciting and challenging approaches and personal feedback to ensure an extremely strong and effective core to their professional learning community (Coggshall, Rasmussen, Colton, Milton, & Jacques, 2012, p. 4).

### **Summary**

As discussed, the development of professional learning communities over the last three decades has revolutionized the way the United States of America and other nations’ approach education. Before the Excellence Movement in the early Eighties, principals, staff, teachers, and community members all approached the elements and objectives of producing effective education system through individual action and responsibilities. However, with the development of professional learning communities, schools are able to approach educational standards and actions in a more influential fashion, in which school members and affiliates approach learning, community, and sustainability efforts in a collective manner. This literature review has provided a brief overview of the scholarly

and academic research that has been developed primarily over the last 5 years both nationally and internationally, including case studies, and that primarily covers the main elements concerning the professional development of principals, teachers, and communities; along with their approaches and behaviors towards technological advances, and how professional learning communities have been understood at the elementary school level. Additionally, during this literature review the top ten best practices of principals and teachers in professional learning communities emerged (see Table 1).

Table 1

*The Top Ten Professional Learning Community Practices Identified in the Literature*

Principals	Teachers
Lead by example	Sharing of practices
Stated shared vision	Support collaborative practices
Foster an atmosphere of collaboration	Collective team learning
Empower others to lead	Commitment to improvement
Clearly stated goals and expectations	Practice reflective dialogue
Shared leadership practices	Shared beliefs and behaviors
Provide resources and materials to achieve goals	Participate in ongoing learning through workshops and college courses
Build and develop and atmosphere of trust	Hold self-accountable for improvement
Continue to support collaborative structures.	Shared leadership practices
Celebrates victories and recognizes contributions	Focus on improving student learning and teaching

These best practices are developed in a collaborative culture by strong principals who are committed to continuous improvement through the empowerment of teachers to be leaders and the ongoing commitment of collective inquiry and examination of their current reality (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). An organized literature review synthesis matrix that divides these broad themes into their respectable categories, to briefly establish the connection discussed above is presented in Appendix A.

Thereafter, this study will offer more introductory data and information, which will allow



professional development communities to develop their own approach towards the readily seen challenges and outcomes seen today.

## **CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY**

### **Overview**

*Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is a success. — Henry Ford*

This chapter describes the research design, instrumentation, and the population sample. The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify the principal and teacher practices that contributed to sustainable collaborative change in an educational organization. Additionally, the study examined practices of teachers in weekly collaboration meetings that contributed to sustainable collaborative practices. The data collection procedures, as well as the data analysis and limitations of the study, were discussed. The actual names of participants and names of the schools were not included in the study in order to protect their identity and their perspectives on professional learning communities.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the principal leadership practices perceived as supporting the development of a professional learning community and a sustainable collaborative culture. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to examine principal leadership practices school teachers in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community.

### **Research Questions**

1. What practices do elementary school principals perceive as important for supporting the development of a professional learning community in Antelope Valley Districts?

2. What leadership practices do elementary principals perceive as important to support a sustainable collaborative school culture in Antelope Valley Districts?
3. What principal leadership practices do elementary school teachers perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community in Antelope Valley Districts?

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research allows greater depth into a select issue, permits inquiry, careful attention to detail and content, and produces a wealth of data about much smaller populations (Patton, 2002). The research design used in this study was qualitative descriptive. Descriptive data was collected through individual and focus group interviews, archival data collection, and demographic questionnaires to describe the respondents. Qualitative studies are often based on gathering and analyzing multiple forms of collected qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; DuPont, 2009). The qualitative research design was appropriate for this study as it allowed the researcher to collect data through interviews and focus-group discussions that identified and described practices principals and teachers used in working in professional learning communities. Borg and Gall (1989) define descriptive research as a way to describe the natural or man-made setting of the educational environment. Brown (2013) lists some of the methods of qualitative descriptive as:

1. Sampling for diversity
2. Data collection by interviews of individuals or focus groups
3. Data collection of archival document review

4. Data analysis by qualitative content analysis
5. Generation of themes or patterns that capture what has been said (p. 39)

Brown (2013) further states, qualitative methods help in understanding the distinct human experiences and social interactions that could be achieved by reducing human experiences to numbers and variables. The data collection sources and methods were triangulated to check for consistency of the information collected. McMillan and Schumacher stated,

Triangulation is used when the strengths of one method offset the weakness of the other, so that together, they provide a more comprehensive set of data. To the extent that the results from each method converge and indicate the same result, there is triangulation and thus greater credibility in the findings. (p. 26)

This design allowed the researcher to gain more information on the complexity of creating a collaborative environment in elementary schools and identified the role of the principals in the change process. The researcher utilized multiple sources to record, and analyzed data documenting the experiences of teachers and principals.

The information gathered was triangulated to help further identify the conditions in elementary schools that led to sustainable professional learning communities. Examining the individual experiences of teachers and principals was important because it provided specific responses from individuals that was used to identify categories of responses and themes. The triangulation of the research design used archival data from schools and interview results from principal and teacher focus groups. The focus group interviews were used to assist the researcher with gaining a better understanding of a problem or program (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The researcher spent several

weeks at selected school sites conducting principal interviews and teacher focus group discussions. Krueger and Casey (2009) stated,

The purpose of conducting a focus group is to listen and gather information. It is a way to better understand how people feel and think about an issue, product or service. Focus groups are used to gather opinions. Participants are selected because they have certain characteristics in common that relate to the topic of the focus group. The researcher creates a permissive environment in the focus group that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of views without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus. (p. 2)

In summary, this qualitative study allowed the researcher to use qualitative collection methods to gather information on sustainable collaborative communities and use multiple methods of data collection to triangulate the data.

### **Population**

A population sample is a group of individuals with certain characteristic that separate them from other groups (Creswell, 2012). According to the California Department of Education, there were over 5,800 elementary schools in the State of California (CDE, 2015), and 80% of these schools (approximately 4,640 schools) are implementing professional learning communities. The 4,640 schools implementing professional learning communities were the population for this study. A target population is a smaller sample unit that is selected from the population sample to whom the researcher wishes to select the sample (Creswell, 2012). The target population for this study was all elementary school principals and teachers from elementary school districts in Southern California. The accessible populations in this study were principals and

teachers of elementary schools in the Antelope Valley, which is situated in the northwest corner of Los Angeles County just south of the Kern County border; who had been implementing and working in professional learning communities for 3 or more years. According to the California Department of Education, there were nine school districts in the Antelope Valley Area, and sixty-two elementary schools. Gay and Airasian (2003), explain that accessible population is one from which the researcher can realistically select participants. Thus, due to the geographical proximity to the researcher, monetary constraint and convenience, the Antelope Valley area was selected. According to Privitera (2014), a researcher can draw a smaller subset from the accessible targeted participants with whom the researcher is in close proximity.

### **Sample**

The sample is a group of participants selected from the targeted population that the researcher wishes to generalize the findings (Creswell, 2012). The sample included ten principals who were identified by their assistant superintendent to have strong knowledge of the implementation of PLCs at their current school sites, and five focus groups made up of four to eight teachers; recommended by their principals, from different school districts in the Antelope Valley. Based on the researcher accessibility, the districts selected for this study were Palmdale School District, Westside School District, Eastside Union School District, Lancaster School District, and Keppel Union School District. Purposeful sampling was conducted to identify the participants. A purposeful sample is typically designed to select a small number of cases that could yield the most information about a particular phenomenon (Teddlie, 2007). The selection criteria for a principal of a school included:

1. Principals working at schools that were in Antelope Valley/Los Angeles County
2. Principals identified by their assistant superintendent to have strong knowledge of the implementation of PLC.
3. Principals who have implemented Professional Learning Communities in the last 3-6 years.
4. Principals who have had specialized training or professional development in the implementation of Professional Learning Communities.
5. Principals who have been in their position for 3 or more years.
6. Principals who were willing to participate in the study.

Principals meeting the above criteria received a personal invitation via email to complete the demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). The demographic questionnaire asked questions regarding site demographics, student population numbers to determine school size, specialized training or workshops received in implementing PLC, number of years at current school site, and number of years implementing a PLC. After the questionnaire response data had been analyzed, the participation of five principals in the sample were identified through stratified purposeful sampling. Stratified purposeful sampling was used to identify samples within samples (Patton 2002). The researcher purposefully identified principals with more training and years of experience with the implementation of PLC. One principal for each of the five school districts was invited for a one-on-one interview (see Appendix C). After the one-on-one interview, principals were asked to recommend teachers from their school site to participate in a focus group discussion based on the following criteria:

1. Teachers who have been at the school site for more than 3 years.
2. Teachers who were part of a grade level professional learning community.
3. Teachers who have been participating in a professional learning community for 3 or more years.
4. Teachers identified by their principals for having knowledge of the implementation of PLC.

On a separate day and time, teacher focus group discussions were conducted. Focus group questions are presented in Appendix D. Teachers from the selected sites were invited to participate in the study by email. As recommended by Merriam (2009) no more than 10 participants should be in a focus group as larger groups are difficult to control. The researcher chose five focus groups of teachers and a minimum of four to five teachers per focus group from five school sites to participate in the focus group discussions. Four of the five focus groups were composed of four teachers each and one focus group was composed of five teachers.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

During the interviews, principals were asked seven questions and potential follow up questions (see Appendix C) about current practices that contributed to the professional learning community, if they believed that these characteristics and actions had proven to be or (if the process was relatively new) could be sustainable in the long-run, and what suggestions they had regarding improving current limitations. One principal from each of the five district was invited to participate in the one-on-one interviews that were conducted at the school sites of the participants. As a result of the one-on-one principal's interviews and teacher recommendation, a minimum of five focus group discussions were



conducted with teachers from selected school sites. The principal interviews were conducted in the principal's office and the teacher focus group interviews were conducted in one of the participating teacher's classroom. The interviews and focus group discussions were audio recorded by the researcher and the researcher, who also took notes for consistency. Each interview was between 30 minutes to 1 hour and the focus group discussion was between 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Archival documents that contained vital information about the schools journey of implementing professional learning communities, were reviewed that contained vital information about the school's journey of implementing professional learning communities, PLC agendas, PLC meeting minutes, and other PLC documents were also reviewed to gain a better understanding of the structures and practices used in developing and sustaining PLCs.

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with elementary principals and prior to interviews emailed principals an initial demographic questionnaire. The semi-structure questions were open-ended and used to gain in-depth information about leadership practices and responsibilities that assisted in sustaining collaborative communities. The demographic questionnaire in Appendix B focused on principals' knowledge of teachers' practices and experiences working in PLC, school demographics, school size, and other factors that could be directly correlated to the implementation of a collaborative community. The questionnaire further determined the relationship of principals' practice to the level of PLC implementation at each school site and this

establishing which principals the researcher invited to participate in a one-on-one interview.

In order to determine that the research instrument adequately covered the research questions, the researcher developed an alignment matrix (see Appendix E) listing the research questions on the left side and the interview and focus group questions on the right. The matrix was used to verify that the interview and focus group questions were appropriate and directly related to one of the research questions. Field testing of the interview and focus group questions were used to assess the quality, appropriateness, and reliability of the questions and ensured that the instrumentation gathered the information it was intended to gather. Field testing was conducted using three elementary school principals and three teachers outside the Antelope Valley area of California. For purposes of additional feedback, the researcher had a colleague sit in on the field test to get constructive feedback and to critique the researchers posture, engagement, and delivery of the questions.

The interview protocols implemented for both principals and teachers were slightly altered depending on the discussion. For principals, interviews were discussed on an individual level to determine their individual roles, responsibilities, and perceived effectiveness of creating a sustainable community. For teachers, a school-based focus group was formed that represented the collaborative nature and development of grade level professional learning communities at the school site and determine what they perceived as the principal's practices and professional community structures that moved them from an individual focus to a collaborative focus. Together the interviews allowed

for a general analysis of how the school perceived its journey in creating and sustaining their professional learning community.

In order for quantitative research to be reliable and valid there only needs to be valid and reliable instruments. However, in qualitative research “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton, 2002. p. 14). To ensure validity and reliability, a panel of three principals and five teachers; outside of the Antelope Valley area, who had knowledge and background in the implementation of professional learning communities was invited to participate in a field study (see Appendix F). The panel provided feedback on the interview and focus group questions and the appropriateness of the protocol, as well as the style and behavior of the researcher during the interviews. The information collected in the field test was used to evaluate the reliability and validity of the instruments and to ensure that it gathered the information it was designed to gather. The field test drew on the expertise and knowledge of others, and were used to refine and adjust the instrument accordingly (Merriam, 2009). Adjustments were made to the interview and focus groups questions based on the expert feedback to ensure that each question was related to the study focus and to provide clarity.

### **Data Collection**

Institutional Review Board approval was requested from the Brandman University in order to conduct the research. With approval from Brandman’s University IRB (see Appendix G) the researcher personally sent an email (see Appendix H) explaining the purpose of the research and called each assistant superintendent of each district to discuss the research study. The researcher asked the assistant superintendent to identify potential principals who met the selection criteria of the study. Prior to sending

out the survey and the scheduling of the interviews informed consent (see Appendix I) and participant bill of rights (see Appendix J) was provided. The researcher described the purpose of the research in the email to each principal, gave information about the demographic questionnaire, the interview process, the time required for the interview, how the information gathered would be used, and invited them to participate in the study. The researcher then followed up with a summary email that included the informed consent and the demographic questionnaire. Informed consent was also embedded in the initial demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B) sent to principals via Survey Monkey, and the same informed consent form was given to teachers later in the study before the focus group discussion began. Confidentiality was emphasized by the researcher and participants received a copy of consent forms that was approved by Brandman University's IRB. All information was protected using a secure password-protected Survey Monkey account. The interview questions were also provided to the interviewees prior to the interview process to give them the opportunity to consider the nature of the questions. The safety of all participants was ensured by following Brandman's IRB Professional Standards that consists of protecting the participants' human rights including their "rights from undue risk" (Brandman University IRB, p1.). Furthermore, pseudo names were chosen by the individuals to protect identify and to decrease the potential risk factors that could develop as a result of this study. The author of the study was responsible for maintaining confidentiality of the study (Patton, 2002). Principals and teachers participated according to their comfort level, as they had the option to end their participation at any time for any reason; including the right to review interview and discussion transcripts. Prior to conducting the focus group discussion and

principal interviews consent forms were reviewed. The consent included a statement allowing the researcher to audio tape the discussion. The participants were asked to sign the form prior to beginning the discussions, after the interviews were completed and all transcribed audio voice files were deleted. All transcribed interviews and coded data were kept in a locked file for 3 years and then destroyed by shredding.

Data was collected in four ways: (a) initial demographic questionnaire; (b) principal interviews; (c) focus group discussions; and (d) archival document review. When a researcher collects multiple sources of data, it helps triangulate the data and reduces bias in the study (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). According to DuPont (2009) and Gruenert (1989), triangulation of data collected was necessary for the researcher to gain insight into understanding and describing organizational culture. Theoretically, the triangulation design was used because the strength of each approach can be applied to provide not only a more complete result but also one that is more valid (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010).

The demographic questionnaire data was collected from the principals identified by their assistant superintendent to have strong knowledge in PLC. Principals were asked to complete a ten question questionnaire on the demographic and professional learning community characteristics information about their school site. Prior to sending the questionnaire principals received an email from the researcher explaining the study, requesting approval to send the questionnaire, and the researcher followed up by sending a reminder email a week later. The demographic questionnaire was sent out via survey monkey and had multiple-choice questions. The demographic data was collected and analyzed to determine level of implementation of PLCS at each school site, and the

principals' experiences creating a collaborative community. This questionnaire data further determined which principals have 3 or more years' experience in a collaborative community and provided the researcher with the data necessary to invited principals to a one-on-one interview. The researcher used stratified purposeful sampling to identify the participants. Stratified purposeful sampling is typically used to identify participants that were part of the larger sample (Patton, 2002). Field testing was conducted of the interview and focus group questions to ensure questions were appropriate for the topic and that they will yield the information that was needed to address the research questions.

Important data was obtained from focus group discussions with teachers and principals' who were involved in the implementation of the collaboration community. The focus group meeting and principal interviews took place at the participant's school site, and lasted no longer than an hour. The focus group questions and principal interview questions were open-ended and developed by the researcher to allow the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the practices that contribute to sustaining collaborative communities. The researcher also conducted archival review of documents that pertain to this study.

As a principal of an elementary school in, the researcher need to bracket biases. To draw attention to possible biases such as personal motivation and beliefs, the researcher wrote in a journal after each interview and focus group discussion to reflect on personal biases. Patton (2002) contended that the level of familiarity of the data by the researcher could develop biases that needed to be acknowledged and addressed. As a principal of an elementary school the researcher paid attention to personal motivations, beliefs, and biases during this research study.

## **Data Analysis**

This section covered the various strategies the researcher used to analyze the qualitative data. The researcher approached this study with an open mind in order to learn how principals' and teachers' practices contributed to creating a sustainable collaborative community. The researcher reflected on personal biases by journaling personal thoughts after each interview and focus group meeting.

The demographic questionnaire data was collected and sorted using Survey Monkey; a password-protected online electronic method. All interviews and focus group discussions were audio taped and then transcribed. Notes taken during the interviews and focus group discussions were compared with the tapes for verification or accuracy. The researcher transcribed the data from the one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions. This gave the researcher an enhanced insight into the richness of the data. The researcher analyzed the transcribe data for this study and match the data to each research question. The researcher collected data from questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions and used the data triangulation methods in preparation for the analysis. The findings were triangulated by the following data collection methods: archival data such as PLC agendas, PLC meeting minutes, PLC binders, and any other PLC documents on file at the schools, focus group dialogue, demographic questionnaires, principal interviews, and researcher's notes taken during the interviews and focus group discussions. This data was triangulated for analysis and was carefully reviewed and sorted by themes and patterns that emerged. The transcribed data was read on a weekly basis for accuracy and completeness. Merriam (2009) explains that data analysis should be simultaneous with data collection, and it was essential to analyze data starting with the

first interview, which allowed the researcher the opportunity to gather more reliable and valid data with each interview. Merriam (2009) further explains that waiting to analyze data at the end of the collection process could create for the research an overwhelming task of trying to figure out where to begin among the hundreds of transcribed pages.

Data was sorted and grouped by research questions. The following five-step process was used to conduct data analysis (a) review the transcripts, (b) organize and code data, (c) review transcripts for final coding, (d) complete the data analysis, and (e) validate the findings. Inter-rater reliability was used to verify coding decisions made during the analysis. Merriam (2009) explains that you must obtain inter-rater reliability to test your codes to ensure validity of the analysis and potentially reduce bias of a single rater. The researcher used another principal to analyze the data to see if there was consistency in the themes identified in the coding of the data. To aid in the process of inter-rater reliability NVivo software was also utilized. The NVivo software uses Kappa statistics and percent agreement when analyzing qualitative data; such as interview transcripts. This demonstrates inter-rater reliability and allows consensus in analysis of multiple data sources (QSR International, 2016).

The researcher identified pertinent information that the analysis yields within the themes and categories. Responses were categorized by research questions. The researcher reviewed all transcripts for a final time to validate the consistency of the findings and patterns in the data. These findings were presented in the next chapter. The literature review was compared to the findings to determine if the themes and patterns were supported by the literature. All transcribed material and coded data were kept in a secure location that was available only to the researcher.



## **Limitations**

Limitations of a study could be potential problems and weaknesses that could affect the results of the research (Creswell, 2005). These could be areas the researcher had no control or influence over, including sample size, loss of participants, errors in measurement, personal bias, or other challenges. Limitations are conditions or weaknesses that happen in part when the study design could not control for all factors (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 2000; Voelkel, 2011). In this study, the small sample size was a limitation of the study given the fact that there were 5,825 elementary schools in California (California Department of Education, 2014) and 1,404 elementary schools in Los Angeles County (Los Angeles County Office of Education). The results of the study could not be generalized to a larger population of elementary school teachers and principals. The study only examined the experiences of a small group of principals and teachers in California; this limited the study because the small sample population does not represent principals and teachers across California. However, findings could be examined in relationship to other research findings to draw conclusions. Another limitation of this study was the use of focus group discussion, which limited the amount of control the researcher had over the interviewees and the direction of the discussion interview. Patton (2002) points out that the researcher has to carefully plan focus group discussions because the conversation format could result in multiple conversations between all participants in the group that had to be guided. Finally, because the researcher was a principal at a school located in one of the school districts included in this study, her intimate knowledge of the schools in the area could lead to interviewer bias. To bracket these biases, the researcher used personal journaling after every

interview and focus group meeting to identify and set aside personal views and beliefs that were could not pertinent to this study. To assist with improving the validity and reliability of this study the researcher carefully documented data and kept data collected in an organized system.

Limitations also related to the roles of teachers and principals, particularly concerning availability and willingness to participate. To combat these issues, the researcher sent out reminder emails and made follow up phone calls in an effort to build a connection so participants would feel more comfortable and open to discuss professional learning community outcomes within focus groups. Elementary principals have very demanding schedules and thus may be reluctant to participate in a study. Therefore, the researcher individually invited them by email to participate in the study. In addition, principals were contacted by phone to encourage participation in the initial survey.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, for this study, the researcher employed a qualitative analysis, using the triangulation method for schools participating in professional learning communities throughout Los Angeles County. The overall purpose of this study was to recognize the specific leadership practices that have recently contributed to the sustainable collaborative changes that educational institutions have been working to achieve. The research design collected information pertaining to the listed research questions for the Antelope Valley area of Los Angeles County, including the use of questionnaires, focus group discussions, and interviews that were requested of principals and teachers on a volunteer basis. For principals, instrumentations were held primarily on an individual level, while teachers participated in brief focus group discussions. Having consistent

participation was essential to combat potential limitations shared by both principals and teachers, because without understanding both sides of professional learning community, the entirety of potential effectiveness could not be successfully achieved in its entirety. Thus, this study aimed to follow the works of at least 21 teachers and five principals from the Antelope Valley area. Doing so allowed for the alignment of their individual and collaborative professional learning communities, and ensured that long-term and effective actions were being taken.

## **CHAPTER IV: RESEARCH, DATA COLLECTION, AND FINDINGS**

This chapter describes the research findings and methodology that were used to conduct this study. The data and findings included key words and phrases that five elementary school principals and 21 elementary teachers from the Antelope Valley area in Southern California identified and described the common practices collaborative community. Studies have shown that principals and teachers are required to improve schools and bring about a positive change. Professional learning communities among educators are becoming the tool to change leadership and teacher practices and improve schools. Regrettably, school leaders are not given the tools they need to be reflective learners in their own practice. Many school leaders are ill-prepared for the daily realities of school leadership and lack the leadership skills to make changes in the school community (Blankstein, Houston, & Cole, 2008). Many professional learning communities fail because their leaders do not know what behaviors must be practiced in order to change the cultures of their organizations (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; DuFour et al., 2008).

The chapter begins with a review of the purpose statement, research questions, methodology, population and sample. The chapter then continues with a review and analysis of the data. The data collected from the interviews were organized by each of the research questions and presented in a table. The data were also presented in narrative which highlighted the trends, beliefs, and common perceptions of principals and teachers' responses to what they perceived as important practices to supporting the development and sustainability of professional learning communities.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the principal leadership practices perceived as supporting the development of a professional learning community and a sustainable collaborative culture. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to examine principal leadership practices school teachers in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to provide an in-depth study of the practices that elementary school principals and teachers perceive as important in the implementation and sustainability of professional learning communities.

1. What practices do elementary school principals perceive as important for supporting the development of a professional learning community in Antelope Valley School Districts?
2. What leadership practices do elementary principals perceive as important to support a sustainable collaborative school culture in Antelope Valley School Districts?
3. What principal leadership practices do elementary school teachers perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community in Antelope Valley School Districts?

### **Methodology**

For this qualitative study, the instruments and sources used to gather data were a demographic questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, focus group discussions and artifacts collected from principals and teachers. Triangulation, analyzing data from multiple sources such as interviews, public records, and other documents, allowed the researcher

to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Triangulation was used to strengthen analysis and interpretation of the data in the study. The triangulation design was used because the strength of each approach can be applied to provide not only a more complete result but also one that is more valid (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The data collection process allowed the researcher to analyze themes and patterns and assisted the researcher in accurately presenting the beliefs of principals and teachers in the Antelope Valley area.

In qualitative research, a field test supports the researcher in describing the phenomenon as it actually exists (Patton, 2002). To ensure validity and reliability of the interview protocols, an expert panel of three principals and five teachers working outside of the Antelope Valley area and who had knowledge and background in the implementation of professional learning communities were invited to participate in a field study (see Appendix F). The expert panel engaged in a mock interview and provided feedback on the content validity and reliability of the interview and focus group questions. Additionally, the field study participants offered feedback on the appropriateness of the protocol as well as the style and behavior of the researcher during the interviews. The expert panel members found that principal's question number one and focus group question number three needed to be revised for clarity. Adjustments were made to the interview and focus group questions based on the expert feedback to ensure that each question was effective in its ability to gather information needed to address the research questions.

The researcher sent an email explaining the purpose of the research and called each assistant superintendent of each of the five districts to discuss the research study.

The researcher asked the assistant superintendent to identify and recommend principals who met the selection criteria of the study. Ten principals that were recommended by their assistant superintendent received an invitation via email to complete the demographic questionnaire. This email included informed consent, participant bill of rights, information about the demographic questionnaire, the time required to take the questionnaire, how the information gathered would be used and invited them to participate in the questionnaire. Once the demographic data was analyzed the researcher selected five elementary school principals that had more years implementing and creating a PLC and attended more PLC training. The researcher called each principal to ask if they were willing to participate in the study. Once agreed, an interview time was reserved and the Informed Consent and Bill of Right's documents that had been approved by Brandman University's Institutional Review Board were resent via email. Of the five invited, five responded and agreed to participate. The five principals were provided with an overview of the study and were allowed to opt out of the study at any time. Participants were also assured of their anonymity within the study.

After the one-on-one principal interview, principals were asked to recommend teachers from their school site to participate in a focus group discussion. An email was sent to each recommended teacher and included informed consent, participant bill of rights, gave information about the study, the interview process, the time required for the interview, how the information gathered would be used, and invited them to participate in the study. Once agreed, an interview time was reserved before the interview was conducted, the researcher met with the teachers to describe the purpose, procedures, and

risk of the study. Teachers were also assured of their confidentiality and their right to opt out of the study at any time.

The researcher personally coded the data for themes and patterns and then used NVivo to contribute to the analysis of the data. To test the codes and ensure validity of the analysis and potentially reduce bias of a single rater, the researcher and an expert principal, not included in the population sample and who had background and knowledge in developing a collaborative school community, independently participated in analyzing the data to ensure that there was consistency in the themes identified in the coding of the data.

### **Population**

A population sample is a group of individuals with certain characteristic that separate them from other groups (Creswell, 2012). According to the California Department of Education, there were over 5,800 elementary schools in the State of California (CDE, 2015), and 80% of these schools (approximately 4,640 schools) are implementing professional learning communities. The 4,640 schools implementing professional learning communities were the population for this study.

A target population is a smaller sample unit that is selected from the population sample to which the researcher wishes to select the sample (Creswell, 2012). The target population for this study was all elementary school principals and teachers from elementary school districts in Southern California. For the purpose of this study, the accessible populations were principals and teachers of elementary schools in the Antelope Valley which is situated in the northwest corner of Los Angeles County just south of the Kern County border who had been implementing and working in



professional learning communities for 3 or more years. Due to the geographical proximity to the researcher, monetary constraints and convenience, the Antelope Valley area was selected. According to Privitera (2014), a researcher can draw a smaller subset from accessible targeted participants with whom the researcher is in close proximity.

### **Sample**

Purposeful sampling was conducted to identify the participants and allowed the researcher to learn and obtain in-depth information regarding the perceptions of what elementary school principals and teachers believe to be important practices use to support the development and sustainability of professional learning communities. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to “capture and describe central themes” providing the researcher with a rich description of the participants’ perceptions (Patton, 2002, p. 234). Additionally, several criteria were developed for identifying and selecting individuals that had experience developing and sustaining a collaborative school culture.

The sample included principals who were identified by their assistant superintendent to have strong knowledge of the implementation of PLCs at their current school sites and five focus groups made up of 21 teachers recommended by their principals, from five school districts in the Antelope Valley. Four of the five focus groups were composed of four teachers each, and one focus group was composed of five teachers. Purposeful sampling was conducted to identify the participants. A purposeful sample is typically designed to select a small number of cases that could yield the most information about a particular phenomenon (Teddlie, 2007). Ten principals who were recommended by their assistant superintendent received an email invitation to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B).

After the questionnaire response data had been analyzed, five principals from the sample were identified through stratified purposeful sampling. Stratified purposeful sampling was used to identify samples within samples (Patton 2002). The principal selection criteria included:

1. Principals working at schools that were in Antelope Valley/Los Angeles County
2. Principals identified by their assistant superintendent to have strong knowledge of the implementation of PLC.
3. Principals who have implemented Professional Learning Communities in the last 3-6 years.
4. Principals who have had specialized training or professional development in the implementation of Professional Learning Communities.
5. Principals who have been in their position for 3 or more years.
6. Principals who were willing to participate in the study.

The researcher purposefully identified five principals with the most training and years of experience with PLC implementation. The researcher called each principal to ask if they were willing to participate in the study. If they agreed, an interview time was reserved and the Informed Consent and Bill of Right's documents that had been approved by Brandman University's Institutional Review Board were resent via email. After the one-on-one interview, principals were asked to recommend teachers from their school site to participate in a focus group discussion based on the following criteria:

1. Teachers who have been at the school site for more than 3 years.
2. Teachers who were part of a grade-level professional learning community.

3. Teachers who have been participating in a professional learning community for 3 or more years.
4. Teachers identified by their principals to have knowledge of the implementation of PLC.

An email was sent to each recommended teacher inviting them to participate in the study. The email provided information about the research, the informed consent form, the Participant's Bill of Rights and a copy of the focus group questions. If teachers agreed to participate, an interview time was reserved, and before the interview was conducted the researcher met with the teachers to describe the purpose, procedures, and risk of the study. Teachers were also assured of their confidentiality, and their right to opt out of the study at any time.

The researcher obtained permission from the participants to audiotape the approximately 1-hour session. The purpose of audiotaping participants was to carefully capture their responses (Patton, 2002). It is vital during the data collection "to record as fully and fairly as possible that particular interviewee's perspective" so as to have a complete understanding of the data being collected (Patton, 2002, p. 380). Audiotaping allowed the researcher the exact information the participants provided (McMillan & Schmacker, 2010).

### **Demographic Data**

This research was conducted with principals and teachers in five elementary school districts in the Antelope Valley area. These five districts serve over 50,000 elementary school students. A total of five elementary school principals and 21 elementary school teachers were interviewed for this study. The participants' ages ranged

from 25 to 60 and their years as school site principals range from 4 to 12 years. All five principals had Master degrees, two were in Ed.D programs, and one had an Ed.D. All 21 teachers had multiple subject teaching credentials and bachelor degrees, and nine teachers had Master degrees.

All principals had been at their current school site for three to 8 years and teachers had a range of years at their current school site of six years to 25 years. All principals had been implementing professional learning communities at their school sites for 3 to 8 years. Four principals started the implementation process of professional learning communities at their school site and one principal stated that another principal implemented the professional learning community before she arrived. There are 20 or more teachers at each school site and three to six teachers on each grade-level PLC team. All principals had attended three or more professional learning community trainings or workshops and all teachers had attended two or more professional learning community trainings or workshops. Below, Table 2 presents the data of each participant in the study.

Table 2

*Demographic Data of Participant Sample*

<b>Participants</b>	<b>Number of trainings in PLCs attended</b>	<b>Years schools have been implementing PLCs</b>	<b>Years at current school site</b>	<b>Total years' experience in education</b>	
Principal #1	15	10	9	21	
Principal #2	10	8	8	22	
Principal #3	8	3	3	15	
Principal #4	5	5	4	10	
Principal #5	6	6	5	19	
	Range				Number of teachers
Focus Group #1	6-8	10	6-25	9-30	4
Focus Group #2	6-8	8	5-10	5-16	4
Focus Group #3	2-4	3	10-18	12-25	4
Focus Group #4	3-4	5	4-10	6-15	4
Focus Group #5	3-5	6	9-10	5-25	5

**Data by Research Question**

The data analysis was reported in a narrative and table format following each of the research questions. Interview data obtained from five principals and 21 elementary teachers in the Antelope Valley School District was organized and summarized to include consistent words or phrases that indicated key themes. The 21 elementary teachers were divided into five focus groups. Four of the five focus groups were composed of four teachers each, and one focus group was composed of five teachers. The interview data was then transcribed, analyzed, and coded for key words and phrases that drew from how principals in Antelope Valley understood what constituted the most important leadership practices for supporting the development of professional learning communities. Interview data was further transcribed, analyzed, and coded for key words and phrases that drew from how principals in Antelope Valley ensure the sustainability of a collaborative school

culture as elementary school teachers strive to create a sustainable professional learning community.

The interview data indicates that collaboration and having a focus on the identified vision and goals had a significant importance as an overarching theme for developing and sustaining PLCs in Antelope Valley. Data-driven instruction and individual and group accountability were also significant themes coded in the interview data obtained from both principals and elementary teachers. Lastly, teachers empowering others presented as a theme with a smaller presence as coded in the interview data. The interview data pertaining to all three research questions helped to gain new insights and similarities into findings of previous research studies highlighted in the literature review (Chapter II). During the data analysis process, coding involved an identification and management of common themes related to leadership practices and collaborative learning in PLCs. Each theme identified and coded in the interview data contributes to educational research on important leadership practices for principals and elementary teachers to develop and sustain professional learning communities.

The review of literature was used to compare the main themes that emerged from the data analysis. As the data was analyzed, specific ideas and categories were created to identify and manage the themes regarding the best leadership practices used to support the development and sustainability of a collaborative community.

The data from the principals who participated in one-on-one interviews and the teachers who participated in the focus group interviews provided in-depth information on central themes. The most common themes that emerged were categorized to include the following:

- Collaboration and supporting teachers through developing capacity from growth
- Having a focus on the right issues and building a clear purpose
- Data-driven instructional decisions during planning to impact teacher and student learning
- Accountability for individual and group goals through sharing practices and student results

### **Research Question One**

Research Question One: What practices do elementary school principals perceive as important for supporting the development of a PLC in the Antelope Valley School District? Descriptions of principal's perspectives collected through one-on-one interviews were analyzed to answer research question number one. Central themes and patterns were created identifying what principals commonly perceived as the most important leadership practices in supporting the development of a professional learning community. The principal's responses were consistent regarding the various leadership practices to support the development of professional learning communities. Table 3 represents the frequency of related comments stated by principals in response to important leadership practices for supporting the development of a PLC.

Table 3

*Analysis of Leadership Practices that Support the Development of PLC*

<b>Practices to support PLCs</b>	<b>Description of identified themes</b>	<b>Frequency of related comments</b>	<b>Key words and phrases stated by participants</b>	<b>Artifacts shared to support claims</b>
Collaboration	Cultivating a collaborative culture	27	Focus on collaboration and teacher support Developing capacity for growth	PLC agendas School monthly calendar Memos about PLC days
Focus	Having clear focus	25	Building a clear purpose and vision A clear understanding of the focusing on Staying focused on goals and revisiting often	Staff Meeting agendas Mission and vision statement PLC grade-level stated goal document, email, meeting minutes
Data-driven decisions	Data inquiry to develop a plan and make refinements	12	Data to determine how meet the needs of our students Data-driven instruction and teaching practices Constantly collect data to monitor and deliver instruction	Data analysis template Teacher made assessments PLC lesson plans
Accountability	Accountability through transparency	8	Hold each other accountable for the work and collaboration Deprivatizing practices Set the tone for individual and group responsibility and expectations	PLC meeting notes Staff meeting agendas Celebrations

As mentioned, collaboration, focus, data-driven decisions, and accountability represent the central themes identified and coded in interview data with principals in the Antelope Valley School District. Principals were asked to give examples and provide artifacts to support their perspectives on leadership practices that support the development of a PLC. Three principals stated that identifying a focus is important in the



developing stages of a PLC. Principals shared that creating collaboration structures in a school gives everyone a voice and allows input into the processes, purpose, and success of the PLC. All five principals stated they used data in three ways: (a) to guide instruction through classroom observation feedback to helping teachers make adjustments to support student learning, (b) by making academic changes to support teacher growth and learning to meet the needs of student learning gaps, (c) by making collective academic decisions and communicating needs with the leadership team. This helped staff in grade level collaborative PLC reflect on practices and have conversations around classroom practice. Principal #1, who has a doctoral degree in education, stated that her early training in her district and participating in required principal collaboration meetings has had an impact on the success of her implementation at her school site. This specific principal reported:

When we met as a principal PLC we had to bring back student work and grade level team PLC agendas and have conversations around that. I think it prepared me to implement it at my school site and it helped me understand the journey of starting a professional learning community and what that journey should look like, how to roll it out with staff that has never learned what a PLC is and you have to focus on what's the best way to continue down that journey year after year. (Principal #1, personal communication, December 1, 2016)

Principal #3 stated in her prior district everyone was “well versed and trained in PLCs from the top down”. Training “administrators, district management, and teachers, and implementation was a smooth process”, but it was very hard and challenging to start the implementation process in her current district because “everyone top down has not been trained or versed in PLC” (Principal #3, personal communication, December 12, 2016).

Principal #2 and #5 shared that their training helped them to understand the process and stages of developing a PLC and the steps necessary to be successful. Principal #2 stated, “I was taught to start the process slowly with my staff and to work on the three big ideas that drive the work of a PLC...we use these foundations to create a 100-day plan of implementation” (Principal #2, personal communication, December 5, 2016). One principal states “my training has prepared me to understand the implementation journey [and what] it takes to get a school staff to buy into the PLC concept and it has helped my school community to continue the process year after year” (Principal #5, personal communication, December 16, 2016).

Principal #5 shared that “the general concept and purpose of a professional learning community is to create an environment in an organization where people work together on an agreed common goal and purpose to help the organization to be successful” (Principal #5, personal communication, December 16, 2016). Principal #1 shared that the main purpose of a PLC is collaboration which encourages elementary teachers participating in PLCs to make data-driven instructional decisions by sharing the work of their students. The interview data suggests that elementary teachers participating in a PLC who demonstrate initial skepticism develop professionally by asking questions about best practices related to data-driven instruction from their colleagues. Collaboration ensures that teachers with varying levels of experience work to sustain a PLC by observing how best practices in data-driven instruction may likely improve student learning outcomes. In terms of accountability, 4 out of 5 principals in the Antelope Valley District suggested that collaborative strategies discourage blaming individual

elementary teachers for not working diligently enough to improve student learning outcomes.

Regarding data-driven decisions making in PLCs, principals #1 and #3 noted that prior to the implementation of PLCs elementary teachers throughout the Antelope Valley District rarely shared data on academic progress for students in their classrooms, but with the implementation of PLCs, teachers are moving from working in isolation to working together collaboratively and sharing practices. However, Principal #1 noted that collaboration in PLCs involves principals conducting walkthroughs and observing how elementary teachers' deliver classroom instruction. Collaboration in PLCs encourages elementary teachers to improve the delivery of instructional curricula and identify the specific learning needs of individual students requiring assistance (Principal #3, personal communication, December 12, 2016). PLCs require elementary teachers in the Antelope Valley District to meet frequently to discuss issues related to the academic progress of individual students. Meetings reflect the "built-in structures" for "collaboration time" for elementary teachers in Antelope Valley (Principal #1, personal communication, December 1, 2016). Grade level PLC time promotes collaboration between elementary teachers who must seek each other out to make growth towards moving towards achieving their team goals.

Principal #2 confirmed the importance of individual and group accountability between teachers in the Antelope Valley School District. PLCs provide a "focus on learning, a collaborative culture and collective responsibility, and a results orientation" (Principal #2, personal communication, December 5, 2016). More specifically, four questions guide the collaborative approach used by elementary teachers in Antelope

Valley. Each of those four questions asked by elementary teachers actively participating in a PLC related to the theme of teacher accountability mentioned earlier. Based on interview data obtained from principals #2 and #4, teachers hold themselves accountable for four practices. First teachers ask themselves what are the essential skills or standards students need to learn. A second practice teachers hold themselves accountable for is asking how they will know when students fully achieve the instructional goal. A third practice to which elementary teachers must hold themselves accountable is asking how best they can respond to students who have not yet fully grasped the instructional material. Fourth, elementary teachers hold themselves even more accountable by asking how to extend collaborative learning practices and mold them to the learning needs of individual students. Elementary teachers who ask these four questions establish a foundation for outlining a 100-day program that requires effective communication and cooperation (Principal #2, personal communication, December 5, 2016).

In a unique example, principal #3 highlighted that her school has a “minimum day Tuesday” requiring elementary teachers to devote 2 hours each week towards a collaborative focus. One Tuesday of each month involves collaborative meetings between the principal and elementary teachers with a focus on student achievement data. Principal #4 also allocates at least one day per month for elementary teachers at her school to participate in an all-day collaborative meeting. The collaborative meetings also involve elementary teachers working with different grade levels who review student achievement data to develop strategic goals for benchmarking improvements in learning outcomes. The focus on student achievement data allows elementary teachers participating in a PLC to develop instructional curricula that align with benchmarking improvement goals.

Principals provided artifacts such as classroom walk through feedback forms, agendas of staff meetings and grade level PLC meetings, schedules, social events, pictures, grade level PLC notes, PLC calendar, grade level goals, data analysis template, and grade level common formative assessments (CFAs). These documents highlighted the importance of the strategies for developing a PLC. They also contributed to an understanding of the processes that go into each stage of development and implementation of the PLC.

### **Research Question Two**

Research Question Two: What leadership practices do elementary principals perceive as important to support a sustainable collaborative school culture in the Antelope Valley District? Descriptions of principal's perspectives collected through one-on-one interviews were analyzed to answer research question number two. The principal's responses were consistent regarding the various practices to support a sustainable collaborative school culture. Central themes and patterns were created identifying what principals commonly perceived as the most important practices in sustaining a collaborative school community. Table 4 represents the frequency of related comments stated by principals in response to important leadership practices that support the sustainability of a collaborative school culture.

Table 4

*Analysis of Leadership Practices That Support Sustainability of a Collaborative Culture*

<b>Practices for sustainability of a collaborative community</b>	<b>Description of identified themes</b>	<b>Frequency of related comments</b>	<b>Key words and phrases stated by participants</b>	<b>Artifacts shared to support claims</b>
Collaboration	Create a collaborative culture Emphasize collaboration	31	Empowering teachers to become leaders Always protect collaboration time	PLC agendas Master schedule Staff meeting agendas Pictures at school events
Focus	Focus on best practices and strategies	28	Modify and build on the identified vision and focus	100-day plan of implementation Observation notes
Data-driven decisions	Identify data Monitor and collect data often	15	Improving instructional practices improves student learning	Grade level PLC notes Data analysis plan sheets
Accountability	Have expectations for everyone Revisit stated goals	13	Asking more questions of one another and themselves Building trust to share	PLC agendas CFAs Minutes from PLC meetings PLC schedule

Within the theme of collaboration and focus, each principal of schools in the Antelope Valley District suggested that leadership practices for sustaining a collaborative culture should empower elementary teachers to lead through a shared leadership process. Focusing on the concept of shared leadership practices was perceived as very important to supporting the sustainability of a collaborative culture by all principals in this study. One principal specifically noted, “I focus on empowering the folks who were really invested in getting the work done and laying the foundations, I empowered them to speak up and make decisions” (Principal #1, personal communication, December 1, 2016). The same principal also drew from her current and past professional experience in sustaining

a collaborative culture by implementing collaborative leadership strategies and further shared the “we are sustaining and going to continue to sustain it (collaborative culture) by empowering those people that really see the power in what we are doing and seeing student growth.” One principal shared that in the early stages of sustaining her collaborative community she “spent collaborative time meeting weekly with her leadership team empowering them to lead the work they were doing” and because of this process the team leaders would empower others in their grade level teams to continue the work (Principal #5, personal communication, December 12, 2016). Principal #5 also shared that because of this work they all worked together collaboratively to create a vision and clear focus, to set goals and decide as a group the best way to achieve those goals (Principal #5, personal communication, December 12, 2016). One of the principals shared her experience in building sustainability. She stated:

The journey of sustaining a collaborative school culture is quite extensive and you have to know and realize that if your knowledge level of PLCs is greater than your staff you have to move slow to move fast. You have to take a step back and look at the needs of the school and your teachers. You have to form a leadership team and have collaborative leadership meetings to ask questions to see where everyone is and develop shared leadership skills. Then you have to use that information to develop a clear focus, common language, common practices, and communicated expectations as you move forward. (Principal # 3, December 12, 2016)

Principals also attribute sustainability of a collaborative culture to analyzing student data to address learning needs, developing effective instructional practices, and

establishing individual and group accountability. One principal shared how she uses data to support sustainability and student academic achievement:

For me, I support it [sustainability] at the school site here, [by] the focus on the student academic performance and using that data to guide our instruction [to] make academic changes [and] to make academic decisions as a group collaboratively... it is also the intense reflection and being able to take risk and being able to reflect on ourselves [on what] we are not doing so well [in the classroom] so as a grade level or as a group we improve student achievement; [an example of this is] we do these data digs and stick to the concept of a PLC... by focusing on the four questions of a PLC. (Principal #4, personal communication, December 14, 2016)

One principal noted the four questions help to drive their weekly collaborative meetings:

1) What do we want students to learn? 2) How do we know they have learned it? 3) What do we do when they have not learned it? 4) How do we extend their knowledge when they have learned it? The principal explained:

We use the four questions when we are planning instruction, unwrapping standards, and [looking to see] if the curriculum is producing the outcome we are looking for. These four questions also drive our data meetings when we are looking at common formative assessment [assessments that are teacher made] and planning interventions. During these collaborative meetings, I am constantly setting the tone and reminding teachers of our goals. These goals are presented on our agendas throughout the school year. (Principal #2, personal communication, December 5, 2016)



Principals in the study shared that they have sustained their collaborative communities by having early conversations around looking at data, talking about how they move forward with supporting students through interventions, and deciding what will support student learning in the classroom.

Interview data obtained from one principal suggested that leadership practices for sustaining a collaborative PLC culture should provide elementary teachers in the Antelope Valley District with considerable collective responsibility and autonomy. The principal stated, “I don’t even have to be here and they all know what to do” (Principal #4, personal communication, December 14, 2016). The principal attributes an increased level of collective responsibility and autonomy between individual elementary teachers across grade levels to professional collaboration practices acquired through active participation in a collaborative culture. During the first year of sustaining a collaborative culture at an Antelope Valley elementary school, one principal commented that she frequently modeled what was expected of teachers who participated in a collaborative culture. Specifically, the principal would sit in on collaborative meetings held by elementary teachers across grade levels and use the four questions of a PLC to model what was expected from the grade level group (Principal #5, personal communication, December 16, 2016). Moreover, the principal empowered elementary teachers across grade` levels to develop plans for instruction and student learning and as these teachers learned from each other they became less and less dependent on the actions and presence of the principal.

### **Research Question Three**

Research Question Three: What principal leadership practices do elementary school teachers perceive as important to creating a sustainable PLC in Antelope Valley Districts? Descriptions of teachers' perspectives collected through focus group interviews were analyzed to answer research question number three. The teachers' responses were consistent regarding the various principal leadership practices that are important in creating a sustainable professional learning community. Central themes and patterns were identifying on what teachers commonly perceived as the most important principal leadership practices in creating a sustainable collaborative school community. Table 5 represents the frequency of related comments stated by teachers in response to important practices that create a sustainable PLC.

Elementary teachers who participated in focus group interviews explained that in order to encourage collaboration and a focus on established goals, principals of schools in the Antelope Valley District should implement PLC structures such as facilitating weekly 2-hour grade level PLC meetings and frequently facilitating discussions related to consistency in grade level expectations and school goals encouraging collaboration and a focus on established goals. One focus group shared:

We often met and many times met way over the 2 hours we are allotted a week.

Our principal always had a focus and was always consistent in what the goals were, she always honored our time for collaboration and stressed the importance of meeting weekly. (Focus Group #1, personal communication, December 2, 2016)

Table 5

*Analysis of Principal Leadership Practices in Creating a Sustainable PLC*

<b>Practices used to create a sustainable PLC</b>	<b>Description of identified themes</b>	<b>Frequency of related comments</b>	<b>Key words and phrases stated by participants</b>	<b>Artifacts shared to support claims</b>
Collaboration	Regular collaboration	21	Learning from one another Respect our collaboration time	PLC agendas PLC meeting notes PLC calendar PLC binder
Focus	Laser-like focus Staying focused on the main thing	26	Intense focus on improvement Focus on the needs of students Use data to improve instruction	Goal setting sheet, PLC notes PLC binder
Data-driven decisions	3	14	Establishing goals based on the data Revisit and track those goals	CFAs Data plan analysis sheets
Accountability	Common commitments Building trust	12	Creating an environment of trust	PLC notes, PLC meeting minutes, PLC binder

Focus Group # 5 provided similar responses regarding actions taken by their principal to sustain their collaborative community:

We meet weekly for two hours on our early release days...but I remember before the district started the early release time our principal paid us two extra duty hours a week to collaborate...that showed us how important [collaboration] was...She would visit our PLCs and guide us through the process, now we have leaders within each grade level and we are all empowered to lead our collaborative meetings. (Focus Group #5, personal communication, December 20, 2016)

Data from interviews with focus groups showed that teachers believe that the principal's practice of weekly collaboration and working together as a team as well as focusing on meeting the needs of students is important in creating a sustainable PLC. One focus group shared their principal sustained their PLC by requiring teachers to develop a weekly collaboration meeting schedule:

[Our principal] built on our knowledge of PLC and [required that we] develop weekly collaborative meeting schedules. At first, we would all be meeting in our grade levels at a table in the cafeteria, and [our principal] guided [us] through the process of conducting collaborative meetings and looking at data to drive our instruction. After some time, our principal knew we were ready to take the lead and be our own leaders of our individual grade level PLCs. Our meetings moved into someone's classroom and we worked together sharing best practices and developing intervention and instruction lesson plans to meet students' needs.

(Focus Group #1, personal communication, December 2, 2016)

Teachers identified the leadership practice of communicating collective collaboration as being important to the success of their PLCs. Teachers shared that during collaboration “we have to trust each other and feel safe to share....it took some time but once we understood what this was all about the process became easier and very valuable” (Focus Group # 4, personal communication, December 19, 2016). When discussing collaboration and focus, four focus groups mentioned their principals' communicated the expectation that during their collaborative meetings they always had a focus, that as a group they created grade level goals for the year and that they visit and revisit those goals weekly and monthly to make sure they were focused on meeting the needs of student learning.

Interview data suggested that the leadership practice of establishing accountability and using data-driven inquiry to improve the instructional practices of elementary teachers in Antelope Valley Districts has helped to make the changes necessary to meet the needs of students and create sustainable PLCs (Focus Group #1, personal communication, December 2, 2016). Principals of schools in Antelope Valley Districts

encouraged elementary teachers to develop effective intervention strategies that impacted the learning needs of individual students by using multiple sources of data on student learning outcomes. Prior to participating actively in a PLC, elementary teachers in the first focus group focused primarily on individual lesson planning and on only their classroom instructional practices. Since participating in a PLC, elementary teachers at the aforementioned elementary school now focus on the analysis of achievement data to improve student learning outcomes for an entire grade level (Focus Group #3, personal communication, December 15, 2016). Collectively, elementary teachers expressed a sigh of relief at the opportunity to work on making data-driven decisions with each other to “develop best practices to help students excel and use data to adjust our instruction” (Focus Group #5, personal communication, December 20, 2016). Teachers expressed that collectively analysis of student data with their peers provides a sense of empowerment for all in the PLC to improve student learning. One focus group elaborated further on principal leadership practices that sustained their PLC:

[Our principal] keeps us focused on the specific goal our team has set and [this] stops us from going off on tangents during our PLC meetings. It helped us look at assessments more often and helps to drive the instruction in the classroom. Before we may have looked at assessments once every 2 months, so we had no idea what our students were doing, now we know weekly where they are and what we need to do. We know what our students can do or can't do, what we need to do to get them to the next level and this helps us to plan intervention. We know what each other is doing in the classroom. It used to be that we didn't share practices and we didn't know what was going on in another teacher's classroom. PLCs have helped

me to become a better teacher in that I have developed my skills that are producing better results for all the students on my grade level. (Focus Group #5, personal communication, December 20, 2016)

One focus group noted the success of sustaining their PLC was because of their “principal’s consistency and focus on student growth” (Focus Group #5, personal communication, December 20, 2016). Focus groups shared that during the early implementation of their PLCs their principal worked with the entire staff to create a collective focus on what needed to happen to promote student achievement, and during the implementation process, their principal continued to communicate the focus on these goals. From the interview data, elementary teachers in the Antelope Valley District noted that principals promoted accountability and required using student data to drive instruction that ensured the development of effective instructional practices that attended to the learning needs of all students. One focus group describes how their principal “expects a growth mindset for us so we always strive to improve in our practices, be reflective of our practices ...and work together so we can continue to grow” (Focus Group #2, personal communication, December 13, 2016). For her, the principal encourages “vertical articulation” between teachers across grade levels as part of a reflective practice so teachers below a grade level gain an understanding of students’ learning needs at the next grade level.

Elementary teachers in the fourth focus group indicated that their principal focused primarily on establishing a sound PLC structure to promote long-term sustainability through group accountability. Elementary teachers in this group reported feeling compelled to share instructions and student achievement data to shape

instructional decision-making processes (Focus Group #4, personal communication, December 19, 2016). Elementary teachers report further that looking at student data improves instructional practices by holding them accountable to meet often and focus on student data to diagnosis what worked for students or didn't work. However, elementary teachers participating in the PLC must still hold themselves accountable for ensuring that the knowledge acquired during weekly and monthly collaborative meetings is transferred into practical goals for improved student learning outcomes. While the interview data with elementary teachers suggested at one point that continued PLC practices provides considerable levels of transparency, sustaining a PLC culture in Antelope Valley Districts requires the principal's ongoing efforts of accountability to maintain professional support networks across grade levels. One focus group noted particularly:

A PLC is only as good as its members. If you don't have members that are forthcoming, then the PLC will fall. Every member has to be accountable and be held to a certain standard. If I fail as a teacher, then my grade level has to take some responsibility in that. You need to have norms and expectations for all members. (Focus Group #5, personal communication, December 20, 2016)

Elementary teachers participating in PLCs throughout the Antelope Valley District had a responsibility to integrate newly acquired knowledge into practice, develop classroom instruction structures that develop student academic growth, and identified relationships between classroom management practices and improvements in student learning outcomes. The teacher interview data indicates that principals leading PLCs in schools throughout the Antelope Valley District hold clear expectations that elementary teachers hold themselves accountable for student growth and implementing effective

instructional practices. One focus group stated that the principal leading their PLC suggested that they focus on collaborative practices involved reviews of student achievement data to create sustainable PLC practices (Focus Group #4, personal communication, December 19, 2016). One focus group shared that “we are all accountable” for the implementation of the PLC process and looking at students’ data to make instructional decisions (Focus Group #5, personal communication, December 20, 2016). Across grade levels, the interview data obtained from elementary teachers suggested that weekly and monthly PLC meetings focused on district and school requirements drawn from the collaborative process and the review of student achievement data to drive decisions have created sustainability. Consequently, elementary teachers “were really protective” of their professional environment (Focus Group #2, personal communication, December 13, 2016). Since participating actively in a PLC, elementary teachers in Antelope Valley Districts had advanced knowledge of how to apply best practices towards sustaining progress in student learning outcomes across all grade levels. Most of these best practices involved principals’ encouraging a collective review of student achievement data during weekly and monthly meetings that required elementary teachers to observe newly implemented district requirements. Elementary teachers participating actively in a PLC also gained advanced knowledge of their instructional practices and received adequate principal feedback concerning their instruction.

Artifacts that were submitted to support their claims included documentation from grade level PLC agendas, PLC binders, master schedule, staff meeting agendas, pictures of school events, data analysis sheets, minutes from PLC meetings, PLC notes, and CFAs



that were unique to the collaborative school culture as well as a master schedule, PLC schedule, a 100-day plan. These documents provided a better understanding of the importance leadership practices used to support a sustainable professional learning community. They also, provided an accurate representation of the process of creating sustainability through collaboration, having a clear focus, using data to drive instruction, and having accountability practices in place. One example is Principal #2 schools' 100-day plan; it represents the goals set for implementation and key actions that both effective leaders and teachers take during the first hundred days of implementation of a PLC.

### **Summary**

This chapter focused on the data and the key findings regarding the three research questions used to guide this study. The chapter included an examination of interviews conducted with five principals and 21 elementary teachers regarding their perceptions of the leadership practices need to support the development and sustainability of a collaborative school environment. Through an intense interview process with elementary principals and teachers from five Antelope Valley school districts descriptive themes were identified and studied.

Thematically, collaboration and focus held a strong presence while data-driven instruction and teacher accountability had high visible presence in the coded interview data. One-on-one interviews with principals and focus groups interviews with elementary teachers suggested that collaboration, focus on student learning, data-driven decisions, and accountability remains a central feature of developing and sustaining a collaborative culture. All the principals and teachers had similar ideas and perceptions about the most

important leadership practices used in a PLC. Leadership practices that support the development and sustainability of a collaborative school environment includes:

- Collaboration and supporting teachers through developing capacity from growth
- Having a focus on the right issues and building a clear purpose
- Data-driven instructional decisions during planning to impact teacher and student learning
- Accountability for individual and group goals through sharing practices and student results

Collaborative communities require that principals and elementary teachers develop effective leadership skills and practices, and acquire the knowledge necessary to build upon professional learning. Specific to elementary teachers, collaborative community growth and sustainability entails that active participation in a PLC involves the continued development of best practices to improve both data-driven decisions and instructional practices and teacher accountability structures. Both principals and teachers in this study agree that it is extremely important for all involved in the process of building a collaborative community to have an intense focus on established goals. It is also equally important to build deprivatization through the process of sharing and opening up about classroom instructional practices and student learning.

The following chapter, Chapter V, discusses these findings in more detail. The chapter also explores unexpected findings, conclusions, implications for action, and recommendations for further research. The chapter then wraps up the research with concluding remarks and reflections.



## **CHAPTER V: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This chapter reviewed the purpose of the study, research questions, methodology, population, and sample. The chapter then described the major findings, conclusions from the findings, implication for action, recommendations for further research, and concluding remarks.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to discover the principal leadership practices perceived as supporting the development of a professional learning community and a sustainable collaborative culture. In addition, it was the purpose of this study to examine to teacher practices that elementary school teachers in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community.

### **Research Questions**

This study sought to provide an in-depth study of the practices that elementary school principals and teachers perceive as important in the implementation and sustainability of professional learning communities.

1. What leadership practices do elementary school principals perceive as important for supporting the development of a professional learning community in Antelope Valley Districts?
2. What leadership practices do elementary principals perceive as important to support a sustainable collaborative school culture in Antelope Valley Districts?

3. What principal leadership practices do elementary school teachers perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community in Antelope Valley Districts?

### **Methods**

The sources used to gather data for this qualitative study were audiotaped semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and a collection of artifacts to support the claims of principals and teachers. These interviews and artifacts enabled the researcher to collect data on the perceptions of elementary school principals and teachers regarding principal leadership practices used to support the development and sustainability of a collaborative school environment. Triangulation of the data increases the validity of the study as it allows the researcher to analyze different dimensions of the same phenomenon. This data collection process assisted the researcher with presenting the perceptions of selected elementary school principals and teachers in five elementary schools in the Antelope Valley area, and allowed the researcher to analyze themes and patterns that highlighted the practices that contributed to the success of their collaborative school communities.

### **Population**

The population for the study encompassed elementary principals and teachers in school districts across the state of California that were implementing professional learning communities. According to the California Department of Education, there were over 5,800 elementary schools in the state of California (CDE, 2015), and 80% of these schools (approximately 4,640 schools) are implementing professional learning

communities. The 4,640 schools implementing professional learning communities were the population for this study.

According to McMillian and Schumacher (2010), “a target population is a group of elements or cases, whether individuals, objects, or events, that conform to specific criteria and to which we intend to generalize the results of the research” (p. 129). The target population for this study was all elementary school principals and teachers from elementary school districts in Southern California. For the purpose of this study, the accessible populations were principals and teachers of elementary schools in the Antelope Valley, which is situated in the northwest corner of Los Angeles County just south of the Kern County border; who had been implementing and working in professional learning communities for 3 or more years. Thus, due to the geographical proximity to the researcher, monetary constraint, and convenience the Antelope Valley area was selected. According to Privitera (2014), a researcher can draw a smaller subset from the accessible targeted participants with whom the researcher is in close proximity.

### **Sample**

Purposeful sampling was conducted to identify the participants and allowed the researcher to learn and obtain in-depth information regarding the perceptions of what elementary school principals and teachers believe to be important practices use to support the development and sustainability of professional learning communities. Purposeful sampling allowed the researcher to “capture and describe central themes” providing the researcher with a rich description of the participants’ perceptions (Patton, 2002, p. 234). Additionally, several criteria were developed for identifying and selecting individuals that had experience developing and sustaining a collaborative school culture. Criteria

included years at their current school site and the number of years implementing professional learning communities.

The sample included principals who were identified by their assistant superintendent to have strong knowledge of the implementation of PLCs and who meet the selection criteria of the study. Ten principals who were recommended by their assistant superintendent received an email invitation to complete a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix B). Purposeful sampling was conducted to identify the participants. A purposeful sample is typically designed to select a small number of cases that could yield the most information about a particular phenomenon (Teddlie, 2007). After the questionnaire response data had been analyzed, five principals in the sample were identified through stratified purposeful sampling. Stratified purposeful sampling was used to identify samples within samples (Patton 2002). The researcher purposefully identified five principals with the most training and years of experience with PLC implementation. The researcher called each principal to ask if they were willing to participate in the study. If they agreed, an interview time was reserved and the Informed Consent and Bill of Right's documents that had been approved by Brandman University's Institutional Review Board were resent via email.

The sample also included five focus groups made up of four to five teachers recommended by their principals, from different school districts in the Antelope Valley. After the one-on-one interview, principals recommend teachers from their school site to participate in a focus group discussion based on the following criteria: (a) been at their site 3 or more years, (b) participates in a grade level PLC, (c) been a part of a grade level PLC for 3 or more years. An email was sent to each recommended teacher inviting them

to participate in the study. The email provided information about the research, the informed consent form, the Participant's Bill of Rights and a copy of the focus group questions. If teachers agreed to participate, an interview time was reserved, and before the interview was conducted the researcher met with the teachers to describe the purpose, procedures and risk of the study. Teachers were also assured of their confidentiality, and their right to opt out of the study at any time.

### **Major Findings**

The research for this study produced various findings regarding the perceptions of elementary principals as to the leadership practices used to supporting the development of a professional learning community and a sustainable collaborative culture. The study also identified the principal leadership practices that elementary school teachers in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community. The intent of each research question was to discover the principal leadership practices perceived as supporting a sustainable collaborative school culture. In addition, this study focused on identifying patterns and themes related to the principal leadership practices that had the greatest impact on the development and sustainability of professional learning communities.

Similar comments contributed by principals and teachers during the interviews and focus group discussions were grouped together and used to identify major themes and categories to produce these findings. The practices used to support the development and sustainable collaborative community that principals and teachers stated were reported in this chapter. Several research questions revealed common responses around the major



themes of collaboration, focus, data-driven instruction, and accountability. In each case where this occurred, findings regarding these themes were reported.

This research study produced findings consistent with the educational research on practices used to support the development and sustainability of a collaborative school community. Findings from this study were compared with findings presented in the review of literature.

### **Research Question One**

Research Question One: What leadership practices do elementary school principals perceive as important for supporting the development of a PLC in the Antelope Valley School District? Similar comments contributed by the principals during the interviews were grouped together and then used to identify related themes and categories. This research study produced meaningful findings consistent with the educational research on leadership practices and the impact they have on the development of professional learning communities. The review of the literature was used to compare the findings from the qualitative data.

**Findings related to collaboration.** Principals included in this study all stated that promoting the practice of collaboration was important in the development of a PLC. The findings show that regular collaboration with peers helps to create a collaborative learning environment that includes all stakeholders involved in the process, and through this process administrators and teachers are able to participate in discussions focused on the agreed goals for school improvement. The literature review supported this perception that collaboration with peers is important to the development of a PLC. R. Anderson (2012), and Michelen (2011) discussed that the key to healthy development in an

organization is for the leader to promote collaboration. This finding regarding the principal's role in supporting collaboration aligns with the current body of knowledge of past research that examined important practices in developing a professional learning community. Marzano et al. (2005) and Waters et al. (2003) found that the principal's role in professional communities is vital to the development of a collaborative team's success.

**Findings related to having a clear focus.** Principals also indicated that having a clear focus was important and necessary in the development of a PLC. Having a clearly stated focus on the goals and vision of the school and continuously pursuing it regularly was commonly perceived as an important practice for principals in supporting the development of a PLC. Prior research supports this perception. Many (2010) and Voelkel (2011) described having a focus and communicating it to staff encouraged an understanding and develop collective commitments. Principals described how having a laser-like focus on the goals during PLC meetings to be the core to developing a collaborative community. Dufour and Marzano (2011) and Frisk and Larson (2011) found that in the early stages of the development of professional learning communities there must be a collaborative focus to ensure continuous community growth. The artifacts indicated a strong focus on principals' supporting and providing the time for weekly and monthly collaboration time, and documents show an alignment with collaboration and staff being required to focus on the collective goals. Principals shared artifacts that represented their support of regular collaboration and ongoing communication with staff with a focus on student improvement goals.

**Findings related to a data-driven environment.** The five principals also stated that having a data-driven environment was also necessary for the development of a PLC.

All the principals involved in this study stated they analyzed student achievement data to provide feedback to teachers that assisted them with making adjustments to support student learning, to help support teacher growth and learning, and to making collective academic decisions with the leadership team. The findings showed that analyzing data to drive instruction, supported the principal's ongoing work with staff, and assisted with the development of collective commitments to improve instruction and student academic achievement. Many authorities support the perception to that data analysis will improve student learning. Dufour and Mattos (2013) and Wiseman (2008) discuss the importance of principals supporting student learning by focusing on the collective analysis of student academic data. Burns and Gibbons (2013) and Strahan (2003) also noted when principals create data analysis environments in their schools this improves the academic outcomes for students because the entire school community is focused on student learning.

**Findings related to accountability.** All the principals agreed that their training helped to support their implementation of PLCs at their school site by guiding their teachers through the process of building deprivatization in order to share of what goes on in their classroom with PLC team members. The research supported the perception to have accountability and a data-driven focus to develop a PLC. These findings contribute to the body of knowledge by building on past research regarding practices needed to embed PLCS in the school culture. Fullan (2007) and Williams (2013) confirms that principals have to create a community of engagement where grade-level teams are part of the decision-making process; accountable for using assessment data to monitor student progress and drive instructional practices; and where collaboration is embedded in the learning process and taught on the job by mentoring and reflective practice.

## **Research Question Two**

Research Question Two: What leadership practices do elementary principals perceive as important to support a sustainable collaborative school culture in the Antelope Valley School Districts? Similar comments contributed by the principals during the interviews were grouped together and then used to identify related themes and categories. This research study produced meaningful findings consistent with the educational research on leadership practices that support the sustainability of a collaborative school culture. The review of the literature was used to compare the findings from the qualitative data.

**Findings related to collaboration.** The five principals in this study stated that supporting collaboration was important to sustain a collaborative school culture. From the principals' perspectives, making time for collaboration should be a priority as well as putting structures in place that protect that time. One such structure was creating a protected set day of the week and time for teachers to meet in grade level PLC meetings. Principals stated that providing the resources needed to embed collaboration in the school culture supports ongoing teacher collaboration. For example, principals allocated funds from the school budget to pay teachers 2 extra hours a week to conduct grade level collaborative meetings. In this way, principals felt they were supporting ongoing teacher collaboration. The literature also supported the finding of the practice of supporting collaboration. Dufour et al. (2016) stressed the importance of collaboration and for school and district level leaders to provide teachers with the time necessary to do the PLC work.

**Findings related to having a clear focus.** During the principals' interviews having a clear focus on the collective goals was also identified as important in supporting

a sustainable collaborative community. Principals in the study shared that in the beginning stages of sustaining a PLC they had to develop collective goals and a clear focus on what it takes to improve the collaborative community and throughout the implementation process communicate and often revisit that collective focus. Principals in the study expressed that the success of their collaborative community had to do with their consistency of staying focused on the goals. This is consistent with what the research identified as a specific benefit of having a clear focus. DuFour and Marzano (2011), Marzano et al. (2005), and Sullivan (20012) assert that the ability of the principals to have a focus on clear goals and relentlessly pursue the school's purpose and priorities is vital to the success of a collaborative community.

**Findings related to a data-driven environment.** A data-driven environment was a significant theme in sustaining a collaborative community. The practice of regular analysis of data, as stated by principals, has been a factor in sustaining a collaborative community. The research supported the perception of having collective data inquiry in sustain a collaborative community. According to DuPont (2009) and Fullan (2014) it is the job of the principal to make sure teachers in a collaborative community are focusing on student data to address specific learning needs by monitoring progress and having accountability measures in place. Principals' in the study stated that because their teachers focused on data it helped to shape and develop what is going on in the classroom, supported the learning of students, and created a sense of community. Principals developed several data analysis structures to support the analysis of student academic data and assisted in the professional growth of teachers. One such collaborative structure was the grade level lesson study. During a lesson study substitute teachers were

used to release teachers for a half or whole day so a team could collectively analysis student data, plan interventions, and improve instructional practice based on a diagnosis of the data. This is consistent with Wu et al.'s (2013) study on professional learning communities and practices principals implement to support the analysis of student data. Analysis of lesson study agendas and data analysis planning forms strongly supported principals' comments about data analysis to support the goals for student academic achievement. The lesson study documents and data analysis tools gave a clear picture of how principals use school resources to provide collaboration time for teachers to focus on the needs of students and on the strategies they need to implemented for improving instruction.

**Findings related to accountability.** Principals described that one of the primary benefits of collaboration is it develops a sense of individual and group accountability. Analysis of principals' memos and teachers' weekly PLC agendas, norms, and grade-level expectations supported the principals' comments on grade-level and individual expectations and accountability to support student learning. The findings show that principals had clear expectations for collaborative meetings and collective data inquiry. The principals' ability to hold everyone accountable for implementation had a positive impact on teachers' instructional practices and personal growth as educators. The literature review supports the findings that principals have to hold everyone accountability for the goals in order to create sustainability of the collaborative school culture. The findings are consistent with Dufour et al. (2016), Schechter (2012), and Wiseman (2008) conclusion that success of a collaborative community requires principals to build collective commitment and accountability with the school environment.

Additional, consistent beliefs emerged as principals in the study stated that everyone is accountable to the collective goals they agreed upon to improve instruction and student learning. These findings align with the current body of knowledge regarding the leadership practices needed to lay the groundwork for sustaining a collaborative culture.

### **Research Question Three**

Research Question Three: What principal leadership practices do elementary school teachers perceive as important to creating a sustainable professional learning community in Antelope Valley Districts? Similar comments contributed by the teachers during the focus group discussions were grouped together and then used to identify related themes and categories. This research study produced meaningful findings consistent with the educational research on principal leadership practices and the impact they have on creating a sustainable professional learning communities. The review of the literature was used to compare the findings from the qualitative data.

**Findings related to collaboration.** All teachers indicated that the principal leadership practice of supporting collaboration was important to creating a sustainable professional learning community. Focus groups share that their principals honored their collaboration time and often stressed the importance of meeting weekly. Teachers who worked together in collaborative teams expressed that their principal implemented structures that embedded collaboration in their school culture. One such structure is the weekly grade level PLC time where teachers meet to plan instruction and intervention. Focus groups felt principal leadership support of their collaboration time conveys the importance of collaboration and created a positive attitude towards collaboration. Prior research supports this finding. Schmoker (2006), Sullivan (2012), and Warrilow (2012)

emphasize that if principals want to promote collaboration they have to actively support collaborative teams and work at building a positive school environment. The analysis of lesson plans, lesson study documents, meeting agendas, and student intervention forms provided evidence that ongoing collaborative structures allow sustainability to happen if teachers are given a focus and the time to meet.

**Findings related to having a clear focus.** The teachers in this study stated that promoting a clear focus was a principal leadership practice that assisted in the sustainability of their grade level PLC. Focus groups discussed how the effect of their collaborative work was significant because their principal established a routine of focusing on what was best for students. Focus groups noted that their principals' were always emphasizing a focus on the goals, and stressed the importance of focusing on the goals during weekly meetings. The authorities support these findings of having a clear focus. Avolio and Yammarino (2008), M. K. Burns and Gibbons (2013), and Dufour et al. (2016) discussed that the success of a professional learning community happens when teachers and administrator of a clear focus on the collective goals and often revisits those goals.

**Findings related to a data-driven environment.** Teachers in this study also reported that the principal leadership practice of using data-driven inquiry to improve classroom instructional practice was also important in creating a sustainable professional learning community. Teachers noted that their principals used student academic data to analyze what training or workshops teachers need to improve student learning outcomes and assist teachers with their on professional growth. They found that the process of their principal analyzing student academic data, observing their instruction, and provided the



necessary training and workshops has assisted them in delivering the best instruction, has been instrumental in students improving academically, and has also made their job much easier. The literature review concurs with these findings as suggested by DuPont (2009), and Eaker and Keating (2008) principals use evidence from data and classroom observations of the collaborative community to improve student learning and also to improve and inform classroom practice.

**Findings related to accountability.** Teachers also refer to the principal leadership practice of holding them accountable to the school's and group's goals and expectations as important to sustaining their PLCs. Teachers also state that being held accountable by their principals for the entire grade level and not just their own students have been a powerful experience to the growth as a school community. In this way, teachers felt that they were all accountable for attending PLC meetings, having PLC documentation, and using data to promote the success of all students. Other research backs these findings. Dufour et al. (2016), Fullan (2014), and Michelen (2011) that part of the responsibility of a principal leading a PLC is to develop the capacity of others to succeed at holding oneself accountable for the expectations. The artifacts submitted indicated a strong emphasis on collectively conducting data inquiry and group accountability for implementing of instruction. Principals required that teachers look at student data quarterly and the forms showed that an extensive intervention plan was created for the students that needed extra support. These findings align with the body of knowledge regarding the leadership practices that are important to increase the capacity of all stakeholders to create a sustainable collaborative environment.

### **Unexpected Findings**

Unexpected findings emerge in all research. However, there are benefits of gaining knowledge from unexpected findings (Yusko, 2014). There were unexpected findings from both principals and teachers that resulted from this study.

The first unexpected finding was the common perceptions and comments by principals about collegial collaboration opportunities and district level support. The principals collectively made several comments related to the support needed by their colleagues and district level administration to support the development and sustainability of their collaborative communities. The principals reported that it was important for their district to support them in several ways during the early stages of developing a collaborative community: (a) allow principals to attend PLC conferences, trainings, and workshops that support their efforts in developing and sustaining their collaborative community, (b) providing collaborative time to meet with other principals and have collegial conversations about PLCs, (c) making sure the everyone in the district that has a connection to schools understands the PLC process and how a PLC works. The review of literature indicates that it is important that district level management support principals by providing professional development time to work collaboratively with other principals to build leadership capacity and growth. As stated by Fullan (2014), “the point is that district collaboratives present new opportunities for principals to learn from each other on a much wider scale for the benefit of their own schools and districts, in doing so, they can become better change leaders” (p. 113).

During the interviews, all principals referred to the support they needed to be able to move forward in the development and sustainability of their collaborative community. Some of the comments about the level of support needed were as follow:

- “My district had many follow-up trainings and meetings to help facilitate the PLC [process] within the entire school district” (Principal #2, personal communication, December 5, 2016).
- “My district supported principals by doing a lot of work with the DuFour’s, principals went to the PLC Solution Tree trainings and workshops, and then after trainings we had expectations with our district that we would implement PLCs at our school sites” (Principal #1, personal communication, December 1, 2016).
- “It has been really challenging to go from a district that was well versed and trained in PLCs from the top down...and coming over to a district that the support and structures of PLCs were not really in place and everyone was not well trained” (Principal #3, personal communication, December 12, 2016).
- “The time my district gave me to meet with other principals across the district have supported my instructional leadership, without that support the implementation process would have been very difficult.” (Principal # 5, personal communication, December 16, 2016).
- “My district made PLCs a district-wide initiative and a stated non-negotiable; everyone was required to use the PLC model; every department and school and staff received some form of training” (Principal #5, personal communication, December 16, 2016).
- “I think it would be important for my district to bring school and district together monthly for collaborative meetings and PLC training so we are all on the same page. This is important so when you visit a school campus or send

out school PD you know what we are working on as a district and everyone is on the same page.” (Principal #3, personal communication, December 12, 2016).

The unexpected finding on principal support was by far the most frequently stated concern principals shared for developing and sustaining their PLCs. Principals wanted to ensure that the study reported on the importance of district support during the implementation process of PLCs, the difficulty of implementation when they do not have the support, and the problems that arise when school and district level administration is not fully trained and versed in PLCs. This finding was unexpected in that principals connect their collaborative culture success to the district’s understanding of PLCs and the support given to principals.

A second unexpected finding that was discovered during interviews was obstacles teachers stated are a barrier to creating a sustainable collaborative community. Teachers shared that there were two obstacles that have a negative aspect on their collaborative meetings: (a) when meetings are cut short because of district alternative agendas, and (b) required PLC documents that take the focus away from the PLC work. All teachers that they face shared that there are times when the district requires the principals to follow an alternative agenda that takes up their PLC time and causes them to lose valuable PLC time. While some elementary teachers praised the principal for respecting their time, “sometimes it is just not enough ... because she will have an agenda ... from the district she has to present to the entire staff that takes up PLC time” (Focus Group #3, personal communication, December 15, 2016). Other teachers shared that when they are not given the time needed to collaborate it leaves them with the only option of meeting informally

and this is usually in the morning when they are trying to prepare the classroom before students arrive.

During the interviews, teachers referred to how these obstacles are a barrier to sustaining their collaborative community. Some of the comments about the obstacles were as follow:

- “I want the district to consider streamlining the reflective process so the teachers can really spend their time making their practices better and not be bogged down with the paperwork. Our time should be spent on planning and growing and not paperwork” (Focus Group # 2, personal communication, December 13, 2016).
- “When she [the principal] presents things from the district it is only supposed to be an hour, but it might end up being an hour and thirty minutes or an hour and forty-five minutes, leaving us with only fifteen to thirty minutes of collaboration time” (Focus Group #3, personal communication, December 15, 2016).
- “Even though our principal honors our time she is required to present things coming from the district that cuts into some or all of our collaborative time. I think it is important for the district to come up with a plan that does not cause teachers to miss out on valuable collaborative time” (Focus Group #4, personal communication, December 19, 2016).
- “The paperwork we have to fill out during our PLC meetings is often a barrier to the collaborative conversations we have, or attention is taking away from what we are focused on by making sure we write it on the forms the

district requires. It not only causes a break in our focus on student learning and instruction; it also takes up too much of our collaborative meeting time” (Focus Group #1, personal communication, December 2, 2016).

- “When the district doesn’t honor our set collaborative time we have to meet informally and this is usually right before school starts. This is such a challenge to really focus on the PLC work that we need to accomplish because most teachers are trying to get ready before your class starts. It’s just not enough time and it sends a bad message about district goals” (Focus Group #3, personal communication, December 15, 2016).

The research review points to the importance of providing teachers with the time to meet. In *Learning by Doing* (DuFour et al., 2016), it is the responsibility of school and district leaders to provide teachers with the time they need to do the work of a PLCs. However, interview data obtained from elementary teachers actively participating in a PLC identified complications related to how principals delivered district agendas and the documentation required during their PLC meetings. For these elementary teachers, the principal must occasionally present information that is required by district level management. In these instances, principals leading weekly and monthly PLC meetings may leave elementary teachers with only a limited amount of time to develop collaborative strategies for improving student learning outcomes. Teachers also stated that the PLC documents they are required to use during PLC meetings often take away for their collective conversations and cause their meetings to be shortened because it takes up so much time just to complete the forms. Several teachers noted that when they meet during their 2 hours protected PLC time they have about 30minutes total in breaks

because they have to stop their conversations and write down what was discussed on the PLC forms. Artifacts submitted to support their claims included PLC agendas and sign-in sheets. These documents provided a clear picture of the obstacles that were a barrier to teachers creating a sustainable collaborative community.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined the leadership practices principals and teachers perceived as important in developing, creating, and sustaining a collaborative community. The data obtained in this qualitative study supported the following four conclusions about the perceptions of principals and teachers of the leadership practices that support the development and creation of a sustainable collaborative community: (a) the practice of supporting teacher collaboration, (b) having a clear focus on the collective goals and student success, (c) creating a data-driven environment where there is an inquiry process to analyze data to improve instructional practices and student learning outcomes, and (d) having transparency and accountability to collective goals and group responsibility. Based on the findings of this study and the literature review it is concluded that practices that impact the development and sustainability of a collaborative community are also supported by the literature review and are as follows:

#### **First Research Question**

Based on the findings from the first research question and the literature it is concluded that principals that are successful in PLCs promote collaboration as a way to involve all stakeholders in the creating of collaborative structures and empower everyone in the collaborative community to share in the decision-making process. These principals successfully promoted collaboration by supporting the learning experiences of staff,

guiding the understanding of PLCs, and supporting the stages of development of a PLC. It is necessary to the success of the PLC that the principal use collaboration to build successful relationships throughout the organization.

Principals were successful in developing PLC by involving others in creating a clear focus and developing collective goals. Findings were consistent with the leadership practice of having a clear focus on the goals as important in the success of developing a PLC. It is concluded that principals developing a successful PLC engaged with others to create a shared vision and clear focus goals. For the success of the PLC, principal's communication of these collective goals needs to be purposeful and ongoing.

Principals developing PLCs must promote staff conversations around instructional practices, student data, and what was best for students. Principals that assist teachers in growing professionally by providing lesson studies and staff professional development that focus on data-driven instruction contribute to teachers improving best practices and sharing classroom data to make collective decisions on meeting student's academic needs. Principals who hold teachers accountable for the success of the PLC by focusing on the four questions that guide collective responsibility to the goals create successful PLC. These four questions were:

- What do we want all students to learn?
- How do we know students have fully learned it?
- What will we do when students have not learned it?
- What will we do to extend the knowledge of students that have learned it?



Principals who do not promote collective commitments to improving student academic outcomes through focusing on the established goals, improving instructions, and using data to drive inquiry will not be successful.

### **Second Research Question**

Findings identified the following leadership practices used by principals to support a sustainable collaborative community: (a) the practice providing the resources that supporting teacher collaboration, (b) working with staff to develop a clear focus on the goals, (c) used data inquiry process to improve instructional and student learning, and (d) emphasized individual and group. Therefore, it is concluded that principals must use school resources to provide staff the time to collaborate. Collaborative communities benefitted from principals that used school resources to provide time for collaboration, one such way was paying for subs to provide release time for teachers to collaborate and plan instruction. DuFour et al. (2010), in *Learning by Doing*, reported that when teams work collaboratively it allows transformation to take hold in an organization when the leader empowers others, disperses leadership, and models collaboration and its practices. The work done in collaborative communities empowered staff and developed teacher leaders that were encouraged and motivated by grade level peers to develop their leadership skills during collaborative meetings. Principals were successful that spent time with teachers working together to develop a vision and clear focus. Having a clear focus on established goals and continuously communicating those goals contributed to the sustainability of the collaborative community. Principals spent time regularly encouraging collaboration and communicating a focus on the goals.

Principals of successful collaborative communities sustained their culture by establishing accountability and building a commitment to analyze student data to improve instruction and student success. Principals who required teachers in collaborative meetings to use data to diagnose students' academic needs improved classroom instruction. Emphasized accountability to the collective goals ensured sustainability of the culture. This practice also contributed to the development of transparency and deprivatization of instructional practices used in the classroom. Waters et al. 2003 agree that transparency between teachers happens when they are involved in developing and implementing responsibility for instruction and assessments.

### **Third Research Question**

Findings identified the following principal leadership practices teachers perceived as important in creating a sustainable PLC: (a) principals must protect and honor teacher collaboration time, (b) working with staff to develop a clear focus on the goals, (c) used data inquiry process to improve instructional and student learning, and (d) emphasized individual and group. Therefore, it is concluded that sustaining a PLC requires that principals must encourage teachers to participate often in collaborative team meetings. PLCs were successful that had teachers whose principals required them to meet in weekly grade level PLCs that had a clear focus on their collective goals. Principals of successful PLC must honor the time for teachers to attend collaborative meetings and support teachers in developing and improving instructional practices in their classrooms. Districts need to develop structures that support teachers and principals in their efforts to develop regular collaboration to increase teachers' capacity to grow as professionals, gain new knowledge from one another, and increase their capacity to achieve established goals. Lin

(2013) noted that it is important for principals to provide the time for teachers to have open dialogue, share instructional practices, and collectively learn in order to sustain professional learning communities.

Principals of successful PLCs must to support student achievement in three ways; (a) by establishing collective responsibility for student achievement, (b) using data inquiry to address the needs of the learning environment, and (c) providing training for teacher growth. Findings were consistent with principals that emphasized how important the process of collecting data, discussing data, and using the results of those collective conversations to guide decision making that supported student achievement. DuFour et al. (2010) also emphasize that sustaining professional learning communities require principals to provide teachers with the ongoing training needed to support working together in collaborative teams to establish collective instructional goals that build on member accountability for improving student achievement. Principals' have to support the PLC structures that are more likely to change the practice of working in isolation. Principals must to promote collective responsibility to the school goals and move teachers from the practice of working in isolation to the practice of working solely as a collaborative group.

### **Implications for Action**

Professional learning communities in elementary schools require principals and teachers to use practices that develop and create sustainable collaborative communities that meet the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The data and prior research clearly showed that schools with successful collaborative communities had district leaders who supported professional learning community initiatives and district-wide PLC trained staff.

Principals leading school change by establishing a collaborative community have to develop specific leadership practices and skills to address the needs of their school community that sustain strong professional learning communities. Principals and teachers that were successful in this endeavor were committed to building collaborative teams that had a clear focus on the goals and used student data to drive the decision-making process in their organization. The interviews and the conclusions of this study supported the following implications on the future actions of educational leaders that are building collaborative communities:

- School district level management (superintendents, assistant superintendents, and directors) must support principals and teachers implementing PLCs by developing a plan that ensures that district level personnel that visit, interact, or impact schools are trained and are well versed in PLCs and the PLC work that is done at schools so that they are on the same page as the and understand the work that is going on in the schools.
- School district level management must create monthly professional development opportunities so principals can meet collaboratively with other principals to promote and develop collaborative structures that build the capacity of leadership and support the growth of principal instructional leadership.
- Professional learning communities work when principals and teachers are trained before the initial implementation phase and are sustained with ongoing training. Therefore, school districts must be committed to providing the

professional development needed to support the ongoing efforts of principals and teachers.

- District leadership and principals must streamline the process of documentation during PLC team meetings by creating a task force of teachers, district leadership, and principals to address the issue of paperwork that teachers are required to complete during collaborative teamwork so that the paperwork does not take away from their collective conversations and time needed to make important decisions for student success.
- District level management must address how teacher collaboration will be supported and not interrupted by district agendas that decrease the quality of teacher conversations and the collaborative process. Districts must create a PLC calendar that protects teacher collaboration time so teachers can do the work necessary in a PLC.
- School principals must create structure in their schools that practice shared leadership and shared decision making through the PLC process.
- The school boards of education must support districts by approving professional development that is designed to meet the needs of principals and teachers implementing professional learning communities.
- Colleges and universities must design educational leadership programs in line with the tenets of this study with a particular focus on building collective goals that impact student achievement.

- Colleges and universities must design educational leadership programs that model how to support the development and sustainability of a collaborative community.
- The researcher will contribute and share the results with the educational community through professional development, conferences, and research articles.

It is important to understand the district implementing professional learning communities must address how the PLC will be supported over time. Professional learning community implementation requires adequate resources and planning to meet the needs of district goals.

### **Recommendation for Further Research**

Based on the findings of this research investigation, the following recommendations for further research are suggested:

- This study focused on the perceptions of practices principals and teachers at elementary schools that have been implementing PLCs for 3 or more years see as important to support the development and sustainability of a collaborative community. Consideration for further research can be conducted by shadowing principals during principal collaborative meetings and identifying the impact this has on supporting the implementation of successful professional learning communities.
- It is recommended that a qualitative study is replicated with superintendents and other central office leaders that have been implementing PLCs for 3 or

more years to discover what practices they perceive as important for developing and sustaining a collaborative community.

- It is recommended that another qualitative study can be conducted with high school principals and teachers at schools that have been implementing PLCs for 3 or more years to discover what practices they perceive as important to support the development and sustainability of a high school collaborative community.
- A Delphi study conducted with an expert panel on successful professional learning communities is needed to generate a consensus on how PLCs are successful in improving student academic achievement.
- It is recommended that a study is replicated with new teachers at elementary schools that have been implementing PLCs for 3 or more years to discover what practices they perceive as important to support a sustainable collaborative community.
- It is recommended that a study is replicated with elementary teachers and principals at schools that have been implementing PLCs for less than one year to discover what practices they perceive as important to support the development of a collaborative community.
- A mixed method study is needed to examine outcome measures of students' data enrolled in schools implementing professional learning communities.
- It is recommended that a case study be conducted to examine the actual classroom practices of elementary teachers that have a successful impact they have on student learning outcomes.

- A qualitative study needs to be conducted by attending teacher collaborative meetings to examine actual teacher collaboration work to discover if these team collaboration meetings successfully improve student learning in the classroom.
- A more detailed study needs to be conducted on a large sample of principals to determine important principal responsibilities that improve teacher collaboration.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflections**

This study examined the common perceptions of principals and teachers to discover principal leadership practices that support the development of professional learning communities and a sustainable collaborative culture, and the principal leadership practices that school teaches in the Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating a sustainable PLC. The research study confirmed the practices principals need to develop and sustain a collaborative community and improve student achievement. The data and findings from this study contributed to the field of educational leadership by identifying leadership practices necessary to sustain a PLC. Additionally, the research contributed to the field of teacher learning by looking at the practices principals used to support teachers in sustainability PLCs of a. This data also showed the need for school districts to develop a plan to support principals and teachers as they do the work necessary to developing and sustaining a PLC. The end goal of this study was to contribute to the body of knowledge on principal and teacher practices used during the implementation of PLCs and what has worked to positively affect schools and the children they serve.



This research investigation has inspired this researcher, an elementary school principal, to work with my teachers in bringing about successful change in our school community. These principals and teachers have inspired this researcher and given her the confidence to look at her school's current situation and evolve all stakeholders in moving forward. As the researcher engaged in this study she did not realize how important the role of the principal was in developing, supporting, and guiding the collaborative community. The researcher has learned so much from the participants in this study. These professionals are dedicated to their school community, willing to do whatever it takes to positively impact student achievement. This study and the participants have had a positive influence on the researchers' faith in instructional leadership.

The research showed that both principals and teachers agreed collaboration was important in developing and sustaining a PLC. Equally, the significance of creating collective commitment, having a clear focus on the goals, and using student data to drive the decision-making process in their organization was clearly evident throughout the research. It is the researchers hope that the research can contribute to what we already know that teachers and principals need to build successful collaborative communities.

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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

SYNTHESIS MATRIX

<b>Common Themes</b>	<b>Sources</b>
<b>I. Principals as Transformational Leaders</b>	
a. Principals as transformational leadership	Avolio and Yammarino 2008; Bass 1985; Bromley and Kirschner-Bromley 2007; Burns 1978; Hartin-Iorio & Yeager 2011; Marzano, Waters, McNulty 2005; Warrilow 2009
b. Transformational and Transactional Leadership	Anderson and Ackerman-Anderson 2010; Bass and Avilio 1994; Burns 1978; Covey 1992; Senge 1996; The Transformation Leadership Report 2007
c. Leadership Sustainability	Dufour and Mattos 2013; Hipp and Huffman 2010; Jung and Avolio 2000; Leithwood 1994
<b>II. Principals in Professional Learning Communities</b>	
a. Importance, Sustainability, Effectiveness, and Responsibilities	Hargreaves, & Fink, 2003a; Wu, et al., 2013; and Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003
b. Principal case study and methods	Crossman & Crossman 2011; Dufour & Mattos, 2013; DeMatthews, 2014; Day & Sammons, 2013; Wang & Kensler, 2014; and Schechter, 2012
c. Development, International case studies and Evaluation	Schechter, 2012; and The Wallace Foundation, 2012
d. Collaborative outcomes and feedback	The Wallace Foundation, 2012; Cotton, 2003; Frisk & Larson, 2011; Schmoker, 2005
<b>III. Teachers in Professional Learning Communities</b>	
a. Commitment and development process	Avalos, 2011; Strahan, 2003; Stevenson, 2014
b. Primary components	Stevenson, et al., 2014; and Cherkowski, 2012
c. Example case study and other practices	Williams, 2013; Robbins & Aydede, 2009;
d. Sustainability	Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2012; Effeney & Davis, 2013; Lin, 2013
<b>IV. Community Assistance in Professional Learning Communities</b>	



a. Teachers and Principals in Collaborative Action	Thessin and Starr, 2011; Hargreaves and Fink, 2003b;
b. State Collaborative Action	The New York City Community Schools Coalition, 2013; Thessin and Starr, 2013; Taylor, et al., 2013; Clift, et al., 1992
c. Collaborative Leadership in University Education	O'Leary, Bingham, & Choi, 2010; Officer, et al., 2013;
d. Collaborative Leadership b/w elementary and university education	Officer, et al., 2013; Day and Sammons, 2013; Bryk, et al., 2010; and Nielsen, et al., 2010
<b>V. Technology in Professional Communities</b>	
a. Introducing technological innovations in PLCs	O'Leary, et al., 2010; Bausmith and Barry, 2011;
b. Technology and teaching teachers	Anderson and Herr, 2011; Bausmith and Barry, 2011; Wu, et al., 2013
c. Methods	Anderson and Herr, 2011; Signorelli and Reed, 2011;
<b>V. Elementary Professional Learning Communities</b>	
a. Benefits seen in case studies	Strahan, 2003; Burns and Gibbons, 2013; Wu, et al., 2013
b. Issues seen in case studies	Strahan, 2003; Lee, Zhang, and Yin, 2013; The New York Community Schools Coalition, 2013; Heck, & Hallinger, 2010; and Coggshall, et al., 2012

## APPENDIX B

### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

# Common Practices of Elementary Principals of Collaborative Communities

## Demographic Questionnaire

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCHER**

I am Regina Tillman, a doctoral student from Brandman University in the Organizational Leadership in Education Department. The data collected in this study will contribute to the completion of my doctoral dissertation. You are invited to participate in this research study because you currently work at a school that is implementing professional learning communities. The purpose of this study is to determine the most prevalent and necessary leadership practices of principals that create sustainable collaborative communities.

### **PROCEDURES**

By participate in this study, I agree to participate in the following:

1. An online survey. The survey is designed to be complete within 20 minutes
2. A one-on-one audiotaped recorded interview. The interview is designed to be completed within 60 minutes.

### **POTENTIAL RISK AND DISCOMFORTS**

The design of this survey instrument has been completed in a manner to reduce potential risks and discomforts.

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

This study is designed to learn from your experiences as an educator and/or principal while working at a school that has and is implementing professional learning communities. The results of this study could be used to help new and experienced educational leaders focus their time developing desired practices and structures needed to create and sustain collaborative environments in their school organizations.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

All information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Regina Tillman, the principal researcher, will be the sole person with access to the data collected.

## IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any question or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

Regina Tillman (Principal Researcher)

Cell: (562) 595-3296

[ginate20@aol.com](mailto:ginate20@aol.com)

Dr. Donna Sonnenburg (Dissertation Chair)

[sonnenbu@brandman.edu](mailto:sonnenbu@brandman.edu)

Dear Participant,

Thank you for participating in this research by completing this questionnaire.

Your participation in this study will help to identify the most prevalent and common leadership practices needed to create and sustain collaborative environments in school organizations.

### **1. How long have you been an elementary school principal?**

0-2 years

3-5 years

6-8 years

9-11 years

12+ years

### **2. How long have you been a principal at your current school site?**

0-2 years

3-5 years

6+ years

### **3. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?**

M.A. / M.S.

Ed.D / Ed.S / Ph.D

ABD

### **4. what type of community is your school site?**

Urban

Suburban

Rural

### **5. How long have you participated in and personally implemented your school's professional learning community?**

0-1 years

1-2 years

2-3 years

3-4 years  
5+ years

**6. How long has your school site been implementing professional learning communities (PLC)?**

0-1 years  
1-2 years  
2-3 years  
3-4 years  
5+ years

**7. How many teachers are currently employed at your school site?**

10-15  
15-20  
20-25  
25-30  
30+

**8. On average how many teachers are in a grade level PLC team at your school site?**

2-3  
3-4  
5-6  
6+

**9. Initially who implemented the PLC structures at your school site?**

Myself  
A principal before me

**10. Have you received any specialized training or professional development in the implementation of PLC?**

Yes  
No

If you answered yes, how many?

1-2 trainings or professional development workshops  
3 or more trainings or professional development workshops.

APPENDIX C

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCHER**

I am Regina Tillman, a doctoral student from Brandman University in the Organizational Leadership in Education Department. The data collected in this study will contribute to the completion of my doctoral dissertation. You are invited to participant in this research study because you currently work at a school that is implementing professional learning communities. The purpose of this study is to determine the most prevalent and necessary

leadership practices of principals and teachers that create sustainable collaborative communities.

## **PROCEDURES**

By participate in this study, I agree to participate in a one-on-one audiotaped recorded interview. The interview is designed to be completed within 60 minutes or less.

## **POTENTIAL RISK AND DISCOMFORTS**

The design of this survey instrument has been completed in a manner to reduce all potential risks and discomforts.

## **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

This study is designed to learn from your experiences as an educator and/or principal while working at a school that has and is implementing professional learning communities. The results of your ratings of the leadership behaviors and practices included in this study could be used to help new and experienced educational leaders focus their time developing desired structures needed to create and sustainable collaborative environments in their school organizations.

## **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Regina Tillman, the principal researcher, will be the sole person with access to the data collected.

## **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any question or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

Regina Tillman (Principal Researcher)

Cell: (562) 595-3296

[ginate20@aol.com](mailto:ginate20@aol.com)

Dr. Donna Sonnenburg (Dissertation Chair)

[sonnenbu@brandman.edu](mailto:sonnenbu@brandman.edu)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this Interview. As part of my dissertation research for the doctorate in Organizational Leadership at Brandman University, I am

interviewing with elementary principals in the Antelope Valley who have been successfully implementing professional learning communities for more than three years. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experience creating a professional learning community at your school site.

As you know there are many facets in professional learning community. Therefore, if you could focus your responses on the specific practices that you perceive as supporting the development of professional learning communities, practices that sustain a collaborative culture, and your perceived capacity in assisting your teachers in improving their instructional and professional practices in professional learning communities. The interview will take approximately 1 hour. There are a series of questions as well as some follow up questions for further clarification. All information gathered during this interview will remain confidential and data will not include any information about individuals or institutions. The data will be recorded and transcribed, and sent to you to check that ideas and thoughts were captured accurately. I would like to remind you of the participant's Bill of Rights that was provided to you with the informed consent. To make this discussion as comfortable as possible, at any point in this discussion you can ask that a question be skipped or entirely discontinue your participation in this interview

With your permission, this interview will be tape record to ensure that all ideas and thoughts are capture accurately.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Part I Background Information**

1. Please state your name, position, name of your school district, and where our interview is currently taking place.
2. Please share some information about your educational background?

## **Part II. Questions**

### ***Research Question 1.***

What practices do elementary school principals in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important for supporting the development of a professional learning community?

1. Please share with me the training you have had in PLC prior to implementation at your school. How did this prepare you to implement the PLC?

#### **Potential follow up question:**

1. Provide a specific example of what you learned at the training or professional development that helped you with the implementation of PLC?
2. Based on your knowledge and experience what do you believe to be the general concept and purpose of a PLC?

#### **Potential follow up question:**

1. Please describe how your school fits into that description?

### ***Research Question 2***

What leadership practices do elementary principals use to create and support sustainability, and embed collaboration into the school culture?

3. Think about your role and your influence in creating a collaborative community?

Share the practices you used to develop and support sustainability of the collaborative community.

**Potential follow up question:**

1. Provide a specific example?

2. Is there an artifact or any documentation that you can provide?

4. Describe the practices you used in the first year of developing PLC? Share how they have changed from your past practices?

**Potential follow up question:**

1. Please describe a specific practice or procedure you implemented?

2. Is there an artifact or any documentation that you can provide?

5. What practices do you think had the biggest impact on sustaining your collaborative community?

**Potential follow up question:**

1. What did you learn about PLC teams during this growth and what would be good for new principals to know?

2. Is there an artifact or any documentation that you can provide?

6. When you think about teacher collaboration; how has the PLC structures had an impact on teacher's instructional practices at you school site?

**Potential follow up question:**

1. What specific structures relate to PLC supported teacher collaboration?

2. Is there an artifact or any documentation that you can provide?



7. Tell me about the changes in teachers practices you've observed and believe were due to the PLC structures?

**Potential follow up question:**

1. Provide a specific example of these practices?

**Part III. Closing**

Are there any additional comments would like to add about your experiences with professional learning communities and the impact they have had on you professional and leadership practices?

This concludes our discussion.

Thank you very much for your time and support in completing my research. A transcript of this interview will be sent through email for your feedback. If you would like a copy of the final research findings once the university accepts the research, please contact me and I will send it to you.

Thank you again.

## APPENDIX D

### Focus Group Discussions

#### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCHER**

I am Regina Tillman, a doctoral student from Brandman University in the Organizational Leadership in Education Department. The data collected in this study will contribute to the completion of my doctoral dissertation. You are invited to participate in this research study because you currently work at a school that is implementing professional learning communities. The purpose of this study is to determine the most prevalent and necessary leadership practices of principals and teachers that create sustainable collaborative communities.

#### **PROCEDURES**

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in the following:

1. An audiotaped recorded focus group discussion.
2. The Discussion is designed to be completed within 60 minutes or less.

#### **POTENTIAL RISK AND DISCOMFORTS**

The design of this survey instrument has been completed in a manner to reduce all potential risks and discomforts.

#### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

This study is designed to learn from your experiences as an educator and/or principal while working at a school that has and is implementing professional learning communities. The results of your ratings of the leadership behaviors and practices included in this study could be used to help new and experienced educational leaders focus their time developing desired structures needed to create and sustainable collaborative environments in their school organizations.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Regina Tillman, the principal researcher, will be the sole person with access to the data collected.

#### **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any question or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:

Regina Tillman (Principal Researcher)  
Cell: (562) 595-3296  
[ginate20@aol.com](mailto:ginate20@aol.com)

Dr. Donna Sonnenburg (Dissertation Chair)  
[sonnenbu@brandman.edu](mailto:sonnenbu@brandman.edu)

**1. Do you agree to participate in the focus group discussion?**

Yes

No

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this focus group discussion. As part of my dissertation research for the doctorate in Organizational Leadership at Brandman University, I am holding focus group discussions with teachers in the Antelope Valley who have been recommended by their principals and have successfully participated in professional learning communities for three or more years. The purpose of this interview is to learn about your experiences in a professional learning community.

As you know there are many facets to professional learning communities. Therefore, if you could focus your responses on the specific structures of professional learning communities that you perceive as the most important to the success of your grade level PLC team and your capacity for improving you instructional and professional practices.

The interview will take approximately 1 hour. There are a series of questions as well as some follow up questions for further clarification. All information gathered during this interview will remain confidential and data will not include any information about individuals or institutions. The data will be recorded and transcribed, and sent to you to check that ideas and thoughts were captured accurately. I would like to remind you of the

participant's Bill of Rights that was provided to you with the informed consent. To make this discussion as comfortable as possible, at any point in this discussion you can ask that a question be skipped or entirely discontinue your participation in this interview

With your permission, this discussion will be tape record to ensure that all ideas and thoughts are capture accurately.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

### **Part I: Introductions**

1. Please state your name, current position, name of your school district, and where our interview is currently taking place.
2. Please share your educational background?
3. How long you have been a teacher at your current school?

### **Part II. Discussion Questions**

#### ***Research Question 2***

What leadership practices do elementary principals use to create and support sustainability, and embed collaboration into the school culture?

1. Think about the practices your principal implemented to support you through the PLC process and what practices had the biggest impact on your team successes?

#### **Potential follow up question:**

1. Provide a specific examples of a practice your principal implemented to supported grade level PLC?

2. What practices has your principal implemented that have had the biggest impact on sustaining your collaborative community?

**Potential follow up question:**

1. Provide a specific example of this change?

***Research Question 3***

What practices do elementary teachers in Antelope Valley School District perceive as important to creating an effective professional learning community?

3. Please share with me the training you had in PLC prior to implementation at your school? How did this prepare you to implement the PLC?

**Potential follow up question:**

1. Provide a specific example of what you learned at the training or professional development that helped you with the implementation of PLC?

4. Think about your practices before PLC, how have your practices changed over time as a result of being in a professional learning community?

5. When you think of your PLC team, how has the PLC structures had an impact on your instructional practices?

**Potential follow up question:**

1. Provide a specific example of this?

**Part III**

Are there any additional comments you would like to add about your experiences with professional learning communities and the impact they have had on your professional and instructional practices?

This concludes our discussion.

Thank you very much for your time and support in completing my research. A transcript of this interview will be sent through email for your feedback. If you would like a copy of the final research findings once the university accepts the research, please contact me and I will send it to you.

Thank you again.

APPENDIX E

Alignment Table

Research Questions	Principal Questions	Focus Group Questions
<p><b>Research Question 1</b></p> <p>What practices do elementary principals in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating an effective professional learning community?</p>	<p>Questions:</p> <p>#1 #2</p>	<p>Questions:</p>
<p><b>Research Question 2</b></p> <p>What leadership practices do elementary principals use to create and support sustainability, and embed collaboration into the school culture?</p>	<p>Questions:</p> <p>#3 #4 #5 #6 #7</p>	<p>Questions:</p>
<p><b>Research Question 3</b></p> <p>What practices do elementary teachers in Antelope Valley School Districts perceive as important to creating an effective professional learning community?</p>	<p>Questions:</p>	<p>Questions:</p> <p>#1 #2 #3 #4 #5</p>

APPENDIX F  
EXPERT PANEL INVITATION

Dear Educator,

I hope this email finds you well. I am conducting research on the most prevalent and necessary leadership practices of principals and teachers that create sustainable collaborative communities at Brandman University. The research instrument, an interview schedule, was developed based on a model built around an extensive literature review on professional learning communities in the elementary school setting. As part of the reliability for this instrument an "Expert Panel" is being assembled for the study. The Expert Panel will be composed of three educational professionals who have extensive experience in the implementation of professional learning communities in elementary schools.

You are being contacted based on your background and knowledge of implementing professional learning communities. To expedite the process, this work will be done through email. Each panel member will independently review the interview protocol instrument and provide feedback on the questions and protocols for the interview. Additionally, after a field test of the interview with two principals, information will be sent to you regarding the process and a summary of results for any feedback and course correction to help make the interview protocol more reliable. If you are willing, documents will be sent to you after approval from Brandman University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) is received.

I appreciate your consideration to serve on the Expert Panel and look forward to your response.

Sincerely



APPENDIX G

BRANDMAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD  
IRB APPLICATION ACTION – APPROVAL  
COMPLETED BY BUIRB

IRB ACTION/APPROVAL

Name of Investigator/Researcher: \_\_\_\_\_

- Returned without review. Insufficient detail to adequately assess risks, protections and benefits.
- Approved/Certified as Exempt from IRB Review.
- Approved as submitted.
- Approved, contingent on minor revisions (see attached)
- Requires significant modifications of the protocol before approval. Research must resubmit with modifications (see attached)
- Researcher must contact IRB member and discuss revisions to research proposal and protocol.

Level of Risk:  No Risk  Minimal Risk  More than Minimal Risk

IRB Comments:

Remove protocol language found at end of each Informed Consent and resubmit the updated Informed Consents. Protocol is separate from Informed Consent.

Digitally signed by Patrick Schire  
DN: cn=Patrick Schire, o=Brandman University, ou,  
email=pschire@brandman.edu, c=US  
IRB Reviewer: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: 2016.11.18 13:45:28 -0700

Telephone: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Digitally signed by Doug Devore  
DN: cn=Doug Devore, o=Brandman University, ou=EDDL,  
email=ddevore@brandman.edu, c=US  
BUIRB Chair: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: November 18, 2016

REVISED IRB Application  Approved  Returned

Name: Douglas P. DeVore  
Telephone: 623-293-2421 Email: ddevore@brandman.edu Date: November 23, 2016

Digitally signed by Doug Devore  
DN: cn=Doug Devore, o=Brandman University, ou=EDDL,  
email=ddevore@brandman.edu, c=US  
BUIRB Chair: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date: 2016.11.23 10:15:04 -0700

## APPENDIX H

### EMAIL INVITATION TO ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENTS

Dear (name of District Superintendent),

I am a doctoral student from Brandman University working on my dissertation in organizational leadership. The topic of my dissertation focuses on the experiences of school leaders in creating and implementing professional learning communities at their school site. Additionally, this study will examine principal and teacher practices that contributed to sustainable collaborative change in an educational organization.

You are being asked to nominate principals that have skillfully implemented professional learning communities in your district to participate in this study. In addition, principals must meet the following:

- a. Have implemented professional learning communities in the last 3-6 years.
- b. Have had specialized training or professional development in the implementation of professional learning communities.
- c. Have been in their current position for three or more years.

This study will contribute to the body of knowledge by building on past research regarding professional learning communities. It will provide evidence of bridging the knowledge of the characteristics of PLC with the practices needed to embed the collaborative community in the school culture. Moreover, by examining the perceptions of elementary principals and teachers toward important practices in creating a sustainable professional learning community, this study will also add to the literature.

This research will provide schools in urban districts that are beginning to lay the groundwork for implementation of professional learning communities the information needed in building a professional learning environment, and creating highly functioning collaborative teams. Using the information to improve their leadership practices principals and teachers in urban schools can increase their capacity to create collaborative leaders and propel the transformation of their organization forward.

It is critical to the success of this study that the nominated principal demonstrate knowledge and experience in the implementation of professional learning communities. Because you know and interact with these principals frequently, your nomination of principals who meet these selection criteria will be extremely helpful.

Your involvement in this study requires only that you nominate principals. Thank you for your valuable assistance with my study.

Sincerely,

Regina Tillman

Principal Scholar, Palmdale School District

## APPENDIX I

### Informed Consent

#### **Informed Consent**

##### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCHER**

I am Regina Tillman, a doctoral student from Brandman University in the Organizational Leadership in Education Department. The data collected in this study will contribute to the completion of my doctoral dissertation. You are invited to participate in this research study because you currently work at a school that is implementing professional learning communities. The purpose of this study is to determine the most prevalent and necessary leadership practices of principals that create sustainable collaborative communities.

##### **PROCEDURES**

By participating in this study, I agree to participate in the following:

1. An online survey. The survey is designed to be complete within 20 minutes
2. A one-on-one audiotaped recorded interview. The interview is designed to be completed within 60 minutes.

##### **POTENTIAL RISK AND DISCOMFORTS**

The design of this survey instrument has been completed in a manner to reduce all potential risks and discomforts.

##### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

This study is designed to learn from your experiences as an educator and/or principal while working at a school that has and is implementing professional learning communities. The results of your ratings of the leadership behaviors and practices included in this study could be used to help new and experienced educational leaders focus their time developing desired structures needed to create and sustainable collaborative environments in their school organizations.

##### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Regina Tillman, the principal researcher, will be the sole person with access to the data collected.

##### **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any question or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact:  
Regina Tillman (Principal Researcher)  
Cell: (562) 595-3296  
ginate20@aol.com

Dr. Donna Sonnenburg  
sonnenbu@brandman.edu

**1. Do you agree to participate in the survey?**

Yes

No

## APPENDIX J

### PARTICIPANT BILL OF RIGHTS

Any person who is requested to consent to participate as a subject in an experiment, or who is requested to consent on behalf of another, has the following rights:

1. To be told what the study is attempting to discover.
2. To be told what will happen in the study and whether any of the procedures, drugs or devices are different from what would be used in standard practice.
3. To be told about the risks, side effects or discomforts of the things that may happen to him/her.
4. To be told if he/she can expect any benefit from participating and, if so, what the benefits might be.
5. To be told what other choices he/she has and how they may be better or worse than being in the study.
6. To be allowed to ask any questions concerning the study both before agreeing to be involved and during the course of the study.
7. To be told what sort of medical treatment is available if any complications arise.
8. To refuse to participate at all before or after the study is started without any adverse effects.
9. To receive a copy of the signed and dated consent form.
10. To be free of pressures when considering whether he/she wishes to agree to be in the study.

If at any time you have questions regarding a research study, you should ask the researchers to answer them. You also may contact the Brandman University Institutional Review Board, which is concerned with the protection of volunteers in research projects. The Brandman University Institutional Review Board may be contacted either by telephoning the Office of Academic Affairs at (949) 341-9937 or by writing to the Vice Chancellor of Academic Affairs, Brandman University, 16355 Laguna Canyon Road, Irvine, CA, 92618.

#### **1. Do you agree to participate in the focus group discussion?**

Yes

No