The professional learning community: an educational construct to improve student learning through effective teacher collaboration

Lynn Barberi
THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY: AN EDUCATIONAL CONSTRUCT TO IMPROVE STUDENT LEARNING THROUGH EFFECTIVE TEACHER COLLABORATION

by
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Dedication

To my husband John, whose love is the firm foundation that supports me in everything I have ever tried to learn or do since the day we met in Astronomy class at Trenton State College in January, 1975. Thanks for sitting on “the girls side” of that classroom, as you have been both “by my side,” and “on my side” ever since. Thanks for taking care of absolutely everything else in our lives while I completed my research and wrote this dissertation. I look forward to spending much more of my time with you very soon.

To my grown and accomplished children, Michelle and David, who are a constant source of pride and pleasure in my life.

To my mother Claire Fenelli, who continues to inspire me from her special place in the garden of Heaven, to my father Joseph Fenelli, who has always made me feel loved and who continues to teach me the value of hard work, and to my siblings, Joe, Bob, Patty, and Dave, whose love I cherish.
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Special thanks to Rick Clendaniel who left our cohort and this life far too soon, but whose words, “Listen to what other people have to say,” is now my mantra.
Abstract

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This limited practical action research study was designed to address a problem of practice at one Pre-K–third grade school located in a suburban community on the east coast of the United States, wherein teachers work the majority of the time in isolation from their peers and where collaboration is the exception, not the rule. Teachers have few opportunities to share teaching strategies and build on the strengths of their peers to improve the learning outcomes of their students as they practice the art of teaching in the classroom.

The goal of this study was for the school principal to serve as the leader of an organizational change which would positively impact student achievement. The teachers self-selected peers with whom they worked as members of a Professional Learning Community. They used a researcher created protocol that required them to identify short term, common student learning outcomes, and develop common pre-assessments and post-assessments to measure students’ performance. Each team used the protocol a minimum of 5 times over a 10 month period. It was inferred that this process would increase the teachers’ collective inquiry, empowering them to effectively monitor students’ progress and intervene early when students had difficulty mastering the specific
learning goals. Staff development was given throughout the process to increase the teachers’ understanding of the Professional Learning Community construct.

Data collection included a review of historical artifacts from the school, a questionnaire, meeting agendas, field observations, structured and semi-structured interviews, a researcher designed protocol and supporting documents, artifacts of professional development activities, and teachers’ written and verbal reflections.

In this practical action research study, I sought to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways will having the elementary school principal create structures and support within the school influence the teachers’ propensity to work collaboratively to support student learning outcomes?

2. Which actions of an elementary school principal have the greatest influence on teacher behavior to foster and support collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning?

3. What conditions will support or hinder teachers in developing and using common student learning objectives, pre-assessments, and post-assessments to measure students’ performance?
# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................................................... v

List of Tables ........................................................................................................................................ xii

Chapter 1: Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1

Problem Statement ............................................................................................................................. 3

Scope of the Study ............................................................................................................................... 6

Research Questions ............................................................................................................................. 7

Methodological and Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................... 8

Limitations .......................................................................................................................................... 11

Definition of Terms ............................................................................................................................ 11

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................................... 13

Evolution of Educational Supervision ............................................................................................... 13

School Improvement and the School Principal .................................................................................. 17

Political Influences on the Mission and Purpose of Public Schools .............................................. 20

Organizational Theory of Loosely Coupled Systems and Schools .................................................. 22

The Persistence of Privacy and Reculturing Schools ...................................................................... 24

Leadership and Change in Schools ................................................................................................... 28

The Professional Learning Community .............................................................................................. 31

Chapter Summary ............................................................................................................................... 38

Chapter 3: Methodology ..................................................................................................................... 40

Action Research- Cycle I ..................................................................................................................... 42

Great Lawn Elementary School’s School Improvement Plan ......................................................... 43
Table of Contents (Continued)

Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools: Report of the school improvement visiting team- Focus on school improvement ........................................... 45
Faculty questionnaire regarding professional development and professional learning communities ............................................................................................................. 45
Faculty meeting and grade level meeting agendas ........................................................................................................................................................................... 47
Preliminary observations of teacher collaboration at Great Lawn Elementary School .................................................................................................................. 48
Reflecting on action research Cycle I ................................................................................................................................. 49
Action Research- Cycle II .......................................................................................................................................................... 49
Researcher designed protocol ......................................................................................................................................................... 50
Professional development for teachers ......................................................................................................................................................... 53
Teachers’ reflections ................................................................................................................................................................................. 54
Reflecting on action research Cycle II ......................................................................................................................................................... 56
Action Research- Cycle III .......................................................................................................................................................... 56
Researcher designed protocol ......................................................................................................................................................... 57
Teachers’ reflections on their role in schools ......................................................................................................................................................... 58
Professional development for teachers ......................................................................................................................................................... 58
Structured interviews with individual teachers ......................................................................................................................................................... 58
Researcher Bias/ Triangulation ......................................................................................................................................................... 59
Chapter 4: Findings ................................................................................................................................................................. 62
Action Research- Cycle I ............................................................................................................................................................. 63
Great Lawn Elementary School’s School Improvement Plan ................................................................................................................. 64
Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools: Report of the school improvement visiting team-Focus on school improvement ........................................66
Faculty questionnaire regarding professional development and professional learning communities ..........................................................68
Faculty meeting and grade level meeting agendas ........................................74
Preliminary observations of teacher collaboration at Great Lawn Elementary School .............................................................................78
Reflecting on action research Cycle I ..........................................................83
Action Research- Cycle II ........................................................................85
Researcher designed protocol .....................................................................85
Teachers’ responses to the first two-week goal protocol- January 2010 .......87
Teachers’ responses to the second two-week goal protocol- February 2010 ....90
Teachers’ reflection-March 2010: Positives and negatives of collaboration ......91
Teachers’ reflections- March 2010: Individual needs for teamwork ...........93
Teachers’ responses to the third two-week goal protocol- April 2010 ............94
Teachers’ reflections-May 2010: Team norms/ground rules ..........................95
Teachers’ reflections- June 2010: Professional learning communities ............97
Action Research- Cycle III ........................................................................99
Teachers’ responses to the researcher designed protocol: Fall 2010 ............100
Teachers’ reflections on their role in schools .................................................101
Professional development for teachers .......................................................102
# Table of Contents (Continued)

Reflections on action research- Cycle III: Structured interviews with individual teachers .......................................................................................................................... 102

Teachers’ Views Regarding Teacher Collaboration .......................................................... 105

Collaboration Regarding Student Learning Goals .................................................................. 106

Pre- and Post-Assessments ..................................................................................................... 107

Sharing Teaching Strategies .................................................................................................. 109

Student Progress as a Result of Collaboration ....................................................................... 110

Intervention Period ................................................................................................................. 111

Principal’s Actions .................................................................................................................. 113

Chapter 5: Summary/Conclusions/Implications .................................................................... 119

Introduction .............................................................................................................................. 119

Scope and Purpose of the Study ............................................................................................. 119

Research Questions ................................................................................................................. 120

Conclusions and Implications ............................................................................................... 121

Significance of the Research .................................................................................................. 126

Leadership and the Change Process ....................................................................................... 128

Suggestions for Future Study ................................................................................................. 130

Summary ................................................................................................................................. 132

References ............................................................................................................................... 133

Appendix A Professional Development Questionnaire .......................................................... 142

Appendix B Results of Professional Development Questionnaire ........................................ 145

Appendix C Planning Sheets ................................................................................................... 148
Table of Contents (Continued)

Appendix D Power Point for Professional Development ........................................ 149
Appendix E Teachers’ Needs .................................................................................. 153
Appendix F Team Norms May 2010 ...................................................................... 156
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1</td>
<td>Excerpt from “Sample Report” from the Survey of Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness (Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 223)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2</td>
<td>Researcher Designed Two-Week Protocol Template: January 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3</td>
<td>Researcher Designed Protocol, Fall 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4</td>
<td>Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan, Part 4, p. 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5</td>
<td>Big Acres Professional Development Program Survey: New Skills and Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6</td>
<td>Big Acres Professional Development Program Survey: Use of Formative Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7</td>
<td>Big Acres Professional Development Program Survey: Use of Post-Assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8</td>
<td>Faculty and Grade Level Meeting Topics 2008-2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 9</td>
<td>Faculty and Grade Level Meeting Topics 2009-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 10</td>
<td>Team Configurations, January 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 11</td>
<td>Teacher’s Individual Needs for Teamwork</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 12</td>
<td>Team Norms/Ground Rules, May 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 13</td>
<td>June 2010 Teacher Reflections</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

Educational supervision has evolved for more than five decades through various machinations designed to improve teaching. From supervision as inspection, to clinical supervision, to perfecting teachers’ skills in pedagogy, the school principal’s work continues to evolve (Pollock & Ford, 2009), primarily because the varying methods used to supervise and influence what teachers do has not achieved the desired result for all teachers and all students. It can be argued through the sociological theory of “loose coupling” (Weick, 1976), that the school principal’s work has consisted primarily of “the management of the structures and processes around instruction” resulting in very little change to the technical core of the institution (Elmore, 2000, p. 6). The research community provides numerous indicators that the school principal’s actions and leadership have an effect on school improvement and student achievement, but it is inconclusive whether that effect is direct or indirect (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty 2005; Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010).

Educational supervision is inextricably linked to the ever evolving mission of the public schools in the United States. Once a system designed to eliminate all but the most elite citizens from school attendance rolls, society now looks to the public schools to "close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice, so that no child is left behind" (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001). Furthermore, it has been posited that the primary mission of the 21st century elementary school principal is to lead and manage
his/her school in an effective manner to ensure that all children learn at high levels (Many, 2009). Significant changes in school culture will be needed if this mission is to be realized. "Culture is conservative: it works to preserve the status quo" (Evans, 1996, p. 17). Changing school culture requires "that leaders invigorate performance and inspire commitment to change by engaging their people in the pursuit of shared goals" (p. 18).

Creating the conditions under which all students learn is complex and challenging work (National Association of Elementary School Principals, 2008). The elementary school principal whose goal is to ensure high levels of learning for all children will need to build the commitment of the entire school community (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008).

A growing body of research indicates that when principals create the conditions in which teachers work collaboratively rather than in isolation, the result is higher student achievement (Langer, Colton, & Goff, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Schmoker (2004a) observed:

If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: The right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. (p. 48)

DuFour et al. (2008) posit that the elementary school principal who is able to create the conditions in which teachers regularly collaborate about student work is likely to see an improvement in children’s learning, as long as “people are focused on the right issues” (p. 15). One of the most frequently cited educational constructs of the past decade that uses focused, teacher collaboration as one of its basic tenets is the professional learning community (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Schmoker (2004a) describes the construct this way:
This simple, powerful structure starts with a group of teachers who meet regularly as a team to identify essential and valued student learning, develop common formative assessments, analyze current levels of achievement, set achievement goals and then share and create lessons to improve upon those levels. Picture these teams of teachers implementing these new lessons, continuously assessing their results and then adjusting their lessons in light of those results. Importantly, there must be an expectation this collaborative effort will produce ongoing improvement-and gains in achievement. (p. 48)

**Problem Statement**

Teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School, located in the Big Acres School District (both pseudonyms used throughout this document), complete the majority of their work in isolation from their peers, where collaboration is the exception, not the rule. This isolated work significantly limits opportunities for teachers to share teaching strategies and build on the strengths of their peers to improve the learning outcomes of their students as they practice the art of teaching in the classroom. This problem of practice is the focus of this practical action research study.

Great Lawn Elementary School is structurally organized in typical elementary school fashion wherein 32 teachers are responsible for teaching the children in their individual classrooms. Special education teachers provide replacement or support instruction when indicated for individual children, but the majority of students do not require this support. Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette (2002) noted that this school model, the most common one in the United States, “often functions as a collection of independent contractors united by a common parking lot” (p. 10). Teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School attend two grade level meetings monthly and generally set their own agendas for these meetings. These are the only required meeting times for teachers to work with their closest peers in “job-alike” fashion. By analyzing meeting notes submitted by the grade level teams over the previous year, the researcher in her role as
school principal found that the majority of the team directed discussions had little to do with improving teaching and learning in the classroom. The discussions often centered on plans for upcoming special grade level events such as field trips, school-wide observances, and other school functions that did not address the teachers’ actual practice or the students’ learning in the classroom. Great Lawn Elementary School teachers generally did not choose to discuss specific teaching and learning practices within their own classrooms when given the time to do so. Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) observe that “most work in schools is still done in isolation” and “most teachers focus on what needs to be done this year with my students” (p. 53). DuFour (2011) wrote that teachers’ “professional practice is shrouded in a veil of privacy and personal autonomy and is not a subject for collective discussion or analysis” (p. 57).

Elmore (2000) suggests that:

Leaders must create environments in which individuals expect to have their personal ideas and practices subjected to the scrutiny of their colleagues, and in which groups expect to have their shared conceptions of practice subjected to the scrutiny of individuals. Privacy of practice produces isolation; isolation is the enemy of improvement. (p. 20)

An analysis of additional data about the student achievement levels at Great Lawn Elementary School indicated a need for growth in the area of language arts/reading.

While student report cards indicated fair to excellent progress for nearly every student during their Kindergarten through third grade year at Great Lawn Elementary School, the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK3) for third grade students indicated that between 15 to 25 percent of the students (depending on the year) did not demonstrate proficiency in language arts/reading. During this analysis period, however, one team of teachers within the school was found to have developed a highly functioning,
collaborative relationship, and the performance of their students as measured by the New Jersey Proficiency Assessment of State Standards (NJ PASS) indicated exceptional academic gains during the previous school year. This team of teachers held frequent discussions about classroom practice and the focus of their weekly planning sessions together was the progress of their individual students. They had successfully reduced the teacher isolation that is inherent in most elementary schools and created a truly collaborative culture within their small community without additional cost, personnel, or resources. This type of teacher collaboration has been shown to improve student learning (Langer et al., 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Schmoker, 2004b). Finally, the researcher in the role of principal observed the tenacity with which these teachers sought solutions to ensure their students were learning by looking inwardly; critically examining and evaluating their practice and seeking solutions when the children faltered.

Additionally, the Big Acres School District in which the Great Lawn Elementary School is located recently experienced a significant revision in the manner in which staff development was provided for the teachers in the district. This new professional development program linked the teachers’ actions with specific student outcomes, and was undertaken with direction from the assistant superintendent of curriculum, the district staff professional developer, and a district committee representative of the faculty. Survey data and a professional journal article about this process provided additional information about the culture of the district, specifically that the faculty of Great Lawn Elementary School may be amenable to functioning within a professional learning community model, in which teacher collaboration and instructional effectiveness are paramount.
The researcher posited that the successful collaborative experience of a small group of teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School could possibly be duplicated on a greater, school-wide scale. This idea, coupled with the professional learning community model being used in the entire Big Acres School District, became the impetus for this action research study.

In summary, the “problem of practice” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009, p. 102), wherein teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School complete the majority of their work in isolation from their peers, without an opportunity to share teaching strategies to improve their teaching and their students’ learning, is the focus of this practical action research study.

Scope of the Study

This limited practical action research study describes the researcher’s work in her role as school principal in “reculturing” (Fullan, 2001, p. 44) a suburban Pre-K through third grade elementary school for 675 students into a Professional Learning Community, wherein teacher collaboration and a culture of inquiry would become the norm, not the exception. The Great Lawn Elementary School student population includes 94.3% of students whose first language is English and 0.6% of students with limited English proficiency. Students identified with disabilities that have individualized educational programs account for 11.3% of the population. The student mobility rate is 7.7% annually, with a 95.8% daily attendance rate. All Great Lawn teachers have Highly Qualified Status and 54.2% hold Masters Degrees. Great Lawn Elementary School has achieved Adequate Yearly Progress every year since the measure was established as indicated by the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJ ASK 3).
The entire faculty was involved in the change initiative, with 24 teacher volunteers granting the researcher permission to complete a more extensive interview protocol. The main goal of this action research study was for the researcher, in her role as school principal, to serve as the leader of an organizational change which would positively impact student achievement. Using Fullan’s (2001) “Framework for Leadership” (p. 4) as the theoretical framework for this change initiative, the researcher spent 10 months working with the faculty to significantly increase the teachers’ collective inquiry as they worked collaboratively to identify short term, common student learning outcomes. The teachers developed and used common pre-assessments and post-assessments to measure students’ performance, carefully monitoring children’s academic growth. It was inferred that this process empowered teachers to reach all students by better monitoring students’ progress and intervening early when students had difficulty mastering the specific learning goals.

While all teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School participated in this change initiative, only those who granted permission to the researcher are quoted in this dissertation. The short term student learning goals were collected, as were the pre- and post-assessments the teachers created and administered to the students. Samples of the students’ work were also collected, and coupled with the teachers’ impressions and data, provided some insight regarding students’ academic progress. Due to the time span in which this study was conducted, standardized state assessment data could not be used to measure academic progress.
Research Questions

In this limited practical action research study, the researcher, in her role as school principal, sought to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways will having the elementary school principal create structures and support within the school influence the teachers’ propensity to work collaboratively to support student learning outcomes?

2. Which actions of an elementary school principal have the greatest influence on teacher behavior to foster and support collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning?

3. What conditions will support or hinder teachers in developing and using common student learning objectives, pre-assessments, and post-assessments to measure students’ performance?

Methodological and Theoretical Framework

The methodological framework of this study is practical action research, which Hinchey (2008) describes as “research that focuses on improving practice” wherein the researcher “identifies a concern, considers various potential data sources, collects data systematically, analyzes it carefully, and produces an action plan to improve the original situation” (p. 39). This methodological framework assumes an interpretivist approach, wherein the researcher is “seeking to better understand (rather than to prove) something” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 24). Interpretivists believe that “all knowledge is socially constructed” (p. 23) and that not one, but multiple realities exist through peoples’ perceptions based on their experiences and prior understandings. It follows, therefore, that a qualitative approach be used to gather data as the researcher attempted to “understand and interpret
how the various participants in a social setting construct the world around them” (Glesne, 2006, p. 4). In the case of this study, the social setting is the school in which the researcher served as principal and the participants are the teachers who were beginning to work as a professional learning community.

This practical action research study was completed in three action research cycles. Cycle I consisted of an analysis of historical artifacts and newly created documents including a school self-study and a Middle States report, a faculty questionnaire, faculty meeting and grade level meeting agendas, semi-structured interviews, and preliminary observations of one teacher team. In Cycle II, all teachers in the school collaborated in self-selected groups across grade levels while writing short term student learning goals, creating common pre- and post-assessments, teaching the children for approximately two weeks, analyzing the results, and repeating the process. Teachers’ reflections were analyzed for themes. In Cycle III, groups of teachers again worked together, with some members joining other teams, creating common pre- and post-assessments, analyzing the results, teaching for a few weeks, and repeating the process. A common, daily intervention period was added in Cycle III to provide additional assistance to children in grades 1 through 3 who did not perform at expected levels on the post-assessments.

Recognizing that the change initiative would likely be embraced by some and resisted by others (Evans, 1996), the researcher utilized a variety of leadership behaviors to support the faculty during the change process, and was able to ascertain her effectiveness by carefully monitoring the teachers’ reflections at multiple intervals throughout the study. The researcher’s primary leadership role was working as a “change agent” and “optimizer” (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 42-43) who challenges the way things
are currently done in the school and who works as someone who “inspires and leads new and challenging innovations” (p. 43). The researcher investigated a distributed theory of leadership practice (Spillane, Halverson, & Diamond, 2001) and carefully considered the implications of the informal school leadership in relationship to her own. She enriched her own understanding of the educational construct of professional learning communities by reading extensively on the topic and by attending two separate “Professional Learning Communities at Work” Institutes offered by the Solution Tree organization. The first Institute was held from August 13-15, 2009 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and the second was held from July 15-17, 2010 in Washington, DC. The researcher frequently communicated her high expectations for students’ and teachers’ work (NAESP, 2008), but was flexible in responding to teachers’ needs and concerns. She carefully managed the resource of time to ensure that tasks were completed, and affirmed the teachers’ efforts through individual and small group feedback as the process moved forward. Finally, she monitored the products the teachers created and worked to inspire the teachers to expand their collaborative efforts as they experienced initial success as measured by the progress of their students in the classroom.

Theoretical frameworks that offer organizational leaders step by step approaches to implementing change in organizations are plentiful (Hamel, 2000; Heifetz, 1994; Kotter, 1996), and while many theorists have influenced the researcher’s thinking, Fullan’s (2001) paradigm for leaders he calls a “framework for thinking about and leading complex change” (p. 3) has significantly informed her understanding of leadership theory and its implications with regard to this research project. This model presents a balanced theoretical base for making change that is long lasting. To summarize
the model, Fullan states that “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” (p. 11). Each of these leadership components helped provide direction for this action research study.

**Limitations**

This action research study will not lend itself to drawing broad conclusions about the implementation of the professional learning communities construct, but it may reveal patterns of behavior that school principals may wish to consider when attempting implementation of the professional learning community in their schools.

As the researcher served as the principal of the school where this action research was conducted, it is important to recognize that faculty members were likely to be influenced by her role as their supervisor when they shared their thoughts and impressions during individual interviews and group tasks. This bias cannot be removed during practical action research, but the researcher attempted to diminish this bias by triangulating the results with sources outside the organization, including a Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools report, and by using multiple sources of data, including Great Lawn Elementary School’s School Improvement Plan, teachers’ reflections at various points in the process, and interviews with more than 24 faculty members at the conclusion of the study.

**Definition of Terms**

**Professional Learning Community (PLC):** Educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve
better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, p. 217).

**Reculturing:** Used by Fullan (2001) to mean “transforming the culture—changing the way we do things around here” (p. 44). Eaker, DuFour, and Burnette (2002) used the term “reculturing” in the title of their book, *Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities* and they describe the “cultural shifts” (p. 9) that occur when schools move toward this model. These include shifts in “collaboration; developing mission, vision, values and goals; focusing on learning; leadership; focused school improvement plans; celebration; and persistence” (p. 10).

**Action Research:** “A process of systematic inquiry, usually cyclical, conducted by those inside a community rather than by outside experts; its goal is to identify action that will generate some improvement the researcher believes important” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 4).

**Practical action researcher:** “The practical action researcher consciously identifies a concern, considers various potential data sources, collects data systematically, analyzes it carefully, and produces an action plan to improve the original situation” (Hinchey, 2008, p. 39).

**Problem of practice:** “The problem of practice is something that you care about that would make a difference for student learning if you improved it” (City et al., 2009, p. 102).
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This literature review will explore the purpose of educational supervision, namely that of the elementary school principal, with the ever evolving mission of the public schools in the United States. Particular attention will be paid to exploring the connections between the research and the educational construct of the professional learning community. The following themes will be explored: Evolution of Educational Supervision, School Improvement and the School Principal, Political Influences on the Mission and Purpose of Public Schools, Organizational Theory of Loosely Coupled Systems and Schools, the Persistence of Privacy and Reculturing Schools, Leadership and Change in Schools, and The Professional Learning Community.

Evolution of Educational Supervision

In the years preceding 1900, the supervision of teachers in the United States could be characterized as inspection (Pollock & Ford, 2009), wherein “local citizens inspect facilities and instruction” and “supervision [was] based on intuition rather than technical knowledge” (p. 11). The purpose of this inspection was to ensure that the schoolmaster was following stringent community standards. The National Education Association’s Committee of Twelve on Rural Schools recommended “expert supervision by county superintendents” (Tyack, 1974, p. 23) and in the 1890s, many communities adopted this model. In the early 1900s, primarily in response to the influence of Taylor’s *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), which encouraged specialization to improve
efficiency, “the role of the principal was to be an authoritarian inspector specializing in skills necessary to reform or dismiss an employee rather than to be an expert in pedagogy” (Pollock & Ford, 2009, p. 14).

In the middle of the century, “more democratic and professional supervisory procedures began to emerge” (Pollock & Ford, 2009, p. 17), giving principals a different role, which was to improve instruction through the science of teaching students and teaching teachers. By the 1960s, several models of clinical supervision, which “foster[ed] leadership” and “focus[ed] on improving rather than evaluating teaching,” (p. 11) became the preferred method for principals as they partnered with teachers to improve instruction. When Hunter (1980) identified objective criteria by which effective teaching could be discerned, her supervision model became widely adopted by schools, and principals used this information to document teachers’ work. As principals focused on identifying effective teacher behaviors, it was “assume[d] that if instruction improved, student learning would likewise improve” (Pollock & Ford, 2009, p. 23).

Critical of ineffective, bureaucratic supervision and teacher evaluation processes common in the early 1980s, researchers and school leaders began to conceptualize a professional evaluation model, wherein:

- the district (1) involves teachers in the development and operation of the teacher evaluation process, (2) bases evaluation on professional standards of practice that are client-oriented, (3) recognizes multiple teaching strategies and learning outcomes, and (4) treats teachers differently according to their teaching assignments, stages of development, and classroom goals. Professional evaluation is clinical, practice oriented, and analytic. (Wise & Darling-Hammond, 1984, p. 30)

Danielson’s (1996) seminal work *Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching* elevated the conversations principals had with their teachers about the
science and the art of their craft, by delineating four "domains of teaching responsibility" (p. 1). These domains include “planning and preparation, the classroom environment, instruction, and professional responsibilities” (p. 1). A noteworthy addition to the 2007 second edition of the framework, includes "participation in a professional community" (p. 99). The framework designates proficiency in this element when a teacher “actively participates in a culture of professional inquiry” (Danielson, 2007, p. 103).

Emerging practices in educational supervision continue to reflect the need for schools to go beyond simply ensuring that teachers are competent; they must ensure that all teachers continue to learn and improve so that their students achieve at high levels. Danielson (2001) discusses the merits of a “differentiated approach that [relies] on different activities, procedures, and timelines for different groups of teachers” (p. 13) based on their status as novices or experienced teachers. Experienced teachers who have demonstrated competence are expected to “engage in such self-directed professional activities as meeting with colleagues in study groups, conducting action research, and pursuing advanced knowledge in either content or pedagogy" (p. 14). These teacher activities are then linked to student achievement. It has been suggested that "teacher evaluations are most effective when they connect to student achievement and align professional development and school improvement" (Iwanicki, 2001, p. 57).

Utilizing a differentiated approach to teacher supervision and evaluation may be an improvement over a bureaucratic style, but this model suggests that there need only be interaction between the teacher and the evaluator. In contrast, another emerging supervision model in the literature taps into a professional vein where a teacher to teacher
relationship is forged. This model has been called “peer assistance and review” or “peer review.” Goldstein and Noguera (2006) describe the model in this fashion:

In peer assistance and review, coaches who have been identified for their excellence in teaching and mentoring support new teachers as well as veterans experiencing difficulty in their teaching. The coaches are also responsible for the formal personnel evaluations of teachers in the program. (p. 32)

This model significantly increases the feedback and assistance a teacher receives as coaches typically visit the classroom more than 20 times during the school year. In contrast, an elementary school principal typically visits a classroom for evaluative purposes far fewer times. Proponents of peer assistance and review maintain that it is a more professional supervision and evaluation model, in contrast to an often ineffective, bureaucratic one. This model requires a carefully crafted delineation of roles as teacher coaches also complete the personnel evaluation for the teachers they coach and this factor could doom the model in certain districts and school systems where collective bargaining agreements prohibit such an arrangement.

Toch (2008) identified three characteristics of effective supervision and evaluation models that have recently been shown to improve teacher performance and student achievement. The characteristics of the successful models include "explicit standards," "multiple measures," and "teamwork" (p. 32-34). Danielson (2007) also identified three characteristics of current, effective supervision and evaluation models. These include "a consistent definition of good teaching," "opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations about practice," and "a focus on what matters" (p. 38).

While educational supervision has evolved from an inspection model, to a bureaucratic model, to a more democratic model, and now seems to be moving toward a
model that emphasizes professionalism, the person responsible for its implementation has not changed: the school principal.

**School Improvement and the School Principal**

The research community provides numerous indicators that the school principal’s actions and leadership have an effect on school improvement and student achievement, but it is inconclusive whether that effect is direct or indirect.

Research conducted in the United States between 1978 and 2001 by Marzano et al. (2005) involving 2,802 schools compared principal leadership to student achievement and identified an average correlation of .25, after which they concluded that "principals can have a profound effect on the achievement of students in their schools" (p. 32).

Hallinger and Heck (1998) completed an extensive study of research that examines principal leadership and its relationship to student achievement from 1980-1995 wherein they found support for "the belief that principals exercise a measurable, though indirect effect on school effectiveness and student achievement," and furthermore that, "while this indirect effect is relatively small, it is statistically significant and supports the general belief among educators that principals contribute to school effectiveness and improvement" (p. 157).

In their data analysis of more than 8,000 surveys completed by principals involved in statewide systemic reform efforts in low, moderate, and high control states during the 1999-2000 school year, Marks and Nance (2007) found that “principals’ influence in both the supervisory and instructional domains is strongly related to that of teachers’ active participation in decision making, suggesting the benefits of mutuality in school leadership” (p. 3).
Hord and Sommers (2008) identify the school principal as the “catalyst” (p. 21) for changing the typical “bee-hive” school, where each worker functions inside his/her “cell,” to one where the “power, authority, and decision making are shared and encouraged” (p. 10). Shared power, authority, and decision making are hallmarks of a professional learning community. Hord and Sommers note:

Principals, specifically, are the lynchpins of school change, providing the necessary modeling and support required for a learning school. We agree that leaders make a difference. They make a difference through their leadership capacity to affect the system around them and on the future of the organization. We want to state that leadership teams and teacher leaders, both formal and informal, are critical in moving the school into professional learning communities. (p. 28)

Copland (2003) conducted a longitudinal leadership study within schools who were members of the Bay Area School Reform Collaborative. His study revealed a shift in the principal’s role when successful schools adopt an inquiry model with “a focus on distributed leadership, continual inquiry into practice, and collective decision-making at the school” (p. 375). Using both qualitative and quantitative data gathered over five years from more than 15 schools, Copland found "principals in schools where shared leadership has taken hold appear to exert less role-based authority, opting instead to engage in framing questions and problems, and provide space and support for inquiry to occur" (p. 391). Copland’s research was conducted within a group of schools involved in a systemic-wide change process with significant funding from the Hewlett-Annenberg Challenge.

Theoretical discussions and research about the type of leadership purported to have a positive effect on student achievement are plentiful. Marks and Printy (2003) studied principal leadership related to transformational and instructional leadership styles.
They defined instructional leadership as the principal's actions focused on teaching and learning, and found that student achievement increased substantially when "transformational and shared instructional leadership coexist" (p. 370). Burns (2003) defines transformational leadership as creating "basic alterations in entire systems" resulting in "new cultures and value systems" which "champion and inspire followers" through a process of "empowerment" (p. 24-26). In a subsequent study, Printy, Marks, and Bowers (2009) explored the conditions under which the leadership by the school principal increased school effectiveness and found that “schools prosper when principals and teacher leaders, whether formal or informal, integrate transformational and instructional leadership approaches in their interactions with others" (p. 505).

Lambert (2005) studied the principals of 15 schools whose student performance ranged from having made significant improvement to being consistently high-performing. The principals had achieved "high leadership capacity," which they defined as "broad-based, skillful participation in the work of leadership" (p. 63). Lambert consistently found that the principal in the studied schools "learns continually, thinks strategically," and is "value and vision driven" (p. 63), and passes through three phases that include, "the instructive phase,” "the transitional phase,” and "the high leadership capacity phase” (p. 63-65).

In the largest study of its kind in the United States thus far, Wahlstrom et al. (2010), with support from the Wallace Foundation, have been conducting research “in an effort to describe successful educational leadership and to explain how such leadership can foster changes in professional practice, yielding improvements in student learning” (p. 5). They view the principal’s leadership as having an indirect influence on student
learning, albeit second only to classroom instruction. Their research “confirms leaders’ potential influence, as well as the limits on their ability, to be the central figure and catalyst for authentic and lasting systemic reform” (p. 32).

Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) used three years of student achievement data and more than 2,800 surveys completed by principals and teachers and found that "school leaders' collective efficacy was an important link between district conditions and both the conditions found in schools and their effects on student achievement" (p. 496). They defined a sense of efficacy as "a belief about one's own ability or the ability of one's colleagues collectively" (p. 497). Again, the principal’s leadership was considered to be an indirect influence on student achievement.

While leadership studies and their effects on student achievement abound, few models exist which indicate the complexity of this relationship. Notable exceptions are two models offered by Mulford (2005) which he calls the "Successful school principalship model" and the "Leadership for organizational learning and student outcomes model" (p. 324). He suggests that the "school principalship is an interactive, reciprocal and evolving process involving many players, which is influenced by and in turn influences the context in which it occurs" (p. 324) and "makes important yet indirect contributions to school outcomes" (p. 326).

**Political Influences on the Mission and Purpose of Public Schools**

In 1994, President Clinton signed federal legislation called “Goals 2000: Educate America Act,” which gave school reform bipartisan national support and focused attention on promoting the “research, consensus building, and systemic changes needed to ensure equitable educational opportunities and high levels of educational achievement
for all students” (Goals 2000, p. 1). This legislation can be viewed as the impetus for the eventual creation of academic standards in this country. It states:

Students learn best when they, their teachers, administrators, and the community share clear and common expectations for education. States, districts, and schools need to agree on challenging content and performance standards that define what children should know and be able to do (Goals 2000, Introduction).

Most recently the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was enacted “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (Title I Revision, NCLB, 2001). For the first time, a federal law punished schools for their lack of performance and forced them into action. Schools who fail to make adequate yearly progress (AYP) as measured by state tests of specific standards face an array of ever increasing sanctions, and in response to missing AYP, nearly all schools reported putting a plan for improvement in place (State and Local Implementation Report, 2007). The law states that 100% of all students must reach proficiency in reading and mathematics by 2014. Since the law “allows each state to determine what it means to be ‘proficient’” (State and Local Implementation Report, p. xx) the standard for proficiency varies greatly. In response to criticism of certain parts of the law, the Obama administration is reportedly seeking to rewrite it in the near future (Dillon, 2010).

If the purpose of the school is to ensure that all children learn at high levels, then the role of the principal must be to ensure that all teachers reach and teach all children at high levels. The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) and the school standards movement places the accountability for student learning at the school level, not the district level, and therefore the principal’s role has never been more important. Principals are held
accountable for producing results on state tests by the State of New Jersey, and if the school misses adequate yearly progress for four years in a row, the No Child Left Behind Act stipulates that the school be restructured. It can be argued that the result a student achieves on a single yearly test is an inadequate method to measure a student’s overall achievement. It is, however, the current practice in our state. The relentless focus on summative student achievement data requires principals to find ways to maximize their influence over the teaching and learning practices within their schools. As Elmore (2000) suggests,

Improvement requires fundamental changes in the way public schools and school systems are designed and in the ways they are led. It will require changes in the values and norms that shape how teachers and principals think about the purposes of their work, changes in how we think about who leaders are, where they are, and what they do, and changes in the knowledge and skill requirements of work in schools. In short, we must fundamentally re-design schools as places where both adults and young people learn. (p. 35)

Organizational Theory of Loosely Coupled Systems and Schools

Weick (1976) describes schools as loosely coupled systems wherein elements of the organization may respond to each other while each maintaining their own identity and physical or logical separation. This sociological theory can explain why all manner of change initiatives imposed on schools and school systems may result in very little change in what actually happens in the classroom, which is considered the technical core of the organization. In a loosely coupled system the actors function autonomously, which creates a significant barrier to the implementation of change initiatives. In schools, the actors who have the greatest influence over the education of the students are the teachers, so a change initiative can only work if the teachers embrace it and find value in it.
Weber’s (1987) research suggested that "there is a loose relationship between decisions made at the top and their implementation among the teachers, who are autonomous workers" (p. 12). Weber concluded that "consistently communicated goals are probably the most important glue to hold loosely coupled groups together" and he suggested that "principals collaborate with staff in planning and grouping for instruction" (p. 13).

Elmore (2000) presents a scathing assessment of how the loosely coupled organizational structure in schools creates a formidable barrier between the classroom and the outside world, promoting the continued use of "practices that research and experience suggest are manifestly not productive for the learning of certain students" (p. 6). These include questionable tracking systems and grouping students for remediation in less engaging environments. Elmore suggests “design principles” for decreasing the influence of the loosely coupled system and for improving school systems by having school leaders do the following:

- maintain a tight instructional focus sustained over time
- routinize accountability for practice and performance in face to face relationships
- reduce isolation and open practice up to direct observation, analysis, and criticism
- exercise differential treatment based on performance and capacity, not on volunteerism
- devolve increased discretion based on practice and performance. (p. 30)
Most of these strategies are incorporated in the professional learning community model for school improvement as described in DuFour, Dufour, and Eaker (2008).

Observing that "schools are now challenged to prevent practically all failures and to close achievement gaps among student groups" (p. 384), Bellamy, Crawford, Marshall, and Coulter (2005) discuss a framework to "improve reliability in loosely coupled professional organizations such as schools" (p. 383) by drawing on the literature related to high reliability organizations. Their research suggests the following:

The fail-safe schools framework identifies a set of functions that need to be addressed systematically and simultaneously. The framework proposes that reliability is enhanced when a school (a) engages in continuous efforts to improve normal operations, (b) creates norms and systems to detect problems early, and (c) uses systematic recovery strategies through backup mechanisms and then establishes cultural and structural supports for these activities. (p. 402)

The professional learning community construct can satisfy the fail-safe model attributes described above as teachers develop a culture of inquiry with norms that ensure children’s learning difficulties are detected early through pre-and post-assessments’ followed by a support system of interventions.

**The Persistence of Privacy and Reculturing Schools**

A critical element in a loosely coupled system as it operates in schools is the pervasive isolation teachers experience in their daily work. Little (1990) labels this phenomenon "the persistence of privacy” (p. 509). In order to promote collegiality among teachers, it is important to explore the factors that contribute to teacher isolation and privacy. One of these factors is the actual work the teachers do. Little writes: “Schoolteaching has endured largely as an assemblage of entrepreneurial individuals whose autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference and is sustained by the very organization of teaching work” (p. 530). In a typical elementary school, teachers
work for extended periods of time in their individual classrooms with their students engaged in the complex social task of teaching. They make myriad decisions, in the moment, in response to the actions and reactions of their students. They do not see what their peers are doing in the classroom, and their peers do not see them. “By its very nature – its immediacy, its unpredictability, its social complexity – teaching is in many ways an inherently individualistic occupation” (Evans, 1996, p. 235).

Barth (2006) has identified four types of relationships among the adults working as teachers in schools, three of which keep teachers isolated in their work private from their peers. These relationship types include “parallel play,” “adversarial relationships,” “congenial relationships,” and “collegial relationships” (p. 10-11). The first three of these relationships among teachers share a common identifier: the teachers keep their personal teaching practices private from their colleagues. Barth discusses factors that contribute to this phenomenon, which include being self-absorbed with one's own work, engaging in competition for scant praise and resources, and preferring to discuss topics unrelated to the teachers’ daily work. In contrast, teachers who enjoy collegial relationships often discuss educational practice, share "craft knowledge," observe each other teaching in the classroom, and celebrate when their colleagues experience success (p. 11). While a congenial faculty may foster positive personal relationships among teachers, congeniality does not automatically produce higher levels of learning for students. In discussing how a leader builds effective relationships in schools, Fullan (2001) states that “the role of the leader is to ensure that the organization develops relationships that help produce desirable results” (p. 68). He cautions, however, that “relationships are not ends in themselves. Relationships are powerful, which means they can also be powerfully wrong” (p. 65).
Schlichte, Yssel, and Merbler (2005) identified mentoring as one strategy to decrease teacher isolation and alienation, which they found was a factor in teacher "burnout" (p. 35). Drago-Severson and Pinto (2006) suggest that teacher isolation can be mitigated by mentoring and teaming approaches, both of which contribute to teacher learning and a collegial environment. Both approaches, however, require additional human resources that could be prohibitive for many school districts.

A significant challenge the elementary school principal will face in creating a collaborative culture is teacher resistance to making their private work public. The bureaucratic structure of school systems is mirrored in the individual school and often in individual classrooms, creating significant structural barriers to teacher collaboration, collective inquiry and action research (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Tyack, 1974). Additionally, a school culture that embraces and supports teacher autonomy and independence is a powerful force working against teacher collaboration (Evans, 1996).

Changing school culture requires school leaders to create structures and procedures that are “realigned to the new initiative” (Bolman & Deal, 2003, p. 373). Strategies to support cultural change in the structural frame include “communicating, realigning, and renegotiating formal patterns and policies” (p. 372).

McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) discuss the challenges involved in re-culturing schools into learning communities. They observe that “the norms and practices of this type of professional community depart significantly from teachers’ work in typical elementary and secondary schools” (p. 16). Focusing on the culture of schools in the United States, after more than 15 years of study, McLaughlin and Talbert identified “three general facets of professional culture that shape both students’ and teachers’
opportunities to learn” (p. 18). These include the “technical culture,” “professional norms,” and “organizational policies” of the schools. Teachers working in schools with a weak professional culture endure “isolation enforced by [the] norm of privacy” (p. 19) in their practice and believe that students “differ in ability to succeed academically” (p.19). In contrast, teachers working in schools with a “learning community” culture experience “collaboration around teaching and learning,” and a belief system in which “all students can achieve at high academic standards” (p. 19). When a professional learning community is fully functioning, these cultural conditions exist in the school.

Deal and Peterson (1999) describe the purpose of a school as one that ensures that all students are learning, and that they "give their heart and soul to seeking high standards of learning for all students” and where "success is defined by how many students reach their learning potential" (p. 25-26). This is exactly the type of effective school Rosenholtz (1985) identified with an empirical study of school effectiveness wherein the principal’s actions emphasized collaboration and continuous improvement focused on skill acquisition to achieve specific goals. In contrast, she found that schools with norms of autonomy lacked agreement between principals and teachers about the outcomes they sought and the means for reaching them and were therefore, far less effective.

Little, Gearhart, Curry, and Kafka (2003) describe effective schools as those that regularly bring teachers together to have structured conversations about student learning and teaching practice while examining student work. This promising school reform strategy decreases teachers’ privacy of practice and improves student learning outcomes while giving the teachers a vehicle to "cultivate a professional community that is both
willing and able to inquire into practice, and to focus school-based teacher conversations directly on the improvement of teaching and learning" (p. 192).

Reducing the privacy of the teachers’ work and creating a collaborative school culture where collegiality is the norm can possibly be accomplished by certain leadership actions. DuFour et al. (2008) suggest that “reculturing- the challenge of impacting the assumptions, beliefs, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm” (p. 92) is the work of the school leader addressing the paradigm shift from a traditional school organization to one with a professional learning community.

**Leadership and Change in Schools**

The relationship between what leaders know and do, particularly school principals, and the overall performance of the teachers and students is well documented in the literature (Marzano et al., 2005). Sparks (2005) observes:

What leaders think, say, and do- and who they are when they come to work each day- profoundly affects organizational performance, the satisfaction they and those with whom they interact derive from their work, and their ability to sustain engagement with their work over the period of time necessary to oversee significant improvements. (p. vii)

Authentic leaders "lead by example in fostering healthy ethical climates characterized by transparency, trust, integrity, and high moral standards" (Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005, p. 344) The authentic leader-follower relationship has been shown to have positive effects in the organization which include “heightened levels of follower trust in the leader, engagement, workplace well-being and veritable, sustainable performance" (p. 343). Additionally, "the authenticity of the school principal was found to be significantly positively related to teacher trust and teacher
engagement levels" (Bird, Wang, Watson, & Murray, 2009, p. 153), which is critically important to foster effective collaboration.

Marzano et al. (2005) posit that educational stimulation is one of the most important responsibilities of the school leader to increase the effectiveness of the school. They described this quality as:

the extent to which the school leader ensures that faculty and staff are aware of the most current theories and practices regarding effective schooling and makes discussions of those theories and practices a regular aspect of the school’s culture. (p. 52)

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) identified six different leadership styles that an emotionally intelligent leader should master for application in a variety of circumstances in order to maximize the organization’s effectiveness. Four of these leadership styles can be applied when a school leader is attempting to change the way teachers relate to one another in a traditional school setting. These styles can also inform the process a school principal uses to begin to establish professional learning communities in schools. By creating resonance in the organization the visionary, coaching, affiliative, and democratic leadership styles may be useful when leading a change initiative. The visionary leadership style “moves people toward shared dreams” and is “appropriate when changes require a new vision, or when a clear direction is needed” (p. 55). Developing a shared vision with the school faculty is a critical first step so that "an organization is able to move forward on a path toward excellence" (Graham & Ferriter, 2010). The coaching leadership style “connects what a person wants with the organization’s goals” and “helps an employee improve performance by building long-term capabilities” (p. 55). In a professional learning community, it is likely that teachers will become informal leaders coaching their peers as they share teaching styles and
strategies that were effective in improving student learning outcomes. The affiliative leadership style “creates harmony by connecting people to each other” and can serve to “heal rifts in a team, motivate during stressful times, or strengthen connections” (p. 55). It would be unrealistic to expect fundamental change to the way in which teachers relate to each other will evolve without conflict. A change initiative that impacts norms of privacy is likely to create discourse and adapting the affiliate style of leadership may be useful.

The democratic leadership style “values people’s input and gets commitment through participation” and is “appropriate to build buy-in or consensus or to get valuable input from employees” (p. 55). By design, professional learning communities require the input and commitment from the participants.

While leadership styles can influence the success or failure of a change initiative, a more comprehensive model for school leaders to consider is Fullan’s (2001) work, Leading in a Culture of Change. He discusses how “five components of leadership represent independent but mutual reinforcing forces for positive change” (p. 3). He discusses the “personal characteristics that all effective leaders possess,” which he calls “the energy-enthusiasm-hopefulness constellation” (p. 7). He cites two leadership components, “moral purpose and relationship building” (p. 4), which also draw heavily from the tenets of emotional intelligence in leaders. He adds three components that reflect leadership skills that can be developed by school leaders with a desire to improve their organization. These include “understanding change,” “coherence making,” and “knowledge creation and sharing” (p. 4). Simply stated, Fullan’s framework encompasses the basic building blocks leaders need for dealing with complex change.
This model presents a balanced, theoretical base for making change that is long lasting. Fullan’s (2001) core belief is the tenet that leaders must “focus on certain key change themes that will allow them to lead effectively under messy conditions,” but most importantly, it shows “how leaders foster leadership in others, thereby making themselves dispensable in the long run” (p. x). To summarize the model, Fullan states that “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). Each of these leadership components helped provide direction for this action research study.

The Professional Learning Community

The term professional learning community has been used to describe all manner of groups working together in schools. The Professional Development Partnership, a coalition of educational organizations working in New Jersey, produced a document titled, A Common Language for Professional Learning Communities, to allow “educators to share a common language and understanding of the terminology, purpose and processes involved in establishing and sustaining a professional learning community” (New Jersey Department of Education, 2008, p. 2). A common language and understanding alone, however, will not create the shift in culture needed for this work to be realized. Fullan (2005) noted that “terms travel easily…but the underlying concepts do not” (p. 67).

DuFour et al. (2006) have been working since 1998 “to persuade educators that the most promising strategy for helping all students learn at high levels is to develop a
staff’s capacity to function as a Professional Learning Community” (p. 1). DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2009) discuss the conceptual beginnings of the Professional Learning Community on their website as “an alternative to the isolation endemic to the teaching profession in the United States” emerging in the research literature as early as the 1960s, but becoming more explicit in the 1980s and 1990s. They mention research by Little and McLaughlin published in 1993:

[Little and McLaughlin] concluded [that] the most effective schools and the most effective departments within schools operated as strong professional communities characterized by shared norms and beliefs, collegial relations, collaborative cultures, reflective practice, ongoing technical inquiry regarding effective practice, professional growth, mutual support and mutual obligation (DuFour et al., 2009, para. 4)

In 1998, DuFour and Eaker wrote Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement, which effectively communicated the concept of Professional Learning Communities to a large professional audience. Their conclusions were based on extensive field studies of successful schools with whom they worked. It stated that educators working in Professional Learning Communities:

Collectively pursue shared mission, vision, values and goals; work interdependently in collaborative teams focused on learning; engage in ongoing collective inquiry into best practice and the current reality of student achievement and the prevailing practices of the school; demonstrate an action orientation and experimentation; participate in systematic processes to promote continuous improvement; maintain an unrelenting focus on results. (DuFour et al., 2009, para. 12)

The professional learning community as both a concept and a reform model for improving student learning continues to develop and gain popularity in the United States. DuFour et al. (2008) observe, that “A Professional Learning Community is composed of collaborative teams whose members work interdependently to achieve common goals-
goals linked to the purpose of learning for all— for which members are held mutually accountable” (p. 15).

Eaker and Keating (2008) describe three critical shifts that transform traditional schools into those that can be described as Professional Learning Communities. These include a shift in purpose from teaching to learning; a shift in the work of teachers from working in isolation to working in collaborative teams; and a shift in focus “from inputs to outcomes and from intentions to results” (p. 14).

McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) observe that in a professional learning community, “teachers work collaboratively to reflect on their practice, examine evidence about the relationship between practice and student outcomes, and make changes that improve teaching and learning for the particular students in their classes” (p. 3).

Arneau (2008) describes the professional learning community as “Teachers who have a clear vision of student achievement goals, an understanding of the gaps in student learning, and a focused plan of professional learning to address those gaps by first improving adult learning” (p. 51).

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) note:

Working together collaboratively, the people in a [Professional Learning Community] begin to focus on the three critical questions: Exactly what is it we want all students to learn? How will we know when each student has acquired the essential knowledge and skills? What happens in our school when a student does not learn? (p. 21)

McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) assert that “school-based teacher learning communities” have “three functions [that] stand out: they build and manage knowledge; they create shared language and standards for practice and student outcomes; and they sustain aspects of their school’s culture vital to continued, consistent norms and
instructional practice” (p. 5). This kind of professional collaboration can be realized in a school with skillful leadership. Sparks (2005) writes, “Skillful leadership by principals and teachers is essential if quality teaching is to occur in all classrooms. An essential part of such leadership is the creation of a performance-oriented culture that has professional learning and collaboration at its core” (p. 114).

Eaker et al. (2002) identify four priorities for leaders attempting to create professional learning communities: Focus on learning; focus on collaborative culture; focus on results; provide timely, relevant information (p. 34).

Brown and Wynn (2007) used professional learning communities as the lens through which they examined the work of twelve principals to ascertain characteristics of principals who successfully retained teachers at a rate higher than their peers. They found that principals who “foster unofficial professional learning communities that reduce teacher isolation, increase teacher responsibility and understanding, and improve teacher satisfaction, morale and commitment…greatly influence retention” (p. 696).

Kanold, Toncheff, and Douglas (2008) suggest that leaders seek “an adult commitment to pursue three ABCs of a professional learning community.” Specifically, attacking the entitlement of private practice by creating a collaborative teacher work environment; building the learning capacity of the adults in each high school within the context of the workplace, and creating a result-oriented focus for all teacher teams and school administrative teams to bring coherence to adult actions and provide student interventions. (p. 23)

Eaker et al. (2002) wrote Getting Started: Reculturing Schools to Become Professional Learning Communities in response to requests from educators who attended their workshops for a “how-to” guide to putting professional learning communities (PLC) in place in their own schools. The process, however, does not lend itself to a step by step approach. They write:
Neither quick fixes nor fool-proof formulas are available to those interested in the PLC model. The structural and cultural changes required to advance a traditional school on the continuum of becoming a PLC are inherently non-linear and complex. Progress is typically incremental, characterized more by starts and stops, messiness, and redundancy than sequential efficiency (p. 2).

Eaker et al. (2002) do, however, state that “a solid conceptual framework is available to guide [the educator’s] efforts” (p. 2). When discussing how leaders can impact school culture DuFour et al. (2008) observe “it is essential to understand the challenge of changing culture begins with the challenge of changing behavior, and therefore actual changes in culture occur late in the process” (p. 108). Kotter (1996) writes:

Culture is not something that you manipulate easily. Attempts to grab it and twist it into a new shape never work because you can’t grab it. Culture changes only after you have successfully altered people’s actions, after the new behavior produces some group benefit for a period of time, and after people see the connection between the new actions and the performance improvement. (p.156)

Mattos (as cited in DuFour et al., 2008) lists “six essential characteristics to being a PLC” shared mission, vision, collective commitments, and goals; collaborative teams focused on learning; collective inquiry into the current reality of the school and best school practices; an action orientation; a commitment to continuous improvement with continuous improvement processes embedded into the routine practices of the school; a focus on results (p. 326). He cautions that “the characteristics are not singular actions to be accomplished, but ongoing goals that must be continually reconsidered and embedded within all the school’s beliefs and procedures” (p. 327).

DuFour et al. (2008) urge the school leader to adopt this job description in order to support the growth of the professional learning community: “My responsibility is to create the conditions that help the adults in this building continually improve upon their
collective capacity to ensure all students acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success” (p. 309).

Schmoker (2004b) writes, “There is broad, even remarkable concurrence among members of the research community on the effects of carefully structured learning teams on the improvement of instruction” (p. 430). In criticism of Schmoker’s views, however, Joyce (2004) writes “The broad literature on school renewal describes many failed attempts to build learning communities; attempts mounted by sophisticated people, armed with considerable energy and carefully constructed strategies. There are successful cases, of course, but generalizable strategies have been elusive” (p. 77). He also writes, “I believe the norms of the workplace haven’t changed all that much and that team inquiry will collide with them” (p. 78). Certainly finding a way to alter teachers’ sense of autonomy and fierce independence will not be easy. Reeves (2009) cautions that:

Leaders will never, for example, get 100 percent of the faculty to enjoy professional collaboration, particularly when some faculty members define their professional independence, self-respect, and personal identity precisely in terms of not having to collaborate. In fact, they take a good deal of pride in being the only teacher to require this or the most demanding faculty member when it comes to that. Consistency to them is not a sign of fairness but of mediocrity. In these cases, the goal of the leader is not to ask the faculty member to enjoy collaboration, but rather to cooperate in collaborative efforts. (p. 53)

DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) recognize that “educators knew Professional Learning Community practices were preferable to what they had been doing,” “and yet, they did not act on that knowledge” (p. 226). Evans’ work (1996) describes how all change, even change for the better, can profoundly affect people, resulting in feelings of loss, incompetence, confusion, and conflict. Since educational leaders may be “prone to energetic optimism” (p. 38) they “can overlook and underestimate the effort and agony of the people who must adapt” (p. 38) to the changes. At the same time, school personnel
who wait for someone else to provide solutions for children who are not learning at high levels will likely be disappointed with the results. “Educators create a results orientation in their schools when they stop looking out the window for solutions to their problems and start looking in the mirror” (DuFour et al., 2005, p. 246).

The educational construct of the Professional Learning Community has become the focus of emerging research in the educational community as schools and school leaders attempt to change the typical culture of schools where teachers often function independently of each other. Grider (2008) surveyed teachers from 25 schools who had been engaged in three years of professional training to become professional learning communities, and his research suggested that “when teachers perceive that their schools function as a professional learning community, they are also likely to have a higher sense of efficacy” (p. iii). His study suggested further research to investigate whether “changing structural features of the school encourage greater collaboration” and inquired whether “changing the structure [would] lead to a change in culture” (p. 119).

Strosberg (2010) explored how “elementary principals restructure their buildings to create and support professional learning communities” and found that “principals built trust, cultivated teachers’ participation in instructional decision-making and facilitated collective responsibility for outcomes” when they “incorporated elements of transformational, shared instructional and distributed leadership behavior” (p. iii). She suggested further research on “principal’s leadership behavior to sustain change amid external pressures” (p. iv).

Reimer (2010) identified certain principal actions that contributed to the formation of successful professional learning communities that included, among other
factors, shared decision making and the principal’s ability to foster school cultures that are “supportive, collaborative in nature, and a safe environment for student learning” (p. 91). Reimer’s study was conducted using data from just four schools spanning grades 3 through 5, suggesting that additional studies in schools with different grade level configurations would further inform practice.

**Chapter Summary**

The purpose of educational supervision is inextricably linked to the ever-evolving mission of the public schools in the United States (Pollock & Ford, 2009). The work of the school principal to improve student learning outcomes is of paramount importance in this era of The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) which places accountability for student learning at the school level. The research community offers significant evidence that student achievement is linked to the effectiveness of the school principal, but the question remains whether that link is direct or indirect (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Marzano et al., 2005; McNulty, 2005; Toch, 2008). Additionally, studies that explicate the attributes of schools where students learn at high levels frequently point toward the tenets of the professional learning community, offering a local solution to teacher isolation which limits opportunities for growth through collaboration focused on improving student learning outcomes (Barth, 2006; DuFour et al., 2008). Changing the culture of the school, which is a loosely coupled system, may be accomplished through leadership actions that increase the teachers sense of efficacy and commitment to student learning (Elmore, 2000; Strosberg, 2010; Weick, 1976).

This study will attempt to address the gaps in the literature pertaining to ways principals can influence teachers’ propensity to work collaboratively. Specifically, the
findings of the following researchers suggested additional studies were needed in this area. After conducting a multiple case study of Professional Learning Communities, Berdos (2009) asked, “How do principals empower teachers to use their collaboration time productively?” (p. 269). As Grider’s (2008) research suggested, this researcher will create structures and support within the school to influence teachers to work collaboratively. Mohabir (2009) completed a Professional Learning Community case study and suggested that more studies are needed “to provide models of leadership roles in implementing learning communities” (p. 152). This study attempts to augment the knowledge base in this area by attempting to answer the question: Which actions of an elementary school principal have the greatest influence on teacher behavior to foster and support collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning? Finally, while Clarke (2009) studied two schools where the Professional Learning Community model was adopted and described resistance on the part of the teachers working at the higher grade levels, this study attempts to identify the conditions under which lower elementary teachers are supported or hindered in their Professional Learning Community work.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This limited practical action research study was designed to address the problem of practice at one Pre-K- third grade school wherein teachers work the majority of the time in isolation from their peers, and where collaboration is the exception, not the rule. Teachers have limited opportunities to share teaching strategies and build on the strengths of their peers to improve the learning outcomes of their students as they practice the art of teaching in the classroom. The goal of this study was for the researcher, in her role as school principal, to serve as the leader of an organizational change which would positively impact student achievement. The teachers self-selected peers with whom they worked as members of a Professional Learning Community, using a protocol that required the teachers to identify short term, common student learning outcomes, and develop common pre-assessments and post-assessments to measure students’ performance. Each team used the protocol a minimum of 5 times over a 10 month period between January-June 2010 and September-December 2010. It was inferred that this process would increase the teachers’ collective inquiry, empowering them to effectively monitor students’ progress and intervene early when students had difficulty mastering the specific learning goals. Staff development was given throughout the process to increase the teachers’ understanding of the Professional Learning Community construct as described by DuFour et al. (2004). Data collection included a review of historical artifacts from the school including a school self-study, a Middle States Commission on
Elementary Schools report, and two years of agendas from faculty and grade level meetings; two surveys created by the researcher, teachers’ written reflections of the process gathered at various times during the study, observations of the teachers while they worked and planned together, and more than 12 hours of group and individual teacher interviews.

In this practical action research study, the researcher sought to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways will having the elementary school principal create structures and support within the school influence the teachers’ propensity to work collaboratively to support student learning outcomes?

2. Which actions of an elementary school principal have the greatest influence on teacher behavior to foster and support collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning?

3. What conditions will support or hinder teachers in developing and using common student learning objectives, pre-assessments, and post-assessments to measure students’ performance?

As an elementary school principal interested in improving professional practice within her own elementary school, the researcher determined that the qualitative methodology of action research was the most appropriate vehicle with which to proceed.

A significant number of educational practitioners embrace action research as the preferred method of inquiry when attempting change in an educational setting (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994; Dana & Yendol-Silva, 2003; Hendricks, 2006; Mertier, 2005; Sagor, 2000). Action research empowers the participants to collaborate in a meaningful
way as they gain knowledge and understanding of a problem embedded in their daily work. In contrast to theoretical solutions offered through scientific research designs, action research is grounded in practice (Ferrance, 2000). Hinchey (2008) defines action research as “a process of systematic inquiry, usually cyclical, conducted by those inside a community rather than by outside experts; its goal is to identify action that will generate some improvement the researcher believes important” (p. 4).

The cyclical nature of action research allows the researcher to put a process in place and then evaluate how well it is working to inform the next action. Using this process allowed this researcher to analyze the outcome of each cycle before moving on to the next. Three cycles of action research were used in this study.

**Action Research- Cycle I**

The goal of the work in Cycle I of this action research study was to gather information concerning the culture of Great Lawn Elementary School and to ascertain the faculty’s proclivity for change, particularly one that would promote regular and frequent teacher collaboration as a means to improve student learning outcomes. Additional consideration was given to finding independent sources for these data to attempt to alleviate the researcher’s personal bias as the building principal.

Glesne (2006) suggests that qualitative researchers collect data in a variety of ways to increase the reliability of the findings in a process “commonly called triangulation” (p. 36). The researcher was able to accomplish this task in a variety of ways. During Action Research- Cycle I, data were collected from historical artifacts from Great Lawn Elementary School and new information the researcher gathered by working
with a team of three second grade teachers who had created their own Professional Learning Community before the researcher attempted to implement a school-wide model.

Data collection in Cycle I included (a) a review of the historical artifact called the *Great Lawn Elementary School’s School Improvement Plan*, written five years before this study, (b) a review of the historical artifact called the *Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools: Report of the School Improvement Visiting Team- Focus on School Improvement* (2005), a document created four years before this study, (c) a faculty questionnaire created by the researcher regarding Professional Development and Professional Learning Communities, (d) faculty meeting and grade level meeting agendas for two school years, (e) preliminary observations of several teachers who were working collaboratively, and (f) a semi-structured group interview conducted with the teachers.

**Great Lawn Elementary School’s School Improvement Plan.** Five years before this study began, the stakeholders of Great Lawn Elementary School completed an extensive self-study process under the guidance of an organization called the *National Study of School Evaluation* (NSSE), which is now part of a non-profit organization called *Advanc-ed* (http://www.advanc-ed.org/). As a culminating activity for this self-study, the stakeholders produced a document called the “Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan.” The information in this document was deemed important by the researcher because it provided an independent viewpoint of the culture of the school, and cited information the school had gathered from a survey instrument called the “Survey of Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness” (NSSE, 1997).

The researcher was able to obtain partial results of the original survey and reviewed information reported about the school’s culture in the “Great Lawn Elementary
School: School Improvement Plan” document. The “Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan” includes data from the “Survey of Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness” (NSSE, 1997) that was collected from 43 faculty members, 233 parents, and 51 students. The participants completed a paper survey and deposited them in a collection box in the front lobby of the school during three days when school conferences were being held. The “Survey of Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness” uses 12 indicators of quality to assess the instructional system of the school and 12 additional indicators of quality to assess the organizational system of the school district. The researcher was particularly interested in the quality indicators regarding the organizational system to inform this action research project, as these indicators referenced collaboration, leadership, and community building within the school. Table 1 lists the indicators from the “Survey of Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness,” under the subtitle "Organization System," which were included in the “Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan,” and the survey results can be found in the Findings section of this dissertation.

Table 1

*Excerpt from “Sample Report” from the Survey of Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness (Fitzpatrick, 2002, p. 223)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational System</th>
<th>Indicators of Quality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Agenda</td>
<td>Facilitates a collaborative process in developing a shared vision</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Agenda</td>
<td>Develops a beliefs and mission that define a compelling purpose and direction of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership for School Improvement</td>
<td>Provides skillful stewardship by ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources of the school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Building</td>
<td>Fosters community building conditions and working relationships within the school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools: Report of the school improvement visiting team - Focus on school improvement. During the 2004-2005 school year, the faculty of Great Lawn Elementary School applied for accreditation from the Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools, which was subsequently awarded in October, 2005. As part of the Cycle I research, the researcher reviewed another historical artifact obtained from Great Lawn Elementary School titled the *Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools: Report of the School Improvement Visiting Team-Focus on School Improvement* (2005). The document presented an independent viewpoint of the school’s culture written by four educators volunteering their time for the Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools who spent 2.5 days visiting the Great Lawn Elementary School. During their visit, the team reviewed the “Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan,” observed teachers and students in classrooms, and interviewed teachers, staff members, students, community members, and administrators. At the conclusion of their visit, the Middle States team wrote a 49 page report that documented their impressions regarding the accuracy of the school improvement plan and its relationship to what they actually observed in the school. This report included references to the mission, organizational effectiveness, leadership, and climate of Great Lawn Elementary School, which the researcher has included in the Findings section of this dissertation.

Faculty questionnaire regarding professional development and professional learning communities. In the spring of 2009, the researcher administered an anonymous survey to determine the level of understanding the faculty at Great Lawn Elementary School held about professional development and the educational construct of Professional
Learning Communities. The term “Professional Learning Communities” had been used in the Big Acres School District over the past few years as the district made a transition to a comprehensive new professional development program for teachers. It was unclear if the term had ever been formally defined for the faculty members, but the researcher suspected that the teachers had formed some opinions about what it meant. In order to ascertain the teachers’ perceptions and opinions about the new professional development program with specific focus on the work of the Professional Learning Communities, the researcher created a two page questionnaire. A sample of the instrument used can be found in Appendix A. The questionnaire included six statements about the teachers’ perceptions of the personalized professional development program in the Big Acres School District, and five statements regarding evidence that their students made improvements as a result of their participation in the program. It also included five statements about Professional Learning Communities. Each of the 16 statements mentioned was rated on a Likert-type scale, with the following range: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree. One question asks the teacher to identify the professional development activity in which they participated. Two demographic questions identify the teachers by the number of years they have been employed, and by the number of years they have been employed in the Big Acres School District. The researcher was interested in learning whether teaching experience (or lack of it) influenced the teachers’ opinions. The teachers with more than 6 years of experience would have participated in the district’s former professional development program, which was markedly different than the current program. A field test of the instrument revealed the need to add a definition for Professional Learning Communities. The following
definition was used: "A Professional Learning Community exists when educators embrace a shared mission, vision, values and goals, and when educators work in high-performing collaborative teams to create a results oriented culture focused on student learning" (adapted from Eaker et al., 2002).

A non-random, sample of convenience was utilized by presenting the instrument to a group of 51 Great Lawn Elementary School teachers who attended a faculty meeting held on June 9, 2009, and the researcher sought volunteers to provide their opinion by completing the anonymous survey. The researcher read aloud the opening paragraph of the questionnaire, which served as the letter of transmittal. This paragraph explained the reason the questionnaire was created, and explained that all responses would remain anonymous. The researcher reiterated several times that the teachers’ participation was strictly voluntary, and that by completing the survey and returning it, they were acknowledging their informed consent to participate. In an effort to lower their level of concern about maintaining their anonymity, the researcher asked the school’s media specialist to collect the completed surveys. A discussion of the results of this survey can be found in the findings section of this document and are also reproduced in Appendix B.

**Faculty meeting and grade level meeting agendas.** To further inform this action research project, the researcher collected two additional types of historical artifacts: faculty meeting agendas and grade level meeting agendas from both the 2008-2009 and the 2009-2010 school years. The researcher recognized that the change initiative in this action research study would require additional time for the teachers to work collaboratively. Through an analysis of these two types of artifacts, the researcher hoped to gain a clearer sense of the specific tasks in which the teachers were currently engaged
and to identify strategies to adjust those tasks to find additional time for the teachers to work together.

Through contractual obligations, teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School are required to attend up to three 45 minute meetings each month, for a total of 22.5 hours yearly. Generally, the school principal designates the purpose of these meetings, setting the agenda items in advance and announcing them electronically through a weekly bulletin. These meetings comprise a combination of faculty meetings and grade level meetings. Faculty members who do not teach a specific grade join a grade level team (i.e., basic skills teacher) or form a "job-alike" team with peers who share their job description (i.e., speech teachers). The agendas for many faculty meetings include staff development and training activities required either by the state or by the school district. The researcher maintained a record of these agenda items electronically as part of a weekly bulletin. While the school principal may designate agenda items for grade level/job-alike meetings, teachers are frequently encouraged to discuss topics of relevance to their current work. To monitor these topics, the researcher requested an attendance sheet with a list of agenda items that were addressed at each meeting.

A discussion and analysis of the faculty meeting agendas and grade level meeting agendas from the 2008-2009 and the 2009-2010 school years can be found in the Findings section of this dissertation.

**Preliminary observations of teacher collaboration at Great Lawn Elementary School.** During the fall of 2009, the researcher observed a team of Great Lawn Elementary School teachers who, by their own choice, had begun to work collaboratively. With the expressed permission of the teachers, the researcher conducted
a semi-structured group interview on September 21, 2009, which was recorded using a
tape recorder. The researcher read a statement of transmittal to confirm authorization to
record the conversation, and composed a brief list of topics the researcher wished to
address during the interview. The topics included the following: (a) identify the factors
that influenced the teachers to collaborate, (b) identify benefits and challenges, and (c)
identify group norms.

Additionally, the researcher sought and gained permission to observe the team of
teachers during three work sessions. During these work sessions the researcher gathered
field notes, but did not tape record the conversations. The work sessions entailed
observing the teachers as they planned instruction for their students, created and selected
pre-and post-assessments, and reflected on the lessons and the teaching strategies they
used.

**Reflecting on action research Cycle I**

The data the researcher gathered and the analysis she performed on these data
informed her decisions and plans for Action Research Cycle II. The data and analysis can
be found in the Findings section of this dissertation.

**Action Research- Cycle II**

The goal of the action research the researcher conducted in Cycle II was to use
principal’s actions to give the teachers an experience in collaborative planning and
assessment that would likely result in greater student achievement. The primary
principal’s actions the researcher used were to create structure: the researcher designed
protocol the teachers called the “Two-Week Goal” (Appendix C) and support: by
reallocating the resource of time. Additional principal’s actions included providing
information through staff development activities, increasing accountability by collecting artifacts from the teachers as their work progressed, and ensuring that adjustments in the project were made in response to teachers’ thoughtful reflections. The researcher’s goal was to do what Fullan (2001) described as, “Transforming the culture-changing the way we do things around here” (p. 44). By changing the teachers’ behavior first, the researcher hoped to influence an incremental change in the culture of the school where 84% of the teachers worked and planned alone.

The decisions the researcher made regarding these actions in Cycle II are discussed in the Findings section of this dissertation. The researcher was also influenced by the suggestion of DuFour et al. (2006) wherein they write:

> Perhaps the greatest insight we have gained in our work with school districts across the continent is that schools that take the plunge and actually begin doing the work of a PLC develop their capacity to help all students learn at high levels far more effectively than schools that spent years preparing to become PLCs through reading or even training. (p. 8)

Data collection in Action Research- Cycle II consisted of the following: (a) a planning sheet and supporting documents which confirmed teachers’ use of a researcher designed protocol that was completed three times between January 2010 and June 2010 by various teams of teachers, (b) artifacts used to provide professional development to the faculty, and (c) teachers’ reflections written in response to researcher created prompts.

**Researcher designed protocol.** In this cycle, a researcher designed protocol for the teacher teams’ action research was used three times between January 2010 and June 2010. The protocol consisted of a two-week goal planning sheet (Appendix C), a copy of the pre-assessment (and post-assessment, if a different one was used), and samples of the students’ work.
The planning sheets the researcher used to guide the teachers’ work are reproduced in Appendix C. The planning sheet used in January 2010 is shown in Table 1. The only changes made in subsequent planning sheets were the specific dates.

Table 2

*Researcher Designed Two-Week Protocol Template: January 2010*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Great Lawn Elementary School</th>
<th>January Two Week Student Learning Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today January 5, 2010 - January 12, 2010:</td>
<td>Choose job-alike team; meet to write one literacy goal for students; create the assessment. The job-alike team members decide to work together because they are already planning to teach the target objective of the goal. Please give one copy to principal on January 12, 2010.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Today-January 12:</td>
<td>Pre-assess students with an assessment that will show whether or not the children understand the target objective of the goal.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 12 - January 25:</td>
<td>Teach!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 22 - January 25:</td>
<td>Reassess students with the same pre-assessment task or a very similar one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 26:</td>
<td>Discuss the process and results at grade level meeting; share the teaching strategies that worked (or didn't work) with your students.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. List job alike team members:

2. **Short Term Student Learning Goal:** Please write goals in the S.M.A.R.T. goal format (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) (Doran, 1981)

3. **Short Term Learning Assessment:** (Attach as appropriate)

To set the stage for this change initiative, the researcher used a simple exercise at the faculty meeting on January 5, 2010, which confirmed her trust in the expertise of the faculty of Great Lawn Elementary School. The researcher asked the teachers to work in
small groups to count the total number of years of experience they had in teaching, and then combined their group totals to reach one grand total for the entire group. Affirming their hundreds of years of experience, the researcher assured them that the answer to our questions for how to reach every learner was surely “in the room.” The researcher then presented the protocol to the faculty as a means to guide them in working together effectively, ensuring that she would give them the time to do the work. The researcher reiterated that the student learning goal must be something that they were already planning to teach as part of their regular work. The researcher did not want them to view this process as additional work. On the contrary, the researcher wanted to give them an opportunity to discuss with their peers an important student learning objective that they already viewed as important in the classroom. Teachers worked in teams during dedicated blocks of time to compose a consistent grade level learning goal that would be taught by them to their students over a two week period (approximately).

In order to begin this process at Great Lawn Elementary School, the researcher designated time previously used for faculty meetings (one 45-minute period per month) and grade level meetings (two 45-minute periods per month) as collaborative meeting time for teachers. The teachers were directed to create an assessment that would indicate the students had mastered the goal. The assessment was then administered to all students prior to being taught, and again at the conclusion of the two weeks. Pre- and post-assessment data were gathered and analyzed.

The researcher designed protocols were collected from all groups at the end of each cycle, which consisted of a copy of the two week goal planning sheet, samples of
the pre-assessments and post-assessments the teachers used, and samples of the children's actual work.

**Professional development for teachers.** The researcher engaged the faculty in several professional development tasks between January 2010 and March 2010 to help them learn more about the way Professional Learning Communities function. She used faculty and grade level meeting time to accomplish each of these tasks.

In January 2010, the researcher used a protocol from the National School Reform Faculty at the Harmony Education Center (2009a) called "Attributes of a Learning Community," which helped the teachers begin to identify the essential elements of a positive collaborative experience. Teachers were asked to write about their own positive learning experience within a learning community, and then share their stories with the group while the group lists the attributes that made the experience productive. The purpose of this activity was to encourage ongoing, collective inquiry of the adult learners throughout the two-week goal protocol process.

In February 2010, the researcher used another protocol from the National School Reform Faculty at the Harmony Education Center (2009b) called "Considering Evidence Protocol," through which the teachers reviewed the post-assessment work their students had produced. The teachers looked for evidence of learning, asked probing questions, and reflected on the lessons that produced the students’ responses.

In March 2010, the researcher introduced the faculty to the educational construct of the Professional Learning Community as envisioned by DuFour et al. (2004). In a Power Point presentation created for this purpose, the researcher shared the overarching conceptual components of the Professional Learning Community:
- Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals
- Collaborative Teams
- Collective Inquiry
- Action Orientation and Experimentation
- Continuous Improvement
- Results Orientation. (Dufour et al., 2004, p. 2-6)

This PowerPoint presentation is included in Appendix D.

The teachers made a first attempt to establish group norms or the “ground rules, or habits that govern the group” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 173). To assist in this process the researcher used another protocol from the National School Reform Faculty at Harmony Education Center called "Forming Ground Rules" (2009c), which helped to guide the teachers’ conversation. The protocol gives every person an opportunity to write down what they need to work productively in a group, and then provides a process to gather the groups’ thoughts systematically. The researcher used this prompt:

“What do you need in order to work productively in a group?

1. Working alone, write these down (Example: I need all voices to be heard).
2. Take turns sharing one item from your list, round robin style, while someone records (no repeats).
3. Edit; can everyone abide by these? Sign on.
4. Review and revise as needed over time.”

**Teachers’ reflections.** In late March 2010, and in recognition of the fact that the teachers of Great Lawn Elementary School had been working collaboratively for over two months, the researcher wanted to gather their thoughts about the process thus far.
Having previously confirmed that the faculty was united in a shared mission, vision, and goals for student learning, the researcher asked the individual teachers to think about what they personally needed in order to work as part of a high functioning, collaborative team. The researcher asked the teachers to complete a written reflection in response to this prompt:

"Working alone, please write down your thoughts about these questions:

1. Thinking about the fall of 2009, how often would you say you did the following collaboratively with other teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School:
   
   a. planned lessons for your classes
   
   b. planned assessments for your students
   
   c. talked about the work your students were doing

2. What do you perceive to be the positives and negatives of working collaboratively with other teachers to plan instruction, create assessments, and evaluate the work your students are doing?"

By June 2010, the teachers had completed three rounds of the action research protocol. The researcher again gathered written reflections from the teachers about their collaborative work during the past six months. The following prompt was used:

"Over the past six months (January 2010 through June 2010), you focused on several two week learning goal tasks for students working with your peers here at Great Lawn Elementary School. This is the beginning of the formation of Professional Learning Communities."
1. In what ways do you believe collaborating with your peers, focusing on students work over a two week span, was beneficial, problematic, or both?

2. Thinking about working with your peers for next year on common learning goals for students, in what ways would you change this process? What needs can you anticipate to make this process successful?”

The results of this reflection are found in the Findings section of this dissertation.

**Reflecting on action research Cycle II.** The data the researcher gathered and the analysis she performed on these data informed her decisions and plans for Action Research Cycle III. The data and analysis can be found in the Findings section of this dissertation.

**Action Research- Cycle III**

The goal of the action research in Cycle III was to provide structure and support to the fledgling Professional Learning Communities as a new school year commenced in September 2010. The researcher provided structure by designating time for collaborative work within the faculty and grade level meeting schedule and by having the teams use the researcher created protocol instrument to document their work in two or more recurring cycles. Teachers were given the option to work in a different self-selected group from within their grade level teams. Additional structure and support was provided in the form of a common, 30 minute intervention period designated in the master schedule for first, second, and third grades. The intended use of this intervention period was to provide support to students who had not mastered the learning goals.

Data collected in Cycle III included (a) a planning sheet and supporting documents which confirmed teachers’ use of a researcher designed protocol that was
completed a minimum of two times between September 2010 and December 2010 by various teams of teachers, (b) teachers’ reflections on their role in schools, that is, “What makes a great teacher?” (c) artifacts used to provide professional development to the faculty, and (d) 24 tape-recorded, structured interviews with individual teachers as they reflected on the 10-month change initiative.

**Researcher designed protocol.** The researcher designed protocol used during the previous school year was reviewed, and one revision was made (see Table 3). The revision did not specify a timeline as the Professional Learning Community teams had requested discretion in this area. Teachers were given time during faculty and grade level meetings to identify the essential student learning outcomes, create pre- and post-assessments, and analyze the results to inform subsequent instruction.

Table 3

*Researcher Designed Protocol, Fall 2010*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Great Lawn Elementary School</th>
<th>Language Arts: Short Term Student Learning Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Today’s Date:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Learning Community Members:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Objective for Student Learning:</td>
<td>(Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Timely) (Doran, 1981)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When will you teach this objective?</td>
<td>Begin_______ End_______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please attach a copy of the assessment you will use to pre-assess students’ work and to post-assess students’ work.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with this form is from (teacher’s name)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Teachers’ reflections on their role in schools.** In an attempt to gather data regarding teachers’ beliefs and attitudes about teaching and learning, the researcher asked this open ended question at a faculty meeting on September 14, 2010 and had the teachers respond in writing, “What makes a great teacher?” The teachers’ responses and an analysis of them can be found in the Findings chapter of this dissertation.

**Professional development for teachers.** During one faculty meeting, teachers read and discussed the article “What is a Professional Learning Community?” (DuFour, 2004). This article clearly articulates the essential elements of the construct. It also mentions having a “coordinated strategy to respond when some students do not learn” (p. 8). The strategy the researcher planned to implement in Cycle III was a daily, 30-minute intervention period for this purpose. To learn more about how an intervention period works in other schools, the researcher directed teachers to a website maintained by Solution Tree (allthingsplc.com), where they could read testimonials from other locations in the United States. This website has additional resources for schools attempting to implement the construct of Professional Learning Communities, and while not required to do so, many Great Lawn Elementary School teachers accessed the site.

**Structured interviews with individual teachers.** In early January 2011, the researcher conducted 24 individual structured interviews with teachers to ascertain their thoughts, reflections, and opinions about the effectiveness of the entire change process that occurred between January 2010 and December 2010. These interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and fully transcribed. The following questions guided these interviews:
With regard to the following, please tell me: What worked well? What didn't work well? What ideas do you have to improve it?

1. Collaboration (Professional Learning Community-PLC work) with your peers about
   a. student learning goals
   b. pre-and post-assessments
   c. sharing teaching strategies

2. Student progress as a result of this collaboration

3. Intervention period

4. Principal's actions (my leadership) that supported or didn't support this process. What can or should I do differently to support teachers as they work to improve student learning?

These interviews provided a rich source of data about the change initiative, and a discussion about their content can be found in the Findings section of this dissertation.

**Researcher Bias/ Triangulation**

In reflecting on the power of the Professional Learning Community as a construct to improve student learning, the researcher recognized biases that may influence the outcome of this study. The first bias concerns her own teaching experience in the past wherein she worked as a member of a highly functioning collaborative team. Having had a very positive experience working interdependently with a group of talented, student-centered educators helped the researcher formulate her opinion that high level teacher collaboration benefits students greatly.
A second bias is the fact that the researcher conducted this study in the school where she serves as the building principal. While all of the teachers will be involved in this change initiative, the researcher will base the conclusions on those who grant her permission to be interviewed and observed as the work progresses. This will likely reduce first person accounts from people who resisted or did not support the process, which will influence the results. Teachers may react and respond differently when the principal of the school is present. The researcher will attempt to minimize the effect of her biases on the research by asking open-ended questions rather than leading ones. The researcher will view her role more as a mediator than a director, providing support as the teachers begin to collaborate. Over the past few years, the researcher has been fortunate to establish an atmosphere of trust with most members of the faculty who know that her personal and professional mission is to persistently seek solutions that benefit the children.

Certain ethical challenges exist when a person conducts research within his/her own workplace, and this challenge is exacerbated when the researcher is also the supervisor and/or evaluator of the participants. In an attempt to alleviate this potential conflict of interest, the researcher utilized the following procedures:

- The entire faculty of Great Lawn Elementary School was involved in the change project, but only those who granted expressed, written consent to the researcher have their opinions and comments included in this dissertation.

- Every precaution was taken by the researcher to protect the identity and confidentiality of the participants.

- The researcher participated in all aspects of the project with the faculty in "appreciation of the capacity for individuals to work together to effect
change” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 12). Ideas and suggestions made by the faculty during the process were incorporated as the project moved forward.

The school’s assistant principal contributed to the formal evaluative process of the faculty members during the time period when this research was conducted to decrease the influence of the researcher’s bias.

In an attempt to alleviate these biases further, the researcher used multiple sources of information to triangulate the findings. These sources included historical artifacts from the school, a questionnaire, meeting agendas, field observations, structured and semi-structured interviews, a researcher designed protocol and supporting documents, artifacts of professional development activities, and teachers’ written and verbal reflections.

It is likely that the research conclusions will not be representative of other dissimilar groups, but perhaps the researcher will be able to discern trends in the changing school culture that other school leaders will find useful.
Chapter 4

Findings

This limited practical action research study (Hinchey, 2008) was designed to address the problem of practice (City et al., 2009) at one Pre-K- third grade school located in a suburban community on the east coast of the United States wherein teachers work the majority of the time in isolation from their peers, and where collaboration is the exception, not the rule. Teachers have limited opportunities to share teaching strategies and build on the strengths of their peers to improve the learning outcomes of their students as they practice the art of teaching in the classroom (Little, 1990). The goal of this study was for the school principal to serve as the leader of an organizational change which would positively impact student achievement. The teachers self-selected peers with whom they worked as members of a Professional Learning Community using a researcher created protocol that required the teachers to identify short term, common student learning outcomes, and develop common pre-assessments and post-assessments to measure students’ performance (DuFour et al., 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Each team used the protocol a minimum of 5 times over a 10-month period. It was inferred that this process would increase the teachers’ collective inquiry (Copland, 2003), empowering them to effectively monitor students’ progress and intervene early when students had difficulty mastering the specific learning goals (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Staff development was given throughout the process to increase the teachers’ understanding of the Professional Learning Community construct as described by DuFour et al. (2004).
Data collection included a review of historical artifacts from the school, a questionnaire, meeting agendas, field observations, structured and semi-structured interviews, a researcher designed protocol and supporting documents, artifacts of professional development activities, and teachers’ written and verbal reflections.

In this practical action research study, the researcher sought to answer the following questions:

1. In what ways will having the elementary school principal create structures and support within the school influence the teachers’ propensity to work collaboratively to support student learning outcomes?

2. Which actions of an elementary school principal have the greatest influence on teacher behavior to foster and support collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning?

3. What conditions will support or hinder teachers in developing and using common student learning objectives, pre-assessments, and post-assessments to measure students’ performance?

**Action Research Cycle I**

The goal of the work in Cycle I of this action research was to gather information concerning the culture of Great Lawn Elementary School and to ascertain the faculty’s proclivity for change, particularly one that would promote regular and frequent teacher collaboration, initiated by the school principal. Each of the following sources shed light on the school’s culture and are discussed as part of the Findings in Cycle I. These data sources include the following: (a) a review of the historical artifact called the *Great Lawn Elementary School’s School Improvement Plan*, written five years before this study, (b) a
review of the historical artifact called the *Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools: Report of the School Improvement Visiting Team- Focus on School Improvement* (2005), a document created four years before this study, (c) a faculty questionnaire created by the researcher regarding Professional Development and Professional Learning Communities, (d) faculty meeting and grade level meeting agendas for two school years, (e) preliminary observations of several teachers who were working collaboratively, and (f) a semi-structured group interview conducted with the teachers.

**Great Lawn Elementary School’s School Improvement Plan.** As a culminating activity for the Great Lawn Elementary School’s extensive school self-study process under the guidance of the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) organization, now known as Advanc-ed (http://www.advanc-ed.org/), the stakeholders wrote a document during the 2004-2005 school year called the "Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan." This historical artifact provided the researcher with an independent viewpoint of the culture of the school, because it cited information the school had gathered from a survey instrument called the "Survey of Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness" (NSSE, 1997). As stated in the Methodology section of this dissertation, the researcher was able to obtain partial results of the original Great Lawn Elementary School survey. The researcher was also able to view the complete survey instrument, which is described in the book *Indicators of Schools of Quality: Schoolwide Indicators of Quality* (Fitzpatrick, 2002). The information presented here was obtained solely from the "Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan."

During the fall of 2004, Great Lawn Elementary School staff members distributed surveys to parents, faculty members, and students during three days when school parent-
teacher conferences were being held at the school. Surveys were ultimately returned to a collection box in the main lobby by 233 parents, 51 community members, 51 third grade students, and 46 school staff members. In reviewing the survey results, the researcher was particularly interested in the areas related to school climate, collaboration, and shared vision.

Table 4 indicates the statements reported as areas of strength by the school staff based upon the results they received from the "Survey of Instructional and Organizational Effectiveness" (NSSE, 1997) surveys. This information was taken from Part Four, page 2, of the "Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan."

Table 4

Great Lawn Elementary School: School Improvement Plan, Part 4, p. 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organizational System</th>
<th>Indicators of Quality</th>
<th>Great Lawn Elementary School Survey Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational Agenda</td>
<td>Facilitates a collaborative process in developing a shared vision</td>
<td>65% of survey respondents indicated this area was at the “Exemplary Level” or “Fully Functioning and Operational”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Agenda</td>
<td>Develops a beliefs and mission that define a compelling purpose and direction of the school</td>
<td>82% of survey respondents indicated this area was at the “Exemplary Level” or “Fully Functioning and Operational”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership for School Improvement</td>
<td>Provides skillful stewardship by ensuring effective management of the organization, operation, and resources of the school</td>
<td>73% of survey respondents indicated this area was at the “Exemplary Level” or “Fully Functioning and Operational”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Building</td>
<td>Fosters community building conditions and working relationships within the school</td>
<td>71% of survey respondents indicated this area was at the “Exemplary Level” or “Fully Functioning and Operational”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The information described above suggested to the researcher that a majority of Great Lawn Elementary School stakeholders were comfortable collaborating to develop the school’s vision, beliefs, and mission. The researcher posited that if 65% of the survey respondents indicated that they valued a collaborative process in developing shared vision, then it is likely (but not guaranteed) that the respondents would value a collaborative process to improve student learning. The majority of stakeholders also indicated that the school leadership provides "skillful stewardship" and "community building conditions," suggesting some proclivity toward an organizational change process initiated by the school principal, especially one that would promote regular and frequent teacher collaboration. “Principals are key to providing the support and learning opportunities teachers and staff need to improve instruction and boost student achievement” (NAESP, 2008, p. 41). In the survey, 73% of the respondents indicated that Great Lawn Elementary School leadership provides “skillful stewardship,” which is where trust develops and organizational change can occur as observed by Evans (1996):

Trust is the essential link between leader and led, vital to people’s job satisfaction and loyalty, vital to followership. It is doubly important when organizations are seeking rapid improvement, which requires exceptional effort and competence, and doubly again to organizations like schools that offer few extrinsic motivators (money, status, power). (p. 183)

**Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools: Report of the school improvement visiting team- Focus on school improvement.** A second historical artifact the researcher reviewed during Cycle I research was the *Middle States Commission on Elementary Schools: Report of the School Improvement Visiting Team-Focus on School Improvement* (2005). The document presented an independent viewpoint of the school’s culture written by four educators working for the Middle States
Commission who spent 2.5 days visiting the Great Lawn Elementary School. During their visit, the team reviewed the self-study documentation the Great Lawn Elementary School staff had prepared. They also observed teachers and students in classrooms and interviewed teachers, staff members, students, community members, and administrators. At the conclusion of their visit, the Middle States Visitation Team wrote a 49 page report that documented their impressions regarding the accuracy of the self-study document and its relationship to what they actually observed in the school. The report included indicators specifically written about the school’s climate and the mission, organizational effectiveness, and leadership of Great Lawn Elementary School. Both commendations and recommendations were included in the report. The following comments were applicable to this action research study.

Commendations:

“The team commends Great Lawn Elementary School for its positive, supportive, and stimulating school climate” (p. 9).

“The team commends the administration, faculty and staff for providing a safe and nurturing environment, not only for students, but also for one another” (p. 10).

“The team commends the School Leadership Team for its work in compiling the shared vision of the entire staff of the Great Lawn Elementary School for improving student learning that addresses the needs of the whole child” (p. 11).

“The team commends the Great Lawn Elementary School for its clear articulation and demonstrated support of a shared vision, beliefs, and mission” (p. 14).

“The team commends the school leadership for creating a climate of warmth, mutual respect, and support for all members of the learning community” (p. 20).
Recommendations include:

"The team recommends that the faculty continue its on-going professional development, and continue to provide a variety of instructional approaches to target the individual learning needs of the students of Great Lawn Elementary School" (p. 10).

"The team recommends the expansion of instructional support for student learning through additional professional development opportunities in differentiated instruction, including guided reading, leveled readers, flexible grouping and learning centers" (p. 14).

"The team recommends providing additional time for staff members to collaborate and evaluate curricula and additional staff members to develop and renew the curricula" (p. 14).

The information provided by the Middle States Visitation Team confirms that Great Lawn Elementary School has a positive school culture as indicated by its safe, nurturing climate where students and adults are treated with respect. The school has a clearly articulated and shared vision, beliefs, and mission. This suggests to the researcher that the school faculty will be amenable to an initiative designed to increase opportunities for teachers to work together, although it is unclear how successful the collaborative work will be if teachers are required to make changes in areas where they currently function comfortably. "A school’s culture is always at work, either helping or hindering adult learning” (Peterson, 2002, p. 10). The information from the Middle States Visitation Team infers that adult learning will be supported at Great Lawn Elementary School.

**Faculty questionnaire regarding professional development and professional learning communities.** The researcher administered an anonymous survey to determine the level of understanding the faculty at Great Lawn Elementary School held about
professional development and the educational construct of Professional Learning Communities in the spring of 2009. Groups of teachers in the Big Acres School District were working collaboratively on professional development and learning designed to “lead directly to observable, measurable, positive change in student outcomes on clearly defined criteria” (Tienken & Stonaker, 2007, p. 29), but it was unclear, however, if the term “Professional Learning Community” had ever been specifically defined for the district’s professional staff. The researcher wanted to determine if the teachers perceived themselves to be contributing members of a Professional Learning Community. If the teachers held a positive conceptual understanding of Professional Learning Communities, creating them on the school level would likely be received in a positive manner.

A sample of the instrument used can be found in Appendix A of this paper, and the complete results of the survey can be found in Appendix B. The questionnaire includes six statements about the teachers’ perceptions of the personalized professional development program in the district and five statements regarding evidence that their students made improvements as a result of their participation in the program. It also includes five statements about Professional Learning Communities. Each of the 16 statements mentioned is rated on a Likert scale, with the following range: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree.

The first section of the survey asked the teachers to rate statements about their perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the personalized professional development program. The researcher analyzed the frequency of their responses, and found that the teachers agreed or strongly agreed with each of the six statements at a rate that ranged from 66% to 90%. The lowest positive response of 66% was given for the statement
regarding teachers who changed some aspect of the way they assess student learning as a direct result of the personalized professional development program. The highest positive response of 90% was given for the statement regarding teachers who acquired knowledge and skills that have increased their effectiveness in teaching their students. The first section of the questionnaire included one statement that allowed the teachers to express their overall satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with the personalized professional development program. Table 5 is a tabulation of the teachers’ responses, indicating that 83% of the teachers either agreed or strongly agreed that they were pleased with the program for helping them to acquire new skills and strategies for teaching. Two teachers (7%) remained neutral on this statement, and just three (10%) responded that they disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 5

*Big Acres Professional Development Program Survey: New Skills and Strategies*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall, I am pleased with the program for helping me to acquire new skills and strategies this past school year.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>30</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The second section of the survey included statements regarding evidence that the teachers had ascertained that their students were improving as a result of their participation in the personalized professional development program. The responses teachers gave regarding their use of formative assessments and post-assessments varied greatly. These results can be seen in Tables 6 and 7. While just four teachers (13%) either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement that they had used new formative assessments or post-assessments this year, between 17% and 27%, respectively, remained neutral on this issue. More teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statements, with 70% stating that they had used new formative assessments, and with 60% stating that they agreed or strongly agreed that they had used new post-assessments this year.

Table 6

Big Acres Professional Development Program Survey: Use of Formative Assessments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have used new formative assessments with my students this year.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Between 77% and 87% of the teachers indicated that they were pleased with their students’ academic, emotional, and social growth this past school year as a direct result of their participation in the personalized professional development program. Just one
respondent indicated displeasure with each of the statements regarding the students’ academic, emotional and social growth.

Table 7

*Big Acres Professional Development Program Survey: Use of Post-Assessments*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I have used new post-assessments this year.</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The third section of the survey was designed to answer this research question, “Do the teachers perceive themselves to be contributing members of a Professional Learning Community?” To increase the likelihood that the teachers understood the meaning of the term Professional Learning Community as I intended it, this statement was included on the survey:

A Professional Learning Community exists when educators embrace a shared mission, vision, values and goals, and when educators work in high-performing collaborative teams to create a results oriented culture focused on student learning (Eaker et al., 2002, p. 3).

Using a Likert-type scale with a range of five attributes (5-strongly agree, 4-agree, 3-neutral, 2-disagree, 1-strongly disagree), I asked teachers to rate five statements about Professional Learning Communities. The survey had a response rate of 59% of the
current teaching staff. The five statements I used on the survey are listed below with their average rating in parenthesis:

- My colleagues and I have embraced a shared mission (4.13/5.00)
- My colleagues and I have embraced a shared vision (4.13/5.00)
- My colleagues and I have embraced shared goals (4.19/5.00)
- My colleagues and I work as a collaborative team (4.13/5.00)
- My colleagues and I collaborate often to plan instruction (3.74/5.00)

An analysis of this survey reveals that most of the teachers who responded to the survey agreed or strongly agreed that they were functioning members of a Professional Learning Community who shared a mission, vision, and goals, and who worked as a collaborative team (83%-94%). Yet, many of the teachers (37%) responded to the statement “My colleagues and I collaborate often to plan instruction” with a negative or neutral response. This response indicates a discrepancy between teachers who viewed themselves as working in a collaborative team and teachers who actually planned instruction collaboratively with other teachers. As DuFour (2008) notes “collaboration does not lead to improved results unless people are focused on the right issues” (p. 15).

In summary, the responses of 66% or more of teachers who chose to answer the survey at Great Lawn Elementary School responded positively to the statements (agree or strongly agree) about the personalized professional development program. More than 77% of these teachers are pleased with their students’ academic, emotional, and social growth this year as a direct result of their participation in the program. An even higher percentage (83%) of the respondents indicated that they view themselves as members of a Professional Learning Community, who embrace a shared mission, vision, and goals. The
data from this survey indicate that the teachers viewed the term Professional Learning Community in a positive light, which was a promising indicator of the faculty’s proclivity toward learning more about the construct.

**Faculty meeting and grade level meeting agendas.** The researcher collected two additional types of historical artifacts: faculty meeting agendas and grade level meeting agendas from both the 2008-2009 and the 2009-2010 school years to further inform this action research project. Through an analysis of these two types of artifacts, the researcher hoped to gain a clearer sense of the specific tasks in which the teachers were currently engaged and to identify strategies to adjust those tasks to find additional time for the teachers to work together.

During the 2008-2009 school year, teachers met once or twice a month with their grade level peers and addressed concerns and issues of interest to themselves. The grade level teams then submitted an agenda sheet listing the topics they discussed during the meeting. Faculty meetings were held once a month and were used to complete required faculty training, to plan school-wide activities and events, and to standardize school and district procedures. Administration specifically avoided holding meetings to transmit information that could easily be disseminated via bulletins or e-mails.

The researcher reviewed the topics discussed at all of these meetings, and assigned each topic a code to determine how often each type of topic was addressed (see Table 8). The topics generally fit into ten categories, and the frequency with which they occurred is found in Table 8. The researcher discovered that just .07% of the topics, or just three out of forty-one, addressed teaching and learning specific to our current students. This information was quite disturbing to the researcher as she considered how
much time and resources had been used to address topics that had virtually no chance of improving student learning outcomes. DuFour et al. (2008) noted:

In many schools, staff members are willing to collaborate on a variety of topics as long as the focus of the conversation stops at their classroom door. In a PLC, collaboration is a systematic process in which teachers work together, interdependently, to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve results for their students, their team, and their school. (p. 15-16)

Table 8

Faculty and Grade Level Meeting Topics 2008-2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty and Grade Level Topics 2008-2009 Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Examples of Specific Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>REQ= required training to satisfy state/local policy</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Substance abuse training Anti-harassment, intimidation, bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT= school-wide special activity</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Parent visitation day Astronomy night</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA= standardize school and district procedures</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Lesson plan format Electronic report card</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPE= special education concerns</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Special education law Autism awareness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPR= testing protocol</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>State testing protocol Local standardized testing procedures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPL= class placement</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Creating new classes for the upcoming school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAT= educational material selection/review</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Science material needs assessment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEH= student behavior concerns</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Composing/creating student behavior plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLS= teaching and learning specific to our current students</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Creating formative assessments Academic concerns for current students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADU= adult learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Teachers create their personal improvement plans for upcoming year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The implication of this realization was that without the principal’s leadership and direction, it was unlikely that the majority of teachers would choose to collaborate about issues related to student learning. Consequently, the researcher decided to make teaching and learning for the specific students currently in the school the focus of as many faculty and grade level meetings possible for the 2009-2010 school year. This represented a cultural change for the faculty as they were accustomed to setting their own agendas for grade level meetings, and is illustrated in Table 9.

Table 9

*Faculty and Grade Level Meeting Topics 2009-2010*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Faculty and Grade Level Topics 2009-2010 Codes</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Examples of Specific Topics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TLS= teaching and learning specific to our current students</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Creating formative assessments, Two week learning goal protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REQ= required training to satisfy state/local policy</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Substance abuse training, Anti-harassment, intimidation, bullying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ADU= adult learning</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Professional Learning Community workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SPE= special education concerns</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Special education law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STA= standardize school and district procedures</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Superintendent’s action plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CPL= class placement</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Creating new classes for the upcoming school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT= school-wide special activity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Field trips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAT= educational material selection/review</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Book orders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TPR= testing protocol</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BEH= student behavior concerns</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Surprisingly, the researcher did not experience much resistance to this change. The percentage of topics addressed with a focus on teaching and learning for the specific students currently in our school rose from .07% to 49%. If topics wherein teachers were taught about the educational construct of the Professional Learning Community were included, this figure increases to 59%. It is important to consider that 27% of the topics discussed involve required training to satisfy state and local policies, many of which have nothing to do with improving teaching and student learning. Some of these required training include topics such as harassment, intimidation, and bullying; suicide awareness; school security; substance abuse; gang awareness; blood-borne pathogens; affirmative action, non-discrimination and equity; section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act; and potentially missing abused or neglected children. While these topics are important and required to be addressed in schools, they took more than eight hours of Great Lawn Elementary School’s allotted eighteen annual hours of meeting time during the 2009-2010 school year. For the 2010-2011 school year, the researcher began to develop and utilize online resources to provide this information to teachers without using faculty and grade level meeting time for this purpose. Teachers were required to review the information on their own time, and then administration used just a few minutes of a faculty meeting to quiz the teachers on the most important points of the training using a PowerPoint game the researcher created for this purpose. This solution worked well with virtually no resistance from the faculty even though everyone was required to use some of their own time to complete the online training. It is the researcher’s assessment that most of the teachers appreciate not using faculty meeting time for these required trainings that many of them have had repeatedly for a number of years.
The researcher also made a concerted effort to share leadership and build capacity, whenever possible, with and through faculty members. According to Fullan (2008), building capacity involves “attracting talented people and then you help them continually develop individually and collectively on the job” (p. 63). For example, instead of covering the standardized testing protocols with the entire faculty during a faculty meeting, the guidance counselor met in small groups with the teachers who needed the information. Members of the child study team met with special education teachers to disseminate the information they needed. These meetings were held during the teachers regular planning periods, and did not require the principal to use precious faculty meeting time for this purpose. Faculty meetings were used primarily to build the collective capacity of the teachers by having them use the time for inquiry regarding the teaching and learning of our current student population.

**Preliminary observations of teacher collaboration at Great Lawn Elementary School.** Without the benefit of being formally trained in the functioning of a Professional Learning Community, three teachers working at Great Lawn Elementary School developed a highly collaborative and interdependent working relationship during the 2008-2009 school year. The researcher interviewed these teachers and observed them during several team planning meetings for the purpose of trying to identify elements that contributed to this successful collaborative relationship. The researcher already knew that the children in their classes scored higher on both the language arts and mathematics portions of the *New Jersey Proficiency Assessment of State Standards* (Riverside Publishing, 2010) as compared to the scores of students in five other same grade classes in the same school. As indicated by letters and e-mails to the principal, parents expressed
great satisfaction regarding their children’s experience with these teachers. Additionally, formal and informal administrator observations of the classrooms revealed students who were highly engaged in their learning and supported in a positive, student centered environment.

As the principal responsible for the direct supervision of these teachers, the researcher began her observations with some preconceived notions about the way these teachers were working together. The researcher assumed that they were writing lesson plans by following the district’s written curriculum, suggested scope and sequence, and textbooks in a sequential, intentional fashion. While she did occasionally observe them making reference to the curricular documents, where they primarily read the section listing the essential understandings for each unit, the researcher quickly realized that their decisions were made primarily by analyzing the children’s results on pre-assessments that they had given. The tasks and activities they planned for students were intentionally designed to address the demonstrated needs of the children. These needs were addressed in a variety of ways as the group brainstormed creatively together. Sometimes the children were regrouped for a short period of time among the teachers’ classrooms for a portion of the day, based both upon the children’s needs and the teachers’ strengths.

There was a transparency to the data each teacher brought to the group, as all of the teachers openly discussed the needs of the specific children in their classes. No one kept these data private. The group frequently questioned whether what they were doing with children was likely to achieve the intended result.

During a subsequent interview of the teachers, the researcher learned that they highly valued their collaborative work and consistently found the time and the structure
to support this collaboration. The teachers experienced some challenges early in the process when their grade level peers felt that they were being excluded from the process, but after inviting them to join their planning sessions, they found that their peers were not interested in the extensive time commitment that this collaborative work involved. Once a week, the team would voluntarily work at school until 7:00 p.m. or later.

As the teachers completed a full year of working collaboratively together, the researcher learned that they reached a point where their collaboration was making their work easier. For example, the teachers talked about how time consuming the creation of individual classroom learning centers was during the first year when they were rotating the centers on a weekly basis. When they began sharing their centers with each other, they found that each teacher had far less work to do while providing greater variety and differentiation of tasks for their individual students, and for a longer period of time. Additionally, when the group of teachers tapped into their own teaching preferences, they began dividing some of the tasks into more easily managed units. One teacher especially enjoyed teaching mathematics and had many creative ideas regarding how to address the curriculum. Another is a master at teaching reading comprehension, while another is a master at getting kids to write fluently. Each of these teachers contributed lessons from their strengths and shared those with the others in the team, making the work easier for everyone.

DuFour (2004) challenges teachers working in a Professional Learning Community to respond to children who are not learning with an intervention that is “systematic,” “timely,” and “directive” (p. 7-8). Data collected from classroom observations indicated some of the ways the teachers in this Professional Learning
Community responded when they discovered that some children were not learning. The teachers used flexible grouping with students to meet their varying learning needs. They provided immediate re-teaching and reinforcement for children who appeared to be struggling with tasks by meeting at a small table with children whose presence was requested by the teacher, in addition to having students self-select when they need additional assistance. They developed and used a variety of pre-assessments, formative assessments, and post-assessments to gauge children’s learning. They provided frequent and varied emotional support to the learners as they worked throughout the school day.

The researcher consistently observed a highly supportive, student centered environment in all three classrooms. Classroom expectations were clearly defined by posters designating levels of behavior with “democracy” as the desirable state. Marshall’s (2007) “Raise Responsibility System” is used in the classrooms to teach children to be internally motivated. In a democratic classroom, children develop self-discipline, initiative and responsibility. In contrast, Marshall describes classrooms where children are externally motivated (“anarchy,” “bullying/bossing,” and “cooperative/conforming”). It was quite clear that all of the children understood their personal responsibility for maintaining a democratic classroom. All of the teachers provided a consistent stream of feedback to their students during the researcher’s observations. The type of feedback varied slightly from one classroom to another, where one teacher seemed to focus more on the children’s behavioral choices and another gave more feedback on the children’s academic responses. All three teachers held high expectations for what the children were responsible for doing, and these tasks were built into the daily routines. The teachers frequently used inclusive language when referring to their classroom and their groups.
They used the terms “our classroom” and “our group” as opposed to “my classroom” or “my group.” The inclusive terms were used within the room when the children were present, as well as when the adults were working together without students present. This inclusive language was another indicator of the student centered philosophy they all shared.

Eaker et al. (2002) state that “a school cannot function as a Professional Learning Community until its staff has grappled with questions that provide direction both for the school as an organization and the individuals within it” (p. 3). While the researcher believes the school has effectively stated its mission and beliefs, she was curious to know how these three teachers defined their own mission or vision regarding how they agree to work together. The researcher did not get a direct answer when this question was asked of the group, and concluded that they had not discussed this topic formally. The teachers view their role as coaches in a student centered classroom. They also expressed some disdain for “teacher centered” classrooms, in which decisions are based upon teacher convenience, not students’ needs. The teachers took direct responsibility for finding ways to help every child succeed. The teachers talked briefly about the challenge of working with some children whose behavior requires greater attention, but they also indicated that they believed most of the challenging behaviors disappeared when the children were given engaging work. They talked about tasks in which they asked the children to respond to open ended questions. They discussed giving the children problems of the day, which each student scored using a rubric. They mentioned math journals, picture prompts, reading journals, and writing folders. The teachers did not mention using workbooks. The teachers told the researcher they believed that a child centered classroom
means that the children are engaged in high level, interesting work most of the time. This child centeredness to which the teachers refer is grounded in a differentiated philosophy or “a way of thinking about teaching and learning” that is “inseparable from a positive learning environment, high-quality curriculum, assessment to inform teacher decision making, and flexible classroom management” (Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2010, p. 13).

As the researcher continued to read over all of the field notes and observation reports that had been collected, she found consistency in what the teachers said they were doing, and in what they had actually done. The children were observed learning in a joyful environment that supports them in a variety of ways based upon their individual needs, in concert with the challenges of addressing the essential understandings of the curriculum in the process.

**Reflecting on action research Cycle I**

Reflecting on the data the researcher had collected and reviewed in Cycle I, she concluded that Great Lawn Elementary School had a supportive, nurturing, and positive climate for learning, with a clearly articulated vision and mission and was led by supportive, respectful leaders. The faculty held the term “Professional Learning Community” in a positive light, and already claimed to collaborate with colleagues, though not for lesson planning, and valued working with a team. The faculty embraced professional development initiatives that were purposeful and relevant to their work to improve their teaching. This information helped me formulate a plan for Action Research Cycle II.

The following questions emerged at the conclusion of the Cycle I research:
- If one group of teachers is achieving outstanding results in student learning through collaboration, how can the researcher, working as the school principal, foster this type of relationship with other groups of teachers in the school?
- What role does student pre-assessment and post-assessment play in this process?
- How can the school principal ensure that when teachers are collaborating that they are focused on the “right issues” (DuFour, 2008, p. 15)?

Recognizing that the teachers of Great Lawn Elementary School were already a highly congenial group, it was the researcher’s intention to increase their opportunities to become collegial as they took the first steps toward working as members of Professional Learning Communities for the purpose of improving student learning outcomes. Through ongoing conversations with faculty members, the researcher determined that only two groups of teachers (totaling five individuals, or 16% of the faculty) collaborated weekly to plan lessons for the upcoming week during the 2008-2009 school year. It was clear that having teachers voluntarily choose to plan weekly lessons together was not sufficient to improve student learning for all groups. Simply planning lessons together also did not guarantee that the lessons would increase in quality and effectiveness, or produce positive student learning outcomes. To make collaborative planning effective, “we must be able to state with clarity what the student should understand and be able to do” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 14). While the school district’s curriculum continues to be revised and realigned in the Understanding by Design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) format with clear
indicators for student learning outcomes, individual teachers continue to make myriad
decisions regarding its implementation.

**Action Research- Cycle II**

The researcher began Cycle II of the action research study with a principal’s action
designed to give the teachers an experience in collaborative planning and
assessment that would likely result in greater student achievement. The plan was to
provide both structure and support for the change initiative. The researcher hoped to
influence an incremental change in the culture of the school where 84% of the teachers
worked and planned alone.

This next section discusses the findings regarding the data collected during Cycle II: (a) a planning sheet and supporting documents which confirmed teachers’ use of a researcher designed protocol that was completed three times between January 2010 and June 2010 by various teams of teachers, (b) artifacts used to provide professional development to the faculty, and (c) teachers’ reflections written in response to researcher created prompts.

**Researcher designed protocol.** On January 6, 2010, the researcher met with the full faculty in a meeting to introduce a researcher designed protocol that would be used three times over the next five months. The researcher specifically avoided using the term Professional Learning Community because she did not want to confuse this new work with the work the teachers were doing with the district’s professional development program. The term Professional Learning Community had been used liberally in the development of that program, but it was the researcher’s belief that it had not been sufficiently defined. Additionally, she believed that true Professional Learning
Communities develop over time as teachers make the “cultural shifts” (Eaker et al., 2002, p. 9) away from traditional school practices. Fullan (2007) noted that “educational change is a learning experience for the adults involved” (p. 85) and she knew that the teachers would need time to learn the best ways to work together.

Introducing this change initiative required thoughtful leadership to ensure that the faculty viewed the initiative as authentic, beneficial, and valuable. The researcher explained that she was interested in learning how teachers working together in collaborative teams would affect children’s academic progress. She then introduced the “Two Week Student Learning Goal-Literacy” protocol, which is reproduced in Appendix C. This protocol would be used repeatedly through the remainder of the school year. The following steps were followed in the process:

- Teachers wrote a literacy goal for their students in the SMART goal format: Specific/Strategic, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic/Results Oriented, Timebound (Doran, 1981)
- Teachers created or identified an assessment tool that, when given to the students, would indicate the children had achieved the goal
- Teachers gave the students the pre-assessment task, analyzed the results, then planned and delivered instruction for the next two weeks (approximately)
- Teachers then gave the children the post-assessment task and reflected on the results with their teams

The researcher asked the teachers to self-select a job-alike team of teachers with whom they would like to work. This self-selection process resulted in teams that ranged from 2 to 10 faculty members. The teams of teachers who agreed to work together
identified a common student literacy objective that they were already planning to teach their students. As a leader, the researcher wanted to ensure that the teachers did not view the selection of an objective as artificial or contrived. She wanted it to fit seamlessly with the objectives they were already planning to address with their students. They worked together to create a common assessment to be used both before and after teaching the students. The teachers were encouraged to share the teaching strategies they used or planned to use. A planning sheet which listed the target dates for the two-week student learning goal process was completed by each team of teachers (see Appendix C). A minimum of two 45-minute meetings were designated for teachers to complete this work in each of the two-week student learning goal cycles, but nearly all teams used additional time to complete the tasks. One additional 45-minute faculty meeting was designated for teachers to reflect upon the learning results their students achieved and to share teaching strategies. Several teams used some of their own time to complete this work, but the time allotment was sufficient for most of the other teams.

**Teachers' responses to the first two-week goal protocol- January 2010.** The 41 teachers of Great Lawn Elementary school responsible for teaching reading and language arts in both general and special education formed nine teams in January 2010. The self-selected teams resulted in the configuration shown in Table 10.
Table 10

*Team Configurations- January 2010*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Team Number</th>
<th>Total Number of Teachers</th>
<th>Teachers’ Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Pre-K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Kindergarten and Basic Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>First Grade, Self-Contained Special Education and Basic Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Second Grade, Reading Specialist, Special Education In Class Resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Second Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Self-Contained Special Education, Speech, Special Education In Class Resource</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>English as a Second Language, Special Education Resource Room</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Third Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Third Grade</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each team identified a specific student learning goal to be addressed over a two-week span. Examples of these student learning goals include the following two-week goals for students in Kindergarten, first, second, and third grades:

- Students will be able to properly use a period at the end of the sentence (Kindergarten).
- Students will be able to compare and contrast story elements in a fictional text using graphic organizers (first grade).
- Students will be able to write a detailed story about a picture that includes a beginning, middle, and end (second grade).
- Students will be able to read a non-fiction passage and determine the author's purpose (second grade).
- Students will be able to identify text features (third grade).
- Students will be able to read a passage and identify the main idea (third grade).

It is important to note that none of the teams wrote an objective that was measurable as requested in the directions given to the teachers to write S.M.A.R.T. goals. It would have been prudent of the researcher to provide one or more specific examples of goals written in the S.M.A.R.T. goal format. The example provided omitted measurement information as part of goal. All of the objectives, however, were indeed measurable when the pre-and post-assessments were considered. Additionally, the unstated teachers’ expectation was that 100% of their students would demonstrate proficiency on the post-assessment.

After each team had completed their work, teachers completed a written reflection that included responses to the following questions:

- Was your pre-assessment effective?
- Would you change it?
- What results can you report?
- What will you do for children who did not reach the goal?

All nine teams reported that they were pleased with their pre-assessment tool, but two teams remarked that they would require students to explain their thinking on the pre-assessment in the future. One team commented that they enjoyed using a common short
term objective, and that they especially enjoyed working collaboratively with their teammates. One team commented that using this type of assessment was not a good use of their limited instructional time. This team works with students in a pull-out resource room, with a 90-minute teaching block. One team had developed a different pre-assessment from their post-assessment and suggested that next time they would make the assessments identical. A few staff members spoke to the researcher individually about the need for the team members to trust and respect each other while working collaboratively. The researcher’s personal bias with regard to trust and respect is that it develops over time as people learn how to respond to each other in a professional manner. To assist teachers in identifying behaviors that enhance group process, the researcher distributed a professional article titled *Building the Emotional Intelligence of Groups* (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). The authors believe that teams need mutual trust among members, a sense of group identity (a feeling among members that they belong to a unique and worthwhile group) and a sense of group efficacy (the belief that the team can perform well and that group members are more effective working together than apart). (p. 83)

Additionally the article provides specific information listing “small things that groups can do to establish the norms that build group emotional intelligence” (p. 86). Several teachers commented that this article was helpful and timely.

**Teachers' responses to the second two-week goal protocol-February 2010.** In February 2010, the faculty members of Great Lawn Elementary School were again asked to identify a literacy goal for students, while working collaboratively with the other faculty members in their teams. Some of their two week goals are listed below for students in Kindergarten, first, second, and third grades:
- Students will be able to demonstrate their understanding of the targeted Concepts About Print (Clay, 2000) skill (Kindergarten).

- Students will be able to identify the theme of a story (first grade).

- Students will be able to write a complete story from a picture prompt (second grade).

- Students will be able to identify the author's purpose for writing a particular story or passage (second grade).

- Students will be able to distinguish between fiction and non-fiction texts after reading a book or a short passage (third grade).

In all cases, it was inferred that 100% of the students would be able to demonstrate proficiency at the end of the two-week period. One notable feature of the February assessments developed by the teams of teachers was their increased specificity. Each team became clearer with regard to what they wanted the children to be able to do at the end of the two-week period. A second notable feature of the February assessments was that many teams developed a rubric, which they used to score their students work.

**Teachers’ reflection-March 2010: Positives and negatives of collaboration.**

Recognizing that the teachers of Great Lawn Elementary School had been working collaboratively for over two months, the researcher gathered their thoughts about the process. She asked the teachers to complete a written reflection in response to this prompt:

"Working alone, please write down your thoughts on these questions:

- How often would you say you do the following collaboratively with other teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School:
a. planned lessons for your classes

b. planned assessments for your students

c. talked about the work your students were doing

- What do you perceive to be the positives and negatives of working collaboratively with other teachers to plan instruction, create assessments, and evaluate the work your students are doing?”

All the teachers present at the faculty meeting worked on the written reflection during the meeting, and ultimately, 31 teachers turned their paper in at the conclusion of the meeting. The responses of four teachers were not coded as they did not provide the researcher permission to use their work. The teachers’ reflections at this point revealed that there was an overall positive feeling regarding working collaboratively with peers (26 of 27 responses). The responses varied, however, regarding the type and frequency of the collaboration, particularly in regard to lesson planning and discussions regarding common student assessments. Several of the teachers (6) reported that they were in daily communication with their peers regarding lessons they planned to teach their students as well as assessments they planned to use. A majority of the teachers (17) mentioned that they planned lessons collaboratively with their peers on a weekly, or more frequent (2 to 3 times a week) basis. Teachers mentioned various benefits of working collaboratively with their peers. These include getting and refining new ideas to teach various concepts, gaining different perspectives about students’ needs, feeling supported and not isolated, having fun together, sharing the work load, and comparing results.

The researcher’s request for the teachers to identify negative aspects of working collaboratively with peers received a mixed response. Many of the teachers commented
that there were no negative aspects in working collaboratively with peers. Others mentioned the following:

- some teachers don't like to work collaboratively; they don't like to share ideas and they don't want others to “steal” their ideas
- some teachers are judgmental
- it takes more time to work collaboratively than it does to work alone
- some teachers may not pull their weight; they may not follow through on their responsibilities

As the building principal, the researcher reflected on actions she could take to ameliorate the negative aspects of working collaboratively, and doubted her ability to change the way a teacher feels about sharing ideas, or acts with regard to being judgmental, or responds with regard to following through on his/her responsibilities. However, peer groups can exercise some influence over these factors if they have carefully and thoughtfully developed and articulated group norms. As DuFour et al. (2008) observe:

All groups will eventually develop norms-standard patterns of behaviors and attitudes. In a PLC, rather than simply allowing norms to emerge, teachers reflect upon the norms that will make their collective experience more satisfying and fulfilling, and then they commit to acting in accordance with those norms. (p. 284)

**Teachers' reflections-March 2010: Individual needs for teamwork.** Having confirmed that the faculty was united in a shared mission, vision, and goals for student learning in Action Research Cycle I, the researcher asked the individual teachers to think about what they personally needed in order to work as part of a high functioning, collaborative group. All Great Lawn Elementary School teachers were given the
opportunity to respond to the request for a written reflection, and ultimately 20 teachers produced 74 comments about what they personally needed to work productively in a group. Table 11 summarizes these themes (also see Appendix E).

Table 11

*Teachers' Individual Needs for Teamwork*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Occurrences in Individual Teachers' Comments</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listen:</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Everyone participates&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen without interrupting;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Take turns when sharing ideas&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everyone’s voice is important;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Everyone giving their best effort to the goal&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>everyone must contribute;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>one person may not dominate</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Respectful:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be respectful of each other;</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Everyone's opinion should be respected&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>respectful of each others' styles</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Create an environment of mutual trust&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and strengths; no judgment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on Task:</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Remain on task and discuss one task at a time&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on task; respect each other's</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Stay on topic don't waste PLC time&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>time</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Technical Advice</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;Assign a scribe for each meeting&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot;No radio, no cell phones, etc., to distract from the work&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

An analysis of their responses yielded several recurring themes that include listening, being respectful, and staying on task. Additionally, a few technical suggestions that contribute to a productive team environment were recorded.

**Teachers' responses to the third two-week goal protocol - April 2010.** In this part of the action research, teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School wrote a two-week
student learning goal for mathematics. Teachers continued to work in the same nine
teams as the first two protocols for language arts, this time creating a common
assessment, teaching a variety of lessons for two weeks, and administering a post-
assessment for mathematics.

**Teachers' reflections-May 2010: Team norms/ground rules.** At the end of this period, the teachers worked with their teams as a group to record the expectations and commitments they would keep during their meetings for their collaborative work. For the first time, the teams began calling themselves Professional Learning Communities or PLCs. Each of the nine teams recorded their thoughts on a small poster. The entire list is included in Appendix F and is summarized in Table 12.

When the teachers responded to the researcher’s request to list their personal needs to be productive when working in a team in March 2010, they clearly expressed that they wanted their team members to listen to each other, be respectable, and stay on task. While these same factors were repeated when the teams worked together to write team norms/ground rules in May 2010, the researcher observed that the teachers articulated their needs with greater specificity. The researcher attributes this result to the fact that the teachers had personally experienced working collaboratively with their peers over the preceding four months. They were more articulate at expressing the factors needed in order for their group to work together productively.
Table 12

**Team Norms/Ground Rules, May 2010**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Occurrences in Team Comments</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>&quot;Specific time frame&quot; &quot;Time management&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Participate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>&quot;Take turns&quot; &quot;Share workload&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>&quot;Be open to new ideas&quot; &quot;Be flexible&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Environment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>&quot;Create positive environment&quot; &quot;Positive feedback&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay on Task</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>&quot;Stay on topic&quot; &quot;Stay on task&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Responsibility</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>&quot;Divide up tasks, pool resources&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&quot;Each member serves specific role&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Advice</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>&quot;Assign a scribe&quot; &quot;Regular contact through e-mail&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Be Respectful</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&quot;Kind, respectful, cooperative attitudes&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>&quot;Agree on attainable goals&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Communication</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&quot;Open-mindedness&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessments</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Assessment tools with commonality”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consensus</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Agree on the goal”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have Fun/Humor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Keep a sense of humor”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“Listen; no interrupting”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Outside Noise</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“No outside noise; no radio”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trust</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>“Mutual trust”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The theme consistently addressed in every group’s list was the time factor; time must be controlled and respected. Other common themes include participation by all members, having flexibility, creating a supportive environment, and staying on task. As
the teachers reflected on the work of their groups, they began to establish new group norms. “Groups begin to change only when they first have fully grasped the reality of how they function, particularly when individuals in the group recognize that they’re working in situations that are dissonant or uncomfortable” (Goleman et al., 2002, p. 172). The norms are stated in positive language but some originate from team members’ experiences with negative factors, such as “no interrupting” and “no radio.”

The researcher suggested that the teams keep their posters and revise them as needed as they continued their Professional Learning Community work. Her thinking was that the teams would have a tool and a protocol to assist them in resolving any future conflicts that may arise.

**Teachers’ reflections: June 2010- Professional learning communities.** By June 2010, the Professional Learning Communities at Great Lawn Elementary School had been working together for nearly 6 months. The focus of their work had come from a principal's action which designated time for the teachers to work in self-selected teams on a specific protocol. The protocol required teachers to select an important student learning objective, plan and implement a pre-and post-assessment that measured that objective, plan lessons and teach the students, and then share the results of those lessons and assessments with their peers. The feedback teachers gave to the researcher about this process during their individual end of the year evaluative conferences was overwhelmingly positive.

The researcher collected written reflections from 17 teachers, and their coded responses can be found in Table 13. Teachers viewed collaboration with their peers as highly productive and beneficial for both themselves and their students. They enjoyed
sharing ideas, lessons, and assessments. They found the process beneficial for students as the pre-and post-assessments yielded important information that assisted them with planning instruction. They recorded positive student learning outcomes as evidenced by their post-assessments. Many teachers commented that they wanted and needed more time to collaborate with their peers. A few teachers desired greater flexibility with the time needed to address the learning goal as some objectives required more or less than two weeks to address in class.

Table 13

*June 2010 Teacher Reflections*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme and Code</th>
<th>Occurrences in Individual Teacher Comments</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PRO: Productive Collaboration</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>“common planning and collaboration was beneficial” “it allowed us to plan together, reflect, and collect data”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MRT: Need More Time</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>“we need more time for planning”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOC: Positive Student Learning Outcomes Observed</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>“students were successful in meeting the goals” “focused on individual needs of students”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FLX: Need More Flexibility</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>“some goals can take longer to reach”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCM: Need Greater Communication</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“I was out of the loop when the teachers were reflecting on student work”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SML: Need smaller group</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>“working with large groups for common goals is difficult; break into small groups”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the Great Lawn Elementary School Planning Team (which consists of five teachers who represent the faculty) as a touchstone, the researcher confirmed faculty support, and decided that the faculty would continue working toward the Professional
Learning Community construct during the 2010-2011 school year. Specifically, the School Planning Team and the researcher wanted to ensure that teacher collaboration would continue because teachers found it beneficial and because positive student learning outcomes were observed. When creating the master schedule, administration ensured that teachers who were working together in a Professional Learning Community shared some common planning time with their peers. Administration was able to guarantee that the teachers had three or more common planning periods weekly. Finally, administration supported the teachers who had been working in a team of 10 teachers when they decided to form two smaller teams.

**Action Research- Cycle III**

The researcher's goal for the Professional Learning Communities at Great Lawn Elementary School in September 2010 was to provide structure and support as the new school year commenced. Structure was provided by designating time for collaborative work within the faculty and grade level meeting schedule and by having the teams use the researcher created protocol instrument to document their work in two or more recurring cycles. In response to individual teachers’ requests and in recognition of a few teacher reassignments in the faculty, teachers were given the option to work in a different self-selected group from within their grade level teams. Additional structure and support was provided in the form of a common, 30-minute intervention period designated in the master schedule for first, second, and third grades. The intended use of this intervention period was to provide support to students who had not mastered the learning goals. “Implementing procedures to monitor each student’s learning on a timely basis and
creating systems of intervention to assist students who need additional time and support are necessary steps in becoming a PLC” (DuFour et al., 2004, p. 37).

Data collected in Cycle III included (a) a planning sheet and supporting documents which confirmed teachers’ use of a researcher designed protocol that was completed a minimum of two times between September 2010 and December 2010 by various teams of teachers, (b) teachers’ reflections on their role in schools, that is, “What makes a great teacher?” (c) artifacts used to provide professional development to the faculty, and (d) 24 tape-recorded, structured interviews with individual teachers as they reflected on the 10-month change initiative.

**Teachers’ responses to the researcher designed protocol: Fall 2010.** Beginning in September 2010 and continuing through December 2010, the researcher again implemented the researcher designed protocol for action research, which was used in two recurring cycles. As requested by teachers, the two-week time period was left open-ended so teachers could decide how long they wished to spend on each student learning objective. A slight reorganization of staff was needed for the 2010-2011 school year, and this changed the makeup of a few teams from the previous school year. Teachers were encouraged to either continue with their previous group or select a new group with whom to work. Several teams had also decided that their original groups were too large to function effectively. A total of 38 teachers who worked with students in grades K through 3 formed a total of eight Professional Learning Community teams. Each Professional Learning Community was asked to think about the essential student learning outcomes they anticipated in the areas of reading and language arts. Teachers were given additional time during faculty and grade level meetings to identify essential student learning
outcomes, create pre-and post-assessments, and analyze the results to inform subsequent instruction.

Also beginning in September 2010, a common 30-minute intervention period was designated in the master schedule for first, second, and third grades. The assistant principal created a master schedule that ensured that the reading specialist, the basic skills teacher, and two paraprofessionals were available daily to assist in classrooms during this intervention period. These staff members either worked directly with the students who had not mastered the common learning goal, or they freed the teacher so that he/she could work directly with the students. Exactly how the teachers were to use this intervention period was left up to the Professional Learning Community teams to decide, however, they were directed to information on the Solution Tree website (allthingsplc.com) where they could read about other similar elementary schools who had utilized this intervention model successfully.

**Teachers’ reflections on their role in schools.** On September 14, 2010, the researcher met with the entire faculty of Great Lawn Elementary School and posed this question for individual teachers to answer, "What makes a great teacher?" The purpose in asking this question was to gather data regarding teachers’ beliefs and to compare those responses to the beliefs of teachers who work as members of Professional Learning Communities. I received 52 responses and overwhelmingly, the faculty of Great Lawn Elementary School defined a great teacher in the affective realm. The teachers mentioned patience, enthusiasm, motivation, ability to listen, sensitivity, compassion, preparation, organization, tolerance, dedication, passion, flexibility, and creativity as their most frequently listed attributes. These are important characteristics for elementary school
teachers to have in order to interact in a positive manner with all students. What the researcher determined was missing in their responses is the expectation that a great teacher ensures that all children are learning at high levels. This is a fundamental tenet of the Professional Learning Community educational construct. The closest their responses came to this idea was "meets the needs of all of their students" and "student achievement." Recognizing that there was a gap in understanding about the basic tenets of the Professional Learning Community, the researcher planned additional professional development tasks.

**Professional development for teachers.** Teachers read and discussed the article, “What Is a "Professional Learning Community"? (DuFour, 2004). This article emphasizes “Big Idea #1: Ensuring That Students Learn” (p. 8), “Big Idea #2: A Culture of Collaboration,” and “Big Idea #3: A Focus on Results” (p. 10). The researcher also reviewed the school's mission which states, in part, that “all students shall receive an exemplary education by a well trained and committed staff.”

**Reflections on action research- Cycle III: Structured interviews with individual teachers.** During this 4-month period, the researcher began to observe some significant changes in the culture of Great Lawn Elementary School in response to her attempt to implement Professional Learning Communities. Five of the eight Professional Learning Community teams were functioning at a highly productive level as indicated by their collaborative work in addition to the action research protocol. While the researcher had requested that the teams repeat the protocol twice, these five teams repeated the process at least three times, and some more than three times. Additionally, several of the
teams were addressing student learning objectives across the entire curriculum and in all subject areas.

At the same time, it became clear that the protocol was outright rejected by one, and possibly two, PLC teams who had a total of 7 members in the fall of 2010, while a third team (4 members) attempted to implement the protocol, but struggled to define and implement the intervention period. The researcher did not receive the requested protocol forms back from the first two groups within the requested time frame. For the first faculty meeting in October 2010, the researcher requested that the teachers bring their students’ pre-assessments with them so the teams could analyze the work the children produced and so they could begin planning their instruction. That was the last piece of evidence the researcher was given from two of the teams.

In early January 2011, every teacher at Great Lawn Elementary School was given the opportunity to speak with the researcher individually about the Professional Learning Community initiative. A total of 38 teachers had previously identified themselves to the researcher as members of eight Professional Learning Community teams. Twenty-four teachers agreed to be interviewed individually by the researcher so that she could ascertain their thoughts, reflections, and opinions about the effectiveness of the entire process.

These 24 teachers represented seven of the eight PLC teams, and two-thirds of the faculty members involved in the action research project that had been in place from January 2010 through December 2010. Their interviews took place over two full school days, and produced more than 100 transcribed pages of text that assisted the researcher in determining the effectiveness of the Professional Learning Community construct as
viewed by the Great Lawn Elementary School teachers involved in the process. The teachers the researcher interviewed represented kindergarten, first, second, and third grades, special education, and general education teachers who provide learning interventions. Their experience ranged from a second year teacher to several with more than 20 years of experience.

The following questions guided these interviews about the functioning of the Professional Learning Communities within Great Lawn Elementary School: “What worked well? What didn't work well? What ideas do you have to improve it?” The researcher asked the teachers to think about each of these questions with regard to the following aspects of the process:

- Collaboration (PLC work) with your peers about
  - student learning goals
  - pre-and post-assessments
  - sharing teaching strategies
- Student progress as a result of this collaboration
- Intervention period
- Principal's actions (my leadership) that supported or didn't support this process. What can or should I do differently to support teachers as they work to improve student learning?

An initial analysis of the text the researcher gathered from these interviews revealed that 22 of the 24 teachers interviewed expressed overall positive support for the Professional Learning Community initiative and the work they were accomplishing at Great Lawn Elementary School. The strongest support was indicated by teachers who had
worked in five of the eight Professional Learning Community groups, representing three of the four grade levels in the school. Two teachers representing two Professional Learning Community teams expressed a decidedly negative response to both the two-week goal protocol and the implementation and use of the intervention period. One of the Professional Learning Community teams was not represented in the interviews, as none of the four teachers on this team volunteered to be interviewed.

In order to provide a clearer picture of the teachers’ responses, the researcher will address each of the interview topics they discussed separately.

Teachers’ Views Regarding Teacher Collaboration

Twenty-three of the 24 teachers the researcher interviewed expressed positive support for teacher collaboration, and many were highly supportive and self-motivated for the collaboration to continue independent of any school-wide initiatives. Following are some examples of direct quotes teachers made during the interviews pertaining to teacher collaboration (to protect the teachers’ identities, the researcher had them select a number between 11-99):

Teacher 36: “When you work in a group with other teachers, there's always something that you can learn from them.”

Teacher 99: "It was a great opportunity for us to meet and collaborate and to figure out what we need to really work on with our students to help them improve."

Teacher 27: "Working with peers? That's something I really, really enjoyed doing. I really liked having that time set aside to give us time to plan together."
Teacher 22: "I just think it makes more sense for teachers to share their good ideas; it helps kids overall if teachers to work together."

Teacher 60: "I'm coming from having worked many years when it was that everybody just did their thing, and didn't share anything, so I really like the idea of working with my peers, and sharing ideas, and asking for help, and getting some better ideas when you’re in a slump and not quite sure how to help a child."

While just one of the teachers did not explicitly express support for teacher collaboration in her interview with the researcher, she knows anecdotally that this teacher collaborates on a daily basis with one, and sometimes two, other teachers. The fact that this is a regular part of her daily work, and not required as one of her job responsibilities, leads the researcher to believe that she does, indeed, support teacher collaboration.

**Collaboration Regarding Student Learning Goals**

The teachers’ reflections in regard to collaborating about student learning goals were mixed. While most of the teachers agreed that having student learning goals was important, coming to consensus about what those goals should be across the grade level was somewhat difficult, and created tension in at least one of the four grade levels. Some examples of the supportive comments are listed below:

Teacher 99: “When we collaborated, and we came up with the student learning goals, we found that we were pretty much on the same page, which was very good.”

Teacher 66: “It was very interesting to see how you write a very measurable goal, because a lot of the time you teach something and you assume that the kids get it because you taught it, but it is not necessarily true.”
Teacher 27: “Having goals for our students is great. It really, really keeps us focused, and pinpoints what we need to teach.”

The teachers who expressed a negative reaction to the goal setting process referred to the difficulty in reaching an agreement. In one grade level, Teacher 21 described her group as having no “buy-in” toward the entire collaborative process, which was clearly indicated when she disclosed in my interview “I wrote the goal.” If one person wrote the goal, it is clear to me that the process had not been collaborative, and was likely written to satisfy the principal’s request to collaborate and complete the action research protocol. Teacher 43, also a member of that same team said, “When we picked the goal they didn't always match what everybody wanted to do, so some of us just had to concede.” Teacher 32 stated, “It was hard to kind of pick a goal that some of us had done and some of us hadn't gotten to yet.”

The last comment gives some insight into the problem the teachers had if they were not all teaching the same thing at the same time. Some classes, as well as some children, move forward in their learning at different paces. Some Professional Learning Communities resolved this issue by selecting goals that addressed essential learning outcomes that could be addressed at varying levels of student development by using different materials and having the children produce different products.

**Pre- and Post-Assessments**

Teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School were unanimous in their support for using pre-and post-assessments to measure student learning, although not all teachers pre-assessed all students for all learning goals. Teachers were accustomed to pre-assessing children using running records to measure reading progress, using writing prompts to
measure students’ writing, and using mathematics benchmark assessments. They were required to do so by the school district at the beginning and end of each school, minimally, although all of Great Lawn teachers updated these assessments throughout the school year. In third grade, the teachers used a computerized assessment called Learnia (Pearson, 2010) to pre-assess the children and to re-assess them several times throughout the year to gauge their progress. The third grade teachers at Great Lawn Elementary School have not fully embraced the Learnia tool as a valuable resource as yet, but the program is new and will likely take time for its value to be realized.

Since using pre- and post-assessments was already a part of the Great Lawn Elementary School culture, using them to measure the agreed upon student learning goals was not problematic. Teachers find value in these tools as they assist them in differentiating instruction to better meet the needs of the learners. Some examples of the teachers’ comments about using pre- and post-assessments are listed below:

Teacher 32: “The children were very used to doing pre-assessments. They knew what that word meant. They knew that it was probably going to be hard in the beginning, but they were excited to see that things were becoming so much easier for them when we did that last, final assessment.”

Teacher 12: “I found what worked very well is the pre-assessment, obviously. It helped us in the beginning of the year because it definitely shows you who knows what. One thing it definitely helped me with is my higher level kids. If they scored very well on the pre-[assessment], I knew, okay, well they don't have to do all this stuff! So it challenges you to come up with more challenging work for them.”
Teacher 99: “The post assessments were helpful, too, because you could see the improvement. The majority of the children in my class actually did very well and they made an improvement.”

Teacher 66: “Because you were really measuring [using] the pre-and post assessments, you really saw what [the] children were getting and what they were not getting.”

**Sharing Teaching Strategies**

All but one teacher commented positively about having the opportunity to share teaching strategies with their peers, although some of the Professional Learning Community teams spent significantly more time on this than others. The more seasoned team, and the ones who fully embraced the process, mentioned repeatedly the benefits the teachers gain when they take the time to talk about the specific things they are doing in the classroom to teach the children. Following are some examples of their comments:

Teacher 74: “Sharing teaching strategies? It worked fantastically. I think that that is a big strength. I think that we tend to that at all periods of time, even informally.”

Teacher 13: “What worked really well was the sharing of teaching strategies. We chose main idea to work on this time, and it was so good because I would never have thought about doing a main idea every single day with my kids.”

Teacher 51: “Sharing teaching strategies? I think, again, it has made me a better teacher.”
Teacher 36: “Sharing teaching strategies, as I said before, I really feel is one of the most beneficial parts of this because you could really learn a lot from other people.”

Sharing teaching strategies and behaviors, however, is difficult to mandate. Fullan (2001) observes, “individuals will not engage in sharing unless they find it motivating to do so (whether because they feel valued and are valued, because they are getting something in return, or because they want to contribute to a bigger vision)” (p. 87). This was evident when Teacher 21 stated, “We did collaborate on student goals, we did our pre-assessment, [we] did not do [a] post assessment, and we certainly did not share any teaching strategies.”

**Student Progress as a Result of Collaboration**

It is difficult to directly attribute student progress to the fact that teachers collaborated on lesson planning, sharing teaching strategies, or identifying specific learning goals. The collaboration of the teachers likely has an indirect effect on the students’ progress; however, the teachers indicated repeatedly in the interviews that as a result of their pre- and post-assessment data, they were able to prove that the children were making progress. Of the teachers who embraced the entire Professional Learning Community process, all indicated that their students’ work and academic progress increased as a result of the collaboration. Some teachers indicated that they felt very pleased and satisfied when they viewed the children’s progress from the pre-assessments when compared to the post-assessments. Additionally, many teachers referred to how their teaching changed when they realized that the children already knew what they were planning to teach. They were required to challenge the children to learn more and at a
higher level based on the results of the assessments. Following are some examples of their comments regarding student progress as a result of the Professional Learning Community process:

Teacher 44: “For our PLC, I would say that it is definitely resulting in student progress as far as the learning goals. We do pre- and post-assess everything that we do, so the data is there. It's working.

Teacher 74: “Especially looking at the pre- and post-assessment, there was a lot more student progress. That's the whole point of it [the PLC]. You are supposed to assess to find out what your kids need to work on and what their strengths and weaknesses were, so I think that overall this [the PLC] really helped.”

Teacher 65: “I see a lot more student progress as a result of our collaboration in a PLC and it kind of goes with our pre- and post- [assessments]. So you kind of guide where the kids are going; I love that we are really honing in on what is expected of us.”

Teacher 18: “I did like doing the pre- and post-assessments because I was able to see their exact growth, and see exactly where they moved from, and the things that they need to work on a little bit more.”

**Intervention Period**

The intervention period was designated for use in grades 1-3, and was a daily 30-minute period of time where the teachers were expected to provide targeted interventions for the children who were not mastering the specific learning goals each team had selected. The Professional Learning Communities representing first grade had some positive remarks regarding this period, but the remainder of the teachers
representing grades 2 and 3 did not. While the teachers were given free rein to decide how to best use the period, they struggled to find a strategy that was useful for helping the children. Overwhelmingly, the teachers found the period to be a disruption in the flow of their instruction. They found it difficult to plan appropriate instruction for the children who were struggling, as well as plan enrichment instruction for the children who had already mastered the goal. Several teachers felt they had to “confess” to the researcher during the interview that they were not using the period at all.

What worked well for the first grade teachers was the addition of two teachers and two paraprofessionals who joined their classes several days a week during the intervention period to provide “push-in” support. Only these teachers found that the additional adult who worked individually or in a small group with their struggling writers to be beneficial. Following is a selection of their comments regarding the intervention period:

Teacher 43: “So intervention period was a time that did not work for me. That was a disruption. I wished we could have picked our own time. So this intervention was just sort of plucked there; it feels contrived. It feels a little like a desperate attempt at a failing school to do something, which I don’t think we are. I think we have better skills than that.”

Teacher 22: “In the past I have pre-tested my way into a skill, taught that skill, post-tested it, and then did intervention. This year we put the cart before the horse a little bit.”

Teacher 74: “I wasn’t a huge fan of the intervention period. I don’t think it was ever totally clear what needed to be done in that period. I didn’t always do
intervention during that time. I did it when it fit in our schedule, not in that actual time period. I understand you put it in so you made sure that other people did intervention, but for me personally I didn't always really do it at that time. Sometimes I might have started off doing it first thing in the morning just because it lent itself better. And I don't think I did anything majorly different because we had intervention period than I did prior to having intervention period. I think the PLC helped you to do better, with clearer data, and intervene with students when you think they needed it, but I don't think the time period itself made a difference.”

Teacher 66: “I think that the group that I worked with did well. I think we used the intervention period very effectively.”

Teacher 55: “What I do feel is working really well is the push-in; having another teacher come in during the intervention period. Having the basic skills person come into my classroom is phenomenal. I think that just those extra couple of minutes are so helpful and she's able to really target those kids that are working at a lower level. She's really able to sit with them and work with them and having her in the room makes such a difference. I am grateful for that time.”

**Principal’s Actions**

Conducting action research within one’s own workplace can make gathering teachers’ honest and open opinions about the principal’s actions challenging. While the researcher would like to believe all of the positive things teachers said in face-to-face interviews about this initiative to implement Professional Learning Communities within Great Lawn Elementary School, the researcher also have to consider the silent opinions
of the teachers who chose not to meet with me face-to-face. As a school leader, the researcher recognized the importance of “emphasizing human relations, interpersonal competence, and instrumental motivational techniques,” (Sergiovanni, 1995, p. 85) particularly in a change initiative that required teachers to work in a way that was significantly different from their previous experience. The researcher recognized that many teachers find their work incredibly stressful and isolating. She wanted to learn if her actions had been successful in supporting the teachers as they took risks in their working relationships with colleagues to benefit their students.

It can be inferred from what the researcher learned in the interviews that the majority of teachers felt that the principal’s actions to bring a collaborative experience to the faculty were well received. Teachers felt supported, especially in the first six months of the project (January-June 2010), and appreciated the things the researcher did to help them. The specific principal’s actions they mentioned were providing time and resources for the teachers to work together. Others mentioned that they felt positively about the principal’s support overall in the work they do at Great Lawn Elementary School, but especially in regard to genuinely caring about the welfare of the children and the adults in the school. Fullan’s (2001) change model states that:

Moral purpose is about both ends and means. In education, an important end is to make a difference in the lives of students. But the means of getting to that end are also crucial. If you don’t treat others (for example, teachers) well and fairly, you will be a leader without followers. (p. 13)

The challenges and difficulties that arose in the project with regard to the principal’s actions were centered on the implementation of the intervention period. DuFour et al. (2004) insist that when a student does not learn, educators must “create a school-wide system of interventions that provides all students with additional time and
support when they experience initial difficulty in their learning” (p. 7). As a school-wide action at Great Lawn, the intervention period became the most controversial aspect of the change initiative. While some groups cherished this time to intervene with their struggling students, others strongly disliked it. Members of two PLC teams who embraced the intervention period expressed their great satisfaction with regard to having additional assistance from either a teacher (basic skills teacher, reading specialist) or a paraprofessional during that time. Another PLC team that had already embraced and been using an intervention period last year only needed to adjust the time of day when it was used. This team also utilized the reading specialist successfully, which they had not done in the previous year.

Two teams who abandoned the intervention period expressed conflicting feelings about that. They did not wish to openly oppose a principal’s initiative, so they felt they had to do it covertly. The researcher had stated many times that the teachers could shape the intervention period in any way they felt worked for their children, but in considering the responses of several teachers, she failed to communicate that clearly. DuFour et al. (2008) “have great confidence in the ability of educators to create a serviceable plan of intervention if an entire faculty focuses its collective attention on the issue” (p. 257). The idea of a system of interventions had not been given sufficient attention at Great Lawn Elementary School. To ameliorate this problem in the future, the faculty will work through a district initiative to create a tiered response to an intervention system that provides appropriate support for struggling learners.

During the researcher’s interviews with members of two of the three teams that quickly abandoned the intervention period, teachers suggested that one principal’s action
that could be taken in the future is to facilitate the PLC meetings, or assign a facilitator, to ensure that the participants remain respectful to each other, and to keep the meeting on track and focused. There were indications in the interviews that these three teams had experienced some early success in working together (from January-June 2010), but when required to negotiate common learning goals across the grade level for students, the process became exceedingly difficult. One teacher attributed these difficulties to differences in the teachers’ philosophies, while another referred to it as a lack of trust.

The following are comments teachers made with regard to the principal’s actions in implementing Professional Learning Communities at Great Lawn Elementary School, including those that mentioned the intervention period:

Teacher 30: “I do honestly feel that you do a great job as the principal. I don’t think there’s anything that can be done differently, because teachers either want to do the work or they don’t do the work; and if we’re going to try to stick to a goal or we’re not going to do it. You as the principal, you as the enforcer, can only do so much if teachers aren’t going to do their part. I don’t think your leadership has anything to do with the teachers trying to make the PLC work or not work.”

Teacher 36: “One thing that I find that you do as a principal that makes me more comfortable is that you don't come into the classroom and say, ‘Why are you doing this?’ You always let us try something, even if we fall on our face doing it. I feel like I always want to give it a try. In a different situation, I wouldn't do it. If I felt that somebody was breathing down my neck and completely nit picking what I'm doing, I'm not going to feel comfortable to take that risk and try something new. And when you're working in a PLC, you're getting all these
different ideas. They might not work for your particular group of students, or it might not work for you, but you don't know until you try it.”

Teacher 32: “I think it was great to bring this idea into this school. I read the articles that you had sent us that [explained how] other schools were trying it out and stuff like that. I'm all for it, because I'm always trying to figure out ways to help everybody, but more so to try to get to those children that are having difficulty, and it is exciting to see them make such progress.”

Teacher 21: “So I would say your actions were good in that you kept bringing it to the faculty meeting, and tried to keep us on task. I don't know if there is much more you could have done with that. How can you support teachers to trust each other?”

These comments were made with regard to the principal’s actions and the intervention period:

Teacher 43: “I would say I'm a workshop kind of girl. I need workshops. I need to watch somebody do it; I need to have a book to look at or handouts and I need to really feel like, okay. I felt a little thrown to the wolves because I didn't have any kind of guidance and when I asked somebody everybody was doing it differently.”

Teacher 27: “I think the fact that this was brought to us and that we were given the opportunity to have this [intervention] period has been great; really, really amazing. We had extra time for planning. We had extra time for our grade levels to allow us to work with our PLC group for this planning; also the fact that it was
built into our schedule [and] that these specialists were free at the same time and available for us to have extra support. That worked very, very well.”

Overall, these findings indicate that progress has been made in fostering teacher collaboration to increase student progress at Great Lawn Elementary School, but also that there is more work to be done.
Chapter 5
Summary/Conclusions/Implications

Introduction

It has been posited that the primary mission of the 21st century elementary school principal is to lead and manage his or her school in an effective manner to ensure that all children learn at high levels (Many, 2009). Significant changes in school culture will be needed if this mission is to be realized. Too often, teachers work as "entrepreneurial individuals whose autonomy is grounded in norms of privacy and noninterference and is sustained by the very organization of teaching work" (Little, 1990, p. 530). A growing body of research indicates that when principals create conditions wherein teachers work collaboratively rather than in isolation, the result is higher student achievement (Langer et al., 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). One promising educational construct a school principal can investigate and implement to positively impact student achievement is the Professional Learning Community (DuFour et al., 2008; Graham & Ferriter, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Elementary school principals who can find the means for their teachers to begin “working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (DuFour et al., 2006, p. 217) will establish a systemic response to the problem.

Scope and Purpose of the Study

The goal of this limited practical action research study was for the school principal to serve as the leader of an organizational change that would positively impact
student achievement. It was designed to address the problem of practice wherein teachers work primarily in isolation from their peers, and where collaboration is the exception, not the rule. By being given opportunities to share teaching strategies and build on the strengths of their peers, the researcher inferred that student learning outcomes would improve. Over a 10-month period spanning two school years (January 2010-June 2010 and September 2010-December 2010) in her role as an elementary school principal working with teachers in one school, the researcher implemented a protocol wherein the teachers worked with self-selected peers as members of Professional Learning Communities regularly collaborating to develop short term, common student learning goals, and common pre-assessments and post-assessments to measure students’ performance, indicating that individual children were demonstrating academic growth. It was inferred that this process empowered teachers to reach all students by better monitoring students’ progress and intervening early when students had difficulty mastering the specific learning goals. Additionally a 30-minute intervention period was used for teachers to provide additional assistance to children in grades 1 through 3 who did not perform at expected levels on the post-assessments.

**Research Questions**

The purpose of this practical study action research was to suggest a response to the following questions:

1. In what ways will having the elementary school principal create structures and support within the school influence the teachers’ propensity to work collaboratively to support student learning outcomes?
2. Which actions of an elementary school principal have the greatest influence on teacher behavior to foster and support collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning?

3. What conditions will support or hinder teachers in developing and using common student learning objectives, pre-assessments, and post-assessments to measure students’ performance?

Each of these questions will be addressed separately in the next section of this dissertation.

**Conclusions and Implications**

The following discussion reflects my conclusions and implications regarding the first research question: 1. In what ways will having the elementary school principal create structures and support within the school influence the teachers’ propensity to work collaboratively to support student learning outcomes?

The structures and support the researcher used as an elementary school principal in this action research project included the following:

**Structures**

- **A Researcher Designed Protocol**: Teachers were directed to follow a specific protocol as outlined on the “Two Week Student Learning Goal” worksheet (list student outcome, select pre- and post-assessment, share teaching strategies and results; repeat).

- **Time**: Designated time was given for teachers to complete the work during a faculty and grade level meetings.
- Monitoring: The principal monitored the work of the teams as they began to work together between January 2010 and June 2010 by having them complete some of their PLC work at faculty meetings.

Support

- Teachers were encouraged to select learning goals that they were already planning to teach to their students, so they did not necessarily view this task as extra work.
- Teachers were able to self-select the peers with whom they wished to collaborate.
- Teachers were given professional development, and access to materials and resources to help them understand the construct of the Professional Learning Community.
- Teachers met with the principal individually and in small PLC groups throughout the project to discuss progress and to brainstorm solutions as problems arose.

Using the teacher interviews conducted in January 2011 as the data source, the results suggest that the structures and support the researcher used in this action research project were sufficient in launching the Professional Learning Community construct between January 2010 and June 2010 for the entire faculty. The teachers needed and were given regular time periods to confer with their peers, although many expressed the need for additional time. The teachers completed the protocols sheets, and copied those to the principal, complete with the students’ actual pre- and post-assessments. Most of those assessments indicated growth in the students’ academic progress. It was also very
important to the teachers, as indicated in the interviews, to be free to choose the members of their groups, and since this support was given, the results were positive. Many positive comments were made when the teachers discussed the value of collaboration.

Between mid-October and December 2010 the researcher chose not to monitor the process as carefully as she had done between January- June 2010 by having teachers bring their goals, assessments, and student work to the faculty meetings. She believed that if the teachers valued the process and began to see increased student learning outcomes as a result of the process, they would continue to complete the protocols on their own. In that time period it appears that three of the PLCs (involving 9 teachers) stopped meeting formally and stopped working on shared goals and assessments. Without monitoring by the principal, five of the PLCs (involving 28 teachers) continued to thrive. There is some indication that several of the PLCs had been moving toward a state of interdependency, which DuFour et al. (2008) describe as the point at which "the success of every member of the team, and equally important, the success of every student served by the team, become the concern of the entire team” (p. 180). Others had not fully embraced the process, and either did not have the motivation or support to continue. As previously noted, it was suggested by two teachers that the meetings needed a facilitator; someone who could keep the teachers on a professional level and on track with the work.

This next discussion reflects the researcher’s conclusions and implications regarding the second research question: 2. Which actions of an elementary school principal have the greatest influence on teacher behavior to foster and support collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning?
Using the information teachers provided in the interviews, many teachers expressed a propensity toward collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning, but did not attribute any specific actions of the principal. The teachers made general statements about the principal offering teacher support in the areas of time and resources, in addition to understanding that the learning process is nonlinear. More often, the teachers themselves expressed their own enjoyment of collaborating with their peers, in talking about their students, and in learning for themselves. For example, Teacher 36 said, “You always let us try something, even if we fall on our face doing it. I feel like I always want to give it a try.”

Teacher 55: “I really feel like you have given us an opportunity to look at ourselves as teachers and to be more evaluative of ourselves and I appreciate that the opportunity to try something new.”

These findings suggest that the principal had little influence in affecting the teachers’ proclivity for collaboration, collective inquiry, or adult learning. Absent any evidence that the principal directly influenced teachers to support collaboration, collective inquiry, and adult learning, the researcher attempted to find indirect influencers within the principal’s control, and while she could not confirm any of these factors, they are listed here for consideration. These questions can be considered for further study and analysis.

Did the principal hire teachers who personally enjoy collaboration, collective inquiry and adult learning?

Did the principal model, in a positive manner, adult learning by pursuing a doctoral degree?
Did the principal acknowledge and reward teachers who collaborated, used collective inquiry, and who continued to learn as adults with affirmation and praise, either overtly or covertly?

The third research question for discussion is 3. What conditions will support or hinder teachers in developing and using common student learning objectives, pre-assessments, and post-assessments to measure students’ performance?

During the extensive interviews the researcher conducted, no teachers mentioned a lack of resources or materials with which to create pre- and post-assessments. Resource materials at Great Lawn Elementary School are plentiful and varied. Teachers have access to hundreds of print resources, including the entire on-line curriculum of the Big Acres School District, access to the New Jersey Department of Education website with the Core Content Curriculum Standards, access to Internet resources, and much more.

The majority of the groups had no difficulty agreeing on student learning objectives and in creating or selecting pre- and post-assessments to use with their students. These groups continued to participate fully in the process beyond the scope of this study.

Several groups experienced some difficulty with regard to agreeing on common student learning objectives. With clearly articulated curricular documents for all subject areas in the Big Acres School District, the researcher would have predicted that this task would have been simple. In reality, this task created significant problems for a few of the teams. There appear to be several reasons for this phenomenon.

Some teachers revealed in their written reflections and in their verbal interviews that at least a few faculty members treated their peers in a less than professional manner
during these initial meetings and during the fall of 2010. This created tension in at least two groups that resulted in teachers “settling” on a student learning objective rather than agreeing to one. Teachers reported that it was more important to achieve harmony than to fight for what others believed was right. Other teachers struggled to write what they thought were broader, meaningful objectives that children could master and then apply in a variety of ways. Instead, their teams settled on narrow, skill based objectives that were more easily measured. These teachers did not experience an early success in seeing the benefit of planning collaboratively or working as a Professional Learning Community.

Kotter (1996) suggested that “a good short-term win has at least these three characteristics: It’s visible; it’s unambiguous; and it’s clearly related to the change effort” (p. 122). Without this short term “win,” the teachers failed to embrace the change initiative.

**Significance of the Research**

Grider’s (2008) research suggested that “when teachers perceive that their schools function as a professional learning community, they are also likely to have a higher sense of efficacy” (p. iii). His study suggested further research to investigate whether “changing structural features of the school encourage greater collaboration” and inquired whether “changing the structure [would] lead to a change in culture” (p. 119). The findings of this researcher’s study suggest that the school principal can initiate teacher collaboration through Professional Learning Communities by providing structure in the manner of designated time for teachers to work together with a clearly communicated protocol that is monitored regularly, coupled with ongoing professional development and support with problem solving as issues surface. The researcher found that teachers involved in
Professional Learning Communities that continued to thrive beyond the scope of the study did so primarily because the members were motivated by the satisfying exchange of ideas with their peers and the significant gains they recorded in their students’ achievement.

This study also suggests that the principal’s actions in initiating structures to create Professional Learning Communities in resistant teams was insufficient for sustaining them over time if the teachers did not develop a sense of their intrinsic value, either for increasing student achievement or for adult satisfaction in the workplace. However, recognizing the power of the Professional Learning Community as a construct to improve student learning, the researcher continued to seek strategies to support the resistant teams in moving forward with the concept. Muhammad’s (2009) ethnographic research using interviews and observations of school faculty gathered from 34 public schools in the United States reveals several strategies that school leaders can utilize to support resistant team members. Muhammad labels resistant faculty members “fundamentalists,” and writes:

Fundamentalists pose the biggest and most critical challenge to schools seeking to create a healthy school culture. Their political stance is rooted in their perception that change is the enemy, and they organize to protect their very narrow view of how schools should operate. Leaders in the public schools of the 21st century and beyond must realize that change is an inevitable part of organizational evolution. (p. 81)

Muhammad’s research suggests that school leaders utilize strategies to provide those who resist change with the support they need depending upon their stance for resisting. One example is when teachers resist change because they do not see a need for the change. School leaders need to provide a “clear rationale for change” (p. 86) which Muhammad suggests school leaders can accomplish by providing resisters with the following:
- Data and statistics that create a catalyst for change in an inspirational way, instead of a threatening way
- Empirical research that paints a clear picture that a technique or strategy is more effective than the one currently practiced
- An organizational mission and vision that give a rationale for adapting a potentially more potent strategy. (Muhammad, 2009, p. 88)

Muhammad also discusses strategies for assisting teachers who lack trust in the school leader, who are overwhelmed by their current work load, or who fear failure in the change process. Moving forward, the researcher plans to implement some of these strategies with the faculty of Great Lawn Elementary School to provide the support they need to mature in the Professional Learning Community process.

**Leadership and the Change Process**

Sergiovanni (1995) wrote, “Professional knowledge is created in use as principals and teachers think, reflect, decide, and do” (p. 32). This research study increased the researcher’s professional knowledge of leadership and the change process in myriad ways. Fullan’s (2001) “framework for leadership” (p. 4) as described in *Leading In a Culture of Change* has helped her prioritize her daily work as a school principal to avoid being consumed by the management responsibilities of the position and to stay focused on cultivating her leadership core. Leadership is needed when complex problems in schools require solutions that are unable to be scripted or prescribed by management procedures. Historically, schools have been insulated from rapid changes in the world (Elmore, 2000), but current trends in the educational, political, and economic fields are creating rapid and unpredictable change. “The big problems of the day are complex, rife with paradoxes and dilemmas” (Fullan, 2001, p. 2). The researcher will discuss the aspects of Fullan’s framework as they relate to this study as a school leader currently serving as the principal of Great Lawn Elementary School.
School leaders create change by “harnessing the school’s social and interpersonal potential” (Sergiovanni, 1995, p. 85). Fullan (2001) states that “every leader, to be effective, must have and work on improving his or her moral purpose” (p. 13). Throughout this study, the researcher intentionally appealed to the teachers’ sense of moral purpose wherein they truly hope to make a positive difference in their students’ lives, especially with those students who are having difficulty demonstrating proficiency. Additionally, the choices she made throughout the process supported her personal sense of moral purpose about the best and most fair way to treat people in the workplace. For example, teachers felt comfortable talking to the researcher about what did not work in the change initiative, because they knew the work was about improving our work to benefit children, and that the researcher would not be personally offended by this criticism. Great Lawn Elementary School’s congenial culture is bolstered by the teachers’ genuine concern for their students and the well-being of each other because they believe they are doing morally right things. Finally, most of the teachers at Great Lawn believe that it is morally wrong to simply accept a lack of progress in the children’s learning, which was evident in their interviews with the researcher.

Fullan’s (2001) leadership framework for change also includes “knowledge creation and sharing” and “coherence making” respectively (p. 4). The National Association of Elementary School Principals (2008) gave credence to this part of the leadership framework when they stated: “Create a culture of continuous learning for adults tied to student learning and other school goals” (p. 75). In this research study the researcher ensured that teachers had plenty of opportunities to learn continuously through the process of collaborating about student learning goals and outcomes. When gaps in
understanding arose, she tried to find resources to ameliorate them or to guide the teachers through a process of figuring out what the student data meant. The researcher knows that this action on her part created a change in culture, because teams of teachers continue to show her students’ pre- and post-assessments so they can be discussed. As several teachers stated in the interviews, though, the most powerful learning occurred in the context of the teachers collaborating with each other. As the school leader, the researcher could create the conditions for knowledge creation and sharing, but the entire faculty working together was needed to figure out what it all meant for the students’ achievement.

Another part of Fullan’s (2001) leadership framework is called “relationship building” (p. 4), and that was the most significant aspect of this research study. The researcher had to figure out how to get many teachers to work together when they had never elected to work together in the past. She ensured that the teachers were able to self-select the peers in their PLC groups, as she believed that would give the process the greatest chance for success. In other schools, it may not be possible to allow teachers to self-select colleagues for teaming. If that is the case, the researcher suggests that the school leader pay significant attention to establishing group norms as described in DuFour et al. (2006). Additionally, the school leader can try strategies to decrease resistance from teachers who are not vested in the PLC concept by better understanding their motives for opposition to the change as found in Muhammad (2009).

**Suggestions for Future Study**

This study involved just one elementary school and one principal in an attempt to reculture the school into a Professional Learning Community. Duplication of the study in
other suburban schools, as well as those in an urban or rural setting, would strengthen the conclusions found in this study. Duplication in a school district that does not have a collaborative component to its professional development program would also be informative.

The study suggests the need for additional research in several areas. The first is to study the effect the Professional Learning Community construct has on actual student progress by devising a systematic method to collect, review, and report data concerning student work. While hundreds of student work samples were collected in the process of this action research, the researcher struggled to find an appropriate quantitative system to report any findings about them as part of this dissertation. The pre-and post-assessments the teachers created and scored varied significantly from one another. It is important to note, however, that the teachers who systematically collected this data continued to report significant gains in student achievement.

Another possible area for research would be to use a different researcher created protocol to focus the teachers’ work as they begin to work collaboratively in Professional Learning Communities.

Still other possible areas for research include a study that links teachers’ responsiveness to change with their age, years of teaching experience, dogmatism and rigidity, locus of control and other individual teacher characteristics.

Finally, research that examines various staff development techniques and leadership styles as factors in creating effective Professional Learning Communities could be conducted.
As the construct of the Professional Learning Community gains popularity in schools, quantitative studies could be conducted to determine the relationship between the construct and students’ academic achievement on a much larger scale.

Summary

This practical action research study explored one principal’s actions and one faculty’s response to an initiation of the educational construct of the Professional Learning Community. It is this researcher’s hope that it has made a small contribution to the field of research in this area.

As an elementary school principal determined to see all children succeed, this researcher will continue to create the conditions by which teachers function as highly effective members of Professional Learning Communities to increase students’ academic achievement. The faculty of Great Lawn Elementary School will continue to respond enthusiastically to the challenge of ensuring that “all children learn at high levels” (Many, 2009). As President Obama has said, “We are the nation that has always understood that our future is inextricably linked to the education of our children- all of them” (Obama, 2008). Professional Learning Communities may become a valuable tool in reaching this important goal.
References


Appendix A

Professional Development Questionnaire

Questionnaire Regarding Personalized Professional Development in the BIG ACRES (pseudonym) School District

Your kind assistance in anonymously answering these questions will greatly enhance my understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the current Personalized Professional Development Program in Big Acres. While you are not required to participate in this survey, your participation would be greatly appreciated. Your completion of this survey reflects your informed consent to participate.

Please check one answer only for each question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding the Effectiveness of the Professional Development Program

As a direct result of my participation in the Personalized Professional Development Program in the Big Acres School District this year:

1. I have acquired knowledge and skills that have increased my effectiveness in teaching my students.

2. I have changed some aspect of lesson planning, increasing my effectiveness in the classroom.

3. I have changed some aspect of lesson delivery, increasing my effectiveness in the classroom.

4. I have changed some aspect of the way I assess student learning, increasing my effectiveness in the classroom.

5. I have changed some aspect of the way I select materials for students to use, increasing my effectiveness in the classroom.

6. Overall, I am pleased with the program for helping me to acquire new skills and strategies this past school year.

Evidence of Student Improvement

As a result of my work in the Personalized Professional Development Program in the Big Acres School District this year:

8. I have used new formative assessments with students this year.

9. I have used new post-assessments with students this year.

10. I have been pleased with the
students’ academic growth this year.

11. I have been pleased with the students’ emotional growth this year.

12. I have been pleased with the students’ social growth this year.

Professional Learning Community A Professional Learning Community exists when educators embrace a shared mission, vision, values and goals, and when educators work in high-performing collaborative teams to create a results oriented culture focused on student learning.

As a direct result of my participation in the Personalized Professional Development Program in the *Big Acres School District* this year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

13. My colleagues and I have embraced a shared mission.

14. My colleagues and I have embraced a shared vision.

15. My colleagues and I have embraced shared goals.

16. My colleagues and I work as a collaborative team.

17. My colleagues and I collaborate often to plan instruction.

18. Teachers participated in just one of the following Professional Development activities this past school year. In which one did you participate?

- [ ] First year teacher training
- [ ] Second year teacher training
- [ ] Completed one of the courses offered
- [ ] Personalized Professional Project
- [ ] Peer coaching
- [ ] Lesson study

19. How many years have you been employed to teach?

- [ ] less than 1
- [ ] 1-2
- [ ] 3-5
- [ ] 6-10
- [ ] 11-20
- [ ] more than 20

20. How many years have you been employed to teach in the *Big Acres School District*?

- [ ] less than 1
Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated!
Appendix B

Results of the Professional Development Questionnaire

Questionnaire Regarding Personalized Professional Development in the BIG ACRES (pseudonym) School District

Your kind assistance in anonymously answering these questions will greatly enhance my understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the current Personalized Professional Development Program in Big Acres. While you are not required to participate in this survey, your participation would be greatly appreciated. Your completion of this survey reflects your informed consent to participate.

*Please check one answer only for each question.*  
F= Frequency the response was given (out of possible 30)  
%= Percentage of this response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding the Effectiveness of the Professional Development Program</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As a direct result of my participation in the Personalized Professional Development Program in the Big Acres School District this year:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. I have acquired knowledge and skills that have increased my effectiveness in teaching my students.</td>
<td>F=14 (47%)</td>
<td>F=13 (43%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. I have changed some aspect of lesson planning, increasing my effectiveness in the classroom.</td>
<td>F=10 (33%)</td>
<td>F=14 (47%)</td>
<td>F=3 (10%)</td>
<td>F=2 (7%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. I have changed some aspect of lesson delivery, increasing my effectiveness in the classroom.</td>
<td>F=10 (33%)</td>
<td>F=12 (40%)</td>
<td>F=5 (17%)</td>
<td>F=2 (7%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. I have changed some aspect of the way I assess student learning, increasing my effectiveness in the classroom.</td>
<td>F=7 (23%)</td>
<td>F=13 (43%)</td>
<td>F=7 (23%)</td>
<td>F=2 (7%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. I have changed some aspect of the way I select materials for students to use, increasing my effectiveness in the classroom.</td>
<td>F=12 (40%)</td>
<td>F=9 (30%)</td>
<td>F=5 (17%)</td>
<td>F=3 (10%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Overall, I am pleased with the program for helping me to acquire new skills and strategies this past school year.</td>
<td>F=13 (43%)</td>
<td>F=12 (40%)</td>
<td>F=2 (7%)</td>
<td>F=2 (7%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Evidence of Student Improvement

As a result of my work in the Personalized Professional Development Program in the Big Acres School District this year:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evidence of Student Improvement</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8. I have used new formative assessments with students this year.</td>
<td>F=11 (37%)</td>
<td>F=10 (33%)</td>
<td>F=5 (17%)</td>
<td>F=3 (10%)</td>
<td>F=1 (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. I have used new post-assessments with students this year.</td>
<td>F=9 (30%)</td>
<td>F=9 (30%)</td>
<td>F=8 (27%)</td>
<td>F=2 (7%)</td>
<td>F=2 (7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
10. I have been pleased with the students’ academic growth this year.  
   F=17  57%  
   F=9  30%  
   F=3  10%  
   F=1  3%  
   F=0  0%  

11. I have been pleased with the students’ emotional growth this year.  
   F=16  53%  
   F=8  27%  
   F=5  17%  
   F=1  3%  
   F=0  0%  

12. I have been pleased with the students’ social growth this year.  
   F=14  47%  
   F=9  30%  
   F=6  20%  
   F=1  3%  
   F=0  0%  

Professional Learning Community  
A Professional Learning Community exists when educators embrace a shared mission, vision, values and goals, and when educators work in high-performing collaborative teams to create a results oriented culture focused on student learning.  

As a direct result of my participation in the Personalized Professional Development Program in the *Big Acres School District* this year:  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13. My colleagues and I have embraced a shared mission.</td>
<td>F=13  43%</td>
<td>F=12  40%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
<td>F=1  3%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. My colleagues and I have embraced a shared vision.</td>
<td>F=13  43%</td>
<td>F=12  40%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
<td>F=1  3%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. My colleagues and I have embraced shared goals.</td>
<td>F=14  47%</td>
<td>F=12  40%</td>
<td>F=1  3%</td>
<td>F=1  3%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. My colleagues and I work as a collaborative team.</td>
<td>F=14  47%</td>
<td>F=11  37%</td>
<td>F=1  3%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. My colleagues and I collaborate often to plan instruction.</td>
<td>F=7  23%</td>
<td>F=12  40%</td>
<td>F=7  23%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
<td>F=2  7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

18. Teachers participated in just one of the following Professional Development activities this past school year. In which one did you participate?  
   F= 1  First year teacher training  
   F= 3  Second year teacher training  
   F= 4  Completed one of the courses offered  
   F=22  Personalized Professional Project  
   F= 0  Peer coaching  
   F= 0  Lesson study  

19. How many years have you been employed to teach?  
   F= 1  less than 1  
   F= 1  1-2  
   F= 4  3-5  
   F= 9  6-10  
   F= 9  11-20  
   F= 6  more than 20  

20. How many years have you been employed to teach in the *Big Acres School District*?  
   F= 1  less than 1
F= 3  1-2
F= 6  3-5
F= 6  6-10
F= 10  11-20
F= 4  more than 20

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Your participation is greatly appreciated!
Appendix C

Planning Sheets

January TWO WEEK Student Learning Goal

TIMELINE

Today through January 12, 2010: Choose job-alike team, meet to write ONE literacy goal for students; create the assessment. The job alike team members decide to work together because they are already planning to teach the target objective of the goal. Please give one copy to the principal on January 12, 2010.

Today-January 12 Pre-assess students with an assessment that will show whether or not the children understand the target objective of the goal.

January 12- January 22 Teach!

January 22 or January 25: Re-assess students with the same pre-assessment task or a very similar one.

January 26: Discuss the process and the results at grade level meeting; share the teaching strategies that worked (or didn’t work) with your students.

1. List Job Alike Team Members:


3. Short Term Assessment

Doran, G. (1981) "There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives."

Management Review, 70 (11).
Appendix D

Power Point for Professional Development

Slide 1

What are Professional Learning Communities?

The term Professional Learning Community “has become so commonplace and has been used so ambiguously to describe virtually any loose coupling of individuals who share a common interest in education that it is in danger of losing all meaning”

• (DuFour, et.al., 2006)

Slide 2

What are Professional Learning Communities?

A FOCUS ON LEARNING

The very essence of a learning community is a focus on and a commitment to the learning of each student
Slide 3

What are Professional Learning Communities?

A COLLABORATIVE CULTURE WITH A FOCUS ON LEARNING FOR ALL

A PLC is composed of collaborative teams whose members work *interdependently* to achieve *common goals* linked to the purpose of learning for all.

Slide 4

What are Professional Learning Communities?

COLLECTIVE INQUIRY INTO BEST PRACTICE AND CURRENT REALITY

The teams in a PLC engage in collective inquiry into both best practices in teaching and best practices in learning.

They also inquire about their current reality.
Slide 5

What are Professional Learning Communities?

ACTION ORIENTATION: LEARNING BY DOING

They move quickly to turn aspirations into action and visions into reality.

Slide 6

What are Professional Learning Communities?

A COMMITMENT TO CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Ongoing cycle of:
- gathering evidence of current levels of student learning
- developing strategies and ideas to build on strengths and address weaknesses in that learning
- implementing those strategies and ideas
- analyzing the impact of the changes to discover what was effective and what was not
- applying new knowledge in the next cycle of continuous improvement
What are Professional Learning Communities?

RESULTS ORIENTATION

Members of a PLC realize that all of their efforts in these areas—a focus on learning, collaborative teams, collective inquiry, action orientation, and continuous improvement—must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions.
Appendix E

Teacher’s Needs

March 2010

Teachers reflections regarding creating a collaborative culture- Team agreements or norms

Teachers’ Comments:

Codes:
Listening 1: listen without interrupting; everyone’s voice is important; everyone must contribute; one person may not dominate

Be Respectful 2: respectful of each other; respectful of each other’s styles and strengths; no judgment

Stay On Task 3: stay on task; respect each others’ time

Technical Advice 4: assign role, assign a scribe, no electronics at meetings

everyone giving input 1-LISTENING

everyone participates 1-LISTENING

all voices should be heard 1-LISTENING

take turns when sharing ideas 1-LISTENING

hear everyone’s ideas 1-LISTENING

when working in a group everyone’s opinions should be heard 1-LISTENING

no one should try to dominate 1-LISTENING

need to share 1-LISTENING

taking turns without being interrupted 1-LISTENING

every person in the group needs to be heard 1-LISTENING

everyone should be able to share their ideas and thoughts 1-LISTENING

everyone must contribute 1-LISTENING

everyone giving their best effort to the goal 1-LISTENING

everyone needs to contribute 1-LISTENING

can’t rely on the same people to do all the work 1-LISTENING

everyone participating 1-LISTENING

I need to not dominate discussion 1-LISTENING

all voices count, nobody sits back either 1-LISTENING

I need to be able to listen to others 1-LISTENING

I need to not be the only one doing work 1-LISTENING
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>In order to work productively in a group I usually ensure that all ideas are shared.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Encouraging the ideas of others is very effective for planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Everyone has an equal voice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>I will share my experience but need to be open to new ideas. I need to be flexible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Equal partnership, no leader, no rank, no seniority.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Listen to everyone’s ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Work on listening intently without interrupting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Listen to each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Listen to each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>I need to listen to others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>I need to not be in control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Time equally the shared for all members.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-LISTENING</td>
<td>Everyone realizes we all have different teaching styles and that’s okay.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>No boss.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Make sure we do not judge others’ opinions harshly. Set up a system to stop regroup and make sure we are on task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Create an environment of mutual trust.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Everyone’s opinion should be respected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Input reserve judgment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>And respectful of each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Respect each other’s opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Respect for one another’s opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>No nit picking on language.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Okay to not do things exactly the same.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Be receptive to various options.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Acceptance of all suggestions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>If there is any criticism, I tend to help make it constructive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Respect each other’s opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>Need acceptance that I may try something in a different way.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-BE RESPECTFUL</td>
<td>One way is not the best way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
work should be divided fairly
stay on task
stay on task
stay on task; time limit
remain on task and discuss one task at a time
everyone needs to be on time
staying on task
timekeeper
make sure everyone is on the same page/task
have a time limit to discuss task
stay on task
stay on task to topic
respect of each other’s time; use preps; no late days; really early starts
stay on topic don’t waste PLC time
I need us to focus on the task at hand
stay on task
task sheet of the day; goals to be accomplished
come prepared
make sure everyone in the PLC is doing the same thing; the same assessment so we can compare data
roles can be assigned to focus the group and keep members on task
grade level meetings are best for all to be together there are times we need longer to discuss other grade level topics or when assigned topic doesn’t take long
assigned a scribe for each meeting
share materials
no outside noise i.e. a radio
no radio, cell phones, etc. to make noise
Appendix F

Team Norms May 2010

- respect each other's time (use preps)
- specific timeframe
- goal work needs to be done around the same time
- grade level agendas versus two-week goals
- time limits
- schedule times in advance
- on time
- contact after posttest
- timekeeper
- time management
- regular meeting time
- everyone participates
- do not dominate discussions
- take turns
- share work load
- turn taking
- allotted time for each participant
- all ideas are shared
- brainstorm, all talk
- Equal voices
- be receptive to various options
- be flexible
- be open to new ideas
- open to suggestions and criticism
- agree to disagree and then work it out
- flexibility
- flexibility, change as needed
- one way isn't the best way
- supportive environment
- create positive environment
- feel comfortable and a part of the team
- appropriate language
- positive feedback
- different teaching styles are okay
- same learning style; easier to plan
- friendliness/camaraderie
- stay on task have a timekeeper
- stay on task
stay on task
STAY ON TASK
on task
STAY ON TASK
stay on topic!
STAY ON TASK
stay on task
STAY ON TASK
be prepared
STAY ON TASK
clear expectations of each participant
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
share responsibility
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
divide up tasks, pool resources
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
jump in and help each other
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
share responsibilities
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
divide work fairly
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY
each member serves specific role
ROLES
deployment of responsibility
ROLES
deployment of tasks to all group members
ROLES
assign roles; focus
ROLES
clear expectation of each member
ROLES
assign a scribe
TECHNICAL ADVICE
recorder
TECHNICAL ADVICE
an outline divided into steps
TECHNICAL ADVICE
regular contact through e-mail
TECHNICAL ADVICE
share materials
TECHNICAL ADVICE
respect others opinions
BE RESPECTFUL
trust/ respect
BE RESPECTFUL
kinds, respectful, cooperative attitudes
BE RESPECTFUL
respectful of others
BE RESPECTFUL
target goals need to be itemized and clear and interdisciplinary
GOALS
flexible goals
GOALS
agree on attainable goals
GOALS
set specific goal and clear expectations
GOALS
open communication
OPEN COMMUNICATION
open mindedness
OPEN COMMUNICATION
reserve judgment
OPEN COMMUNICATION
assessment tools with commonality
ASSESSMENTS
same assessments
ASSESSMENTS
agree on the goal
CONSENSUS
shared views and philosophy
CONSENSUS
keep a sense of humor
HAVE FUN/HUMOR
have fun
HAVE FUN/HUMOR
listen
LISTEN
listen; no interrupting
LISTEN
quiet environment, no outside noise
NO OUTSIDE NOISE