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ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES IN DEVELOPING AND
SUSTAINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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By

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ELEMENTARY PRINCIPALS' PERSPECTIVES IN DEVELOPING AND
SUSTAINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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ABSTRACT

ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL'S PERCEPTIVES IN DEVELOPING AND SUSTAINING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES

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The purpose of this study was to answer through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community? Based on the interviews of nine elementary principals, with phenomenology as a research method, the study sought to answer this research question. The data after analysis resulted in seven themes emerging from the data.

The emerging themes to answer how elementary principals develop professional learning communities were; (1) Time, (2) Right People-Right Places, (3) There Will Be Struggles, and (4) Must Be Able to See the Gifts. The three themes that emerged to answer how elementary principals sustain professional learning communities were; (5) Utilize Outside Support, (6) Lead from the Back, and (7) Sustain the Feeling of Community.

CHAPTER I

The Research Problem

Introduction

Principal leadership is in a dramatically changing time. The Modern thought of leading by position is slowly drifting away. A trend of leading with a supportive and shared leadership style is continually growing. A professional learning community is what we call a team with an intentional focus on student learning (Richardson, 2005). Hord (2003) defines a professional learning community as “the professional staff learning together to direct efforts toward improved student learning.” Deborah Schussler developed a construct to look at a more comprehensive view of professional learning communities (Schussler, 2003). Her construct has three broad dimensions: cognitive, affective, and ideological (Schussler, 2003). “The sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 214). Building professional learning communities is on the rise. Building communities where everyone’s ideas are valued and structure of position is removed is going to involve change. Principals need to understand how to lead in a time of change. “Clearly these are exciting times—there is a lot going on. Not the least of these developments is the new realization that leadership is key to large-scale improvement yet must be radically different than it has been” (Fullan, 2001, p. xii). Principal leadership and school leadership are changing.

Why are professional learning communities important? Research findings link professional learning communities in schools to higher student achievement (Darling Hammond, 2000; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Reyes, Schribner & Paredes, 1999; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999), and teaching staffs with higher

morale and greater satisfaction (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hargreaves, 2002). With student achievement a goal of every school, learning community structures that support this goal are needed. “Leadership required in a culture of change, however, is not straightforward. We are living in chaotic conditions. Thus leaders must be able to operate under complex, uncertain circumstances” (Fullan, 2001 p. xiii). Principal leadership continues to be important, complicated and confusing.

Lee, Smith, and Croninger (1995), in a report on extensive restructuring conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, shared results on 11,000 students that were enrolled in 820 schools in the United States. In the schools organized as professional learning communities:

The staff had worked together and changed their classroom pedagogy. As a result, they engaged students in high intellectual learning tasks, and students achieved greater gains in math, science, history, and reading than students in traditionally organized schools. In addition, the achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds were smaller in these schools, students learned more. (Hord, 1997 p. 26)

Professional Learning Communities improve student achievement (Darling Hammond, 2000; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995, Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Reyes, Scribner & Paredes, 1999; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999).

As stated by Darling-Hammond (2000), schools that initiated school improvement efforts by looking at their teaching and learning and discussing how their teaching practices were effective for students showed academic gains more quickly than schools

that were not professional learning communities. She insists that teachers need time to share what they know, consult with their colleagues, and observe fellow teachers.

Darling-Hammond (2000) concludes that activities as simple as these described in professional learning communities deepens teachers' understanding.

Leading in a professional learning community requires supportive leadership in the way Louis and Kruse (1995) described as "post-heroic leaders who do not view themselves as the architects of school effectiveness" (p. 234). Leaders must be democratic leaders not top-down agents of change or visionaries. They must as the principal, support and encourage continuous learning among the staff (Hord, 1997). Principals must, as Leithwood and colleagues' studies (1997) suggested, treat teachers with respect and professionalism, and work with them as peers or colleagues.

So why would not every principal lead this way? If teachers are more successful and engaged, and student learning increases, why not lead as a professional learning community? It is not as simple as it sounds. It is not only an exciting time to be a principal, but also a very confusing and difficult time. The literature about the importance and the rationale to lead this way are abundant, but in schools with a diverse staff of professionals and federal and state requirements, it is not easy. Professional learning community leadership is as important as the professional literature suggests, but what does a principal need to realize, reflect upon, and understand to endure the hardships, problems, controversies, and failures in development of a professional learning community? What do principals from their own perspectives need to facilitate, sustain, and thrive in evolving professional learning communities?

Background

The outcomes from professional learning communities in literature have made direct links from professional learning communities to positive learning results for staff and students. In the work of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) four studies were put together including three and four year case studies, as well as surveys and the collection of student test data. This included 1,500 elementary, middle, and high schools in the United States. The conclusions showed that the redesign of schools, including shared decision-making, teacher teaming, and professional communities in the staffs, will improve student learning. (Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; Bryk et al., 1994; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995)

It is not simply the presence of the learning community but what the community chooses to focus on that influences the outcomes (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). This is why the leadership component is important. Principals have much research at their fingertips to help them change their leadership paradigm. Information about leadership and professional learning communities and how to facilitate them is abundant (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2001; Hord, 1997; O’Hair, Reitzug, Cate, Averso, Atkinson, Garn, Gentry, & Jean-Marie, 2005; Sergiovanni, 2000). This is not easy to implement even with so much information available. “The more complex society gets, the more sophisticated leadership must become. Complexity means change, but specifically it means rapidly occurring, unpredictable, nonlinear change (Fullan, 2001, p. ix).” Fullan has captured how we as practicing principals feel in today’s changing world.

After a principal decides to change their environment, how do they begin? “The principal’s job is to create an environment in which staff can learn continuously” (O’Neil,

1995). If this is the expectation, how does one start? Research indicates that one begins with a shared mission (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Not the kind of mission that no one remembers, or even where to find it, but a shared mission that everyone has a stake in developing and implementing. Consequently, the shared vision is changing and evolving with principals developing new complex thoughts about leadership, and forging new relationships between themselves and their staffs.

According to research, this new relationship leads to a shared and collegial leadership in the school. This leadership allows all to grow professionally and begin to view themselves as “all playing on the same team and working toward the same goal: a better school” (Hoerr, 1996 p. 381). Principals treat teachers with respect and professionally work with them as colleagues and peers. Kleine-Kracht (1993) suggested that administrators, along with teachers, must be learners. They must question, investigate, and seek solutions. The principal is no longer the all knowing person, but a participant in staff development. Prestine (1993) defined three factors required of principals that attempted restructuring. Factors include the ability to share authority, the ability to facilitate the work of the staff, and the ability to participate without dominating (p. 234).

Facilitating professional learning communities is all about change. Fullan’s (2001) leadership theory for leading in a culture of change, “A Framework for Leadership” has five components of leadership that represent independent but mutual reinforcing forces for positive change. The Components are moral purpose, understanding change, relationship building, knowledge creation and sharing, and

coherence building (Fullan, 2001). These components of leadership help the principal build commitments and achieve results.

Once a school has a shared vision and a principal willing to share leadership, the school begins to develop collective creativity. Collective creativity refers to a learning organization that uses deliberate dialogue or reflective dialogue, in which staff conducts in-depth conversations about teaching and learning and identify related issues. Griffin (sited by Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 154) referred to these activities as inquiry. Inquiry opens up the possibility of debate about what is important. Inquiry, where everyone's ideas are respected and considered, helps schools become communities of learners. Leadership has more to do with establishing and nurturing relationships than it has to do with "being out in front" of change. The top priority of the principal is building leadership capacity in others (Lambert, 2002) while creating a safe place for learning and continuous improvement. Trust and respect are at the foundation of this leadership culture (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Principals also need to manage physical conditions to support the growth of a learning community. Time to meet and talk with teachers must be scheduled. This allows teachers to share with each other. The size of the school, proximity of the staff to one another, and communication structures must be considered. Boyd's (1992) list of physical factors in the context of school change included the availability of resources, schedules and structures that reduce isolation and policies that provide greater autonomy, foster collaboration, provide effective communication, and provide for staff development (p. 21). School leaders in the higher scoring schools promoted collaboration by establishing common planning and facilitating across-grade planning groups

(Allensworth, Bryk, Newmann, & Smith, 2001). Teachers need time to share with each other.

A professional learning community is willing to accept feedback and work toward improvement. For this to occur, you must have respect and trust among the staff, highly developed skillfulness and participation (Lambert, 2002). Deliberate dialogue is a way to create a trusting environment in which to share. Everyone must be included, and everything must stay positive. Deliberate dialogue is just one technique a principal may implement to work to build a trusting environment. Two other discourse structures that may be used are seminar and deliberation. A seminar is used to discuss a topic deeply. This is led around a central question. Learning about the topic is the goal. A deliberation is to think, speak, listen, and discuss a specific topic. The goal is to decide on a course of action for a shared problem (Parker, 2006). Andy Hargreaves (2002), in his study “Teaching and Betrayal,” studied the effects of betrayal in schools and found that for professional learning communities to be successful, they must have a trusting community (Hargreaves, 2002).

In a professional learning community, shared personal practice with peers learning from and helping peers becomes the norm. Having teachers share at faculty meetings is a good way to implement the shared personal practice concept. Having the staff site committee plan their own professional days is another way to implement a community of sharing. Teachers need an opportunity to lead and share their wealth of knowledge. Teachers need an environment that values their hard work and promotes risk-taking and shared ideas (Wignall, 1992).

Principals should also not be afraid to challenge traditions and norms. Schools do not have to do something just because they always have. Schools must look outside the box. Sometimes the leader must ask the question, “Why will this lead to a better community?” Sometimes only the principal as the leader can begin the questioning process. Others may not want to be the first to question a long time school practice, but when the question is asked in a trusting professional learning community, others can then voice their opinions and ideas and positive change can occur (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

In summarizing principal leadership today, Dufour (1999) concludes: Principals can promote the shared decision-making and collaborative culture of a learning community and demonstrate strong instructional leadership if they attend to the following leadership responsibilities. 1. Lead through shared vision and collective commitments rather than rules and authority. 2. Create collaborative structures that focus on teaching and learning. 3. Pose the questions that help the school focus on issues of teaching and learning. 4. Provide staff with the training, information, and parameters they need to make good decisions. (p. 16)

Schools need leaders who understand how and why to build professional learning communities. Professional learning communities are key to effective leadership in our nation’s schools (Reyes, Scribner, & Paredes, 1999; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999). While leading in a culture of change (Fullan, 2001), what do principals perceive as required to develop and sustain a professional learning community? What perceptions do principals have regarding moral purpose,

understanding change, making coherence, building relationships, and creating and sharing knowledge in a professional learning community?

Statement of the Problem

The problem is that developing a professional learning community is very appealing in theory, but difficult to implement in practice. It is ongoing, and research is needed to understand what successful principals perceive as critical to developing and sustaining a professional learning community. By studying the phenomenon of experienced principals and their ongoing facilitation of the development of professional learning communities, the researcher will be able identify themes needed for principals to continue to develop and sustain professional learning communities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the lived phenomenon of successful elementary principals who have been developing and sustaining a professional learning community. By studying their perceptions of their experiences, the researcher can discover what understanding these successful principals had about the phenomenon of developing a professional learning community. This is in the hope that this study could help other principals and school communities through this process in the future and add to the research about developing and sustaining professional learning communities.

The Research Question

Through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community?

Implications

This study will fill a void in the research for practitioners seeking to develop professional learning communities in their schools. Principals and researchers alike have provided many images as to “how” these professional learning communities should look, but few have developed these ideas into reality because little has been documented as to how to create, much less sustain, professional learning communities (Darling-Hammond, 1996; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2000; Hord, 1997; Senge, 1990). “Research in additional settings, including more traditional kinds of schools, is necessary. By describing patterns that can inform, rather than defining generalities that seek to prescribe, research that is both theory and data-driven will add to the knowledge base and provide guidance to those seeking to achieve learning communities” (Schussler, 2003, p. 523). By studying peer principals’ journeys through the process of developing professional learning communities, the researcher will be able to theme out concepts needed for principals going through this process. This study will assist principals and inform future research, theory, practice, and principal pre-service programs.

Significance

This study could help inform elementary principals begin the journey in leading a professional learning community. Principals may benefit from the perceptions of principals who are traveling this journey. This study could help every new principal and any experienced principal who has decided to lead differently in his/her leadership goals and visions. In the tradition of a professional learning community that improves because of the communication and learning from peers, this study could help principals beginning

the journey by communicating with and learning from other principals who have been facilitating the development and sustaining professional learning communities.

Assumptions

It is assumed that by studying principals who are developing and sustaining professional learning communities in their schools that themes will emerge to inform future and current administrators which they could use and learn from in order to help them facilitate and sustain new professional learning communities to help improve teacher morale and student achievement. The findings would also add to the research knowledge base to help direct future research and principal pre-service programs.

Limitations

This study is limited by being a phenomenological study with a limited population. This is an in-depth study of nine successful southwest elementary principals and their perception of their personal journey facilitating and sustaining professional learning communities. The sample is small by design but very direct in its purpose. Creswell (1998) suggests that phenomenological data be collected utilizing long interview protocol from a sample of up to ten individuals who have experienced the phenomenon.

Summary

If schools are going to be more effective in improving student achievement and teacher morale, then research stated in this chapter suggests that principals develop and sustain professional learning communities. How do successful elementary principals develop and sustain a professional learning community in their school? The purpose of

this study is to describe through successful principals' own perceptions how they develop and sustain a professional learning community. Through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community?

CHAPTER II

The Literature Review/Part I Professional Learning Communities

Historical Context of Professional Learning Communities

This chapter focuses on the historical context of professional learning communities, defining professional learning communities, leading professional learning communities, and sustaining professional learning communities. Lately the term “professional learning community” or “learning community” has been used to describe an effective school or a good school (Beck, 1996). Schussler (2003) hypothesized that over time the limited scope of effective schools research in defining a good school, “has resulted in a gradual shift to the concept of school as a learning community” (p.499). What is a professional learning community and what is the historical context?

In 1966 the Coleman Report, a federally funded research project, resulted in a claim that schools do not make a difference in student achievement. This report used data from about six hundred forty-five thousand students and sixty thousand teachers (Coleman, 1966). The Coleman Report suggested that the family background was the primary predictor of student achievement, not school experiences (Coleman, 1966). Ever since the Coleman Report, educational researchers have been trying to prove that schools do make a difference in a student’s achievement.

The “effective schools” movement began to prove schools make a difference by looking for characteristics that separate effective schools from ineffective schools. “The effective schools studies took the form of input-output studies with academic achievement on standardized tests used as the main output measure” (Schussler, 2003, p.

500). Once researchers controlled the social economic status of schools, they attempted to define the differences between low-achieving and high –achieving schools. Many studies primarily focused on elementary schools (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979). The “common characteristics associated with those schools having the highest levels of student academic achievement included a clear mission, instructional leadership, frequent monitoring of student achievement, high expectations, and a safe and orderly environment” (Schussler, 2003). Many school districts around the country used the “effective schools” research to start school improvement initiatives.

The “effective schools” research movement was a beginning, but it was not comprehensive. One limitation is that “effective schools” research usually used the entire school as the unit of comparison (Cuban, 1983; Fitz-Gibbon & Kochan, 2000). Another limitation of this research is that, “overwhelmingly, the effective schools research is comprised of quantitative studies that measure one outcome of school, namely, academic achievement, rather that explicate the processes of school” (Schussler, 2003, p. 502-503). The study of good schools needs to use more than the standardized tests only measuring academic achievement of the school unit (Schussler, 2003). “We use test scores... as though they tell us something about the condition of schools. They tell us even less about schools than a thermometer designed to measure body temperature tells us about body health” (Goodlad, 1984, p. 14). The literature on professional learning communities has attempted to look at a more holistic view of schools and their processes. Literature on professional learning communities looks at more than test scores. This literature not only looks at the outcomes, but also the procedures and processes getting to the outcomes (Schussler, 2003).

Schussler in her research attempted to unpack the concept of learning communities. She started with the effective schools research which mainly only looked at one variable, student achievement. This was usually overall student achievement not looking at individual students. She then began to unpack and dive into how the concept of learning communities have developed over time and began to develop a construct of three broad dimensions: cognitive, affective, and ideological. She developed this construct of learning communities to look at a more comprehensive view of a school (Schussler, 2003, p. 498).

In Schussler's construct, the cognitive domain refers to "academic rigor" instead of academic achievement. This is because learning communities view student learning differently. In a learning community, the emphasis is placed on individual students and not just a school overview. Also in a learning community intellectual development is regarded as an outcome and a process. A learning community only exists if "education is emphasized and academic rigor is expected of everyone" (Schussler, 2003, p. 506). All students are expected to learn and have high standards.

In effective schools research, academic achievement was usually all that was examined to show effectiveness. Schussler's learning community construct does not stop at academic achievement. The second dimension is the affective dimension. In the affective dimension there are two areas that a good school encompasses: interpersonal relationships and caring. "The affective dimensions are worthy in their own right, but also

because they help create a context that is conducive for the attainment of academic rigor” (Schussler, 2003, p. 510).

Interpersonal relations are very important to the success of a school. The quality of interactions taking place in a school are extremely important to the success of students. The interpersonal relationships important in a school are not just the teacher-student relationships, but also the relationships among teachers. The second dimension under the affective domain is caring. “Schools operating as learning communities understand the personal nature of teaching and learning and thus, the necessity of a caring environment” (Schussler, 2003, p. 513). All members of the school community need a caring environment.

The last dimension in Schussler’s construct of learning communities is the ideological dimension. To foster and develop academic rigor and caring beneficial relationships a school must be structured and organized to include these goals in their school vision, values, and school purpose. These first two dimensions must be in the ideological structure of the school. They must be included in what the school stands for, where it is going, and how it will get there.

Schussler stated in her research that her goal in unpacking the learning community concept was to propose a theoretical construct that includes a more comprehensive view of a good school than what previous effective schools research had accomplished. The theoretical construct that was proposed adopts a holistic view of the school and its purpose by describing a learning community in terms of three dimensions: cognitive, affective, and ideological. This comprehensive holistic view of a successful

learning community will be another reason for school principals to want to develop and sustain a professional learning community in their school.

Components of Professional Learning Communities

Our school is a professional learning community! This assertion is very common today in our public schools. Researchers have provided a myriad of images as to how professional learning communities should look, but few have formed these visions into reality “because little has been documented as to how to create, much less sustain, these communities of learning (Darling-Hammond, 2000; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2000; Hord, 1997; Schussler, 2003; Senge, 1990).” This is a very ambitious promise for a school to make. The promise first claims that the school is a “community.” This would mean a community of adults and students, who care about each other, work together for the improvement of the whole school in good times and bad. This statement would also mean that this community, if a professional learning community, has an underlying culture of learning, a place where learning is the center of everything. One of the most interesting findings from many studies on effective school leadership has been the importance of developing the school as a professional learning community (Harris, 2003). If this is one of the most important concepts a principal can develop to improve their school and student achievement, then what is a professional learning community? What are the key concepts, big ideas, and implications for school leaders developing professional learning communities? What leadership theory and practices assist principals in leading in rapidly changing culture? How does one sustain a professional learning community?

Professional Learning Community

The learning organization concept that in the work setting influenced workers, began to come into focus of school leaders and corporate leaders in the 1980s. *Corporate Cultures* by Deal and Kennedy (1982) focused attention to how business and private industry managers could use cultural factors to facilitate change. In 1990, Peter Senge's book, *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization*, took the learning organization to a new level. Education leaders then began to take notice of Senge's book. "Senge and others (Block, 1993; Galagan, 1994; Whyte, 1994) emphasized the importance of nurturing individual staff in activities such as shared vision development, problem identification, learning, and problem resolution" (Hord, 2003). All employees need to be included and heard.

In educational research, Rosenholtz (1989) introduced teachers' workplace environmental factors into the literature on quality teaching and instruction. Fullan (1991) suggested a "redesign of the workplace so that innovation and improvement are built into daily activities of teachers" (p. 353). Rosenholtz's findings were confirmed by McLaughlin and Talbert in 1993. Darling-Hammond (1996) cited shared decision making as a factor related to reform. This research was the beginning of the literature describing professional learning communities.

What is the definition of a professional learning community? Astruto and colleagues (1993) proposed three related communities which were, the professional community of educators, the learning communities of teachers and students, the stakeholder community. Hord (1997) then focused on what Astruto and colleagues labeled the professional community of learners and expanded the definition to include: "a

community in which the teachers in a school and its administrators continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning. The goal of their actions is to enhance their effectiveness as professionals for the student's benefit" (Hord, 1997, p.6). Hord (1997) defines a professional learning community as the professional staff learning together to direct efforts toward improved student achievement. This researcher will focus on Hord's definition of professional learning communities which includes the community of teachers, parents, community members and administrators.

Hord's Key Concepts of a Professional Learning Community

The key concepts according to Hord in a professional learning community are Supportive and Shared Leadership, Collective Creativity, Shared Values and Vision, Supportive Conditions, and Shared Personal Practice. These key concepts are all included in the IDEALS Framework and Practices for High Achieving Schools (O'Hair, McLaughlin & Reitzug, 2000; O'Hair, Reitzug, Cate & Averso, 2005), in which all the principals in this study used as Phase II principals.

Supportive and Shared Leadership

As Sergiovanni (1994) stated, "The sources of authority for leadership are embedded in shared ideas" (p. 214). Supportive and Shared Leadership is a key component of a professional learning community. The Modern thought of leading by position is slowly changing. As stated previously, a trend of shared leadership is emerging (Eaker, DuFour & Burnette, 2002; Fullan, 2002; Johnson, 1996). Building professional learning communities where everyone's ideas are valued and the structure of position is removed is much closer to a Post-Modern philosophy. This new shared and supportive leadership style help everyone view themselves as "all playing on the same

team and working toward the same goal: a better school” (Hoerr, 1996, p. 381).

Principals are treating teachers with respect and professionally working with them as colleagues and peers. Kleine-Kracht (1993, p. 393) suggested that administrators, along with teachers, must be learners and question, investigate, and seek solutions. Principals participate in staff development, rather than serve as the all knowing expert. In a professional learning community, a new collegial relationship exists between principals and teachers and principals lead in a shared and collaborative style. Teacher leaders and administrators provide most of the leadership in schools (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Louis and Kruse (1995) identified that supportive principal leadership was one of the necessary resources for a professional learning community. Principals are “post-heroic leaders who do not view themselves as the architects of school effectiveness” (Louis & Kruse, 1995, p. 234). Leaders cannot be thought of as top- down leaders or visionaries of the system. Leaders in school must now be seen as democratic leaders. The principals “plant seeds of community, nurture fledgling community, and protect the community once it emerges. They lead by following. They lead by serving. They lead by inviting others to share in the burdens of leadership” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. xix). The principal is a learner and shares leadership responsibilities.

Trust and respect are at the foundation of a shared leadership culture. (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) Newmann and Wehlage (1995) also describe building shared leadership around the needed trust that a smaller school environment provides. An empirical research study titled, “Teaching and Betrayal” Hargreaves (2002) looked at the difficulty in getting teachers to openly share in education. The nature of teaching makes it hard for teachers and their colleagues to share their craft. (Huberman, 1990) Sharing is

though what this is all about. Without trust a professional learning community cannot flourish. After studying fifty Canadian teachers in fifteen schools to examine the nature and effects of betrayal, the opposite of trust, among colleagues in teaching, Hargreaves (2002) found betrayal is not only significant in a moral sense, but also because its consequence is leading teachers to avoid conflict and interaction with each other, thereby undermining and destroying the chance of a professional learning community. Hargreaves (2002) concluded by arguing “that if schools are going to become stronger professional learning communities, they must seek not only to establish trust in teaching, but also avoid the causes of pervasive betrayal” (p. 393). Sustainable school improvement which builds real and lasting gains in student achievement depends on teachers working together in a professional learning community (Newmann, King, & Young, 2000). “Strong professional communities depend on teachers’ capacity to blend commitment with doubt and a shared passion for improving learning and achievement, along with healthy disagreement about and inquiry into the best ways to do it” (Hargreaves, 2002, P. 404). Strong professional communities take risks in shared leadership. Trust makes this all possible. Betrayal will destroy a professional learning community.

In this study, Hargreaves concluded that when betrayed teachers evaded interactions with those who betrayed them. “Fewer interactions mean fewer opportunities for professional learning and lessened chances of school improvement” (Hargreaves, 2002, p. 405). The three most prevalent types of betrayal according to Hargreaves (2002) were contractual betrayal where colleagues did not meet the usual expectations for the job and nothing was done about it. If a teacher didn’t carry their

weight, taught the minimum, or didn't come to work on time and the administrator did nothing. The second type of betrayal was communication betrayal. This was where gossip was allowed to occur or they were shamed in front of their peers or students. The third type of betrayal was competence betrayal where a colleague advocates another teacher's incompetence. From this leads to shame and blame and, "the shame and blame that accompany attributions of incompetence threaten the basic social bonds of human interaction" (Hargreaves, 2002, p. 400).

This study provided very useful information when developing a professional learning community. You must have trust and not feelings of betrayal to be able to have shared and supportive leadership in schools. These three types of betrayal that are most prevalent in schools provide very important information for the school principal and their staff. This could be a study to discuss as a professional learning community and together come up with ways to build trust in a community and avoid these common types of betrayal. The knowledge gained from this study in research could really enable a school's shared and supportive leadership along with teacher collaboration to grow.

Collective Creativity

Collective Creativity based in teacher collaboration is the second key component in a professional learning community. By collaboration, it is understood that all members in the community collaborate and continually work together to improve teaching and learning in their school. Newmann (reported by Brandt, 1995), and Louis and Kruse (1995) label this communication in which staff discuss students and teaching and learning as reflective dialog. Smylie and Hart (1999) emphasize that increased student learning is tied to teacher collaboration, stating "that if we want to improve schools for student

learning, we must also improve schools for the adults who work within them.” Teachers working together is what makes the professional learning community effective. It is getting at all the knowledge teachers have collectively and sharing it. Helping one another is what this is about. Teachers are what make the true difference in improving student achievement. Linda Darling-Hammond’s empirical research concludes that, “poverty does matter, and spending does matter, but overall what seems to have the strongest influence is the general quality of teaching in a state” (Darling-Hammond, 2000, p. 37). In order to come to this conclusion, Linda Darling-Hammond conducted a study using a statistical tool called regression analysis where she examined federal databases of teachers’ qualifications and student performance, as well as surveys of state policies carried out by the National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, which Darling-Hammond directed. Her main purpose of the study was to discover which of several factors best predicted improvement on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Of the students selected, the best predictor was the proportion of a state’s teaching force that were highly qualified. Darling-Hammond defined this as having a full teaching license and at least a college major in the subject taught. These two qualifications were more related to gains on NAEP than per-pupil spending, class size, or the student’s socioeconomic status. The most important factor in student achievement was a highly qualified teacher.

If teacher quality is more influential than money spent, class size, or how many students qualify for free and reduced lunch, than imagine the influence over student achievement if highly qualified teachers collaborated with each other about what works best and shared their craft. Schools could increase student gains even more and that is

exactly why professional learning communities are so important to improving student achievement. Teachers must collaborate with one another and it is the principal's job to find ways to facilitate this sharing. If schools are interested in community building in a professional learning community then they, along with other members of the proposed community, are going to have to invent their own practice of community (Sergiovanni, 1994).

Shared Values and Vision

The third key concept according to Hord (1997) is Shared Values and Vision. As Sergiovanni (1994) reported inventing a school's own practice of community in a school, the school will invent its own community including the values and vision the community is based on. Vision provides a guide to a school for what the community wishes to attain. It is like a sign pointing the way for all who need to understand what the organization is and where it wants to go (Nanus, 1992). The vision is what molds meaning for the people in an organization (Manasse, 1986). Seeley (1992) explained that a vision is the goal-oriented mental construct that helps guide members behavior. To help leaders facilitate a vision, Nanus (1992) said that a vision has five characteristics: attracts commitment, creates meaning, establishes a standard of excellence, bridges the present to the future, and transcends the status quo.

In order for a vision to be effective in a professional learning community, it must be a shared vision. Sergiovanni (1994) has said that a shared values and vision bond a leader and the faculty together in a common cause in order to meet a common goal. A vision is no more than an empty dream until it is widely shared and accepted by the

community. (Nanus, 1992). A shared vision is the core, the foundation, for all a professional learning community will become.

Once a faculty has developed their common values and develop a shared vision, the leader must “manage the dream” (Bennis, 1990). This management of the vision has been called visionary leadership. Visionary leadership is dynamic and has a three-stage continuum (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989). The three stages are: an image of the desired future for the organization is, communicated or shared which, “empower those followers so that they can enact the vision” (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989). As Sergiovanni stated, a school must create their own community. This should be built on the communities shared values and vision. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) specifically identify that a professional learning community with a clear and shared purpose, collaboration, and collective responsibility for student learning, is critical to effective teaching, and does have a direct impact on growth in student achievement.

A study of five superintendents and their districts by Petersen (1999) concluded that there are four attributes essential for a superintendent to be an effective leader. Attributes included: “(1) Possession and articulation of an instructional vision, (2) the creation of an organizational structure that supports their instructional vision and leadership, (3) assessment and evaluation of personnel and instructional programs, and (4) organizational adaptation” (Petersen, 1999, p. 1). In this exploratory study, Petersen confirmed these attributes to be essential. Petersen employed mixed methods analyses drawn from in-depth interviews and surveys. He concluded that the most important attribute for a superintendent to have was a clear vision through shared decision making, clear communication through principals, high visibility, stress the importance of

professional development and shared decision-making, and board support for the district vision. This study is important to shared values and vision because it states that a clear vision through shared values and shared decision making is what it takes make a successful district superintendent and school district.

Averso (2005) in his qualitative study of seven elementary principals examined what leadership aspects of elementary principals contributed to the development of a shared vision. Averso (2005) found that four themes emerged from this research study. The four themes were leaders empower vision, leaders model support for vision, leaders build coherence, and leaders monitor vision.

In the first theme, leaders empower vision, “each of the principals described the critical need for leaders to provide opportunities for the development of an informed knowledge base by those stakeholders involved in the development of the shared vision before the beliefs and vision are crafted” (Averso, 2005). These would include cross-site or cross-classroom visits, book studies, professional literature, and use of technology. The principals all stated that they developed collaborate structures in their schools in order to share information. In the second theme, leaders model support for vision, principals made sure in their own ways to show they were committed to the vision. All principals also stated the importance of achieving consensus of commitment to the vision. The third theme was leaders build vision coherence. “The principals all spoke of the need for focus that vision could provide” (Averso, 2005). Leaders would do this by regularly verbalizing and highlighting classroom practices that tied to the vision. Finally the four theme, leaders monitor vision, stressed how important the fact that what is being

monitored in schools, gets done. This study is important because it examines what leadership aspects contribute to the development of a shared school vision.

Supportive Conditions

The next key component of a professional learning community is Supportive Conditions. According Boyd (1992) and Louis and Kruse (1995) two types of conditions that support professional learning communities are Physical Conditions and Human Capacities. Principals manage physical conditions to support the growth of a learning community. Time to meet and talk is scheduled. The size of the school and the proximity of the staff to one another is considered. Communication structures are improved often and always addressed. Boyd's (1992) list of physical factors in the context of school change is similar. Boyd's list included the availability of resources, schedules, and structures to reduce isolation, policies that provide greater autonomy, foster collaboration, provide effective communication, and provide for staff development. Time is the most important issue. "Time, or more properly lack of it, is one of the most difficult problems faced by schools and districts" (Watts & Castle, 1993, p. 306). Leaders must organize time to come together to have an effective learning community.

As far as people capacities, "One of the first characteristics of individuals cited by Louis and Kruse (1995) in a productive learning community is a willingness to accept feedback and work toward improvement" (Hord, 1997, p. 22). For this to occur, a community must have respect and trust among staff, appropriate skill base, and supportive leadership. Deliberate dialog is a way to create a trusting environment in which to share. Everyone needs to be included and everyone stays positive.

Mintrop (2003) reveals what happens to schools that do not have supportive conditions in “The Limits of Sanctions in Low-Performing Schools: A Study of Maryland and Kentucky Schools on Probation.” Mintrop’s study is of eleven schools labeled as low-performing by state accountability systems. Incentives and sanctions are the linchpin of a new generation of high-stakes accountability policies” (Mintrop, 2003, p. 21). He explored how schools responded to accountability systems putting schools on probation. On the positive side, schools did stop declining and were at least modestly energized by the label. Management did tighten up in some schools, but the costs were high. Teacher turnover rates were from thirty to fifty percent from year to year. Accountability systems operate on the assumption of organizational stability. These eleven schools were very challenging environments which required baseline stabilization before embarking on any ambitious instructional reforms. These schools needed to build teacher support through professional learning communities. They needed to get teacher buy in and slow down the teacher turnover to stabilize the schools first, (Mintrop, 2003), but these new accountability systems are requiring immediate results and sanctions as this study indicates only can slow decline. Sanctions according to this study by Mintrop do not bring about big increases in student achievement. This study showed what happens to schools that are in sanctions without supportive conditions. Schools must have supportive conditions set up with support from the principal (Louis & Kruse, 1995).

Shared Personal Practice

The final of the five key components is Shared Personal Practice. Peers helping peers is to be the norm. Teachers share practice at faculty meetings. Committees should help plan professional days. Teachers have an opportunity to lead and share their wealth

of knowledge of their craft. Teachers have an environment that values their hard work and promotes risk taking and shared ideas. Teachers regularly visiting each other's classrooms and discussing the observations is the norm in a professional learning community (Louis & Kruse, 1995). Mutual respect and trust are so important to this key concept of a professional learning community.

Two empirical research studies support this last but equally important component. The first is Lisa Kirtman's Policy and Practice: Restructuring Teacher's Work. This was a case study of three schools and their implementation of California's Senate Bill 1274. The purpose of the bill was to have a five-year effort of school change aimed at student achievement. The three schools she studied were very different. One was a very small magnet school. One was a school that had a very stable staff where everyone got along very well and the third school was a very large charter school. What makes this study so interesting is that she made three assumptions and all turned out to be false. First she assumed that the small school would be able to change easier. Second, she assumed that the school that had strong trusting relationships would be able to change easier. Third, she assumed that the large school would have more difficulty with communication, relationships, consensus and any type of wide reaching change. She then studied the models of change implemented to find out why and discovered the large school changed easier because they had a strong professional learning community and shared their practice. They had true shared decision-making and shared leadership. They shared their successes and failures and learned from each other and they were able to change more efficiently.

The second study to validate shared practice is David Strahan's "Promoting a Collaborative Professional Culture in Three Elementary Schools That Have Beaten the Odds." His study was a three-year case study examining the dynamics of school culture in three elementary schools that have beaten the odds in improving low-income and minority student's achievement. "Analysis of 51 original interviews and 28 new interviews indicate that personnel at these schools reported developing supportive cultures that enabled participants to coordinate efforts to improve instruction and strengthen professional learning communities" (Strahan, 2003, p. 127). One teacher stated that the biggest change was their concentration on what students can do academically, not on what they do in behavior. Strahan discovered that if a school staff believe they can work collaboratively to bring about change, they can through shared perceptions of teaching shape their school. "This process occurs as teachers discuss their work with each other" (Strahan, 2003, p. 130). These three case studies by Strahan have documented the powerful role of a professional learning community in school reform and change and at the core of this community is shared practice along with the other five key components of a professional learning community.

Summary of Hord's Key Concepts of Professional Learning Communities

The five key components of a professional learning community according to Hord are Supportive and Shared Practice, Collective Creativity, Shared Values and Vision, Supportive Conditions, and Shared Personal Practice. The researcher has provided empirical research to support that all five key components result in improved professional learning communities with improved student achievement. This is why it is so important to develop and sustain a professional learning community as the principal. Also

remember as previously stated that, “The quality of leadership is a key factor in building a school community where improvement is most likely to occur” (Harris, 2002, p. 22).

Part II: Leading in a Professional Learning Community

The Importance of Principal Leadership

The second section of this chapter will focus on principal leadership in a professional learning community. Remember as previously stated, “The quality of leadership is a key factor in building a school community where improvement is most likely to occur” (Harris, 2002, p. 22). Hord (1997) states about the influence of the principal that:

The literature on educational leadership and school change recognizes clearly the role and influence of the campus administrator (the principal, and sometimes the assistant principal) on whether change will occur in the school. It seems clear that transforming the school organization into a learning community can be done only with the leaders’ sanction and active nurturing of the entire staff’s development as a community. Thus, a look at the principal of a school whose staff is a professional learning community seems a good starting point for describing what these learning communities look like and how they operate (p. 14).

According to Hord (1997), the principal is the essential supportive factor for the process of a professional learning community to develop.

Starting in 1998, McREL began synthesizing more than three decades of research on the effects of instruction and schooling on student achievement. Findings from the meta-analysis demonstrate that a substantial relationship exists between leadership and achievement. They found that the average effect size correlated between leadership and

student achievement is .25. This translates into mean achievement gains in two similar schools would be 10 percentile points difference based on leadership. In some of their studies the effect size was as much as .50. “This translates mathematically into a one standard deviation difference in demonstrated leadership ability being associated with as much as a 19 percentile point increase in student achievement” (Marzano, McNulty, & Waters, 2004). A relationship exists between leadership and student achievement.

McREL broke down effective leadership into twenty-one key leadership responsibilities. The three with the greatest effect size were situational awareness .33, intellectual stimulation .32, and input .30. All three specifically relate to a principal’s leadership in the development of a professional learning community. This analysis of thirty years of educational research expresses the importance of principal leadership to develop a professional learning community to improve student achievement. Since this is the case, the researcher will focus on principal’s perceptions of developing and sustaining professional learning communities.

A Framework for Leadership

Fullan (2001) has developed a leadership theory for leading in a culture of change. Professional learning communities are about change. The title of this theory is “A Framework for Leadership.” (Fullan, 2001,). Fullan (2001) lists five components of leadership that represent independent but mutual reinforcing forces for positive change. The components are Moral Purpose, Understanding Change, Relationship Building, Knowledge Creation and Sharing, and Coherence Building (Fullan, 2001). These components of leadership, used in developing and sustaining professional learning communities, will help the leader build commitments and have better results. “Leaders

will increase their effectiveness if they continually work on the five components of leadership – if they pursue moral purpose, understand the change process, develop relationships, foster knowledge building, and strive for coherence – with energy, enthusiasm, and hopefulness” (Fullan, 2001, p. 11). Fullan’s theory will help a principal increase their effectiveness.

Moral Purpose

The first component is Moral Purpose. “Whatever one’s style, every leader, to be effective, must have moral purpose” (Fullan, 2001, p. 13). Moral purpose needs to be included in the end product such as student learning and it must also be included in the way you get there. Student learning is the moral purpose a school would want to happen and getting there a principal would have to lead others in a fair and moral way. “To strive to improve the quality of how we live together is a moral purpose of the highest order” (Fullan, 2001, p. 14). Sergiovani (2000) draws out the importance of having a moral purpose. He suggests that you ask the next five people you meet to list the three people they consider to be authentic leaders, and then to describe them. He states that they will mention, “integrity, reliability, moral excellence, a sense of purpose, firmness of conviction, steadiness, and unique qualities of style and substance that differentiate the leaders they choose from others” (Sergiovanni, 2000, p. 17). Leaders people admire have a moral purpose.

Sober and Wilson (1998) argue that it is not important when looking at moral purpose to see if it’s driven by egoistic or self-centered motives or altruistic or unselfish motives. Facts conclude that all are driven by both. This is why everyday leaders such as principals, don’t have to be perfect. It is ok to have mixed motives.

Moral purpose also does not stand by itself. Moral purpose though is in all five of Fullan's components. "Moral purpose is profoundly built into the five components of leadership as they are carried out in practice" (Fullan, 2001, p. 15). Moral purpose would profoundly fit into leading all of Hord's concepts of professional learning communities. To have a true shared vision and values in a professional learning community, a leader would have to have a moral purpose.

The most important conclusion about moral purpose from Fullan is that, "moral purpose and sustained performance of organizations are mutually dependant. Leaders in a culture of change realize this" (Fullan, 2001, p. 28). Sustainability has been called the challenge of the century. "The theory of sustainability is that it is constituted by a trinity of environmental soundness, social justice, and economic viability" (Pascale, Millemann, & Gioja, 2000, p. 34). They state that if any one of these is weak or missing, than whatever the organization is doing will not sustain over time. Moral purpose fits in all of these components and concepts.

Understanding Change

Understanding change is Fullan's second component. "Remember that a culture of change consists of great rapidity and nonlinearity on the one hand and equally great potential for creative breakthroughs on the other. The paradox is that transformation would not be possible without accompanying messiness" (Fullan, 2001, p.31). Understanding change and that it will be messy is very important for principals to understand. Fullan after studying change stated that, "many of us have concluded that change cannot be managed. It can be understood and perhaps led, but it cannot be managed" (Fullan, 2001, p. 33). It is important for principals to understand change.

Fullan (2001) states that the purpose for this component in his model is to understand change in order to lead it better. Fullan lists six topics to discuss in his understanding change component. He lists; “The goal is not to innovate the most, it is not enough to have the best ideas, appreciate the implementation dip, redefine resistance, reculturing is the name of the game, and never a checklist, always complexity” (Fullan, 2001, p. 34). Fullan (2001) states that leaders need to understand change to better lead change.

Fullan’s (2001) six topics are all straight forward concepts, and very important in understanding change. The first topic simply means to not try to do too many innovations. The “leader who takes on the sheer most number of innovations is not the winner” (Fullan, 2001, p. 35). Schools with leaders like this may shine from the distance, but they lack the depth of real change. His second topic is also very straight forward. Just having the best ideas isn’t enough. The leader must be able to lead followers to lead real change. Having good ideas is a good thing, but the leader needs to be able to motivate the staff. The third topic, “the implementation dip is literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings” (Fullan, 2001, p. 40). The principal needs to understand this so that when change occurs they will give new innovations time to show if they work. Redefining resisters is a very important topic in understanding change. Redefining resisters is important because they sometimes have ideas that the leader might have missed and often they have something important to tell us. “People resist for what they view as good reasons” (Fullan, 2001, p. 42). Resisters are also important in the politics of implementation of change. About the fourth topic Fullan states, “Transforming the

culture – changing the way we do things around here –is the main point. I call this reculturing” (Fullan, 2001, p. 44). Lastly Fullan reminds us that change is never a checklist, it is always complexity. There is no recipe for change. There is no right answer. This fact is why Fullan’s model of change is centered around understanding and insight rather than on mere action steps. In concluding on the complexities of change Fullan states, “Complexities can be unlocked and even understood but rarely controlled” (Fullan, 2001, p. 46). Change is always complex.

Kirtman (2002) focuses on understanding change. Kirtman’s study was a case study of three schools and their implementation of California’s Senate Bill 1274 (SB 1274). The purpose of the bill was to have a five-year effort of school change aimed at student achievement. The three schools she studied were very different. One was a very small magnet school. One was a school that had a very stable staff where everyone got along with each other very well and the third was a very large charter school. She made three assumptions. First, she assumed that the small school would be able to change easier. Second, she assumed that the school where everyone got along well and had strong trusting relationships would be able to change easier. Third, she assumed that the large school would have more difficulty with communication, relationships, consensus and any type of wide reaching change. She found all of her assumptions would turn out to be false.

To understand why, she studied the models of change implemented. She looked at teachers’ roles inside and outside the classroom. In the large successful school the teachers’ made decisions together in committees, incorporated team planning, team teaching, clan meetings, peer reviews, and made teaching change decisions together with

a feedback evaluation and assessment together. They had a professional learning community with shared decision-making and shared leadership. The unsuccessful small school had all change decisions made from the administration in a top down fashion. This resulted in high teacher turnover and a superficial adoption of change. The unsuccessful school where staff liked each other had powerless committees and they lacked focus. They were not in charge of the change process. Even though everyone got along and trusted one another, they didn't have a professional learning community with committees that truly made decisions, so they weren't successful.

The senate law asserted that changing professional roles can lead to change and this study clearly supported this claim. The successful school provided us with a clear example of the importance of changing professional roles. These teachers moved from only focusing on their classroom to focusing on the whole school and doing administrative actions in an administrative role. They were giving the opportunity to have shared decision-making and to participate in shared leadership and they successfully implemented change that the other schools did not. This research study helps researchers understand change and how important facilitative leadership of principals in developing professional learning communities can be to develop and sustain positive change in schools.

Relationships, Relationships, Relationships

Fullan's third component is "relationships, relationships, relationships."

"If moral purpose is job one, relationships are job two, as you can't get anywhere without them" (Fullan, 2001, p. 51). It is all about the people. They are the ones who make the change. Developing individual teacher's skills is obviously a good idea and can

make a difference in certain classrooms, but Newmann (2000) and his colleagues make the point that the school as a whole must change along with the individuals. The training of individual or small groups of teachers isn't enough. "For this reason schools must also focus on creating schoolwide professional learning communities" (Fullan, 2001, p. 64). Professional learning communities can give schools the opportunities for successful change.

Fullan does caution that having relationships just to have good friendships is not enough. "Relationships are powerful, which means they can also be powerfully wrong" (Fullan, 2001, p. 65). McLaughlin and Talbert's study of professional learning communities illustrates the power of relationships good or bad. In their insight from their observations, McLaughlin and Talbert (2001) made the point that strong professional learning communities will be effective or not depending on whether the teachers focus on good practice and student learning or whether they strongly reinforce each others bad or ineffective instructional practices. Powerful relationships can be powerfully good or bad. In effective schools, relationships have a moral purpose and focus on increasing student learning.

In supporting the power of relationships in school improvement, Strahan (2003) examined the dynamics of three schools' cultures which had made the improvements in their students' achievement. To explain the connection between school culture and student accomplishments, "the pictures that have emerged from these studies are fairly consistent. One characteristic of successful schools is that teachers work collaboratively. As they do so, they develop stronger instructional strategies, and these strategies enhance student achievement. At the same time, teachers develop a stronger professional

community, enabling them to provide even more social support for learning. This “spiral of reform activity” links ongoing assessment and instructional improvement to enhance student accomplishment” (Fullan, 1999, p.34). Strahan concluded with summaries of rich descriptions of the three schools and hopes the findings will enrich and extend the descriptions of successful schools. Each school accomplished reform in a different manner, but all three schools were places where adults and students care for each other and invest great energy in their work. Data directed dialogue provided support and focus for their tasks. These three schools succeeded because of strong professional learning communities with much open and shared collaboration. Teachers working in professional learning communities can accomplish unprecedented tasks.

Knowledge Creation and Sharing

Knowledge Creation and Sharing is the fourth component in Fullan’s model. In education, this is the most significant part in a professional learning community (Fullan, 2001). Teachers and staff must share and build their knowledge as a group for improving student learning. DuFour has three big ideas to add to professional learning communities. DuFour (2004) states he has added three big ideas that must be present to ensure a true successful professional learning community that improves student achievement.

The first big idea is to ensure that students learn. What he is getting at here is the idea that schools must ensure that students are learning not just ensuring what is taught. He found this to separate the true professional learning communities from traditional schools. The second big idea is to have a culture of collaboration. “Educators who are building a professional learning community recognize that they must work together to

achieve their collective purpose of learning for all” (DuFour, 2004, p. 9). This is a key component in Hord’s description of a professional learning community. The last big idea is that the school must focus on results. “Working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work of everyone in the school” (DuFour, 2004, p. 10). Ensuring students learn and focusing on results are certainly in Hord’s definition of a professional learning community, but her definition is more open ended so that the definition may let any professional learning community decide their own vision and purpose. DuFour in this article wants to ensure the survival of the concept of professional learning communities and believes these three big ideas are critical to the survival of professional learning communities.

Darling-Hammond (2000) in a comprehensive review of research of teacher quality linked teacher quality to student achievement. When reviewing the literature, general academic ability and intelligence of the teacher did not have statistically significant results. Two reviews of such studies concluded that there is little or no relationship between teachers’ measured intelligence and their students’ achievement (Schalok, 1979; Soar, Medley, & Coker, 1983). Subject matter knowledge also showed statistically insignificant relationships, and these were both positive and negative (Andrews, Blackmon & Mackey, 1980; Ayers & Qualls, 1979). Studies have found more positive relations to student learning with teachers’ knowledge of teaching and learning (Ashton & Crodker, 1987). Teacher experience is an area where Rosenholtz found that inexperienced teachers were less effective but the effects evened off after about five years. Certified licensed teachers are more effective. In a recent study (Fuller, 1999) found that students in school districts with more licensed teachers were significantly

more likely to pass state achievement tests. Lastly, teacher behaviors and practices may have a significant result such as teachers' "flexibility," "creativity," or "adaptability," (Berliner & Tikunoff, 1976; Schalock, 1979; Walberg & Waxman, 1983). Also listed (Darling-Hammond, 1996) stated that planning time, opportunities to plan and problem-solve with colleagues also showed positive results.

Linda Darling-Hammond after reviewing this research conducted a triangulation analysis of the data from surveys of state policies, case study analyses of state policymaking, and quantitative examination of the distribution of state achievement scores and resources, taking student characteristics into account. She has some very noteworthy findings. First, teacher quality variables appear to be more strongly related to student achievement than class size, overall spending levels, teacher salaries, or the proportion of staff who are teachers statewide. Next, by quality she is referring to teachers with full certification and a major in the field, and this was more powerful of a predictor than advanced degrees. In other words, if teachers are certified and have the education coursework and background, they know more about instruction and teaching strategies and their students are more successful. There is nothing that has more of an impact on student learning than teacher quality (Darling-Hammond, 2000). Teachers with much knowledge share and build knowledge together for the improvement of student learning.

Coherence Making

The fifth component in Fullan's model is Coherence Making. If the leader has a moral purpose, understands change, develops good relationships around learning, and builds and shares knowledge, then the leader is ready for coherence making. "Change is

the leader's friend, but it has a split personality" (Fullan, 2001, p. 107). There are two parts to coherence making. They are self-organizing and strange attractors.

Self-organizing refers to working on components one through four. The leader leads with a moral purpose, works to understand change, works on developing good relationships based on improving learning which involve sharing knowledge and building new knowledge. "When you do this the dynamics are such that the organization shifts to a new state as a result of the new interactions and ideas" (Fullan, 2001). The leader utilizes components one through four in Fullan's model.

Strange attractors refer to experiences that will energize and build commitment of employees. Fullan call them strange because they are not predictable. Think of them as a series of events that will bring a staff together to be committed to one goal. Visions can be attractors. Building coherence is all a matter of timing. Focusing on student outcomes in schools can certainly bring people together.

In conclusion of Fullan's model, all five components work together as a checks and balances for the leader in a time of change. The strong moral purpose will keep a leader on track while understanding change and the give and take of relationships. In the professional learning community, the leader will help set up opportunities for staff to share and gain knowledge together and the leader will know when to disturb things and when to build coherence. "Ultimately, your leadership in a culture of change will be judged as effective or ineffective not by who you are as a leader but by what leadership you produce in others" (Fullan, 2001, p. 137). Leaders are judged on results.

Part III Sustainable Leadership

Sustainable Leadership

Professional learning communities are always evolving. Michael Fullan's leadership model for times of change fits beautifully for leading professional learning communities, but there is also a sustainable part in every professional learning community. The professional learning community must be able to sustain itself as it continues to evolve over time. Hargreaves and Fink (2006) have researched sustainable leadership and developed a theory including seven principles of sustainability. The term sustainability was first started in the environmental field by Lester Brown. His definition was that a sustainable society is one that is able to satisfy its needs without diminishing the opportunities of future generations to meet their needs (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Definition of Sustainable Leadership

Hargreaves and Fink (2006) state that the idea of sustainable leadership is completely moral. This synthesizes with Fullan and his leadership theory having a moral purpose. Their definition of sustainable leadership is "Sustainable educational leadership and improvement preserves and develops deep learning for all that spreads and lasts, in ways that do no harm to and indeed create positive benefit for others around us, now and in the future" (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 17). There are seven principles of sustainability according to Hargreaves and Fink. The seven principles of sustainability are depth, length, breath, justice, diversity, resourcefulness, and conservation. "The ultimate goal for sustainable leadership in a complex, knowledge-sharing society is for schools to become professional learning communities"

(Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 125). Sustainable leadership develops deep learning for students (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

Seven Principles of Sustainable Leadership

The first principle of sustainability is depth. In a nutshell, sustainable leadership matters (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Leaders must be preserving and protecting the fundamental moral purpose of deep knowledgeable learning, not what is being tested today with such high stakes, which is a narrowly defined curriculum and narrowly tested with one test on one day using multiple choice items (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). The first principle of sustainable leadership is that leadership is for learning and for caring for others. The leader cares and is constantly grounding their leadership in the theory that it is all about depth, deep and broad learning. This means a strong and unswerving sense of moral purpose for deep learning.

The second principle of sustainability is length. This simply put means, that sustainable leadership lasts. All leaders are eventually gone. Sustainable leadership preserves and continues year after year, from one leader to another. These challenges we face in leadership succession of leading beyond individual leaders over time is at the heart of sustainable leadership and change in education (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Sustainable leadership and improvement must be measured over many years and several principalships.

The third principle of sustainability is breadth. Sustainable leadership spreads as it sustains as well as it depends on the leadership of others. No one leader can or should control everything. Sustainable leadership is distributed leadership. This fits perfectly with professional learning communities and the leadership of teachers in the schools.

This is why the ultimate goal of sustainable leadership for schools is for them to become professional learning communities (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The fourth principle of sustainable leadership is justice. Sustainable leadership is not self-centered; it is morally and socially just. This leadership does not harm other neighborhood environments. It does not raid the best resources such as great teachers from other schools (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006). Sustainable leadership actively improves the surrounding environment.

The fifth principle of sustainable leadership is diversity. Strong schools are just as strong ecosystems as they are diverse. In sustainable communities, alignment is not what they are after. “Sustainable leadership, in contrast, fosters and learns from diversity in teaching and learning and moves things forward by creating cohesion and networking among its richly varied components” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 19). Professional learning communities utilize and embrace the diversity of the school staff.

The sixth principle of sustainable leadership is resourcefulness. Sustainable leadership takes care of its leaders by making sure they take care of themselves. It renews people’s energy by keeping realistic timelines and appropriate levels of innovation. It is resourceful in that it doesn’t waste its money or its people. It also through shared leadership recognizes and rewards the leadership talent earlier rather than later in their career (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The seventh principle of sustainable leadership is conservation. Sustainable leadership honors and learns from the best of its past to make an even better future. In the middle of change, sustainable leadership is careful about preserving and renewing its long-standing purposes. It is this leadership that revisits and revives memories and

honors the wisdom of the best of the past. “Sustainable leadership needs a rearview mirror as well as a driver’s windshield” (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006, p. 249).

Sustainable leadership does not forget its past.

In sustainable leadership, leaders must have all of the principles. Leaders can’t just pick and choose. It is a meal, not a menu. All principles fit together. “You have to eat all of your greens” (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006, p. 251). Individual school improvement efforts according to Hargreaves and Fink (2006), should no longer be attempted or judged as a snapshot. Leadership and improvement efforts should be stretched out and tested on the essence of their sustainability or unsustainability.

Why Professional Learning Communities?

In these tough times of accountability, developing and sustaining professional learning communities will improve student achievement (Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; Bryk et al., 1996; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). In a professional learning community, all teachers are working together to ensure the success of all students (DuFour, 2004). This is the leadership and culture needed to survive today’s accountability. Professional learning communities improve student achievement (Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; Bryk et al., 1996; Louis & Kruse, 1994; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) which is the bottom line today for a successful school. So as far as accountability goes, there is no greater school culture than a professional learning community. This is also the best way to get sustainable leadership that will ensure the best for all students and make sure that deep learning continues to evolve over the passage of time.

Summary

In conclusion, the five key components of a professional learning community are Supportive and Shared Leadership, Collective Creativity, Shared Values and Vision, Supportive Conditions, and Shared Personal Practice. Each of these is the foundation for learning communities to bring about great changes in education today.

What is now envisioned is a quantum leap toward the creation of a setting where inquiry is normal and the conditions of the workplace support continuous, collegial inquiry...that involves the total faculty, builds community, serves to increase student learning through the study of instruction and curriculum, and seeks to provide a nurturant organization through collective study of the health of the school (Joyce & Calhoun, 1995, p. 51).

Since a professional learning community is so important to school effectiveness, and since “The quality of leadership is a key factor in building a school community where improvement is most likely to occur” (Harris, 2002, p. 22), then using Fullan’s framework for leadership, a principal can lead with a moral purpose, understanding change, building relationships, sharing knowledge, and building coherence. The principal can also use all of the principles of sustainability including depth, length, breadth, justice, diversity, resourcefulness, and conservation to help lead the community to continue to sustain over time. This is leading on the edge of chaos (Fullan, 2001). Through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community?

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Philosophy

The research philosophy used in this study is the qualitative research design. The qualitative researcher learns about a way of life by studying the people who live it and asking them about their experiences (Yow, 1994). “Qualitative research is an umbrella concept covering several forms of inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible” (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). Other forms of inquiry often used interchangeably according to Merriam (1998) are naturalistic inquiry, interpretive research, field study, participant observation, inductive research, case study and ethnography. Some writers in the field refer to these and other terms as types of qualitative research. One lists forty types (Tesch, 1990). Many writers consider the philosophical roots of qualitative research to be phenomenology and symbolic interaction (Merriam, 1998). Others look to constructivism, postpositivism, and critical social science to understand the world of qualitative research.

The key philosophical assumption in all qualitative research is that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 1998, p.6). What is in direct contrast of quantitative research is that quantitative research takes apart the phenomenon to examine the parts which become the variables in studies, and

qualitative research strives to understand how the parts work together to form the entire phenomenon.

Qualitative research (Patton, 1985) is described as; an effort to understand situations in their uniqueness as part of a particular context and the interactions there? This understanding is an end in itself, so that it is not attempting to predict what may happen in the future necessarily, but to understand the nature of that setting-what it means for participants to be in that setting, what their lives are like, what's going on for them, what their meanings are, what the work looks like in that particular setting-and in the analysis to be able to communicate that faithfully to others who are interested in that setting...The analysis strives for depth of understanding.

(p. 1)

This depth of understanding is what the researcher needs to examine.

There are four key characteristics of qualitative research according to Merriam. The number one characteristic is understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participants' perspectives and not the researchers. Some call this the emic or the insider's view. The second characteristic is that the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. "Data is mediated through this human instrument, the researcher, rather than through some inanimate inventory, questionnaire, or computer" (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). The third characteristic is that the research usually has fieldwork where the researcher must physically go to the people or setting in question. Lastly, the fourth characteristic is that qualitative research usually is inductive in that it builds theory or concepts rather than test them. Many times qualitative research is done because of a lack

of research in an area or that existing theory fails to adequately explain or describe the phenomenon in question. “Typically, qualitative research findings are in the form of themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypotheses, even theory which have been inductively derived from the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 7). Qualitative research usually builds theory or concepts rather than test theory or concepts.

Qualitative research focuses on process, understanding, and meaning. Products of qualitative research are vivid descriptions of words and pictures rather than numbers. The qualitative researcher uses words to explain what they have learned about the phenomenon they are studying. Qualitative research is the way to the most vivid description of the principal’s personal perceptions of their own perspective.

Methodology

The methodology used in this study is phenomenology. The researcher listened to the principal’s personal perceptions and stories. Phenomenology is the study of the lived phenomenon. Tesch (1990) states about phenomenology that:

It began as a school of philosophy. In the course of applying this philosophy to the scientific exploration of the social world, however, scholars developed explicit investigation methods. Phenomenological researchers study ordinary ‘life-world’: they are interested in the way people experience their world, what it is like for them, how to best understand them. (p. 68)

The focus of a phenomenological study is the focus on the essence or structure of the phenomenon. According to Patton (1990), phenomenology is based on “the assumption that there is an essence or essences to shared experience. These essences

are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of the phenomenon” (p. 15). Examining the principals’ perceptions to reveal themes which emerge describing the phenomenon is transcendental phenomenology. The task of the phenomenologist is to discover the essence of the basic structure of the experience. This study will attempt to understand “the insider’s perspective” (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996) of the principal who is living the experience of developing and sustaining a professional learning community. Through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community?

Dialectical phenomenology was derived from G.W.F. Hegel in 1807 who believed that one can grasp the spirit of a phenomenon by initially examining immediate conscious thoughts over time. The vignettes in chapter four reveal the conscious thoughts and reflections of the principals’ through their open ended stories. Edmond Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology held that one can ultimately reveal the thematic essence of a phenomenon through one’s recollections and reflections. Heidegger’s existential phenomenology is about the individual’s participation in his or her own self (Becker, 1992). The researcher used existential phenomenology when revealing all participants’ unique stories in the vignettes in chapter four. The researcher used all three of these approaches because all principals had some of the same experiences, but all principals’ thought processes were unique to themselves.

The researcher studied the lived experiences of principals who are developing and sustaining professional learning communities in their schools. This was a

phenomenology study examining the phenomenon of facilitating development of a professional learning community. Some individuals have considered phenomenology a paradigm rather than a research strategy. In order to understand principals' developing and sustaining professional learning communities, the researcher needs to understand the principals' thoughts, feelings, and reflections in understanding the phenomenon of developing and sustaining a professional learning community in a school. This study attempts to understand "the insider's perspective" (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996). Qualitative research of principal's perceptions is an interpretation of reality that is useful in understanding the human condition (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998). The researcher studied the lived experiences of elementary principals who are developing and sustaining professional learning communities in their schools.

Participants

Nine principals participated in this study. All principals were from OETT/OK-ACTS School Grant recipients, referred to as "Phase II Schools" from a southwestern state and had served as professional development leaders in their schools through a state-wide externally funded project at a major university. To be a phase two principal, the principal's school was involved in developing key components of a professional learning community. All principals responded that they have been involved in professional learning community development and sustainability. All were well respected by university staff and viewed as successful leaders in developing and sustaining a professional learning community in their schools. The researcher selected through the assistance of university personnel urban, suburban, and rural elementary school principals who were phase two principals in this university led professional development program.

Principals were from small to large elementary schools. They were from Title I schools with poverty issues and from Non-Title I schools from wealthy suburban areas.

Principals were from a wide variety of environments serving as representative of the state.

Researcher's Perspective

The researcher is a practicing elementary principal in his sixth year of his current assignment. He is actively developing and sustaining a professional learning community in a school while researching the topic. The researcher is using Fullan's change theory(2003) in his own practice. This gives the researcher an insider's perspective of the phenomenon and when interviewing other principals, they know the researcher understands their perspective allowing participants to be open and honest in their responses. The researcher has also been a summer school principal, assistant principal, and an elementary teacher.

Data Collection

The main research tool the phenomenologist uses to understand the phenomenon is the interview. The interview is not just a question and answer format but is a "dialogical reflection" of the researcher and participant working together (Langenbach, Vaughn, & Aagaard, 1994). The interaction is a significant part of the method of research. The collaboration of this work together is referred to "shared work" (Yow, 1994).

The researcher conducted open-ended interviews with each principal. Each interview was about sixty to ninety minutes in length. The interviews were conducted at the principal's office after school, whenever possible, so they would feel more

comfortable and be able to show the researcher anything at the site they wished. The interviews were taped and conducted in a single session. The participants were first asked just to tell about their career. This was a good non-threatening way to begin. The interviews were interactive and the researcher sometimes asked clarifying questions. All participants were very open and honest. All were able to be open and honest since the researcher was also a fellow principal. These interviews help the researcher understand the participants' perspectives. The researcher could only get this type of rich data from interviewing principals who had lived the phenomenon of developing and sustaining of a professional learning community. The researcher needed to hear the principal's stories. This could not be done through surveys or questionnaires. The researcher needed to listen and hear their participant's personal stories, perceptions, reflections, and understandings. This is a missing piece in the current professional literature about professional learning communities (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were finished the collected tapes and field notes were transcribed. They then were sorted and arranged systematically. According to Von Manen (1990) grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of looking for and finding meaning. The researcher then looked for themes that ran across all interviews and then placed all reoccurring themes into a number of themes that each principal reflected upon in their interviews. The researcher shared the transcriptions and themes with his Chair who read the interviews.

Correct careful data analysis is critical. "Analysis involves working with data, organizing them, breaking them into manageable units, synthesizing them, searching for

patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what to tell others” (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998, p. 177). Discovering the patterns takes time and careful analysis.

Using transcendental phenomenology, the researcher used Colaizzi’s (1978) procedural steps for data analysis. Colaizzi’s steps are protocols, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clusters of themes, exhaustive description, and fundamental structure. Stage one: protocols; is when the researcher reads all of the subjects’ interviews and descriptions. This is done in order to acquire a feeling for them. Stage two: extracting significant statements; is when the researcher returns to each transcript and extracts from them phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the investigated phenomenon. Stage Three: formulating meanings; is when the researcher tries to spell out the meaning of each significant statement. Colaizzi (1978) describes this as a precarious leap, as a leap moving beyond the transcript but not ever severing the meaning totally from the transcript. Key theme words are identified for each formulated meaning. Stage four: Clusters of themes; is when the researcher aggregates the formulated meanings into clusters of themes and then refers these clusters of themes back to the original transcripts to validate them. Stage five: exhaustive description; is when the researcher writes an exhaustive description of the investigated phenomenon so far, and stage six: fundamental structure; is when the researcher makes an effort to formulate the exhaustive description of the phenomenon in as unequivocal a statement of identification of its fundamental structure as possible. The researcher used Colaizzi’s procedural steps for analysis to guide him as a phenomenologist. Now the researcher may give a voice to these principals and their thoughts, reflections, realizations, and

understanding of the complexity of developing and sustaining a professional learning community.

Summary

Nine principals from a southwestern state who were all developing and sustaining a professional learning community in their school were interviewed for a qualitative phenomenology research study in order to theme out common themes that explain how successful elementary principals develop and sustain a professional learning community in their schools. These themes help explain how successful principals develop and sustain professional learning communities. These themes will help practicing principals and their schools to be more prepared while developing and sustaining professional learning communities. These themes will also help inform future research, theory, and principal pre-service programs.

CHAPTER IV

Vignettes

Introduction

This study sought to answer: Through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community? In chapter one, the need in schools for professional learning communities, and the importance of principal leadership were established. In chapter two, the literature review shared a historical context, identified key concepts and constructs of professional learning communities, identified a leadership model for leading in an evolving professional learning community, and identified principles of sustainable leadership. Chapter three detailed the use of phenomenology as a method to inform how experienced principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community.

This chapter presents observations of the interview surroundings and reveals each principal's story as to how they came to be an elementary principal. This will serve to establish the background of each principal interviewed and school context. This background and context will deepen the researcher's and reader's knowledge of the viewpoint of each principal.

The principals were chosen based on the level of participation and leadership in a university led staff development program. Their personal story of becoming a principal and the field notes taken by the researcher about the principal's school are presented as brief vignettes in this chapter to more accurately portray the principal's perspective. Vignettes are an effective way to help the reader most effectively understand the

phenomenon through principals' perspectives showing context and background (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Principal Smith

Principal Smith works at Country Side Elementary School – a medium size, rural public school with a total of thirty-seven certified staff members. The school serves grades Preschool through Fifth Grade. The school is in the middle of the country in a school complex with the middle school and the high school all together.

On the day of the interview, the researcher pulled off the small highway and saw the school complex. He did not see a town, just a large school complex. He saw a football field for the high school and followed the road to see the sign for the administration offices and saw the elementary school sign. The researcher pulled in and parked in a gravel parking lot. The school was a metal building.

The minute the researcher walked inside, he felt welcomed. The school was colorful with a beautiful large student-made mosaic display on the wall across from the office. The school had a friendly welcoming feeling once inside. Principal Smith was right on time to welcome him. She shook his hand and led him into the office. She sat him down directly across from her in the office and told him her story of how she became a principal:

I'm 61 years of age. I was one of those who graduated high school Friday night and got married on Sunday. I'm one of those. So, I really didn't start into a career or anything, I was a homemaker until my youngest child started kindergarten then I started college. It took me five years to get through because I arranged my

schedule around my kids' schedule. I had the best of both worlds there. We had moved to Townsville from Oklahoma City. So when I graduated college, there was an opening at Townsville and I was hired in as a rover over there which meant I taught. I didn't know year to year what I would teach. It was just what was needed. I taught seventeen years. I went back to school to get my counseling; I already had my masters in elementary education. The counselor at the college told me I had so many hours in administration that I should get that too. I went ahead and got both and after that I still worked at Townsville for several years. I became the assistant over there and the superintendent over there was good friends with the super over here so they decided to hire an assistant over here and I was at the chalkboard teaching and the superintendent knocked on the door and said 'I really think you need to apply over at Country Side', and I said, 'Are you trying to tell me something!' 'What are you telling me, you don't want me anymore?' Anyway, that's how it worked out. I became the assistant over here, and I was the assistant until May. The next year, they put me over the 4th and 5th grade principal and then the next year they gave everything to me. I've been here ten years now.

Principal Smith asked the researcher about his history, and how he ended up being a principal. The interview was very open and honest. The researcher being an elementary principal who is also leading in a professional learning community really opened the frankness and honesty in the responses of the principal. She was so open with him of the dreams, true feelings and emotions that it even surprised the researcher. It

seemed to the researcher that principal one enjoyed a time to share her work and her dreams.

Principal Jones

Principal Jones works at University Central Elementary School- a medium sized suburban elementary school with thirty-three certified staff members. The school serves grades Preschool through Fifth Grade. It is located about one block from a major state university.

On the day of the interview, the researcher drove past a huge state university football stadium in the suburban community. He then turned on a small residential side street and drove down to University Central Elementary. It is a very well kept modern looking school. A large flower surrounded marquee welcomes visitors next to the circle drive to the front door. The school is almost completely surrounded by beautiful lush green university practice fields.

Once the researcher entered the school, he was welcomed by friendly office staff and escorted to Mrs. Jones's office. Mrs. Jones asked the researcher about himself and then seemed very excited to tell her story of becoming a principal:

Mine is funny. It is extended. First, when I got out of college I was the director of education at a hospital. I did all their education classes. I wanted to be in education, but I graduated college when I was nineteen, and I wanted some more experience first. I then got my first Masters in Secondary Education which would work for the hospital, and I did a prevention program for them for drug ed. I did drug education for a long time and taught alternative education and night classes,

many different things. I kept going to school. I have a 2nd Masters in Secondary Counseling, 3rd in Elementary Counseling, 4th in Elementary Administration, and my Doctorate and Superintendent Certification.

Principal Jones and the researcher had a very open interview. She asked if she could read his work when he was finished. She was very interested in the other principals' stories, knowledge, and feelings. Once the interview was over, Mrs. Jones gave the researcher a tour around the school and showed where the teachers meet, their computer labs, classrooms, and he witnessed the feeling of community in the school.

Principal Johnson

Principal Johnson works at Rural Elementary- a small, rural public school with a total of eighteen certified staff members. The school serves only grades Preschool through Third Grade. It is located in the middle of beautiful farm and ranch land. There are no other buildings anywhere around Rural Elementary.

On the day of the interview, the researcher talked with Mr. Johnson as he had asked him to call to make sure he would be in the building when the researcher arrived. He needed to sequence the meeting between taking care of his horses and his hay. The school year had just ended and he was very busy with his farm. This was by far the hardest school to find. Map quest couldn't help. The researcher reviewed careful directions from Mr. Johnson and was warned that, his cell phone would not work to call him. Mr. Johnson was right. It didn't work, but the researcher did find the school. Rural Elementary is a beautiful school building in the middle of nowhere located between two towns. Children from both towns attend the school. The building is fairly new and in wonderful condition.

Once inside, the researcher was greeted by one of the friendliest staff the researcher had ever encountered. The office staff and Mr. Johnson were very friendly. The researcher had to wait a few minutes until they stopped talking to the mail carrier. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. Mr. Johnson led the researcher into his office and asked about him and then told him his story of becoming a principal:

I had been teaching fourteen years, I think, and an administrator came to me and asked me about becoming a Junior High Principal. I told him that I was not certified or anything, and he told me that I was fixing to go back to school. He insisted that I go back and get my Masters in Administration and this was when I was at Rockwall. I went back to school and I hated it, but I did it. I didn't want to be teaching for another fifteen years or so and I knew this would open possibilities. I got my Masters and became the Junior High Principal for a couple of years, then the Elementary School Principal retired and I became the Elementary Principal at Rockwall. I was in that job for a couple of years and then this position came open. My wife teaches here and my kids went to school here. We were on two different schedules so when this opened up, they asked if I was interested and I was because it fit into my family. That is how I came into this little job. Being a principal has been all I thought it would be. I have been very fortunate to be surrounded by good people. I'll be honest, I don't know much, but I surround myself with good people, and I credit myself at being able to hire the right people and trying to position them in the right places and let them lead in their range. I like to lead from the back. That's where I'm at. I like to let them

lead in between their lines. That is how I lead this school and how I led the other schools. This is my fourteenth year at this site. I'm just getting started!

Mr. Johnson was so excited after the interview that he took the researcher on a tour of his entire school. It was a very impressive tour. The school had a brand new auditorium and gym also. The kindergarten classrooms had two rooms. One was just for centers. Every classroom had smartboards and computers. He also stopped to show the researcher where certain key teacher leaders worked and where teachers met to discuss how to help all students. Visiting this school was a joy. As Mr. Johnson said, "It's the best little secret in Ranch County."

Principal Greene

Principal Greene works at Cityland Elementary- a large urban public school with forty certified staff members. The school serves grades Kindergarten through Fifth Grade. It is located on a very busy city street in the middle of a large metropolitan city.

One the day of the interview, the researcher found this school very easily with mapquest. The school is well kept and has a nice appearance from the street. As the researcher entered the school, he was greeted by several teachers and staff and made to feel very much at home. The inside of the school was very kid friendly with a large colorful office. Mrs. Greene came to meet him and took him to a comfortable conference room to interview her in. She, like the others, asked about him and his career. She asked several questions about his university experience and then asked if he could meet her assistant principal after the interview and talk with him about graduate school as the assistant begins a doctorate program. The researcher did get to meet him after the

interview. Mrs. Greene began the interview by telling the researcher her story of becoming a principal:

I began my teaching career in a little school house in Arkansas in 1969. I came from New York, went to school in San Diego and ended up teaching in a little place called Earls. There were only five hundred kids, no five hundred people in the whole town. The kids got their first pair of shoes when they came to school. That was where my teaching began. I taught first grade, and then I went and taught in an all black school just outside Atlanta. Then I came here and ended up at Hillstown which is a highly challenged school. They are a hundred percent poverty now. When I was there, I was grade level chairman, vertical team chairman, and school improvement. People kept telling me, you should go into administration. Teachers would bring me their discipline problems. I was doing it so I thought I'll go to school and see what this is really about, and I did. Low and behold, I then became a principal. I was an assistant for one year at two different schools in the district and then became principal here and I've been here for eight years. I thought I would miss the classroom and the contact with the kid's, but I feel I have just broadened the contact. That is not a problem, maybe more contact than I want some days.

After our interview, Mrs. Greene took the researcher around the school to see different places that she had talked about in the interview. The assistant principal and the researcher had a good talk about graduate school and he could see Principal Greene's leadership and dreams for her staff while talking with her and her assistant principal.

Principal Scott

Principal Scott works at Garfield Elementary School- a suburban middle sized school with twenty-five staff members. The school serves grade Preschool through Fifth Grade. The school is located in an old residential area of town on a small school site. It is the oldest school building in the district, but is a wonderful looking school facility.

On the day of the interview, the researcher drove up to Garfield finding it quite charming. Garfield does not look nearly as old as it is, but it has a certain charm. The researcher saw the old original school bell. As he walked in he saw a wonderful painting of four children from different eras painted for the school's hundredth celebration. The school has a very friendly feeling with staff pictures and pictures of students and the school displayed. The staff was very friendly and the principal greeted the researcher and welcomed him immediately to her office. The office and the principal's office were very small. Even though it was small, it felt comfortable. There were pictures students had made the principal taped to the wall. Mrs. Greene began the interview by telling the researcher her story:

I guess a significant point in my career was when I stayed home. I had taught for seven years and I stayed home for four years after my second child. My son was starting first grade. I started subbing some. My son's first grade needed a long term sub and the sub they had was probably a good sub for survival. I went and told the principal that they needed to find a good sub, and if they couldn't, I would do it, because the last time I taught, it was first grade, and I wasn't willing to sacrifice my son's first grade year. The principal called me a few days later and asked if I would start on Monday. Well, I was in that class for three and a half

months and when the teacher was ready to come back about Christmas time, I didn't want to leave. It was a real big realization for me. First, it had been a job, a job I loved, but just a job, now this was something that satisfies me like nothing else does. So, I went back to work with a real different perspective. I taught a year, and then wanted something more and the Danforth Program was advertised. The principal I was with was on that board. I already had my Masters in Reading from before I had kids. The leadership piece of this sounded fascinating to me. I had no intention of leaving the classroom. There was an interview process and an application. My principal said to me that my application was ranked pretty high and I said, 'I hope I want this.' She said, 'You want this and you're going to do it.' This was a lesson to me about how a principal supports and pushes. That's how I got in. At the end of the program, there was a month long internship and it was a real internship. The principal I was with set up an office for me. Like student teaching, I was given responsibilities as I grew into them. We talked each day about how the day had gone. The principal I was with had a secondary background and didn't really like elementary teachers. She thought they were too needy and needed too many strokes. She also never really had an understanding of how to discipline elementary students. The first day I was there, she had me witness a paddling, but to her credit when he kept getting in trouble, she asked me what I thought. I asked where he keeps getting in trouble, could we do something there instead of here in the office? Through this internship my perspective broadened. I realized that the principal was still a teacher with a much bigger class. She influenced all the kids and the teachers were like her class. That was

my beginning; I had a wonderful leader for most of my teaching career. What happened was the principal where I did my internship left. I interviewed and got the job. I have never been a principal anywhere else. So that is how I got here and I can't imagine being anywhere else. I had this wonderful model, a great leader I had who was the best principal I could imagine. I know I can't be her, I like to think now that I have some strengths she didn't cause I know she had strengths I don't, but anyway, I had that model and I base everything on that and from that point, you have to look at your staff and see what they need.

Through interviewing Mrs. Scott, the researcher learned a lot about how she cares deeply about her staff and students. As Mrs. Scott walked the researcher around her building, she discussed which teachers were leaders, and she showed where the teachers met. She also openly talked about the loneliness in this job and the struggles. She was a very open and honest interviewee that touched the researcher deeply by her dedication.

Principal Maus

Principal Maus works at Hughes Elementary School- a large, suburban public school with forty-four certified staff members. The school serves grades Preschool through Fifth Grade. The school is very large and a new beautiful school building located in an affluent neighborhood.

On the morning of the interview, the researcher drove up to Hughes and admired the beautiful architecture and appearance of the building. Once inside, the researcher was in a large entry with a glassed in office to the left. Hughes had very friendly staff who made the researcher feel at home even in such a fancy school setting. Mrs. Maus took the researcher to her office for the interview. It was a very modern office with a glass wall

looking out at the circle drive out front. Mrs. Maus began the interview by telling the researcher her story of becoming a principal:

I taught sixth grade for about seven years in like five different schools. The first year I taught I remember the school psychologist, a man, saying about another teacher, she should go back to school to be a principal. It must have planted a seed, because I can still remember where I was. I was in a parking lot getting ready to give him a ride home. I remember thinking that that was something I hadn't thought about. It was twenty-three years ago, but it planted a seed. I was twenty-three years old in my first year of teaching and I hadn't thought that far yet. Three years later I was in Germany teaching and I had a female principal. She was just dynamite. I had that stereotype of men being the principal. She was awesome. She would pull me in a lot on leadership things. Then when we came back from Germany, I knew I wanted to get my masters and be a principal. I went to a south-central university and got my degree and interviewed and got a job as an assistant principal at a middle school. About half my experience has been in middle school and half in elementary. I have been a middle school assistant principal, middle school principal, and elementary school principal. I have flip-flopped back and forth. I have my superintendent certification and my PhD. in higher education.

Mrs. Maus after a very open and honest interview took the researcher into an incredible conference room with a very professional conference table and chairs with a modern painting on the wall by the head of the table. She took him here to show him where the professional discussions of the teachers have taken place. They sat and talked

some more in that conference room. The researcher thought to himself, wouldn't it be nice if all schools could have a conference room like that for teachers to discuss and meet in?

Principal Sale

Principal Sale is the principal of Clarksdale Elementary- a medium sized suburban public school which has thirty certified staff members. The school serves grades Kindergarten through Fifth Grade. It is located in a suburban town just outside of a major city.

On the day of the interview, the researcher was surprised that Mrs. Sale brought a guest to the interview. Mrs. Sale introduced herself and then introduced a young first-year principal that she had taken on as a mentor. While getting to know Mrs. Sale it became obvious her dedication to being a principal and how much she cared about schools and all students. She thought it would be good for her mentor to hear all she was about to say in her interview about leading in a professional learning community. She asked the researcher about his background and how he became a principal and then she very frankly told him her story:

Never in my life did I ever think I would be a principal. Did you? I was in another life married to a football coach. I'm old enough that I was in that generation where I wanted to support him. He wanted to build his career in football. It ended up that he had a little more extracurricular activities than I wanted him to have so we got divorced, and I got a job as a counselor. I was counselor working with this principal who was a nice man, but I knew I could do a better job. Well that sounds bad. Well, anyway, I had a good mentor who was

the assistant superintendent and when he retired she called me and asked me why I hadn't applied. So I got the job. I thought I knew all the answers after watching him and quickly found out I didn't know anything about being a principal. It took me about five years to even feel like I was the principal, because I had been the counselor before. Which is a terrible thing to do, because one day you are the friend of everyone, and then the next day you are the boss, and it is just not a good thing. It took about five years to even get started, and it has only been about the last eight years that I feel I know where I am going. When I read Richard Dufour's book I knew I had found something. This is what I have been looking for. This is what I want us to be. Then OKACTS came out and I applied for that and I had just started to work on becoming a PLC and then OKACTS just blended beautifully. Well here I am.

Mrs. Sale was a wonderful mentor to this other principal. She wanted her to hear her story as an experienced principal. She wanted her mentor to know the struggles, the time it takes, the gifts a principal needs to see, and making sure you have the right people in the right places.

Principal Barr

Principal Barr works at Hilltop Elementary School- a medium-sized rural elementary school. The school serves the entire towns second and third grade students. It is located on a hill on the edge of town.

On the day of the interview, as the researcher pulled up to Hilltop Elementary he was impressed by the beautiful school facility. The school is a very modern looking school facility with two wings going off in opposite directions. The school had beautiful

landscaping and modern large circle cut out shapes in the building. The school is a very impressive building. As the researcher entered the building he was greeted by friendly staff, and Mr. Barr came right out to meet him. They talked for a moment, and then they went into his large office where after first getting to talk a little about the researcher, Mr. Barr told the researcher his story:

I never wanted to be a teacher to tell you the truth. Wanted to be a lawyer and this and that. I had an English teacher in college who had a friend who was a 1st grade teacher in downtown Dallas, and he asked if anyone wanted to volunteer. I started volunteering and helping the little kids learn to read. I volunteered all through college. When I was finished I realized that I enjoyed that more than anything else I was doing. They got me I guess. Then I went back to school and got my teaching certificate and then started teaching in the city. I enjoyed teaching. At the time I told people that I would never be a principal. Then I got married and moved towns. I commuted a while and then got tired of the drive. I changed districts and continued teaching. I probably only got my Masters because I lived so close to the university. I used credits from having student teachers and just kind of fell into that. I wasn't even looking to apply when I finished that, but I was teaching in this building when the position vacated. I guess I just got lucky or someone told me I just deserved it. I wasn't quite sure what they meant by that. I probably wouldn't have quit teaching if the opportunity hadn't just come.

Mr. Barr was pretty modest in his story of becoming a principal, but through his interview, the researcher was impressed by his knowledge of experiences and dedication.

He asked the researcher a lot of questions about his work in graduate school since he had just started his doctorate program. Principal Barr was very excited to begin his doctorate program and reflective and open during the interview.

Principal Daniels

Principal Daniels works at Oldtown Elementary School- a small rural public school with eighteen certified staff members. The school serves Kindergarten through Fifth Grade and is located centrally in a small town.

On the day of the interview, the researcher drove up to the front of the school and viewed an older well-kept small elementary school. When entering the building he saw a very fun school environment with frogs painted on the walls. When entering the office, he would describe the office as warm and friendly to parents, students, and teachers. Mrs. Daniels took him into her small cozy office and told him her story becoming the principal of Oldtown Elementary:

I've been a principal for ten years. When I started, I was an assistant principal for one year then I moved to the second year and I was principal of two schools. I was baptized by fire from the very beginning. I guess I did a good enough job as an assistant that they thought I could handle it. They were both small schools and title one schools. They were exactly thirteen minutes apart. I enjoyed my transition from the classroom to being an assistant principal. I had major high expectations from my staff from the start. I have a lot of learning in it. I am very much a classroom teacher gone principal. I am an instructional leader. I manage when I have time. I went from there to staying at one of those schools for the next four years. Then the superintendent decided that this school was the place

for me. It was the lowest achieving school in the district. It had almost three hundred students and twenty percent were special education. Low moral of teachers. Parents pulling out to go to the other school that I was at and all sorts of major toxicity. The first thing I did was come over and see the place and the building just looked horrible. By the way, you are seeing the good version. I went and peeked in the doors and walked around the whole campus and then I cried all the way home. I cried because of how the teachers and the students had been treated. I didn't know why I was the chosen one. It felt more like a punishment than a promotion. I thank God for all that I have learned. He used me to intervene. Today, this school is moving in great guns. We have a strong community involvement. Our test scores have improved dramatically. We were at the bottom and now we have very good scores on our CRT's. We are now the third school in the district. I really enjoy being a principal. I have my superintendent certificate, but I really like the principalship. I plan on continuing and watching this little professional learning community grow. I have got to see it from the pits to the rise and it's a good feeling. Next year is my sixth year here. You can't do it all at once. It takes time. I told God, I want to do three things and I want to do three things well. Please help show me what they should be, and I will lead those things well. That is kind of my story.

What a passion Mrs. Daniels has for her school. She was very open and very candid during the interview. The researcher was sometimes shocked at how open she was during their time together. She toured him around the school and showed him where their school's professional learning community started. She wanted him to see the table

where it began. She wanted him to see what they had accomplished as a professional learning community.

The researcher was touched and impressed how much all of these principals enjoyed having someone to show what they have been working on. The researcher thought it is amazing how much time they wanted to give, and how much they wanted to discuss and share their story of leading their professional learning communities. To all of these nine successful principals it was very important to share their knowledge, successes, and failures. They were happy to give input to such an important question to principals. How do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community?

In summary, through existential phenomenology, the researcher was able to, through the vignettes in this chapter, show each principal's story and background which leads the reader to see each individual's participation is a different and unique experience which only they experienced. Such as Principal Smith who started her career late in life compared to Principal Jones who started her career right out of college. Even though each principal's story of why and how they became a principal is different, themes transcended once the interviews moved from telling their story to an open ended question and answer format about the phenomenon studied. These transcendental themes answering the question how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community will be presented in the findings chapter.

CHAPTER V

Findings

This study sought to answer: Through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community? In chapter one, the need in schools for professional learning communities and the importance of principal leadership were established. In chapter two, the literature review identified key concepts and constructs of professional learning communities, a leadership model for leading in an evolving professional learning community, and principles of sustainable leadership. Chapter three detailed the use of phenomenology as a method to inform how experienced elementary principals develop and sustain evolving professional learning communities. Chapter four presented vignettes about the nine elementary principals interviewed.

This chapter analyzes data using the guiding frameworks of Hord's (1997) key concepts of professional learning communities, Schussler's (2003) professional learning communities' construct, Fullan's (2001) leadership theory, and Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) theory of sustainable leadership, revealing four emerging themes that extend and deepen the knowledge presented in the literature review about developing professional learning communities. The themes that emerged about how experienced elementary principals develop professional learning communities from the nine interviews were:

- | | |
|-----------|----------------------------|
| Theme I | Time |
| Theme II | Right People, Right Places |
| Theme III | There Will Be Struggles |

Theme IV Must Be Able to See the Gifts

These four themes help support current research, and help to reduce a void or provide a missing piece in the literature about how successful elementary principals themselves perceive the development of an evolving professional learning community.

Using the same guiding frameworks three themes emerged from the nine interviews revealing how successful experienced elementary principals sustain evolving professional learning communities. The themes that emerged were:

Theme V Utilize Outside Support

Theme VI Lead from the Back

Theme VII Sustain the Feeling of Community

These three themes help to reduce a void or provide a missing piece in the literature about how successful elementary principals perceive sustaining an evolving professional learning community.

Nine principals were interviewed. They were from urban, suburban, and rural elementary schools. They described their experiences of developing and sustaining a professional learning community in sixty to ninety minute sessions. The participants included two males and seven females. All were elementary principals who had been actively involved in a university led professional development program.

The sessions began by asking the principals to tell their story of how they became a principal. After they described their story, a loosely structured agenda of questions (Appendix A) was used to guide the principals through revealing their reflections of developing and sustaining a professional learning community in their schools. After a

short explanation of what the researcher was doing and how the research would be used, the participants talked easily and were extremely open about experiences in developing and sustaining their professional learning community.

The analysis of the professional experiences revealed four main themes listed previously describing how the principals develop professional learning communities, that were discussed by all participants. The conversations were intense, funny, emotional, and often revealing. The interviews were a self-reflective process for the principals who were attempting to express and understand their professional events that were significant in developing and sustaining an evolving professional learning community. The information was always revealing to the researcher, but sometimes the principals were surprised by their revelations. All principals were interested in the topic and many asked if they could read the work when finished by the researcher so they could read the other principals' stories and reflections. In this self-reflective process the principals gave interpretations of their experiences. What each explained was their perception of reality as they had experienced it.

The four themes concerning the development of a professional learning community are (1) Time, (2) Right People-Right Places, (3) There Will Be Struggles, and (4) Must Be Able to See the Gifts. All principals discussed all of these themes in their interviews. The researcher has placed the themes in order leading or building up to seeing the gifts. All principals agreed you must be able to see the gifts to continue this type of leadership.

Developing a Professional Learning Community

Theme I: Time

As Mick Jagger sang, “Time is on my side.” Every principal understands this basic, but extremely important concept in the development of a professional learning community. All principals discussed how developing a professional learning community is a slow process. This process takes time, and there is no hurrying the process. Mrs. Scott said, “Time, time is always an issue, it is overwhelming to teachers and it is overwhelming to me” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Smith said it great when she said, “we can begin with baby steps because leading this way takes time. You can’t go quickly” (Interviews, 2006). Time is a theme every principal takes seriously.

One of the most important reasons that the development of a professional learning community must take time is the building of trust (Hargreaves, 2002). A professional learning community is an open community and to work properly everyone must trust each other. Mrs. Greene stated, “Another key component would be the time to build the trust level. I’ve been here eight years. It was the second or third year before I started doing this (facilitating the PLC). First, they needed to get to know me and I needed to get to know them” (Interviews, 2006). As far as building trust goes, Mrs. Scott said it clearly and to the point, “I think trust is important, and you can only show this over time” (Interviews, 2006). Developing a professional learning community will take a lot of time.

Every principal interviewed understood that developing an evolving professional learning community is a process that takes time. Mr. Johnson said, “You have to understand that it is not going to happen in a short period of time. It’s not going to

happen in a two month period or a sixth month period. It takes dedication and understanding that it will take, two, four, or six years to have things happen and see results” (Interviews, 2006). He also said, “The investment in the right people and the trust and time it takes. Patience is the key” (Interviews, 2006)! Mr. Barr also stated, “It takes a year or two just to get started even though I taught here. It takes time” (Interviews, 2006). All principals interviewed agreed and discussed the importance of understanding that this process cannot be hurried and will take a lot of time.

If a principal takes the time though, much can be accomplished (Kirtman, 2002). Mrs. Daniels said, “It is a slow process; you take baby steps and hope that they turn into giant thoughts in their minds” (Interviews, 2006). She after this quote stated, “We have completely revamped this little school through our professional learning community. We are all amazed, but we did it slowly one step at a time” (Interviews, 2006). This is the same principal that also stated, “The first year I felt attacked. The second and third year I felt abandoned. I had teachers leaving the building, two or three at a time” (Interviews, 2006). She realized it takes time though, and she kept developing their professional learning community. To quote Mrs. Scott, “Patience is key, you can’t push too fast” (Interviews, 2006). Principals interviewed saw that if they take the time, much can be accomplished. As Mr. Barr explained, “The first year I just worked on climate. The second year we got involved with OK-ACT’s. I worked on communication that year. The third year everything just started to evolve. Teachers started being proud of student achievement, working together to make more decisions. It just has to evolve” (Interviews, 2006). Principals interviewed explained to take the time and be patient.

Lastly, another very important concept about time is realizing that a professional learning community is an always evolving community (Hord, 1997). Mr. Johnson said it wonderfully, “You are never really there, but we are working hard together” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Daniels said, “A professional learning community is like learning, you are never there. Every year you learn more” (Interviews, 2006). Principals engaged in developing an evolving professional learning community are reminded that the community is always evolving, and this type of leadership is a slow process that must be given adequate time to get started. According to the principals interviewed, in their perceptions, a principal can’t have a professional learning community overnight. They stated that principals need to give it time to grow, develop, and evolve.

Theme II; Right People, Right Places

Having the right people in the right places was the second theme that emerged from all interviews. Mr. Barr said it clearly when he stated, “Having key leaders in place is most important. Here, until we had that in place, nothing could really happen” (Interviews, 2006). A principal after taking the time to build trust and to get to know their faculty should be discovering the key leaders in their community (Fullan, 2001). Mr. Barr went on to say, “Having leaders in place so the dialog can begin helps it all start. It has to be the right people in the right places” (Interviews, 2006). While taking the time it takes to get a professional learning community started, the principal should be discovering the key leaders in the community according to these successful principals.

Developing a professional learning community is not just having the right people. Developing the community involves the principal knowing their staff well enough to know who should be in which leadership role. Who has the desire to lead, is respected by

the staff, and has the ability to be a key leader in the school. Mr. Barr continues, “One of the most important leadership pieces is getting to know your staff well enough to identify key leaders to put into key places” (Interviews, 2006). Having the “investment in the right people and trust and time it takes,” to quote Mr. Johnson (Interviews, 2006). This was a common theme for all principals interviewed.

All interviewed principals when asked what they believed were the key components to have in place for a professional learning community, responded having the right people. Mrs. Jones said, I had to “get to know staff and make sure I have the right people in the right places” and “hiring the right staff, the right people in the right positions” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Smith said, “As far as a professional learning community I took the first step. A good principal surrounds themselves with excellent people” (Interviews, 2006). She continued with, “so, I think a learning community has to be just that. It has to be built with a group of people who are willing and want (to learn)” (Interviews, 2006). She continued, “People who are willing, see a need, and are willing to intervene and try new innovations” (Interviews, 2006). She concluded with, “The right people, having the right people in place” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Greene answered when asked about the key components in a professional learning community, “It is also very important for the administrator to know the people in their building, because they are the leaders, so the more you know your people, the more you know who to put where” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Scott summed up having the right people in the right places with this statement, “Finally, the last might be to use the teacher experts that you’ve got. You are going to find people that either learn something more quickly, or have bigger interest in a topic, and you’ve got to use these leaders so you are not forced

to be the expert all the time. You can't always be the expert, and even if you could it is not good" (Interviews, 2006). Principals interviewed clearly agreed that principals to develop a professional learning community need to step back, and let teacher leaders play key leadership roles in schools.

Nurturing key leaders and having them in the right places doesn't have to be formal. The principal does not have to have a representative of each grade level on a leadership team. Principals can let their leadership team evolve as Mrs. Maus has and have a leadership team of the right people leading. Mrs. Maus explained, "I think you must have some sort of leadership team. This has kind of evolved for me. It started out that I had a shared leadership team which had a representative from each grade level and each department and all that. I actually found that didn't do the things I wanted it to" (Interviews, 2006). Not every team has a building wide leader on it. Mrs. Maus realized that you must have the right people in the right places. Her leadership team needed the right people so she has changed to not requiring all grade levels be represented and now it is working very well. She explains, "So, we changed the team to be a staff development committee and let on the people who wanted to be on it, and were the leaders of staff" (Interviews, 2006). She concluded getting the right people to lead with you is so important by saying, "I needed people who have the time and the passion for that. They still represent everyone" (Interviews, 2006). Mr. Barr also talked about formal collaboration. He said, "I think sometimes you have your most difficult conflicts when you set up collaboration just for collaboration's sake, and it is formal in design" (Interviews, 2006). He also stated, "We have had the most success when it has happened informally" (Interviews, 2006). Having the right people as key leaders is so important,

and it is important to listen to these reflections from the principals. These statements are revealing that a principal has the freedom to set up teacher leaders in the building in a way that the right people are in the right leadership positions. Having the right people in the right places doesn't have to be a formal setup. The right people in the right places can be a leadership team or a staff development committee. This can be called many things. The most important piece from these principals' reflections is having the right people leading who have the ability and desire to lead.

In summary, principals wanting to develop an evolving professional learning community should note that stepping back and letting the right people in the right places to be leaders is a critical component in every one of these principal's perceptions of their professional learning communities. They believe schools must have the right people in the right places and principals developing professional learning communities need to step back and let the professional community lead.

Theme III: There Will Be Struggles

Principals wanting to develop an evolving professional learning community need to know that there will be struggles. There will be struggles because a professional learning community even after building trust over time, still opens up the communication and that alone can be harsh. It also opens up the leader to criticism. Principals leading this way through Fullan's (2001) change model including all of Hord's (1997) concepts of a professional learning community still need to realize that there will be struggles.

All principals interviewed said even though they would never want to lead another way that being the principal in a professional learning community is not as easy as it sounds in the literature. All agreed and reflected that they had many struggles. One

struggle is that when you open up the communication especially at first, it can be harsh. Mrs. Daniels describes their beginning, “In there at that conference table, we began our professional learning community with open discussions, and they weren’t always pretty. This was a place of toxicity. They didn’t know they were poisoning each other. They didn’t know their attitudes were not healthy. They didn’t know they were the reason that the parent involvement was down the tubes. I had to be brave enough to tell them that there are better ways, and let’s find them together” (Interviews, 2006). The principal leadership is so important. Mrs. Daniels also stated that, “If you haven’t seen the light, you enjoy the darkness. Before no one talked with each other, and now this place is a buzz with communication” (Interviews, 2006). She also explained it could be really difficult at first. She said in our interview, “I could write a whole book just about the rough times in the beginning like when a teacher told me I was full of...” (Interviews, 2006). Like she said, “It was very hard in the beginning” (Interviews, 2006). All principals agreed there were, and continued to be, struggles.

Sometimes it can be truly difficult to get teachers to open up the communication. Mrs. Sale said, “I can’t tell you the number of teachers who said to me, ‘leave me alone and let me teach.’ I would ask them what they were teaching, and they couldn’t answer” (Interviews, 2006). She also stated that the hardest part of leading this way was, “getting teachers to buy into it. I don’t care what kind of teachers you have after they have been there a couple of years; they want to be left alone. It’s like they think they work for themselves. Getting teachers to come around is the hardest part” (Interviews, 2006). The principal leadership to get people to open up is so important. Mr. Johnson said, “A lot of teachers have tunnel vision, not all of them, but a lot of them. They just can’t see outside

their room. Elementary is the worst at this. You have to be watching out for the school vision” (Interviews, 2006). The principal must help open up the communication and as Mr. Johnson put it, see the whole picture (DuFour, 2004).

Leading this way the principals stated sets the leader up for attacks. Mr. Barr said, “Let’s see, the hardest parts, I feel you open yourself up to a lot of attacks. I think when you involve everyone in decision making, you open yourself up to attacks that you let this person do what they want, or this group, or jumping on the bandwagon this year on this project, stuff like that. You can’t be sensitive and do this job, but I would be lying if I said it sometimes didn’t get to me. That’s probably the hardest” (Interviews, 2006). Mr. Johnson also explained that when you give your leadership role to others it opens you up to criticism. He stated, “It is a form of leadership to me to let them lead. Now I know that I’m doing it this way on purpose, and I know everyone may not see this, and that is a concern to me, but I know I’m truly leading this way on purpose for good reason” (Interviews, 2006). As Mrs. Smith said, “It has to be their idea” (Interviews, 2006). She explained, “It most certainly is not that easy. If I come in and say, ‘We are building a team community here.’ The first thing you will hear is ‘no, we can’t because of this and that.’ As a principal you have to guide them, but it has to be their idea” (Interviews, 2006). According to these principals, this is the hardest part. Knowing you are leading this way for a reason, but knowing many will not see you as leading. They will see you getting others to lead.

Another struggle principals had was that when you open it up to be their idea, it might not end up exactly where you thought it would, and the principal has to be ok with that. It is so important for principals to know that this is going to be hard, but the benefits

of a professional learning community are worth these struggles. Mrs. Greene said it well, “As a principal or the leader, you have to be willing to let go. You have to say to yourself, ‘I’m going to let them try this.’ I think that is the hardest part for most of us. As the administrator, we are kind of control freaks for the most part, so this is hard for us” (Interviews, 2006). The principals all agreed you have to be willing to let go.

Relationships with teachers according to some can be the hardest struggle. Mrs. Scott said it clearly about this struggle, “Well the hardest parts are the relationships with teachers. The hardest part is if you have someone whose philosophy doesn’t fit yet they are a long standing member of your faculty. You can’t just cut them off. You have to give evidence that you are doing your best to bring them along, that’s painful” (Interviews, 2006). She also said to explain how painful, “I have had teachers not speak to me in months. That hurts” (Interviews, 2006). As Fullan in his change model says, “relationships, relationships, relationships” (2001, p.51), and relationships can be hard. Mrs. Sale explained about relationships and the principalship, “There are a lot of things about being a principal that I don’t like. Working with a bunch of women, it feels like herding a bunch of ants. I was so naïve when I took this job, because when I was the counselor they were my friends. As principal, they are not my friends. The big mistakes I made, I didn’t understand as first that the ideas and changes have to come from them. When you get that principal name behind your name, you don’t change, but their perception of you changes” (Interviews, 2006). Relationships can be hard. Principals must learn not to take things personally.

Principals wanting to develop an evolving professional learning community need to know there will be struggles, because all principals explained how difficult this type of

leadership can be at times. Mrs. Daniels said it best, “Did I cry? Yes, I cried crocodile tears. Did I think I was going to call it quits? Yes, more than once. Did I cry myself to sleep? A couple of times I did. Did I complain to my family more than they wanted to hear? Yes” (Interviews, 2006). Even with all of these struggles, all principals said they had seen the benefits and even as hard as it can be, they wouldn’t lead any other way.

Theme IV: Must Be Able To See the Gifts

In order for principals to take the time needed, organize the right people into the right places, and continue through the struggles to develop an evolving professional learning community, all of these experienced principals agree, they must be able to see the gifts. The principals wanting to lead this way need to see the gifts. They need to be able to see how much the school can thrive, how much students can achieve. The experienced principals interviewed all agreed that they would never lead another way. They all see the gifts of a thriving evolving professional learning community.

The first gift from leading this way is the relationships, the community working together (Fullan, 2001, Hord, 1997). Mr. Barr said, “The thing I’m most comfortable with is that we have created a climate where people feel valued” (Interviews, 2006). He went on to say what keeps him going. “Just the relationships with people to tell you the truth. The relationships with staff, and I love the students, and I love what we are doing. I think success breeds success and makes you hungry for more” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Jones explained, “The joy of leading this way, we have to do it together. We have to relay on each other, especially with No Child Left Behind. We have to focus together on why we are really here, and we must do it together. The joy of celebrating together is so wonderful” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Smith talked about this togetherness. “The teachers

themselves, the team itself, it is the team that keeps going. Sometimes we have to back up and reassess. I have complete trust in them, and they have complete trust in me, and the team keeps the process going” (Interviews, 2006). These experienced principals all talked about the gift of the relationships in an evolving professional learning community.

The second gift of leading this way is the extra knowledge when everyone gets involved (Fullan, 2001; DuFour, 2004; Hord, 1997). There are so many more ideas when we include everyone in the process. Mrs. Daniels put this gift into words beautifully, “I realized how little I know, and how grateful I am for so many gifts in the teachers that surrounded me. They have been awakened through our professional community” (Interviews, 2006). She also discussed how they began together to share and discover together. “Let’s read and discover. We began to read books together and articles. We started to see a little something different in ourselves. Little did I know, because I am not that smart. That these little things that I thought were right things to do would be so powerful” (Interviews, 2006). Coming together and learning together and from one another is a power gift in an evolving professional learning community.

Lastly, all principals talked about seeing the results as a gift. Experienced principals saw the whole picture and saw how powerful this evolving professional learning community can be for student learning and the school culture (Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; Bryk et al., 1994; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Mrs. Scott explained, “Work with the teachers who get it and are exciting, and people who will bring stuff back to you. People that are succeeding are rejuvenating” (Interviews, 2006). This success and seeing the relationship between the successes and the professional learning community help keep you going and working together. The

principals see the teachers feeling a part in the success as Mrs. Greene explained, “Each one of them is having a little part of that, and when the test scores come in, they say and feel, ‘wow, we did that.’ They get more excited about it too” (Interviews, 2006). She went on to say, “I’ve seen some teachers this year, twenty year veterans who are saying, ‘this is pretty good’” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Sale said, “Looking at our results. About six of the teachers that left our site went to the other school, and we outscored them this year” (Interviews, 2006). She also went on to say, “I have a lot of good ideas, but as principal I didn’t know how to get them done, and the professional learning community helps me get them out there. It is a very demanding and tiring job, and I hate that I’m sixty and just figuring out how to do it” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Maus said about looking at results. “This may sound goofy, but I sometimes go back to the work we have done like our site plans, and say to myself, ‘we did that.’ I sometimes have to go back to the documents that show progress we have made, or the growth we have made to refocus me” (Interviews, 2006). Looking at the successes the school has achieved is a wonderful gift that principals need to see as it relates to their school’s professional learning community.

Mrs. Smith summed up seeing the successes and leading this way clearly when she said, “This has been the most successful model of leadership I have ever been acquainted with or every tried. I have been in this for twenty-seven years and I feel this is the most non-threatening type of leadership, and until something better comes along, this is it. This is very liberating and what you get from your staff leading this way is so great. They are seeing how to put fun into the curriculum by working together” (Interviews, 2006). All the principals interviewed said after seeing the gifts, they would

never lead any other way. Many of the principals took the researcher on a tour of their school buildings after the interviews and showed and explained where certain key pieces of their professional learning communities happened. These experienced principals all saw the big picture and kept the vision of a successful professional learning community in mind through the struggles to get to the gifts, and they saw and understood the gifts of leading this way. They explained that they will continue to develop and sustain their evolving professional learning communities.

Sustaining a Professional Learning Community

The three themes that emerged from the interviews to answer how experienced successful elementary principals sustain professional learning communities were Utilize Outside Support, Leading from the Back, and Sustaining the Feeling of Community. All principals discussed all of these themes in their interviews.

Theme V: Utilize Outside Support

When asked about sustaining a professional learning community, all nine principals discussed the need to utilize outside support for the community and for themselves to sustain a professional learning community.

When asked how she sustained her school's professional learning community, Mrs. Daniels stated, "I had good external people. I was working on my doctorate. I was in a university led staff development program. I had to go out looking for the good things" (Interviews, 2006). Mr. Barr also agreed, he said, "staff development, a university led staff development program, working with teachers and principals, my PhD program. It was nice to get out of the box, and meet some other nice people who are out

there trying to make a difference too. That is what keeps me going” (Interviews, 2006). The principals stressed a need to have support outside the school. This outside support could be in many different forms.

The outside support meant different things to different principals. Mrs. Scott explained, “Well, the hard part is that for the elementary principal, there is not a good person to talk to. I was really fortunate to become best friends with my secretary for the first few years. We could go get in the car, and she knew that anything said in the car, that was as far as it went” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Scott went on to explain that it should be someone in education because, “they don’t get it if they are not in education. They will say, just fire them” (Interviews, 2006). She continued to explain where she gets her outside support now. “I now have a good friend in education, but not at my school, who I can talk to while we walk each morning. I’ll even practice things out on her. This will help” (Interviews, 2006). Having someone to talk to about sustaining the professional learning community that is outside the community provides outside support for the principal.

Another area of outside support for principals was support from central office in their school district. Mrs. Greene showed her appreciation of this outside support by stating, “I’m so happy our district has embraced leading this way. It is a great way to run a school, or let a school run, like a symphony” (Interviews, 2006). One principal revealed that she left her last principal position because she could not make a professional learning community work without outside support from the central office. Mrs. Jones said, “I didn’t have the support from central office. I couldn’t make it work without their support, so I looked for somewhere else. So the hardest part is, if you don’t have support”

(Interviews, 2006). This principal is a successful principal sustaining a professional learning community now. She continued, “Here in this position, I have the right people and support. It is not as easy as it sounds in the literature, and central office support is huge” (Interviews, 2006). The principals clearly stated that district outside support was critical in sustaining a professional learning community.

Another outside support mentioned were other principals in the district. Mrs. Jones said, “When I first came to this district, we had the most principal meetings I have ever had in my life. We had so many meetings, but the knowledge and the support you get from the other principals, that is so huge” (Interviews, 2006). Principals can get the needed outside support from other principals.

All of the principals mentioned university led staff development in the area of professional learning communities critical for their sustaining a professional learning community in their school. A state university is an outside source all principals stated as support for them in sustaining their school’s professional learning community. Mrs. Daniels said, “I really feel like when I was introduced to the university model that it was part of the plan laid out for me” (Interviews, 2006). Mr. Barr said about the university staff development, “It has been huge. Sometimes, it was understanding in hindsight, but it was huge. It required me to identify those leaders which I probably would have done later, and it helped so much into technology integration. It helped me pick key leaders for technology, and then I was able to apply this getting leaders to help in other areas” (Interviews, 2006). Many principals mentioned changing their faculty meetings after the university led staff development. Mr. Barr said, “I have changed the way I do faculty meetings highlighting teachers to lead different things” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Maus

said, “We started putting professional development in our faculty meetings. It got us over the hump that faculty meetings are not just announcements. It can be a learning time and a sharing time as a professional community” (Interviews, 2006). The principals listed a state university as a very important outside support to sustaining professional learning communities. One principal even discussed calling the local university and utilizing their staff. Mrs. Jones stated, “Everything I do, I use the university framework and I call and utilize their staff too. I got \$10,000 from the district this year for technology, and we wanted a mobile laptop lab. I called the university staff and asked which one was best. I call with questions about leading a professional learning community” (Interviews, 2006). The state university can be a helpful outside source according to these successful elementary principals.

All principals also discussed that outside support was needed to help sustain the professional learning community as a whole. All of these principals listed outside grants and/or outside programs as a necessary outside support to sustain the community. Mrs. Scott explained, “We are in a state staff development program based on the arts, and we had one hundred percent staff attendance at our first retreat. We focus on technology through a university led staff development grant” (Interviews, 2006). Another principal listed four different outside supports her school had been involved in over the last few years. Outside supports are needed to sustain professional learning communities according to the principals interviewed.

Theme VI: Lead from the Back

All the principals discussed that once your professional learning community has begun to develop in order to sustain it, the principal must step back and lead from the

back. The principal is still involved and a member of the team, but according to these successful elementary principals, the principal needs to step back, and lead from the back in order to successfully sustain the professional learning community.

All the principals stated that to sustain a professional learning community, you must lead from the back. Mr. Johnson said, “You have to find lead teachers that the others respect and let them lead, and you stay in the back and that’s how I do it. It is a form of leadership to me to let them lead. Now I know that I’m doing it this way on purpose, and I know everyone may not see this, and that is a concern to me, but I know I’m truly leading this way on purpose for good reason” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Maus agreed and said in her interview, “Always building up teachers who have a passion and giving them opportunities to be leaders and share. This helps you sustain your community. These leaders have their own little professional networks that will reach people that I can’t get to. You have to plant seeds and direct from the back” (Interviews, 2006). The principals said leading from the back. They did not say stepping out. Mrs. Smith explains, “I don’t step all the way back. I’m interested, and it’s a joint effort. They have the trust and the authority to just go with it” (Interviews, 2006). This is similar to a component in Hargreaves and Fink’s model of sustainable leadership (2006). Leading from the back helps leadership spread as Hargreaves and Fink describe as breadth in sustainable leadership.

Including in this theme, the principals all considered and stated that successfully sustaining an evolving professional learning community is a leadership style. About this leadership style, Mrs. Jones said, “That is the only way I know how to lead. That is why I was so desperate to find the right place for me” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Smith

concluded her interview by stating, “This has been the most successful model of leadership I have ever been acquainted with or ever tried. I have been in this for twenty-seven years, and I feel this is the most non-threatening type of leadership and until something better comes along, this is it. This is very liberating and what you get from your staff leading this way is so great” (Interviews, 2006). This leadership style according to the principals is successful in sustaining a professional learning community.

Theme VII: Sustaining the Feeling of Community

In order to sustain the professional learning community, these principals believe that you must sustain the feeling of community. When asked about sustainability Mrs. Greene said, “I’m going to go on down the road one of these days, and I really hope I have given them a feeling, that spark that they know they are doing the right thing for themselves and for kids. The feeling of community they have created, they will want to sustain it” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Scott stated after her teachers have felt this feeling of community that, “I don’t think my teachers could do it a different way now. If someone came in now, and tried to lead in an authoritative way, they would have a hard time. I know we accomplish so much more with teachers leading and sharing” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Sale explained that she believed once you get teachers out of their classrooms, and let them feel the community, they will want to sustain the community. She said, “A real community, really looking at where they are going. The collaboration, opening the door of your classroom and going next door and asking, ‘How are you teaching this?’ Asking, ‘How can you help me teach this better,’ instead of shutting the door and teaching a unit on dinosaurs” (Interviews, 2006). These principals all agreed

that once a school has sustained the feeling of community, they will sustain the professional learning community.

In sustaining the feeling of community, these principals described a community all examining how students' learn. Mrs. Daniels said, "The emphasis is always on learning" (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Maus explained, "This is an entirely new feeling for the whole school, this professional learning community. This is something we are doing all the time in every staff meeting. It has become our everyday practice" (Interviews, 2006). She went on to explain that in this new feeling of community that one meeting they might be discussing data, the next diversity, and the next week math instruction. This feeling of community is engaging for the staff. Mrs. Scott said, "Everybody brings something to it. Community means we are all coming with a commitment. This will vary as with any large group, but there must be a bottom line commitment from everyone" (Interviews, 2006). When asking about how a principal sustains a professional learning community, Mrs. Smith explained that it is "the teachers themselves, the team itself. It is the team that keeps going" (Interviews, 2006). These principals all agreed that once a school has sustained the feeling of community, they will sustain the professional learning community.

Summary

In summary, the analysis of the principals' professional experiences revealed the four main themes; (1) Time, (2) Right People-Right Places, (3) There Will Be Struggles, and (4) Must Be Able to See the Gifts for developing professional learning communities. Three themes were revealed for sustaining professional learning communities. These themes were (5) Utilize Outside Support, (6) Lead from the Back, and (7) Sustain the

Feeling of Community. These were discussed by all participants. These principals agreed that principals need to understand that this type of leadership takes time to develop. It takes time to build trust. Principals need to see that the community is an evolving community that is never complete, but through giving the time it takes, much can be accomplished. All principals agreed that the principal must have the right people in the right places. All agreed that this was a key component to have in place for a professional learning community to be successful. This means having people who have the drive and want to continue to learn together as a community. All principals felt that principals need to expect that there will be struggles. All nine principals agreed that they would never lead any other way, but they also agreed that leading this way, opening up the communication, letting multiple people be leaders, stepping back and letting the community lead will have its struggles and is not as easy as it sounds in the literature. All principals said that they would never lead another way. All these principals saw the gifts of leading this way. The community, the relationships, the extra knowledge, and the results all principals saw for their students and their community makes leading this way the only way for these principals. In order to sustain the professional learning community, all principals explained that they needed to utilize outside support. They needed to once the community is begun, step back and lead from the back. These principals also agreed that once a school has sustained the feeling of community, then the school will want to continue to sustain the professional learning community. These seven themes answer the question, how experienced elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community?

In summary, the data revealed seven emerging themes that extend and deepen the knowledge of how principals develop and sustain evolving professional learning communities. The themes were Time, Right People – Right Places, There Will Be Struggles, Must Be Able to See the Gifts, Utilize Outside Support, Lead from the Back, and Sustain the Feeling of Community. These seven themes help to reduce a void or provide a missing piece in the literature about how principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community.

CHAPTER VI

Conclusion

This chapter summarized the problem, research, questions, and the research design. The purpose of this chapter was to discuss and draw conclusions from the findings, link results to current literature, discuss new findings, and list questions for future research. Implications for practice, and preparation programs were also included.

Problem

The outcomes from professional learning communities in literature have made direct links from professional learning communities to positive learning results for staff and students. In the work of the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) four studies were put together including three and four year case studies, as well as surveys and the collection of student test data. This included 1,500 elementary, middle, and high schools in the United States. The conclusions showed that the redesign of schools, including shared decision-making, teacher teaming, and professional communities in the staffs, will improve student learning (Bryk et al., 1994; DuFour, 2004; Lee, Smith & Croninger, 1995; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Professional learning communities improve student learning.

It is not simply the presence of the learning community but what the community chooses to focus on that influences the outcomes (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993). This is why the leadership component is important. Principals have much research at their fingertips to help them change their leadership paradigm. Information about leadership and professional learning communities and how to facilitate them is abundant (DuFour, 2004; Fullan, 2001; Hord, 1997; O'Hair, Reitzug, Cate, Averso, 2005; Sergiovanni,

2000). This is not easy to implement even with so much information available. “The more complex society gets, the more sophisticated leadership must become. Complexity means change, but specifically it means rapidly occurring, unpredictable, nonlinear change” (Fullan, 2001, p. ix). Fullan has captured how practicing principals feel in today’s changing world.

How do experienced elementary principals develop and sustain professional learning communities? By studying the phenomenon of experienced principals and their ongoing development of professional learning communities, and how they sustain their professional learning communities, the researcher was able identify themes needed for principals to continue to develop and sustain an ever changing professional learning community. The problem developing and sustaining a professional learning community is that it is very difficult. It is ongoing, and research is needed to understand how principals develop and sustain a professional learning community.

Research Question

Through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community?

Design of Study

This study was a phenomenology study examining the phenomenon of developing and sustaining an evolving professional learning community. The researcher used dialectical, transcendental, and existential phenomenology. Nine principals participated in this study. They were selected with the help of university personnel and had all participated as Phase II principals in a university led, externally funded, staff

development grant program. All principals stated that their schools were evolving professional learning communities.

Data were collected through open-ended interviews with each principal. Each interview was approximately sixty to ninety minutes in length. After the interviews were completed, the collected field notes and tapes were transcribed. The researcher used Colaizzi's (1978) procedural steps for data analysis. Seven themes emerged from the interviews to help answer the research question.

Summary and Discussion of Themes and Theory

This study sought to answer: Through the perceptions of experienced elementary principals, how do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community? The data analysis revealed seven emerging themes. The themes that emerged from the nine interviews were: (1) Time, (2) Right People- Right Places, (3) There Will Be Struggles, (4) Must Be Able to See the Gifts, (5) Utilize Outside Support, (6) Lead from the Back, and (7) Sustain the Feeling of Community. These seven themes answer the research question.

Developing a Professional Learning Community

Time

How do elementary principals develop an evolving professional learning community? The experienced principals also all understood that this development would take time. The theme of taking the time needed, began to answer how principals develop a professional learning community. All nine principals talked about how this is a slow process. Principal Smith explained, "We can begin with baby steps cause leading this

way takes time. You can't go quickly" (Interviews, 2006). Principal Johnson stated, "You have to understand that it is not going to happen in a short period of time. It's not going to happen in a two month period or a six month period. It takes dedication and understanding that it will take, two, four, or six years to have things happen and see results" (Interviews, 2006). Hord (1997) describes one reason she sought to discover a better school improvement process, "A quick-fix mentality, especially prevalent in U.S. culture, resulted in many schools being poorly prepared for their plans for change" (p. 3). Therefore, developing professional learning communities takes time. Hord (1997) believed that building a professional learning community takes the time needed. Leadership takes time to develop. Staying the course is crucial. "Kanter's Law" states, "Everything can look like a failure in the middle" (Kanter, 2004, p. 67). She goes on to say that wins are the result of persistence, of not giving up (Kanter, 2004). It takes time for things to change. "It is not only that the existing leader needs more time to work on the new direction; more importantly, a culture of distributive leadership, a culture that grooms new leaders for the next phase must be established" (Fullan, 2006, p. 31). Leaders need to take the time to build a culture of shared or distributed leadership. One of the reasons is it takes time to build leadership capacity (Lambert, 2002), involves the building of trust (Hargreaves, 2002), and develop in Schussler's (2003) construct, the affective dimension including the building of interpersonal relationships and the caring environment. Hargreaves (2002) wrote, "Trust cannot be presumed. It must be built and won" (p. 395). Research on change indicates that change in schools takes much longer than one year (Fullan, 1993, 2001). All principals agreed and strongly stated that this was a slow process and takes a lot of time.

Right People- Right Places

Another theme that emerged to help answer the research question was ensuring the placement of the right people in the right places. This continued to answer how principals develop professional learning communities. To quote Principal Barr, “One of the most important leadership pieces is getting to know your staff well enough to identify key leaders to put into key places who have the desire to lead, are respected by the staff, and have the ability to be key teacher leaders in the school” (Interviews, 2006). This is an important theme to emerge from all the interviews. The right people leading in the right places was what the principals stated lead to the development of their evolving professional learning communities. Fullan (2006) explained to have turnaround, schools need to ensure that the best people are working on the problem (p. 52). Patterson and Patterson (2004) concurred that teacher leaders influence by credibility, expertise, and relationships. These teacher leaders “emphasize productivity and do not allow themselves or others to get distracted from the main goal of promoting learning for all students” (Patterson & Patterson, 2004, p. 76). Collins (2005) said about having the right people in the right places, “First, get the right people on the bus” (p. 13). In Schussler’s (2003) theoretical construct, having the right people in the right places would be a part of the affective dimension and having a caring environment and strong interpersonal relationships.

There Will Be Struggles

Another theme to emerge from the interviews that informed how experienced principals develop an evolving professional learning community was the principals recognized there will be struggles. This type of leadership, including everyone in the

community, is going to have struggles. All nine principals said that they wouldn't lead any other way, but that leading a professional learning community was not as easy as it sounds in the literature. Leading this way, the principals stated, sets the leader up for attacks. Principal Barr said, "Let's see, the hardest parts, I feel you open yourself up to a lot of attacks. I think when you involve everyone in decision making, you open yourself up to attacks that you let this person do what they want, or this group, or jumping on the bandwagon this year on this project, stuff like that. You can't be sensitive and do this job, but I would be lying if I said it sometimes didn't get to me. That's probably the hardest" (Interviews, 2006). Heifetz and Linsky (2004) state, "You may appear dangerous to people when you question their values, beliefs, or habits of a lifetime" (p. 34). Principal Johnson also said when you give your leadership role to others it opens you up to criticism. He stated, "It is a form of leadership to me to let them lead. Now I know that I'm doing it this way on purpose, and I know everyone may not see this and that is a concern to me, but I know I'm truly leading this way on purpose for good reason" (Interviews, 2006). "Guiding others responsibly must entail a deep understanding of oneself" (Ackerman & Maslin-Ostrowski, 2004, p. 32). The principals understand that when leading a professional learning community, you will have struggles, helped all of these nine principals continue to develop their communities. They knew it was part of the process. "If leadership were about giving people good news, the job would be easy" (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004, p. 34). All principals stated clearly that this type of leadership was not easy. The principals could benefit from using a change model like Fullan's Framework for Leadership. This might help understand leading through the unavoidable struggles.

Must Be Able to See the Gifts

Principals continue to develop the community because they see the gifts. They observe students achieving so much more in a professional learning community. Principals see, as in Schussler's theoretical construct of the cognitive dimension of learning communities that in a learning community the emphasis is not overall academic achievement as measured by one test, but emphasis on individual student's academic rigor and intellectual development is regarded as an outcome and a process (Schussler, 2003). These principals see the gift of higher student achievement in their schools. They see more depth of learning as in Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) seven principles of sustainable leadership. Research studies link professional learning communities with higher student achievement (Darling Hammond, 2000; DuFour, 2004; Lee, Smith, & Croninger, 1995; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Reyes, Schribner & Paredes, 1999; Thiessen & Anderson, 1999).

These experienced principals saw the gift in the relationships, their communities working together. Studies have linked professional learning communities with teaching staffs that maintain higher morale and greater satisfaction than traditionally organized schools (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Hargreaves, 2002). Principal Barr saw his biggest gift from leading this way as, "The thing I'm most comfortable with is that we have created a climate where people feel valued" (Interviews, 2006). He concluded that what keeps him going is, "Just the relationships with people, to tell you the truth" (Interviews, 2006). These experienced principals saw the gifts of leading this way. This synthesizes with Schussler's construct in her affective dimension. "Schools operating as learning communities understand the personal nature of teaching and learning and thus, the

necessity of a caring environment (Schussler, 2003, p. 513).” These principals saw the gifts of developing an evolving professional learning community.

Another gift the principals talked about was the extra knowledge you gain when everyone gets involved. There are so many more ideas when we include everyone in the process. Richardson (2007) reported that professional learning communities deepen teacher’s understanding of their practice through collaboration. Principal Daniels said it beautifully, “I realize how little I know and how grateful I am for so many gifts in the teachers that surrounded me. They have been awakened through our professional community” (Interviews, 2006). These experienced principals were able to develop an evolving professional learning community, because they saw the gifts impacting learning.

Just as every principal needed to be able to see the gifts of leading this way so they could make it through the struggles, also Hord’s key components of a professional learning community and Schussler’s ideological dimension needs to be in place as vital prerequisites to engage the cognitive and affective dimensions of a professional learning community. All principals discussed what a professional learning community was and they all included Hord and Schussler’s key components and dimensions.

Sustaining a Professional Learning Community

Utilize Outside Support

When asked about sustaining a professional learning community, all nine principals discussed the need to utilize outside support for the community and themselves to sustain a professional learning community. This was perhaps the most important finding of this study. The need to utilize outside support in order to be able to sustain

your school's professional learning community was an important piece to add to the literature concerning sustainability of professional learning communities.

When asked how to sustain a professional learning community, Mrs. Daniels said, "I had good external people. I was working on my doctorate. I was in a university let staff development program. I had to go out looking for the good things" (Interviews, 2006). Mr. Barr was in agreement when he stated, "staff development, a university led staff development program, working with teachers and principals, my PhD program. It was nice to get out of the box, and meet some other nice people who are out there trying to make a difference too. That is what keeps me going" (Interviews, 2006). All principals stressed a need to have outside support to sustain a professional learning community. One type of outside support is referred to as a network. "A network is an opportunity for schools and universities to work together as equal partners" (Veugelers & O'Hair, 2005, p. 6). Included in the ten practices of high achieving schools from the K20 Center is practice ten: access to external expertise (O'Hair, Reitzug, Cate, Averso, Atkinson, Gentry, Garn, & Jean-Marie, 2005). "In schools that are professional learning communities, teachers and others are regularly exposed to ideas and knowledge from sources external to the school" (O'Hair, Reitzug, Cate, Averso, Atkinson, Gentry, Garn, & Jean-Marie, 2005, p. 82). Utilizing outside support does not fit easily into Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) sustainable leadership model. Utilizing outside support is a major component in sustaining a professional learning community according to the principals in this study, but it does not fit easily into any principle of Hargreaves and Fink's model (2006). It could possibly fit in the principle Breadth under the concept of leadership spreading, or possibly in the principle Justice, as Hargreaves and Fink state that

sustainable leadership, “actively finds ways to share knowledge and resources with neighboring schools and the local community” (2006, p. 19). This does not reflect though the level of outside support that these principals revealed was needed for the sustaining of a professional learning community. All nine principals revealed that outside support was needed to sustain a professional learning community.

This outside support could be in many forms. Mrs. Scott stressed the need for an outside person to talk to about sustaining your professional learning community. She said, “Well, the hard part is that for the elementary principal, there is not a good person to talk to (in the building)” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Scott went on to explain where she gets this outside support now, “I now gave a good friend in education, but not at my school, who I can talk to while we walk each morning” (Interviews, 2006). This outside support could come from central office. Mrs. Jones explained that she left her last principalship because she didn’t have support from central office to sustain a professional learning community, and now she is in a district that central office does support the sustaining of her professional learning community. Mrs. Jones explains, “Here in this position, I have the right people and support. It is not as easy as it sounds in the literature, and central office support is huge” (Interviews, 2006). “Vitaly important, central office staff members provide the support and consistency necessary for a high-quality instructional program” (Grove, 2002, p. 47). This outside support could also come from other principals. Mrs. Jones explains, “The knowledge and the support you get from other principals, that is huge” (Interviews, 2006). This outside support could come from a state university. A state university was an outside support listed by all nine principals to help sustain their professional learning communities. Mrs. Maus said with the university’s

support, “We started putting professional development in our faculty meetings” (Interviews, 2006). Lastly, another outside support to help principals sustain the school’s professional learning community was utilizing outside grants and programs. Mrs. Scott explained, “We are in a state staff development program based on the arts, and we had one hundred percent staff attendance at our first retreat. We focus on technology through a university led staff development grant” (Interviews, 2006). Another principal listed four different outside supports her school had been involved in over the last few years. According to these successful elementary principals, utilizing outside support is needed to sustain a professional learning community.

Lead from the Back

Another theme to emerge from the interviews of the principals was that to sustain a professional learning community, the principal needs to lead from the back. Mr. Johnson said, “You have to find lead teachers that the others respect and let them lead, and you stay in the back and that’s how I do it” (Interviews, 2006). Mrs. Maus was in agreement when she stated, “Always building up teachers who have a passion and giving them opportunities to be leaders and share. This helps you sustain your community. These leaders have their own little professional networks that will reach people that I can’t get to. You have to plant seeds and direct from the back” (Interviews, 2006). “A growing number of schools have undertaken the work of building leadership capacity to bring about sustainable school improvement” (Lambert, 2002, p. 38). This is similar to a principle in Hargreaves and Finks’ model of sustainable leadership (2006). Breadth a principle in Hargreaves and Finks’ model has explained that “Sustainable leadership is distributed leadership” (2006, p. 19). Leading from the back helps spread leadership as

Hargreaves and Fink describe as breadth in their model (2006). “An organization cannot flourish-at least, not for long-on the actions of the top leader alone” (Fullan, 2002, p. 20). Leading from the back though as these principals’ describe is more than just distributed leadership.

The principals also all called this professional learning community leadership to sustain the community, a leadership style. Mrs. Smith concluded her interview by stating about this leadership style, “This has been the most successful model of leadership I have ever been acquainted with or ever tried” (Interviews, 2006). “Leadership succession is more likely if there are many leaders at many levels” (Fullan, 2002, p. 20). In this leadership style, sustainability depends on many leaders (Fullan, 2002). Leadership in professional learning communities depends on leading from the back. Collins (2001) reported that charismatic leaders are actually a liability for sustained improvement. All principals in this study agreed that to sustain a professional learning community, the principal needs to step out of the way, and lead from the back.

Sustain the Feeling of Community

The last theme to emerge in sustaining a professional learning community was to sustain the feeling of community. Mrs. Scott stated after her teachers have felt this feeling of community that, “I don’t think my teachers could do it a different way now. If someone came in now, and tried to lead in an authoritative way, they would have a hard time. I know we accomplish so much more with teachers leading and sharing” (Interviews, 2006). This theme fits under Hargreaves and Finks’ principle depth. They refer to depth as “Leadership is leadership for learning and leadership for caring for and among others” (2006, p. 18). This touches on the feeling of community that the

principals interviewed described. These principals all agreed that once a school has sustained the feeling of community, they will sustain the professional learning community.

Included in this feeling of community is what Sergiovanni (2004) describes as hope. “Placing hope at the core of our school community provides encouragement and promotes clear thinking and informed action, giving us the leverage we need to close the achievement gap and solve other intractable problems” (Sergiovanni, 2004, p. 33). This feeling of community centered around hope is more than wishing. “Hoping is often confused with wishing. But hope is grounded in realism, not in wishful thinking” (Sergiovanni, 2004, p. 34). This feeling of community full of hope will grow into action. “Individuals with high hope possess goals, find pathways to these goals, navigate around obstacles, and develop agency to reach their goals” (Snyder, Harris, Anderson, Holleran, Irving, & Sigmon, 1991, p. 573). All principals in this study discussed that the feeling of community will help sustain a professional learning community.

Conclusion

How do elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community? In conclusion, the analysis of the principals’ professional experiences revealed the four main themes; (1) Time, (2) Right People-Right Places, (3) There Will Be Struggles, and (4) Must Be Able to See the Gifts for developing professional learning communities. Three themes were revealed for sustaining professional learning communities. These themes were (5) Utilize Outside Support, (6) Lead from the Back, and (7) Sustain the Feeling of Community. These were discussed by all participants. These principals agreed that principals need to understand that this

type of leadership takes time to develop. It takes time to build trust. All principals agreed that the principal must have the right people in the right places. All agreed that this was a key component to have in place for a professional learning community development to be successful. This means having people who have the drive and want to continue to learn together as a community. All principals felt that principals need to expect that there will be struggles. All nine principals agreed that they would never lead any other way, but they also agreed that leading this way, opening up the communication, letting multiple people be leaders, stepping back and letting the community lead, will have its struggles, and is not as easy as it sounds in the literature. All these principals saw the gifts of leading this way. The community, the relationships, the extra knowledge, and the results all principals saw for their students and their community makes leading this way the only way for these principals. In order to sustain the professional learning community, all principals explained that they needed to utilize outside support. This could come in many forms, but all principals discussed that outside support was needed to sustain a professional learning community. The principals needed to once the community has begun, step back and lead from the back. Leading from the back, sustains the community. These principals also agreed that once a school has sustained the feeling of community, then the school will want to continue to sustain the professional learning community. These seven themes answer the question from the principals' perceptions, how experienced elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community?

These seven themes add new information about the phenomenon of being an experienced principal developing and sustaining a professional learning community.

These seven themes which emerged from all nine interviews explain an insight that was not prevalent in the literature. These seven themes help to better understand the phenomenon of these principals' experiences. This study adds to Hargreaves and Fink's (2006) model of sustainable leadership by adding the important theme of outside support. This study adds to Huffman and Hipp's (2003) work by revealing how from the principal's perspective, a professional learning community is developed and sustained. This adds an inside perspective that is more than analyzing Hord's (1997) dimensions as Huffman and Hipp's (2003) research assessed. This adds to Schussler's construct of a learning community by revealing a perspective from the experienced principals who are developing and sustaining evolving professional learning communities.

Implications for Practice

These seven themes that emerged from the experienced principals' interviews to answer the question, how do experienced principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community, will provide an insight to the phenomenon of leading a professional learning community. Principals in the field could read this study and discover inside information about all themes which emerged from this research, which could result in helping other principals develop and sustain a professional learning community by revealing experienced principals' perceptions. Principal pre-service programs could use these themes in training future administrators to be prepared for the first principal position by revealing to them the insider's perspective of the phenomenon of developing and sustaining a professional learning community. Huffman and Hipp (2003) state that, "Beyond dispute, the preparation of school administrators is key" (p. 149). Huffman and Hipp (2003) also stated that, "As evidenced by our case studies,

whether or not a school principal engages with the faculty and staff during an innovation or change effort can determine its success or failure” (p. 149). This study provides insight to understanding how principals perceive they develop and sustain a professional learning community. This study adds the insider’s perspective from the change agent or leader that effects school improvement the most. The principal is the essential supportive factor for the process of a professional learning community to develop (Hord, 1997). These themes add a new important piece to the literature about how elementary principals develop and sustain professional learning communities in their schools.

Implications for Further Study

This study was implemented by interviewing only elementary principals. Further study needs to be investigated interviewing secondary principals. This study was small by design. This study needs to be implemented with a larger population involving more than one state. This study focused on elementary principals’ perceptions. More studies need to be done studying professional learning communities from the teachers’ point of view. This study investigated successful principals. Studies need to be implemented comparing successful professional learning communities to unsuccessful professional learning communities. The study revealed that outside support is needed to sustain professional learning communities. Veugelers and O’Hair (2005) refer to utilizing outside support as networking. “Networking results in increased professional interaction across schools, which generates excitement and learning” (Veugelers & O’Hair, 2005, p. 1). More studies need to look into these different outside supports, and their effect on sustaining professional learning communities. These principals referred to leading or

sustaining a professional learning community as a leadership style. More study could be completed on describing this leadership style and its effects.

Summary

In summary, the data revealed seven emerging themes that extend and deepen the knowledge of how principals develop and sustain evolving professional communities.

The themes were (1)Time, (2) Right People – Right Places, (3) There Will Be Struggles, (4) Must Be Able to See the Gifts, (5) Utilize Outside Support, (6) Lead from the Back, and (7) Sustain the Feeling of Community. These seven themes help to reduce a void or provide a missing piece in the literature about how elementary principals develop and sustain an evolving professional learning community.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Interview Questions

First, tell me a little about your professional history, how did you become a principal? Is it what you thought it would be? Why?

Describe a professional learning community.

What do you feel are the most important key concepts to have in place in a professional learning community?

Tell me your story in developing and sustaining your faculty in a professional learning community.

What are the greatest accomplishments of your professional learning community?

What are the hardest parts of developing and sustaining a professional learning community?

What helps you get through the hard parts?

How do you sustain your community?

Was there some staff development or professional development that helped you?

How far along do you feel your school is in the process?

Do you plan to continue this type of leadership in the future?

Table I

<u>School</u>	<u>Principal</u>	<u>Number of Staff</u>	<u>Setting</u>	<u>Grades</u>
Country Side	Smith	37	Rural	Pre-k-5 th
University Central	Jones	33	Suburban	Pre-k-5 th
Rural	Johnson	18	Rural	Pre-k-3 rd
Cityland	Greene	40	Urban	K-5 th
Garfield	Scott	25	Suburban	Pre-k-5 th
Hughes	Maus	44	Suburban	Pre-k-5 th
Clarksdale	Sale	30	Suburban	K-5 th
Hilltop	Barr	28	Rural	2 nd -3 rd
Oldtown	Daniels	18	Rural	K-5 th