An Examination of the Actions and Strategies Principals Use in Establishing, Fostering, and Sustaining Supportive Relational Conditions (SRC) for Professional Learning Communities in Elementary Schools

Emily K. Spear

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Title: An Examination of the Actions and Strategies Principals Use in Establishing, Fostering, and Sustaining Supportive Relational Conditions (SRC) for Professional Learning Communities in Elementary Schools

Abstract approved:

Kathleen C. McCabe, Ph.D.

Dissertation Committee Chair

The purpose of this hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to investigate the strategies elementary principals use to develop trusting relationships that support a collaborative professional learning community (PLC) culture within their schools. Participants included six public elementary school principals purposefully selected from survey results for face to face interviews. The study was based on Hord and Tobia’s (2012) six dimensions of PLCs and focused on the supportive relational conditions dimension as the bond holding the other dimensions together. Interview participants responded to questions regarding five attributes of supportive relational conditions including: Caring relationships; trust and respect; recognitions and celebrations; risk taking; and unified efforts to embed change. Training for PLCs was also a factor for discussion. The principals pointed to modeling behaviors, mutual trust, honesty, their presence and visibility, and extended time and patience for developing relationships as important factors in the sustainability of PLCs.
Additionally, the principals’ longevity at their schools emerged as a major influence in developing trusting relationships. Participants also concentrated on the use of student data as an integral component in staff members’ efforts to embed change. The results offer information gleaned from the field about what has been identified as enabling PLC work with regards to supportive relationships. These results hold importance for school leaders, practicing and aspiring principals, and for institutions for school administrator certification to offer strategies and techniques for developing a positive school climate that allows for supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities.
An Examination of the Actions and Strategies Principals Use in Establishing, Fostering, and Sustaining Supportive Relational Conditions (SRC) for Professional Learning Communities in Elementary Schools

By

Emily K. Spear

A DISSERTATION

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Dissertation of Emily K. Spear

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I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of Plymouth State University, Lamson Learning Commons. My signature below authorizes release of my dissertation to any reader upon request.

Emily K. Spear, Author
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My journey has been a long one, longer than most of those in my wonderful and supportive Summer Camp cohort at PSU. They are a most treasured group who have helped me through each step of this journey. However long it has taken me, I am here at last, after a lifetime of perseverance and challenges, to a place I have aspired to for decades...the doctoral degree.

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became the exemplar of a PLC for me. I extend a very special thank you to one member of that staff, Alison Roberts. Without her confidence and faith in me, in addition to her outstanding technical skills, I might not have made it all the way through. Thank you, Alison, I intend to make the help and support reciprocal as you begin your doctoral journey.

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic, phenomenological study was to investigate the strategies elementary principals use to develop trusting relationships that support a professional learning community (PLC) culture within their schools. Participants included six public elementary school principals purposefully selected from survey results for face to face interviews. The study was based on Hord and Tobia’s (2012) six dimensions of PLCs and focused on the supportive relational conditions dimension as the bond holding the other dimensions together. Interview participants responded to questions regarding five attributes of supportive relational conditions including: Caring relationships; trust and respect; recognitions and celebrations; risk taking; and unified efforts to embed change. Training for PLCs was also a factor for discussion. The principals pointed to modeling behaviors, mutual trust, honesty, their presence and visibility, and extended time and patience for developing relationships as important factors in the sustainability of PLCs. Additionally, the principals’ longevity at their schools emerged as a major influence in developing trusting relationships. Participants also concentrated on the use of student data as an integral component in staff members’ efforts to embed change. The results offer information gleaned from the field about what has been identified as enabling PLC work with regards to supportive relationships. These results hold importance for practicing and aspiring school leaders, school staff members, and for institutions for school administrator certification to offer strategies and techniques for developing a positive school climate that allows for supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities.
Chapter 1: Introduction and Purpose of the Study

**Background: The Environment of Change**

Current newspaper headlines across the country tell of challenges facing our public schools. Low test scores, disappointing state and national assessments, increased public education accountability, greater student diversity, an explosion of information technologies, global economies, and the need for highly qualified teachers and administrators are common lead stories that gain attention of the media (Fullan, 2007). These recurring themes cause one to question how schools can be reinvented to support the needs of students and faculty and promote student learning (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves, 2008; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Siegrist, Weeks, Pate, & Monetti, 2009). What is the face of school reform?

Bascia and Hargreaves (2000) describe school reform as educational changes implemented to raise student achievement levels. There are multiple terms used in the literature to describe educational changes that lead to increased student learning. Throughout this study, the following terms will be used interchangeably and mean educational changes that lead to increased student learning and achievement levels: school restructuring, school reform, school reform efforts, school reform movements, school reculturing, school transformation, school change, or educational improvements.

The fervor of school reform efforts has fluctuated during the 20th century in response to the public’s perception of the situation or crisis (Resnick & Hall, 1998). Many times in the past century the response to reinventing schools was aligned to changes in the U.S. economic and social culture (Ravitch, 2001). Although there have been school reform movements throughout America’s history (Ravitch, 2001),
McAndrews (2006) contends that it has been in the last 30 years that public education has been brought to the attention of the national consciousness through government policies, legislation, and public discussion.

Pressure by national, state, and local governments continues to build towards public schools providing expanding curricula to ensure that all students learn at consistently higher rates (Darling-Hammond, 1997). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001 (www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml), exemplifies the federal government’s influence on public schools through its demand for increased levels of student learning supported by highly qualified teachers.

Global events, cultural changes, and government policies have caused the educational community to explore ways to improve learning for all students. In the midst of current financial shortages (Graham & Harvey, 2008), schools are economically strapped by increasing scarcity of resources. However, student achievement rates are required to increase as mandated by NCLB’s accountability tenets. In light of the challenges facing education, schools are turning to those within their organizations to utilize the collective talents, strengths, and leadership of teachers and administrators to increase student learning (Buffum, et al., 2008). The need for continuous improvement within public schools has compelled educational leaders to focus on developing supportive school cultures and transformational leadership to meet the needs of all students (DuFour, 2004; Eaker, DuFour, & DuFour, 2002; Fullan, 2007; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Sergiovanni, 2004).

As educators muddled through many failed attempts at effective and sustainable school change, the idea of professional learning communities (PLCs) began to emerge as
a hopeful concept to facilitate the transformation of the teaching and learning environment (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Newmann, 1991; Newmann, & Wehlage, 1995). School reform must involve teachers working together within their schools, sharing best practices, and acting on new knowledge to change practice and apply learning experiences within their classrooms (Buffum et al., 2008). Schools can become learning organizations, whose members commit to learning and acting with new knowledge. Those members can create changes and influence the organization, as well as its individuals (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, & Smith, 2012). It is within this school reform context that this researcher investigated the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs) and the specific PLC dimension of supportive relational conditions.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to examine the actions and strategies the principal uses to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools.

Research Questions

1. How do principals establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools? Those conditions include five attributes: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).
2. What strategies and actions do principals report using in developing the five attributes of supportive relational conditions of professional learning communities?

3. What, if any, evidence exists that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) occur in the schools’ professional learning communities?

**Conceptual Underpinnings of the Study**

**Social Constructivism**

Before beginning research and data collection, Creswell (2009) advises researchers to establish a philosophical idea or *worldview* based on the assumption that the worldview influences the practice of the research. Social constructivism is a perspective or worldview that is typically seen as an approach to qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Social constructivists surmise that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live and develop subjective meanings from their experiences (Vygotsky, 1980). The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants’ views and perceptions (Creswell, 2009).

The work of professional learning communities (PLCs) is based, partially, on social constructivist theory (Vygotsky, 1987) as PLCs stress the need for collaborative activities and social interaction in order for learning to take place. Vygotsky’s theory of learning, which occurs in collaboration with others in a social environment, is related to the collaborative interactions of PLCs where teachers learn new skills through the support of one another (Leonard, 2002). The social constructivist worldview of research “addresses the process of interaction among individuals” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). This
research study will address the ways in which principals establish, foster, and sustain the positive relationships and interactions among individuals of a school staff that are necessary for PLCs; thus, the social constructivist worldview pertains to this research study.

**Professional Learning Communities**

Schools are more successful when there are frequent interactions among staff and when teachers value and participate in norms of collegiality and continuous improvement (Little, 1982). The educators in the high achieving schools in Little’s (1982) study pursued a range of professional interactions with fellow teachers or administrators, including talk about instruction, structured observation, as well as shared planning and preparation within their community.

Sergiovanni (1994) described community as “collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together binded to a set of shared ideas and ideals” (p. xvi). He elaborated on this notion by comparing the community to the tightly held bonds of families, neighborhoods, or any other group which displays familial or even sacred bonds. He suggested that this bonding together of people and the binding of them to shared values and ideas are the defining characteristics of schools as communities (Sergiovanni, 1994). It is through group bonding and shared vision that schools can develop a growth and change-oriented culture.

Newman and Wehlage (1995) produced a report synthesizing the studies conducted between 1990 and 1995 by the Center on Organization and Restructuring Schools (CORS). Newman and Wehlage found that organizational capacity was enhanced, and student learning improved, when schools were created into professional
communities. Newman and Wehlage (1995) described the professional community as a school which allows teachers “to pursue a clear shared purpose for all students’ learning; to engage in collaborative activity to achieve the purpose and to take collective responsibility for learning” (p. 30).

Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) began formulating their concept of professional community through their work with urban schools. Many of the characteristics they identified as indicative of the professional community overlapped with those described by Newman and Wehlage (1995). Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) described the professional school community as sharing core characteristics: shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, and collaboration. Newman and Wehlage (1995), along with Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995), developed the basis for understanding the professional school community model and their work provided a foundation for research focused on professional learning communities (PLCs).

Hord (1997a) further explored the concept of learning community by identifying characteristics of the group interactions in schools that encouraged the development of a professional learning community. The dimensions of the professional learning community that emerged from Hord’s (1997a) extensive literature review focused on school improvement efforts and school reform. She summarized the professional learning community as having: (1) supportive and shared leadership, (2) shared values and vision, (3) collective learning and application, (4) shared personal practice, and (5) supportive conditions – including structural conditions and relational conditions (Hord, 1997a).
Professional learning communities have since come to the forefront as a method for schools to improve student achievement (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Haberman, 2004; Hord & Tobia, 2012; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Schmoker, 2006;). The benefits of PLCs in transforming schools have been acclaimed throughout the literature. At the forefront of the review of the effects of professional learning communities is the increased focus on student learning (DuFour, 2004; Hord, 2008; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996; Stoll & Louis, 2007).

In addition to the impact on student learning, researchers have noted benefits derived from developing collegiality as educators work collaboratively with a shared vision (Hipp & Huffman, 2007; Hord, 1997a, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Louis et al., 1996; Pankake & Moller, 2003). The notion of PLCs is grounded in the assumption that what teachers do together outside their classrooms for school improvement, i.e. professional development, can be as important as what they do inside their classrooms (Sleegers, den Brok, Verbiest, Moolenaar, & Daly, 2013).

Hord and Tobia (2012) contend that the factor that most influences student learning is quality teaching. Other researchers agree that teacher quality and knowledge is essential to student achievement (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Cowan, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 1999; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Marzano, 2007). To increase quality teaching, professional learning is essential and Hord contends that “professional learning communities are the most powerful tool for teacher learning and school change” (personal communication, June 27, 2013). Hord (1997a) further contends that effective professional learning communities are comprised of six components she calls dimensions, these include: Supportive and shared leadership; shared beliefs, values, and
vision; intentional collective learning and its application; shared personal practice; supportive structural conditions; and supportive relational conditions. Each of these dimensions was further defined when Hord and Tobia (2012) articulated the attributes of each. Supportive relational conditions, the focus of this study, are defined as caring, trusting relationships. Hord and Tobia (2012) contend that if these attributes are not present between school staff members, PLCs will not be effective (Hord & Tobia, 2012).

Table 1 illustrates the six dimensions of professional learning communities and the attributes of each. As can be seen, the number of attributes for each dimension differs.

Supportive relational conditions has five attributes, which were articulated by Hipp and Huffman (2010) and Huffman and Hipp (2003). Supportive relational conditions impact all of the other dimensions of PLCs (Hipp & Huffman, 2003).

Table 1

*The Six Dimensions of PLCs with Attributes for Each*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shared &amp; Supportive Leadership</th>
<th>Shared Beliefs, Values &amp; Vision</th>
<th>Collective Learning &amp; Application</th>
<th>Shared Personal Practices</th>
<th>Supportive Structural Conditions</th>
<th>Supportive Relational Conditions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Staff make decisions</td>
<td>1. Process to develop shared values</td>
<td>1. Staff seek new knowledge &amp; apply to instruction</td>
<td>1. Staff observe peers and offer input</td>
<td>1. Time provided to facilitate collaboration</td>
<td>1. Caring relationships exist among staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Principal takes staff advice</td>
<td>2. Shared values guide norms of behavior</td>
<td>2. Collegial relations reflect commitment to improvement</td>
<td>2. Feedback on peer observations is offered</td>
<td>2. School schedule promoted collective learning &amp; collaboration</td>
<td>2. Culture of trust and respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Staff have access to key</td>
<td>3. Shared vision for school improvement</td>
<td>3. Staff plan and work together to address student</td>
<td>3. Ideas and suggestions for improve student</td>
<td>3. Fiscal resources for professional</td>
<td>3. Regular recognition and celebration of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information focused on student learning</td>
<td>Needs for learning are shared</td>
<td>Development of technology &amp; instructional materials available</td>
<td>Achievement of risk taking and instructional innovation is encouraged</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Principal addresses areas in need of support</td>
<td>4. Decisions aligned with values and vision</td>
<td>4. Regular collaborative review of student work</td>
<td>4. Resource staff provide expertise for learning</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Staff members can initiate change</td>
<td>5. Process to develop shared vision</td>
<td>5. Coaching and mentoring opportunities</td>
<td>5. Sustained and unified efforts to embed change</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Principal shares power &amp; authority</td>
<td>7. Policies aligned to school vision</td>
<td>7. Staff learn together and apply knowledge for solutions</td>
<td>7. Proximity of staff allows for ease of collaboration</td>
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<td>8. Leadership is promoted among staff</td>
<td>8. All involved in creating high expectations</td>
<td>8. Staff committed to programs that enhance learning</td>
<td>8. Systems of communication promote flow of information among staff</td>
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<td>10. Shared responsibility for student learning</td>
<td>10. Collective analysis of student work</td>
<td>10. Staff has easy access to data</td>
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<td>11. Multiple sources of data used for decisions</td>
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Note. Adapted from *Professional Learning Communities Assessment- Revised* (Hipp and Huffman, 2010).
Supportive Relational Conditions

Supportive relational conditions are encouragements and attitudes that build collaborative relationships and sustain an atmosphere of collegial learning. Relationships provide a productive environment for the operation of a PLC (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Hipp and Huffman (2010) contend that the environment must be safe for professionals in order for supportive relational conditions to exist. These conditions foster the kind of respect and trust among colleagues that promote: collegial relationships, a willingness to accept feedback and to establish norms of continuous critical inquiry and improvement; and the development of positive and caring relationships (Hord, Meehan, Orletsky, & Sattes, 1999). The climate of trust and respect, and the structures that support continual learning, are embodied in the supportive conditions which are essential in creating a professional learning community (Hipp, Stoll, Bolam, Wallace, McMahan, Thomas, & Huffman, 2003; Routman, 2012).

Furthermore, supportive relational conditions are essential in holding the other six dimensions together (Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Routman, 2012). PLCs thrive on the high regard and respect that members hold for one another, which develops over time as members work together. A mature level of trust for one another is a necessity, as differences are expressed and resolved (Achinstein, 2002).

Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleegers (2011) recommend that as countries continue to demand innovative practices to increase student performance, the first step required is understanding that close professional networks and trusting relationships support a climate of innovation. “By far the strongest facilitator of professional community is social trust among faculty members” (Bryk, Camburn, & Louis, 1999, p. 767). When
staff members feel safe, are honest with one another, and trust and respect each other, a powerful social resource is available for supporting collaboration, reflective dialogue, and sharing of ideas - characteristics of professional learning communities (Bryk, et al., 1999).

However, engaging in learning together can be threatening, especially when working with colleagues. Teachers are unlikely to participate in classroom observation and feedback, mentoring partnerships, discussion about pedagogical issues, or curriculum innovation unless they feel safe; therefore, trust and respect from colleagues are critical (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). The quality of interpersonal relationships between adults in a school influences the climate and morale, and makes a difference in student achievement (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The school administrator plays a critical role in establishing and nurturing a school setting that supports relationships related to the goals of professional learning communities (Morrissey, 2000).

As an elementary school principal, I have promoted professional learning communities in my school and district for many years, yet believe that some attributes of supportive relational conditions may not yet be present. After working directly with Shirley Hord and Edward Tobia, both authors and researchers in the area of PLCs and school improvement, I came to understand that supportive relational conditions create the vital foundation on which the other dimensions of PLCs are developed. For this reason, I became very interested in how principals actually establish and foster those conditions. This study will examine the lived experiences of elementary school principals who have
nurtured professional learning communities in their schools and will determine the strategies used to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions.

Statement of the Problem

The supportive role of the school principal is hailed as an important aspect in the successful implementation of a professional learning community (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert 2006). The principal has been described in the literature as a key player in transforming the school into a learning community (Hord, 1997a). As leaders of schools, principals matter both in the “creation and the long-term maintenance of professional learning communities” (Sparks, 2005, p. 156). Additionally, lack of support by the principal is viewed as a barrier to successful implementation of PLCs (Wells & Feun, 2007). Principals share in the responsibility of developing the dimensions of a professional learning community: shared and supportive leadership; shared beliefs, values, and vision; collective learning and application; shared personal practice; supportive structural conditions; and supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

As administrators, principals have the opportunity to play a vital role in building and extending the PLC concept in order to bring about transformation that can lead to school improvement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Easton, 2011). The literature has offered insight into the importance of the principal’s role in developing the dimensions of PLCs and even provided examples of how principals play an important part in the implementation of the dimensions.
The literature also describes the dimension of supportive relational conditions as being essential in supporting the other five dimensions, if PLCs are to be effective (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Routman, 2012). For this reason, I have chosen to investigate the behaviors, actions, and strategies elementary principals use to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for PLCs. Supportive relational conditions consist of the attributes of caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). While the need for a supportive principal was evident throughout the literature in developing these five attributes in a school staff, questions about specific ways in which the principal can establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions continued to rise.

Little research was found that examined the actual behaviors and actions of the principal and the strategies employed in order to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions in elementary schools. Greater insight and understanding into the ways in which an elementary principal can foster the five attributes of supportive relational conditions could be gained from a focused look at the principal’s behavior and actions.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to examine specific strategies and practices used by elementary school principals in building supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities. The five essential attributes necessary to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions provided the basis for the examination. Those attributes are: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and
celebration, risk-taking, and a unified effort to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

**Research Questions**

Considering the key role research (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997a; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert 2006) suggests the principal plays in establishing supportive relational conditions that lead to a positive school culture, the questions examined were:

1. How do principals establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools? Those conditions include five attributes: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).
2. What strategies and actions do principals report using in developing the five attributes of supportive relational conditions of professional learning communities?
3. What, if any, evidence exists that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) occur in the schools’ professional learning communities?

**Significance of this Study**

With a focus on student achievement, working in professional learning communities has been found to lead to changes that positively impact student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Shared and supportive leadership, shared vision and beliefs, team learning, dialogue, supportive conditions, shared practice, and collegiality
were found to be common components in schools that are utilizing learning communities (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Hord, 1998, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Olivier, Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Roundtree & Hipp, 2010).

Throughout the literature, the role of the principal is viewed as critical in creating and developing professional learning communities (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; Easton, 2011; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Hord, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Additionally, the PLC dimension of supportive relational conditions is viewed as crucial to the success of PLCs (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Routman, 2012). However, with little evidence of focused examination on how the principal actually fosters those relational conditions, this study addressed this gap in the literature by providing a deeper exploration of the principal’s role in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities.

A clearer picture of the principal’s impact on establishing, fostering, and sustaining relational conditions is important for all who believe in the power of PLCs to improve student learning. For school leaders who are implementing or considering PLCs as a means to bring about school reform, results from this study offer information gleaned from the field about what has been identified as enabling PLC work with regards to supportive relationships. Educators who are working in PLCs will benefit from this study as the findings inform and influence the practices of their principals. Thus, school districts, school leaders, and teachers can profit from what the principals in this study have learned from their experiences fostering supportive relational conditions.
The information gathered will also be useful for practicing and aspiring principals, to offer strategies and techniques for developing a positive school climate that allows for supportive relational conditions for PLCs. The information could be useful to institutions for school administrator certification and could be included in coursework for school leadership training programs. In summary, a closer examination of the role of the principal in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for PLCs could provide understanding for future leaders as they seek to successfully implement professional learning communities.

**Methodology, Limitations, and Assumptions**

As the researcher, I examined the strategies and practices used by principals in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions in professional learning communities (PLCs). This study focused on the experiences of elementary school principals as they established, fostered, and sustain caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change in their schools – the attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp& Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

**An Overview of Methodology**

Marshall and Rossman (2006) describe qualitative research as grounded in the lived experiences of people and as a “broad approach to the study of social phenomena” (p.2). Qualitative research takes place in the natural setting, uses multiple methods that are interactive, focuses on the context and emerging information, and is interpretive on the part of the researcher (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Creswell (2009) defines qualitative research as “…the means for exploring and understanding the meaning
individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 232). The process of qualitative research is based on asking questions, with data collected in the participants’ settings, with the researchers analyzing data from which general themes then emerge (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research is the means that would be selected for describing and attempting to understand the observed regularities in what people do, or in what they report as their experience (Locke, Spirdoso & Silverman, 2007).

Phenomenology is a branch of qualitative research in which the researcher attempts to understand the essence of lived experiences of a phenomenon as described by participants (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2007). It involves rich description of the lived experience of the participants with the researcher setting aside prior judgments about the phenomenon (Finlay, 2009). Hermeneutic phenomenology, one branch of phenomenology, is also concerned with the lived human experience, yet is aimed at illuminating details to create meaning and a sense of understanding that is drawn from a person’s background (Laverty, 2003). It is the “art and science of interpretation and thus also of meaning” (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012, p. 1). Hermeneutic phenomenology is not final and stable, but is continuously open to new insight and interpretation (Friesen et al., 2012).

I examined the details of principals’ background experiences concerning the establishment, fostering, and sustainability of supportive relational conditions for PLCs in elementary schools as well as the continued behaviors and actions which sustain those relationships. The strategies principals have utilized to promote caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebration, risk-taking, and unified efforts to embed change – the components of supportive relational conditions of PLCs (Huffman & Hipp,
2003) were explored. Hermeneutic phenomenology explores the stories told from the “inner perspective” (Friesen et al, 2012, p. 39) of the participants. It is the description from active participants of their subjective knowledge and personal impression of the phenomenon (Friesen et al, 2012). As the researcher, I examined the stories of principals as they fostered supportive relational conditions for PLCs; listening to and interpreting the role they played in the process. I was most interested in understanding what strategies were most successful for establishing and fostering relationships. Therefore, a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design was most suitable for this study.

Principals in New Hampshire elementary schools were surveyed through a principal’s network to determine if they have PLCs functioning in their schools. The survey consisted of several questions describing PLCs to determine if effective PLCs are indeed being sustained in specific school settings and if the principals were willing to consent to an interview. Effectiveness was determined by an analysis of the results of the Professional Learning Communities Assessment-R (PLCA-R) developed by Olivier and Hipp (2010).

Depending on the number of principals responding and willing to interview, purposeful sampling selection was necessary to best support an understanding of the research problem and question (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling is used when a researcher “wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). In a hermeneutic study, only those who have lived the experience should be included as a participant.
Sample size was determined based on number and location of respondents and the available time, feasibility, and resources for the data collection. Participants included principals from elementary schools located in a variety of the state’s regions. The participating principals were asked to complete the Professional Learning Community Assessment- Revised (PLCA-R) (Olivier & Hipp, 2010; Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003). The PLCA-R is a diagnostic tool to determine school level practices that support Hord’s (1997a) PLC dimensions. This assessment tool helped to determine the principals’ perspectives as to the level of implementation of the dimensions of PLCs. This questionnaire served as a descriptive tool of practices at the school level related to all six dimensions of professional learning communities (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Those dimensions were used as the definition for PLCs in this research. The questionnaire utilized a scale of 1-4, which offered quantitative data and helped to determine if effective PLCs were actually functioning within the schools. The PLCA-R questionnaire also contains specific questions regarding the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Huffman & Hipp, 2003), which determined the principals’ understanding of that specific dimension of PLCs.

Those responding principals whose schools are fully implementing the dimensions of PLCs were contacted for an interview, which involved open-ended questions and probes to yield in-depth responses about their experiences establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for PLCs (Patton, 2002). A request to examine and include as data points any artifacts related to implementing and sustaining PLCs was sought. Those artifacts included, but were not limited to: school schedules that allow for common meeting time, minutes of meetings related to
professional learning community functioning, texts, correspondence, or procedural information regarding establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions within the schools.

Through the use of the survey/questionnaire, interviews, and artifacts, data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted (Patton, 2002). The data from this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological investigation revealed an understanding of the behaviors, actions, and strategies principals use to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for PLCs as defined by Hord and Tobia (2012).

**Limitations**

All proposed research studies have limitations. None are perfectly designed (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This study was limited to a purposeful sampling of elementary principals in New Hampshire from schools that are implementing the concept of professional learning communities. The location may cause a lack of generalizability of the findings to the greater population of public elementary schools in the United States where the educators are implementing professional learning communities, as well as the generalizability to other levels of schools (Locke, Spirduso & Silverman, 2007).

The survey, *Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R)* (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003; Olivier & Hipp, 2010) utilizes a Likert scale. Unknown factors could have been involved in the completion of the *PLCA-R* survey that contributed to it not reflecting actual perceptions of the participants. For example, rating errors occur with Likert scales where participants may tend to overrate, underrate, or neglect to use the extreme ends of the scale (Biemer, Groves, Lyberg, Mathiowetz, & Sudman, 1991).
The gathering of imprecise data from interviews depending on a participant’s frame of reference could have been another limitation (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). There was also a limited window of time for data collection for this study that may represent a “snap-shot in time” limitation (Teague, 2012, p. 10).

Additionally, there was the possibility of researcher bias. As a practicing elementary school principal in New Hampshire, I have long been working on the effective implementation of PLC dimensions and activities in my school. The experience of working directly with Shirley Hord and Edward Tobia, authors and researchers in the field of PLCs, has also influenced my thinking and beliefs. Approaching the research with an open mind, understanding how previous experiences may influence my thinking and interpretations, and being able to state those influences assisted the process of reflection (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Laverty, 2003). Furthermore, the use of open-ended questions that allowed themes to emerge from interviews, with follow up discussion being led by participants, encouraged my process to stay as close to the lived experience as possible (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012; Laverty, 2003) and mitigated the researcher bias limitation.

Assumptions

This researcher examined the role of the principal in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities under the following assumptions:

- The depth of implementation of a professional learning community can be measured by activities and practices related to the dimensions of a professional learning community: (a) shared and supportive leadership (b) shared beliefs,
values, and vision, (c) collective learning and application, (d) shared personal
practice, (e) supportive structural conditions, and (f) supportive relational
conditions (Hord, 1997a, 1998, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hord & Tobia,
2012; Olivier, Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Olivier & Hipp, 2010).

- The Professional Learning Community Assessment—Revised (PLCA – R) is a
valid measure of principal perceptions concerning the implementation of the
dimensions of professional learning communities, especially those concerning
supportive relational conditions (Olivier & Hipp, 2010; Olivier, Hipp, &
Huffman, 2003).

- Participants responded to the PLCA-R instrument with integrity. Additionally,
interview participants spoke candidly about their perceptions of the strategies
used in developing and sustaining supportive relational conditions of PLCs.

Definition of Key Terms

Defining terminology that is pertinent to the research can provide clarity for the
reader and participants. This study will be conducted utilizing the following definitions:

Hermeneutic phenomenology: the study of human lived experience together with its
meanings that is open to revision and reinterpretation (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi,
2012).

Horizontalization: listing statements during data analysis about the experiences of the
participants related to the phenomenon. The statements that are included are nonrepetitive
and nonoverlapping, with the researcher recognizing that every statement has equal value
(Moustakas, 1994).
Imaginative variation: the researcher considers the varying frames of reference that may be attached to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Intentional collective learning and application: School staff at all levels are engaged in processes that collectively seek new knowledge among staff and apply learning to solutions that address student needs (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012).

Invariant horizons: statements by participants related to the phenomena under study that are nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping (Moustakas, 1994).

Learning organization: an organization where “people continually expand their capacity to create the results they desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 3).

Lifeworld: the world as we immediately experience it, rather than as we conceptualize, categorize, or theorize about it (van Manen, 1984).

Phenomenology: the study of human lived experience and the way in which things are perceived as they appear to consciousness (Langdridge, 2007).

Principal: For the purposes of this study, the principal role is embodied by one person and does not include the role of other school administrators, such as assistant principals.

Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement where the following dimensions are present: (a) supportive and shared leadership; (b) shared beliefs, values, and vision; (c) intentional collective learning and its application; (d) shared personal and collective practice; (e) supportive structural conditions; and (f) supportive relational conditions (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012).
School culture: The assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norm for the school and that shape how the staff thinks, feels, and acts (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003).

School learning community: A group of educators who are bonded together through sharing and critically reflecting on their practices in order to enhance the learning of students and teachers, thereby supporting school improvement (Bolam et al., 2005; Hord, 1997a; Mitchell & Sackney, 2009).

Shared beliefs, values, and vision: An unwavering commitment to student learning that is consistently articulated and referenced in the staff’s work (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012).

Shared personal and collective practice: Review of a teacher’s skills and practices by colleagues that includes feedback and assistance to support individual and community improvement (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012).

Supportive and shared leadership: The collegial and facilitative participation of the principal who shares leadership and thus, power and authority, by inviting staff input and action in decision-making (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012).

Supportive relational conditions: Encouragements and attitudes that sustain an atmosphere of collegial learning (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012), such as caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Supportive structural conditions: Elements such as time, data, location, and resources provided for the community to do their learning work (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012).
Summary of Chapter 1

Success in school and the school educator’s ability to adapt to change so that students may achieve is determined by a variety of factors of which culture is extremely important (Fullan & Ballew, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2004). The professional learning community (PLC) model that was researched in this study is presented in the literature as a potential organizational structure for sustaining continued growth for teachers and students (Hord, 1997a, 1997b, 2004; Hipp & Huffman, 2002; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). The PLC model is also a means for creating a recultured school focused on student learning (Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

When professional learning communities are functioning effectively there are certain dimensions present. These dimensions exemplify professional behaviors. The dimensions include: shared and supportive leadership, shared beliefs, values, and vision, collective learning and its application, shared personal practices, supportive structural conditions, and supportive relational conditions (Hord and Tobia, 2012). Hipp and Huffman (2010) contend that supportive relational conditions are the basis of effective PLCs because the other five dimensions are not possible without the trusting relationships described as supportive relational conditions.

The literature indicates that the principal of a school plays a key role in transforming the school into a professional learning community (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Firestone & Martinez, 2007; Fullan & Ballew, 2001; Hargreaves, 2008; Hord, 1997a, 2004; Hord & Hirsh, 2009) and would therefore be instrumental in establishing, fostering, and sustaining the six dimensions of PLCs. Because supportive relational conditions are requisite for the effectiveness of the other five dimensions,
school leaders need insight and understanding into how to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions that will lead the organization toward successful PLC implementation.

The purpose of this study was to examine the behaviors, actions, and strategies used by the principal in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary school settings. This qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was conducted using Hord & Tobia’s (2012) six dimensions of a professional learning community as the theoretical framework. The study focused on the experiences of elementary school principals and the strategies used to develop the five attributes of the supportive relational conditions dimension - caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change in their schools (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

This chapter has presented the conceptual framework for the study, the problem statement, purpose and research questions, as well as the significance, methodology, limitations, assumptions, and definitions of the terms involved in the study. Chapter 2 will present a review of the literature related to professional learning communities and the significance of supportive relational conditions. The key role of the school principal in developing PLCs and supportive relational conditions will also be examined in the review of literature.

Chapter 3 includes a discussion of the research methodology. This qualitative study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design as the lived experiences of principals and the strategies they use to effectively implement supportive relational
conditions for PLCs were examined. Participants, data collection instruments, as well as the collection plan and data analysis plan, will be described.
Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this research was to examine the behaviors, actions, and strategies principals use to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools. This research revealed specific strategies and practices used by principals in building supportive relational conditions. The five essential attributes necessary to sustain supportive relational conditions were investigated. Those attributes include caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk-taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp and Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

**Research Questions**

Considering the key role research (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997a; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert 2006) suggests the principal plays in establishing supportive relational conditions that lead to a positive school culture, the questions this study examined are:

- How do principals establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools? Those conditions include five attributes: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

- What strategies and actions do principals report using in developing the five attributes of supportive relational conditions of professional learning communities?
What, if any, evidence exists that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) occur in the schools’ professional learning communities?

**Background**

The issue of power was of great concern for the Founding Fathers and central to the wording of the Constitution of the United States. Great debates were held over the issues of states’ rights versus the rights of the federal government (Van Alstyne, 1987). For example, the U.S. Constitution does not guarantee the right to an education. Such a right and responsibility has been left to each state. The New Hampshire State Constitution, established in 1783, effective in 1784, states in Part II, Article 83, that

“...knowledge and learning are essential to the preservation of a free government; and, spreading the opportunities and advantages of education through the various parts of the country being highly conducive to promote this end; it shall be the duty of the legislators and magistrates…” (as amended in 2007).

This article places responsibility on the State of New Hampshire legislators to provide access to knowledge and learning.

The U.S. Constitution has undergone twenty-seven changes since it was first written (Amendments to the US Constitution, n.d.). In addition to the formal amendments, the Constitution is constantly being interpreted and reinterpreted. Over the past two hundred years, the role of the federal government in education has also changed, most notably beginning with the infusion of federal dollars to states for use in education (Bitensky, 1991). These federal dollars have come to the states with mandates and legislation from the federal government.
The enactment of No Child Left Behind federal legislation (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001) and accompanying accountability measures have put pressure on educators to examine the effectiveness of public education. NCLB also holds implications for funding tied to success or failure in meeting Adequate Yearly Progress. NCLB has “compelled educators to examine what they do, how they do it and the effects it has on students” (Hord & Sommers, 2008, p. 58).

Because many schools were not meeting the requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress, further pressure to examine public education came from the Council of Chief State School Officers in 2009. The Common Core Standards Initiative (National Governors Association Center & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2009) moved to the educational forefront when states began to adopt the standards in 2010 and work toward developing core standards in math and in English language arts and reading that will better prepare American students for college and/or career (Teague, 2012). The demands from legislators to implement a common core of standards, an emphasis on test taking as a consequence of NCLB, and an ongoing push for increased student achievement have raised accountability levels and created the need for educational reform.

Porter, McMaken, Hwang, and Yang (2011) assert, “The Common Core Standards represent considerable change from what states currently call for in their standards and in what they assess” (p. 114). With the additional impact of implementing the Common Core Standards initiative in conjunction with NCLB, educators face an ongoing push for increased student achievement and the call for work on curriculum
realignment. Hipp and Huffman (2010) summarized the impact of the current demands on schools as follows:

With increased expectations for accountability in schools, concerns about administrator and teacher morale and retention, and the continuing challenge to address the needs of diverse and marginalized learners, the urgency of school reform calls school leaders to seek alternative ways to address these issues (p. 1).

One of the alternative measures to address these challenges may be to institute changes at the school level that help educators improve student learning, such as learning and working together in professional learning communities.

**Challenge of Educational Reform and Professional Learning Communities**

Developing the expertise of educators to engage and restructure education for the achievement of all students continues to be challenging for schools (Donaldson, 2006; Johnson & Donaldson, 2007; Lambert, 2003). The impact of the current demands on schools forces school administrators to investigate other methods to meet these requirements. As principals and teachers consider how to improve learning for all students, the imperative for effective school reform comes to the surface (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker; 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Growing numbers of schools have implemented professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means of bringing about school reform and sustainable change (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker; 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Professional learning communities provide a setting for educators to collaboratively face the demands for school reform that positively impact student learning (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008;
Nieto, 2003). Schools utilizing professional learning communities have the capacity for transforming the learning in their school (DuFour, 2007).

The question of how to bring about reform and sustainable change continues to concern school personnel. Huffman and Hipp (2003) concluded that school reform is more likely to occur if discussions about current practices include collectively studying the needs of students, questioning what is worth continuing, and developing shared purposes among staff members. They contend that improvement must be based on change of practice and transformation in ways of functioning.

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are a method to address some of the challenges of school reform and have been supported throughout the literature as powerful tools in building the capacity of educators to transform schools and improve student learning (Andrews & Lewis, 2007; Cohen & Brown, 2013; DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Hall & Hord, 2006; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997a; Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Nieto, 2003). Schools are discovering that PLCs encourage collaboration and reflective dialogue among the staff, resulting in the ability to break down barriers of isolation and fragmentation (Hall & Hord, 2006).

In his study of organizations that made the leap from Good to Great, Collins (2001) found that the transformation was never the result of "a single defining action, no ground breaking program, no one killer innovation, no miracle moment" (p. 14). The improvement was always the result of "a cumulative process… pushing in a constant direction over an extended period of time" (p. 169). Collins (2001) asserts that improvement requires persistence and consistent, coherent efforts over long periods.
Schools as organizations must also reach improvement through persistence and consistent efforts.

School improvement has been widely promoted and mandated in nearly every state in the Union (Hord, et al, 2000). “All too often, approaches to school change have been like using a microwave oven—put a program into a school, heat for four minutes, and voila’, call it school change” (S.M. Hord, personal communication, June 27, 2013). A quick-fix mentality, especially prevalent in U.S. culture, results in many schools being poorly prepared for change and therefore change is implemented in a superficial and low quality manner (Hord, 1997a). It comes as no surprise that school change efforts implemented in this fashion are short-lived, with disappointing results (Hord et al., 2000). Hord and her colleagues discovered through their research on school reform that any school change requires abundant time, energy, and resourcefulness, along with focused efforts from school leadership. New understandings regarding the ability of schools to change are focusing on the capacity of the school staff to reflect on its work, assess its effectiveness in terms of student gains, determine areas in need for improvement, and identify the staff learning that is needed for the school to increase its effectiveness in delivering high quality learning opportunities for students (Hord et al., 2000).

Hipp and Huffman (2007) support the view of Hord et al. (2000) and Fullan (2001) when they assert that a transformation, such as reculturing a school, does not happen through fragmented attempts at change, but needs to be embedded within the daily work of educators. Schools with educators who continuously improve, adapt, and collectively problem solve to address the challenges that they face are much more successful in establishing, fostering, and sustaining effective and nurturing cultures than
traditionally organized schools (Fullan, 2007). Professional learning communities have played a major role in helping schools to redesign themselves into organizations that continually learn and invent new ways to increase the effectiveness of the work of improving student learning (Hord, 2004). Hargreaves (2008) describes the nature of sustainable PLCs in the following excerpt:

Strong professional learning communities are not merely a matter of goals and teamwork, meetings, and plans concerned with evidence and achievement. They are a way of life that does not focus only or always on tested literacy, but on all aspects of learning and also caring for others within the school. (p. 188)

The professional learning community concept does not offer a short cut to school improvement. “It does provide a powerful, proven conceptual framework for transforming schools at all levels. A school staff must focus on learning…work collaboratively… and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement” (DuFour, 2007, p. 7).

**Historical Context of Professional Learning Communities**

The research on professional learning communities (PLCs) extends beyond the realm of education. Professional learning communities are based in part on the social learning theory of Lev Vygotsky, a Russian researcher concerned with language acquisition and development (Ardichvili, 2001). The foundation of his social constructivist theory is the premise that we learn best with the support of more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1987) and create meaning in a social structure. In a PLC, this manifests itself as teachers learning from one another. Vygotsky believed that the process of social interaction supports learning (Powell & Kalina, 2009). Glassman
(1996) offers that in Vygotsky’s social constructivist theory, it is social activity and interaction that leads thinking and not thinking that leads the social activity. Instructional approaches based on social constructivist theory stress the need for collaborative activities and social interaction, which can include such strategies as collegial circles, critical friends groups, or professional learning communities (St. George, 2010; Jolly, 2008). Vygotsky’s theory of learning, in collaboration with others in a social environment, relates to the growing preference for collegial situations where teachers can learn and develop their skills through the support of other educators (Leonard, 2002).

The concept of PLCs can also be traced back to the business sector and the work of Peter Senge (1990). Senge believes that organizations can learn using collective intelligence characterized by working together in a systems thinking framework. These learning organizations continually expand their capacity to become groups “… where people are learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p. 4). Senge lists five disciplines that characterize learning organizations: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, building a shared vision, and team learning. Senge’s work on learning communities is foundational to the development of the professional learning community concept (Senge, Cambron-McCabe, Lucas, & Smith, 2012). Senge and his colleagues provided a model of a learning organization that has greatly impacted schools as the ideas have been incorporated into the educational setting (Teague, 2012). Systems thinking encourages teachers and administrators to look beyond their own part of the school and see the larger system as a whole (Senge et al., 2012).

In order for a learning organization to thrive, individuals must have the opportunity to grow as well. Senge (1990) proposed that the capacity for learning within
an organization can only be as great as the learning of the individuals that make up the organization. One point of leverage for change involves good teachers as continuous and lifelong learners with their knowledge evolving through time and regular collegial conversations in team learning situations (Senge et al., 2012), such as in professional learning communities.

According to Hord (1997a), a learning organization, as proposed by Senge, “emphasizes the importance of nurturing and celebrating the work of each individual staff person and of supporting the collective engagement of staff in such activities as shared vision development, problem identification, learning, and problem resolution” (p. 12), activities that can change the way a school functions. The similarities between Senge’s five disciplines and Hord’s dimensions of a PLC are notable. However, changing a school culture and the day to day functioning of the staff requires changing the way people both think and act, a very complex task (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Hord (1997a) states that she had seen numerous examples of unsuccessful change efforts throughout her many years of involvement in school improvement. She admits that she began to wonder if there was not a better way to improve schools than the ones she had observed in her work (Hord, 1997a). Hord had the opportunity to work in an organizational arrangement that matched Peter Senge’s (1990) descriptions of a learning organization (Hord, 1997a). In that environment, she experienced a “nurturing culture that encouraged a high level of staff collaboration” (Hord, 1997a, p. 7). That nurturing culture allowed teachers to feel more supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice (Hord, 1997a). Both Senge (1990) and Hord (1997a) emphasized the
importance of nurturing the work of each staff member, as well as the collective engagement of all staff members.

Hord (1997a) advocated for a school culture that supported trust and respect among colleagues, as well as positive caring relationships. Hord later supported the work of Huffman and Hipp (2003), who describe the attributes of relationships among staff that are necessary for the successful implementation of learning communities. Those attributes are described as caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk-taking, and unified efforts to embed change.

Shirley Hord (1997a) first highlighted the dimensions of PLCs when The Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) conducted a significant study of the concept of professional learning communities from 1995-2000. The study, *Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement* (CCCII), provided deeper understanding of the attributes of a professional learning community and also insight into their creation. Hord’s (1997a) work for SEDL has been viewed as the seminal work that established a theoretical framework of five dimensions of PLCs in school settings. That work was a review of the literature of learning organization theory and professional development for educators. Her work was based on the research of Little (1982), Rosenholtz (1989), Senge (1990), Fullan (1993), and Sergiovanni (1994), among others.

Little (1982) was an early researcher in the area of interaction among staff in successful schools. In schools where student learning improved, it was found that teachers valued and participated in norms of collegiality and continuous improvement, as well as pursued a range of professional interactions with fellow teachers or administrators (Little, 1982). Those interactions included talk about instruction, structured observations,
and shared planning or preparation. Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) also wrote about school-level teams and identified some characteristics necessary for learning communities, but Shirley Hord is possibly the first to use the term *Professional Learning Community* or *PLC* in her 1997 work (Easton, 2011). Hord (1997a) concluded that collaborative learning communities were key to teacher learning, which directly resulted in student learning. “Schools must become a place where teachers are involved in a community of learning, caring and inquiring” (Hord, 1997a, p. 59). Hord noted that through a climate of inquiry, PLCs “…can increase staff capacity to serve students, but success depends on what the staff do in their collective efforts” (p. 60).

There has been an evolution in the research on PLCs since the work of Little (1982). Hord’s (1997a) seminal work with SEDL, identified five dimensions of professional learning communities. The five original dimensions were, shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning, shared personal practice, and supportive conditions.

However, in their 2012 research, Hord and Tobia separated the dimension of supportive conditions into two separate dimensions. Those dimensions are now included as supportive structural conditions, which refers to time and resources, and supportive relational conditions, which encompasses collegial relationships and factors such as trust and respect between school staff members. The separation of supportive relational conditions from structural conditions offered better specificity (Hord & Tobia, 2012) and allowed the researchers “to stress the importance of creating relationships that support a collegial climate” (S.M. Hord, personal communication, June 27, 2013).
The Six Dimensions of PLCs

Hord (1997a) defined PLCs as communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. When PLCs are functioning effectively there are certain dimensions or attributes present. The six dimensions identified by Hord & Tobia (2012), now “serve to explicate the identity of effective PLCs” (p. 38).

Supportive and Shared Leadership

Hord and Tobia (2012) describe the dimension of supportive and shared leadership as the “collegial and facilitative participation of the principal who shares leadership and thus, power and authority, by inviting staff input and action in decision-making” (p. 25). A PLC is a self-organizing group, determining its own norms and distribution of leadership (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Shared leadership is demonstrated when members make decisions about their learning, which is always designed to benefit students. Sharing leadership includes delegating authority, enlisting the faculty in critical decisions, posing questions rather than solutions, and creating an environment where teachers can continually grow (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010). This approach to instructional leadership creates a school culture that mobilizes the capacity of teachers to strengthen student performance and develop real collaboration within the school (Fullan & Ballew, 2001). Decision-making must take place, however, within a prescribed set of parameters. The PLC must continue to operate within the framework of school district policies and school level procedures (Hord & Tobia, 2012).

Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision

Hord and Tobia (2012) define the dimension of shared beliefs, values, and vision as an unwavering commitment to student learning that is consistently articulated and
referenced in the staff’s work. In a PLC, teachers and principals specify the goal of their intended learning in explicit terms related to delivering effective instruction for students (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Clearly articulated, specific learning goals provide guidance for professional learners. Shared beliefs, values, and vision serve as a way to bind the norms of the school culture and become the focus of the work that has to be done. The shared vision within PLCs becomes focused on all students learning at high levels, rather than simply ensuring all students are taught (Hord & Tobia, 2012). The moral purpose of the PLC then becomes ensuring that all students learn and achieve at high levels (DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005).

**Intentional Collective Learning and Application**

Intentional collective learning and its application mean that the school staff at all levels are engaged in processes that collectively seek new knowledge among staff and apply learning to solutions that address student needs (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Jolly, 2008). Schools that operate as PLCs need to foster a culture in which learning by all is valued, encouraged, and supported (Hipp & Huffman, 2007).

Collective learning and the application of learning within the professional learning community becomes a school process where teachers work collaboratively by sharing information and developing and applying strategies that foster learning for students (Hord & Tobia, 2012). The focus of collective learning is identified from reviews of student performance data. Professionals focus on gaining new knowledge and skills that will enable them to be more effective at producing desired student outcomes. Collective learning is the “collaborative and continual learning of a staff that is grounded
in reflective dialogue and inquiry” (Hord, 2004, p. 9). Within the PLC, schools become focused and intentional about improving student achievement.

**Shared Personal and Collective Practice**

Shared personal and collective practice is the process of peer review of a teacher’s skills and practices by colleagues (Hord & Tobia, 2012). In Hord and Tobia’s description, feedback and assistance is given to support individual and community improvement. Collective learning and application and shared personal practice are closely interrelated. Teachers within PLCs work together collectively and collaboratively to improve student achievement as they share their practices, study together, focus instructional strategies to respond to student needs, and use data to make decisions about their teaching (Hord, 2004). Additional competencies are gained in transferring the learning achieved in the group setting to classroom practices. According to Hord (2004), shared personal practice is characterized by “the review of a teacher’s behavior by colleagues with included feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement” (p. 7). Hord (2004) advocates that these types of review by colleagues are critical for sustaining teacher learning that is focused on student achievement. Inviting others to observe teaching and give feedback requires trust and multiple opportunities for practice before members become completely comfortable with this activity (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Meier, 2002).

It is interesting to note that the United States Department of Education’s Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative includes increased demands for teacher evaluation (Reform Support Network, n.d.). States receiving RTTT funds are required to implement peer evaluations as a part of the summative teacher evaluation process. Such a requirement
would be warmly embraced in a PLC, according to Hord’s (1997a) vision of a professional learning community.

**Supportive Structural Conditions**

Hord and Tobia (2012) use supportive structural conditions as the collective term utilized to describe supports such as time, location, student assessment data, and research that the learning community will need to do their work. In order to learn and develop new pedagogical skills, teachers must have time built into the day (Hord & Tobia, 2012), a place to meet, and the resources concerning student learning. The time required for collegiality and collaboration must be frequent and long enough to discuss methods of improving student learning, teacher educational philosophies, and long term issues. Educators and school administrators must find the resources to undertake the PLC work if it is to be successful (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010).

**Supportive Relational Conditions**

Supportive relational conditions are described by Hord and Tobia (2012) as conditions such as caring relationships, or the level of trust and respect among PLC members, which build collaborative environments and sustain an atmosphere of collegial learning. Positive collegial relationships provide a productive environment for the operation of a PLC. Supportive relational conditions are described as the “glue that is critical to hold the other dimensions together” (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, p. 146) and become the “springboard for creating PLCs while also supporting and sustaining commitment” (p. 7). Hord and Tobia (2012) further add that PLCs can thrive on the high regard and respect that members hold for one another, which develops over time as members work together. A mature level of trust for one another is a necessity, as
differences are expressed and resolved (Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010). Expressing differences adds to the richness of discussions and the possibilities of new ways of teaching (Achinstein, 2002).

Hord and Tobia (2012) offer that all six of these dimensions exemplify professional behaviors. The basic concept of PLCs is the learning of the professionals, which is tightly connected to the needs of their students. “The PLC is the most powerful structure or strategy available for the required, continuous, formal, and informal learning of the education force” (Hord & Tobia, 2012, p.106). Although a powerful structure for professional learning, implementing PLCs may require changes in the way schools operate. Those changes can present both benefits and challenges to students, teachers, and administrators.

**Professional Learning Communities – Benefits and Challenges**

**Benefits of PLCs**

**PLCs and student achievement.** At its core, the premise of a professional learning community (PLC) rests on the promise of improving student learning by improving teaching practice (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Professional learning communities are supported by research (DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Easton, 2011; Haberman, 2004; Hord, 1997b; Hord & Tobia, 2012; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006; Schmoker, 2006) as a method for teacher learning, school improvement, and student achievement. “The [PLC] model is working to shift teachers’ habits of mind and create cultures of teaching that engage educators in enhancing teacher and student learning” (Vescio, et.al, 2008, p. 89). Darling-Hammond (1997) pointed out the factors that make a substantial difference in student and teacher learning include common curricular
experiences and high expectations for all students, an emphasis on active learning and
authentic instruction, and forms of organization that allow teachers to work together and
take collective responsibility for students, all of which are encompassed within the
dimensions of PLCs.

In a comprehensive study of professional learning communities, Bolam et al.
(2005) examined survey data from 393 schools that included early childhood, elementary,
and secondary schools as well as interview-based case study data from 16 school sites.
Both survey and case study data suggest a positive impact on teaching practice, morale,
and student achievement as a result of participation in professional learning community
activities. Teachers reported an increase in collaboration as they worked in learning
communities (Bolam et al., 2005). This change in teacher culture to collaboration, which
had traditionally been described as isolationist (Hord & Sommers, 2008), led to
fundamental shifts in the way that teachers approached their work.

In their review of the literature Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) concluded that
participation in learning communities impacted teaching practice as teachers became
more student centered. Their examination included schools at elementary, middle, and
high school levels. With a focus on improving student learning, working in professional
learning communities was found to lead to changes that positively impacted student
learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). In addition, the researchers found that the
teaching culture was improved because the learning communities increased collaboration,
the focus on student learning, teacher authority or empowerment, and continuous
learning. Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) also concluded that when teachers participate
in a learning community, students benefit as well, as indicated by improved achievement
scores over time. The results of each of the ten studies in their review revealed that the intense focus on student learning and achievement was the aspect of PLCs that most impacted student learning. The findings of Vescio and his colleagues (2008) provided evidence of the benefit of learning communities for teachers and their students. They concluded that when professional learning communities are implemented, school culture is improved due to greater collaboration, teacher empowerment is increased, teachers become more student centered, and the focus is on student learning, as evidenced by improved achievement scores (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

Similarly, in a study linking the effects of teacher collaboration in a PLC structure to student achievement on high-stakes accountability assessments, Goddard, Goddard, and Tschannen-Moran (2007) found that “teacher collaboration is positively and significantly related to differences in fourth grade achievement on state mandated assessments of mathematics and reading achievement” (p. 883). The authors concluded that when teachers collaborate, they share experiences and knowledge that can promote learning for instructional improvement.

In a case study involving low-income schools, Darling-Hammond and Friedlaender (2008) discovered that structuring time for teachers to collaborate in the design of a curriculum to meet the needs of the students not only increased staff morale, but also resulted in higher than average graduation and college admission rates in comparison to other schools in that state. Their findings supported the premise that collaboration among teachers within the PLC environment had a profound effect on reducing teacher isolation, as well as improving student learning.
Owen (2012) found that ongoing professional learning involving collaborative team approaches was an important aspect of the process required to support changes in teaching practices. Teacher learning occurred within the day-to-day collaborative work of PLCs, with specific examples of changes in practices occurring through observations, collaborative planning, teaching, assessing, and reflection with colleagues (Owen, 2012). Student learning impacts included improved achievement, fewer behavior management issues, increased attendance, greater student engagement, and increased student confidence levels (Owen, 2012).

**PLCs and school culture.** DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) expound upon the conditions supporting the school as a professional learning community (PLC) by stating “it represents more than just a series of practices; it rests upon a set of beliefs, assumptions, and expectations regarding school” (p. 11). School culture is defined as the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norm for the school and that shape how the staff thinks, feels, and acts (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003).

The staff members within a school who function collaboratively have “the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. xi), and has the basis for creating a professional learning community. In an interview conducted by Dennis Sparks (2004), Andy Hargreaves elaborated further by saying, “A professional learning community is an ethos that infuses every single aspect of a school’s operation. When a school becomes a professional learning community, everything in the school looks different than it did before” (p. 48). Changing the norms of the way a school operates can affect the habits and actions of the staff which creates a change in the school’s culture.
In the Forward to *Reculturing Schools as Professional Learning Communities* (Huffman & Hipp, 2003), Hord stated, “A community of continuous learners – professional learners – is a key element of school capacity, a way of working, and the most powerful professional development and change strategy available for improving our education system” (p. vii). When educators work in professional learning communities, they build capacity for creating changes in schools that can impact students in a positive way (Hord, 1997a; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). A change of practice is linked to a change of culture (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003). “The improvement of practice is based on change of practice, and change of practice is based on learning. Change of knowledge, understanding, insights, skills, behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, and values requires learning” (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, p. vii) (Italics added for emphasis by authors).

**Challenges of PLCs**

Sustainability may be difficult for professional learning communities for many reasons; however, if a school community supports the PLC approach, the PLC in itself can become a tool to address many of the problems that threaten sustainability (Easton, 2011). Easton (2011) contends that while not all attempts at creating and sustaining PLCs have been completely successful, some PLCs remain self-organizing and vibrant. Other PLCs have disappeared in disappointment. This may be because PLCs were not allowed to become a self-organizing community…but were subjected to rigid structures and rules (Easton, 2011). It could be the lack of time for needed support that presents a challenge to sustaining PLCs, or multiple levels of practice that inhibits school-wide communication (Leonard & Leonard, 2003). The lack of professional development
resources to support PLCs or the lack of the principal’s support have presented challenges to sustainability in many schools as well (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

**School accountability.** Often, the reason for failure of professional learning communities is that not all of the dimensions are included. For example, it can be difficult in this era of high accountability for school leaders to actually share leadership, an important component of PLCs. Additionally, school climate and the social capacity of the school staff for change and improvement have been largely ignored by state and national policy makers (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Instead of supporting and sustaining PLCs, testing mandates and system changes, such as school choice or finance reform, have been favored (Louis, 2008).

The pressures and stress of meeting mandates have often taken precedence over sustaining PLCs in some schools; as collaborative learning is a slower, although more sustainable, process for change (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Decision makers who demand improvement data too early in the life of new PLCs have created barriers to success. According to Wasley and Lear (2001), “…the demand for instant evidence of success often leads to compromises that seem necessary for survival but decrease the possibility for long-term success” (p. 25). In some schools, PLCs have been used as an instrument for accountability as they have been turned into add-on teams driven by data analysis in “cultures of fear that demand instant results” (Hargreaves, 2007, p. 183). Hargreaves (2007) contends that if the team’s only purpose is to analyze data, it would be more appropriately called a data team, rather than a PLC.

**Teacher preparation programs and teacher decision-making.** “Recent Federal mandates have targeted the area that has the greatest impact on student learning – teacher
quality” (Hord & Tobia, 2012, p. 30). That focus has created opposing views between some who believe that teachers can only be prepared through rigorous university training programs that grant certification, and others, who believe this process to be inadequate and ought to be supplemented, even supplanted, by a process that allows non education college graduates alternative pathways to certification (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Many of the federal and state mandates have controlled decisions that teachers themselves should be making. Hord and Tobia (2012) offer that teachers, as a profession, should be setting the standards for student achievement, rather than those decisions being made by legislators or administrators. Professional learning communities would offer teachers an arena for the work of setting the standards.

Teacher unions. Teachers’ unions have attempted to bring teacher voice back into the decisions being made for teachers about what and how they will teach (Hord & Tobia, 2012). While unions have supported fairness for all, many of their arguments have focused more on teacher rights, rather than on teacher responsibilities (Hord & Tobia, 2012).

However, Hord and Tobia (2012) contend that the reputation of unions for protecting poor performing teachers and focusing mainly on working conditions has been a barrier to the success of PLCs. There are few positive examples of unions that focus on improving teaching as a profession by setting higher expectations for teachers (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Creating a culture within a school where teachers work and plan together and hold each other accountable for student success, which is the basic structure of a PLC, would not allow unions to protect poor performing teachers (Hord & Tobia, 2012). The most effective method that unions and teachers can utilize to convince the public and
each other of their professionalism, is to “…engage with one another as partners in…improving instruction…to improve student learning” (Hord & Tobia, 2012, p. 33), such as participating in professional learning community activities.

**Conflicts.** When conflict and diversity arise, some faculty members are at odds while others value the growth they experience. Achinstein (2002) challenged the concept that teachers in learning communities should consistently have the same values and share common opinions. She contends that conflict is a natural part of the learning community experience and, as such, allows teachers the opportunity to embrace and understand their differences – ultimately, to learn from one another. The key, according to Achinstein (2002), is viewing the conflict as positive and hopeful toward needed change, rather than problematic or unprofessional.

Bourke, Mentis, and O’Neill (2013) conducted a study on the introduction of a new assessment model. They found that conflict and tensions arose among teachers linked to roles, rules, and division of labor. They recommended constant discussion, review, and negotiations among participants in order to thoroughly learn a new initiative. Similarly, the Harvard Business Manager Update (2006) states about teamwork, “…the conditions that foster team effectiveness are simple and seemingly straightforward to put into place. Yet what’s required for success can be a wrenching organizational change, threatening turf and interests of…people within the company” (p. 4). The key is how learning communities are managed and if the organization really supports teamwork.

**School leaders.** Sometimes PLCs have been introduced and supported by a particular school leader, yet have not become ingrained in the culture of how the staff operates. When that leader moves on, the impetus for collaboration may die and the
fledgling school culture cannot sustain the professional learning community approach. If PLCs are looked upon as a new program, rather than a method of functioning, they will not be sustainable (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Once schools implement a PLC, sustaining commitment to continuous improvement can be challenging. Hord and Sommers (2008) explained, “One of the enduring problems in many schools is the lack of a consistent focus or direction for improvement” (p. 49), which can occur with a change in leadership. The success of PLCs is dependent on the teachers’ commitment to collaboration, so much so that it becomes the culture of the school (Hord & Sommers, 2008), not the initiative of one leader.

**Isolation.** The collaboration required in PLCs is not the typical way that schools operate; isolationism has been the traditional mode of operation in schools (Hord & Sommers, 2008). In the U.S., teachers’ practice and learning environments are characterized by an *egg carton* structure, separated by classrooms that provide little opportunity for teachers to learn from one another (Spillane & Louis, 2002). It just may be too difficult in some schools to overcome the attitude of the egg carton.

DuFour and Eaker (1998) remind principals of the difficulty involved in transforming schools into professional learning communities. While change initiatives bring about discomfort, anxiousness, and even conflict, the task is not impossible (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Research (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Louis et al., 1996; Wells & Feun, 2007) has shown that political agendas as well as internal and external forces, which seek to diminish the value of the work of PLCs, have surfaced and had to be faced by the principal.
Moving beyond the traditional practice of teacher isolation impacted PLC development. Snyder, Acker-Hocevar, and Snyder (2008) indicated that teams needed both knowledge and skills in order to “overcome our traditions and training to work alone, teams need knowledge and skills for working together” (p. 252). Many teachers still operate in isolation, only doing superficial planning together rather than the deep learning, reflection, and self-accountability that comes from engaging with one another in professional learning communities (Hord & Tobia, 2012).

**Teacher Attitudes.** “Engaging in learning and trusting relationships can be risky, especially when working with colleagues” (E. F. Tobia, personal communication, June 26, 2013). This is somewhat new to teachers since teaching has essentially been an isolated profession (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Staff attitude regarding collaborative work and teachers’ fears of open and honest feedback from colleagues can present barriers to PLC success (Meier, 2002; Wood, 2007). The type of professional learning which occurs in PLCs requires teachers to take more control of their work, release knowledge and expertise to their colleagues, develop critical judgment of one another’s practices based on student achievement data, and take more responsibility for student learning (Wood, 2007). Many teachers are fearful of accepting these changes (Wood, 2007).

Teachers are unlikely to participate in sharing personal teaching practices, classroom observation and feedback, mentoring partnerships, discussion about pedagogical issues, or curriculum innovation unless they feel safe; therefore, trust and respect from colleagues is vital (Louis, Kruse & Bryk, 1995; E. F. Tobia, personal communication, June 26, 2013). “Developing this trust can be critical to the success of
professional learning communities and can be a real challenge to school administrators” (E.F. Tobia, personal communication, June 26, 2013).

The Role of the Principal in Professional Learning Communities

In 2001, the federal Elementary and Secondary Act was reauthorized and became known as No Child Left Behind [NCLB] (www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml). This legislation placed new pressures on school principals by raising the accountability standards for individual schools. NCLB supports standard-based education, which establishes measurable goals to improve individual outcomes in education (Hughes & Jones, 2010). NCLB requires that each state develop assessment instruments to measure students’ abilities to meet the state standards and each teacher’s ability to adequately teach the content contained in the state standards (Siegrist, Weeks, Pate, & Monetti, 2009). Consequently, a sense of urgency has ensued among school principals to find ways to increase student achievement in order to meet the demands imposed by this legislation (Faklaris, 2013). Arthur Levine (2005) in his report, Educating School Leaders, which was based on a four-year study of the nation's schools of education, asserts that in addition to managing a school, today's principal must lead the school “through an era of profound social change that has required fundamental rethinking of what schools do and how they do it” (p. 5).

As school leaders, principals play a key role in the success or failure of professional learning community development (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Transforming the school into a professional learning community can be done only with the school leaders’ consent and active nurturing of the entire staff’s development as a community (Hord, 1997a). In contrast, lack of administrative support or direction has been identified as a
stumbling block to the successful development and sustaining of learning communities (Wells & Feun, 2007).

Morrissey (2000) describes the role of the principal in establishing PLCs as supporting the staff in continuous learning, sharing decision-making responsibility and leadership capacity, keeping the vision of the school at the forefront, all while holding high expectations for student achievement and communicating them often. Morrissey’s (2000) research revealed that school leaders can support and sustain PLCs by maintaining a visible presence in the school and visiting classrooms frequently, providing resources to support staff learning, providing time for teachers to meet and discuss improvement related issues, and promoting and encouraging communication among staff members in order to promote coordination of effort and unity of purpose.

The role of principals in developing professional learning communities involves acting as an agent for change who shapes the culture of a school (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008). The Ontario Principals’ Council (2009) places emphasis on the principal’s role as it describes a PLC as “a school environment where teachers work collaboratively in purposefully designed groups to improve student achievement within a structure of support provided by the school administrator” (p. 119).

The role of principals in developing and sustaining professional learning communities is broad. Sparks (2005) contends that leaders matter in the creation and long term maintenance of professional learning communities. Principals in schools with successful learning communities have provided opportunities for developing a culture within a school that leads to the incorporation of the six dimensions of a professional
learning community (Hord & Tobia, 2012). The literature on the role of the principal will be examined through the lens of Hord and Tobia’s six dimensions of PLCs.

**Supportive and Shared Leadership**

Hord, Roussin, and Sommers (2010) advise principals to view the professional staff as a resource for school improvement by expanding opportunities for leadership among staff members. Delegation of authority is a common practice among effective and successful principals (Blase & Kirby, 2009). Strosberg (2010) advocates that the release of authority, while giving teachers greater responsibility for decision making, is vital to the success of PLCs. By sharing leadership, principals also expand the capacity of the entire school to address problems and discover solutions (Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010).

Schools immersed in the professional learning community concept have utilized shared leadership and decision-making to bring about school improvement that positively impact teacher morale, as well as the learning of students (Cowan, 2003; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Such leadership does not resemble that of the factory model found in the early part of the twentieth century, but finds administrators participating in nurturing relationships within the school that allows for shared leadership, shared power, shared authority, and shared responsibility (Hord, 1997a; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

A principal who is willing to initiate structure and share responsibilities contributes to a positive school culture and the development of a PLC (O’Malley, 2010). Hipp and Huffman (2007) agree that school communities involved in efforts to broaden the base of leadership to include both teachers and administrators, are much more likely
to make great strides in becoming learning organizations which address critical student needs. PLCs, when functioning at their best, have been found to “embody the most positive features of distributed leadership, bringing the energy and ability of the whole community forward to serve the best interests of all students” (Hargreaves & Fink, 2006, p. 128).

The principal is not the authoritative manager in a PLC, but one who involves the staff in the decision making process (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Professional learning communities require a paradigm shift from viewing the principals as the “leaders” of schools and teachers as the “implementers” to a practice of principals serving as “leaders of leaders” (Hipp & Huffman, 2007, p. 22). Top-down management structures can impede the development of shared leadership in schools (York-Barr & Duke, 2004).

Senge (1990) described the new work of leaders in learning communities as being designers, stewards, and teachers. Portin, Schnelder, DeArmond, and Gundlach, (2003) added to the body of literature on leadership by finding that while principals are responsible for ensuring leadership in critical areas, they do not have to be the sole provider. Incorporating leadership practices that utilize shared power has been found to create greater motivation, a sense of community, efficacy, trust, and even risk taking among staff (Wahlstrom & Louis, 2008).

Shared leadership implies that principals provide guidance and resources needed for teachers and other staff members to make critical decisions (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Sagnak’s (2012) research revealed that when elementary principals display leadership empowerment, such as giving teachers more leadership responsibility in professional learning communities, teacher efficacy increases and staff members become more
innovative in their instruction. Similarly, Phillips (2003) concluded that the shared leadership approach where principals invite staff input and action in decision-making, creates a supportive learning environment in which teachers feel comfortable experimenting with innovative curriculum and instructional strategies. Together the principal and teachers in these schools developed innovative programs that increased student achievement.

Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) contend that when principals share leadership responsibilities with faculty members, they must also be ready to abide by actions initiated by teachers. Giving up control over key decisions becomes an increasingly high-stakes stance when the bottom line for accountability rests with the principal. In addition, tentative principal and teacher efforts to share leadership are increasingly complicated by school districts’ initiatives to involve teachers in other leadership activities as well (Firestone & Martinez, 2007). Although the system in today’s schools is designed as a hierarchical model where the responsibility for ensuring quality education rests at the top of the organization, there is increasing recognition everywhere that there is a need for leadership from more people to get the needed work done (Leithwood & Mascall, 2007).

Hord, Roussin, and Sommers (2010) offer that the principal should play a strong directing role at the initiation of the PLC, then step back to support leadership opportunities and leadership development in the staff, while still participating in the professional learning community. Their research findings agree with that of Wahlstrom and Louis (2008), as the findings suggest that sharing that power and authority with the staff can be challenging. However, Hord, Roussin, and Sommers offer that those who
have accomplished the sharing of authority have “…found it satisfying to have colleagues who are responsible and accountable for improving instruction for the students” (p.59). The research of Lambert (2003) adds that the mistake in the past has been to look to the principal alone for instructional leadership, when instructional leadership in everyone’s work.

**Shared Beliefs, Values, and Vision**

Shared beliefs, values, and vision are foundational elements of successful professional learning communities (Hord, 1997b). In effective professional learning communities, principals not only participated in the development of shared vision and beliefs, but also shouldered responsibility to promote and protect the shared vision (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Hord & Sommers, 2008). In a study of mature and less mature professional learning communities, Huffman (2003) found that “strong leadership by the principal provides faculty members the direction needed to develop the why, what, who, and how related to shared values and vision for their school” (p. 32).

Principals need to be cognizant of the varying levels of buy-in and implementation of PLC practices. Wells and Feun (2007) reported that teachers in their study expressed the need for help in dealing with those who were resistant to the collaboration that was needed to develop shared beliefs, values, and visions, as well as for collective learning and shared practice. From their research on sustainable leadership, Hargreaves and Fink (2006) found that PLCs “can’t be forced, they can only be facilitated” (p. 129). Administrators have the opportunity to provide this help as they
recognize that each of the staff members may be in different stages of implementation (Ontario Principals’ Council, 2009).

In her study of communities of practice, Printy (2008) posited that the expectations communicated by school leaders are critical influences on teachers’ participation in communities of practice, motivating them generally and cuing them that learning is required to attain the vision of the instructional programs. The Ontario Principals’ Council (2009) concluded that transforming a school into a PLC can only happen when the principal advocates for collaborative action, collective vision, and actively supports the faculty’s development as a learning community.

**Intentional Collective Learning and Application**

Collective learning and application represents another hallmark of schools that are operating as effective PLCs. Intentional collective learning and application occurs when a school staff engages in processes that collectively seek new knowledge and apply learning to solutions that address student needs (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012). In this era of high accountability, there is a great need for instructional leaders who are responsible for developing a plan to improve instruction, improve student assessment results, and increase the total performance of the school (Gupton, 2010). The need to prepare teachers to learn more innovative practices that enable students to achieve the new educational standards calls for educators to become learners themselves in order to develop the appropriate knowledge and skills to achieve their effectiveness with students (Hord & Tobia, 2012).

PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many,
2010; Jolly, 2008). Because student learning is dependent on knowledgeable teachers (Hord & Tobia, 2012), never before in the history of education has there been such a need for leaders who can create a culture that fosters both adult and student learning (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004).

From his extensive work on the role of the principal, Barth (2005) asserted that the principal must lead the way to bring about a community of lifelong learners. School leaders have the opportunity to provide supportive structures that lead to collective learning and build the capacity of the staff (Barth, 2005). Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom (2010) concluded, “First, both teachers and those with formal administrative responsibilities need to acknowledge and act on the increased importance of collective and shared work around instruction” (p. 331). They proposed that PLCs must be more than a program initiated by administrators to analyze data for the purposes of increasing test scores.

Wahlstrom and York-Barr (2011) surmised that when school leaders attend to the context in which others around them learn, they will be able to put into place structures and supports which are likely to be effective for learning. Just as PLCs are based on the belief that students can learn, principals must believe that teachers can and are willing to learn as well (Barth, 2005). In order to build a community of lifelong learners, Barth posited that principals should model lifelong learning and build a staff of lifelong learners. Findings from Hord’s (1997a) research indicated that in order to develop a culture of intellectual quality, school leaders “actively supported a culture of inquiry through constant scanning and bringing in of new ideas and people to help teachers reflect on their teaching practice and to develop increased skills” (p. 37).
Hord and Sommers (2008) believe that if PLCs are to be sustained in schools, then principals will have to monitor the progress of learning, participate as partners, and communicate the results. It is the principal’s role to inform the staff of the value of learning in the PLC framework, thus creating the direction (Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). Some administrators provide the supports necessary for PLCs to function, “…and then say, go to it, without actually guiding the groups and helping them to understand their mission and how to function as a PLC. The principal needs to be a participant, not leading the PLCs, but collaborating with the teachers” (S.M. Hord, personal communication, June 27, 2013).

Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) concur that the principal must offer and attend professional development opportunities with the staff. Additionally, their research offered that redesigning the school to develop collaborative teams and participating on those teams, as well as being knowledgeable on instructional practices that have the greatest impact on student learning, will allow principals to better manage the instructional program.

**Shared Personal and Collective Practice**

Morrissey (2000) describes the role of the principal in establishing professional learning communities as promoting and encouraging communication among staff members in order to promote coordination of effort and unity of purpose. Today, principals are faced with the challenge of creating a school culture with a climate of collegiality in which "professionals talk about practice, share their craft knowledge, and observe and root for the success of one another" (Barth, 2006, p. 13). Barth believes that principals must develop a leadership style which encourages frequent collaboration
between administrators and the teaching staff if professional learning communities are to be effective. Principals have a direct influence on the progress of the PLCs, setting the tone and boundaries for teacher interactions and conversations (Jacques, 2010).

“The school principal is often the catalyst for launching a PLC and for the staff’s development into a way of working collaboratively, sharing expertise, wisdom, and craft knowledge with colleagues” (Hord, 2008, p. 384). Hord, Roussin, and Sommers (2010) offer that when principals convene PLCs, the typical isolation of staff members is reduced and collegiality is gained in the help and support of other educators in solving the problems of challenged learners. Similarly, in a study on the conditions and factors that have the most effect on professional communities, Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1994) found that leaders can promote patterns of interaction and communication among faculty in even the largest schools. Their study demonstrated that the development of a professional community requires structures that encourage sharing of ideas, within and among units such as teams, grade levels, and subject departments (Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). They suggest that regular meetings or electronic communications can provide a network for the exchange of ideas on instruction, curriculum, assessment and other professional issues. The school leader can facilitate this sort of communication and create the time and structures necessary.

When principals teach discussion skills to their staff, they support strong learning communities (Hord & Hirsh, 2009). Hord and Hirsh (2009) suggest that principals should teach the staff to use dialogue, where members share knowledge and practices, feelings or biases. This type of communication is preferred when the goal is to help participants understand one another and come to consensus. Hord and Hirsh (2009) also
offer that discussion is a good choice when the goal is to make a decision about a course of action, such as adopting various instructional strategies, and add that the principal should teach the staff how to communicate during these various interactions to finalize their decisions.

Supportive Structural Conditions

McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) assert, “Because of their positional authority and control over school resources, principals are in a strategic position to promote or inhibit the development of teacher learning communities in their school” (p. 56). Supportive structural conditions are defined as time, data, location, and resources provided for the community to do their learning work (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012). Principals can impact the practices of PLCs by establishing policies, expectations, and structures that will support the collaborative work of PLCs.

Scheduling time for professional learning community meetings, providing resources and training necessary for the change of teacher practice, and incorporating opportunities for mentoring and coaching are roles that have also been identified as falling under the principal’s realm of influence (Cawelti, 2003; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord & Sommers, 2008). Successful leaders set directions, develop people, and redesign the organization into learning communities (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). As change agents, successful leaders developed people by “offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support and providing appropriate models of best practice considered fundamental to the organization” (Leithwood et al., p. 9).
Supportive Relational Conditions

Ensuring that conditions are in place which will foster the development and sustainability of the professional learning community falls under the principal’s responsibilities (Hord, 2008). Supportive relational conditions are caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and efforts to improve learning, which build collaborative environments and sustain an atmosphere of collegial learning (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Hord and Sommers (2008) maintain that when principals nurture the human capacity of their staff, they contribute to the development of collegiality necessary to create a culture of trust. “Because of the hierarchical nature of relationships within schools, it is the responsibility of the person with greater power to take the initiative to build and sustain trusting relationships” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p.35). Similarly, Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) contend that education leaders must possess an affective affinity with those they seek to lead in caring professions, such as teaching. A successful school leader must attend to the emotional well-being of the learning organization in order to develop the positive relationships necessary to support professional learning communities (Goleman, et. al., 2002). It is not enough to have pedagogical competence, emotional and cultural competencies must be present as well. Louis, Dretzke, and Wahlstrom (2010) recommend, “…school leader preparation and professional development programs should continue to emphasize both the ‘softer’ (emotional) and ‘harder’ (behavioral) aspects of leadership” (p. 332).

“Leaders…, along with others, shape a school or school system’s structure and culture in ways that promote learning, collaboration, and environments in which all
members of the community feel cared for and respected” (Sparks, 2005, p. 157).

Principals in schools with successful learning communities have provided opportunities for developing a culture within the school that led to the incorporation of supportive relational conditions (Hord & Sommers, 2008). A deeper examination of supportive relational conditions is necessary if one is to fully understand both the importance of this aspect of PLCs and the role of the principal in creating and supporting positive relationships.

A Deeper Look at Supportive Relational Conditions and Behaviors

Learning and School Climate

Hord and Tobia (2012) describe relational conditions as those behaviors which have to do with collegial relationships between people in school settings. Furthermore, they define supportive relational conditions as encouragement and supports which sustain an atmosphere of collegial learning and positive relationships (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). When supportive conditions are present, collegial relationships are established and fostered (Leo & Cowan, 2000). Examples of supportive relational conditions include:

- making efforts to reduce teacher isolation (Boyd-Dimock, & Hord, 1994; Hord, 1997b),
- offering time for collaboration (Hord & Tobia, 2012),
- teaching staff members positive discussion skills (Hord & Hirsch, 2009),
- offering teachers opportunities for observation and feedback on instructional strategies by colleagues (Louis, Kruse & Bryk, 1995),
- offering decision-making opportunities (Depasquale, 2012; Strosberg, 2010), and
setting the expectation for respectful dialog (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009)

It is essential for leaders and teachers to create the positive setting, where

collaborative work can flourish if teacher learning is to occur (Palmer, 2007).

Establishing conditions that promote collegial learning, positive relationships, and

collaborative practice build the capacity of schools to foster greater student learning
(Fleming & Leo, 1999; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp,
2003).

Hord and Tobia (2012) place emphasis on establishing a positive school climate
and supportive relational conditions in order for professional learning communities
(PLCs) to be effective. School climate refers to the quality and character of school life
and is in part, based on patterns of people’s experiences, interpersonal relationships,
teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli,
& Pickeral, 2009). “A sustainable, positive school climate fosters youth development
and the learning necessary for a productive, contributive, and satisfying life in a
democratic society” (Cohen et al., 2009, p. 181). This climate includes norms, values,
and expectations that support people in feeling socially, emotionally, and physically safe
and respected (Cohen et al., 2009). In a study on school environment, supportive
relationships were addressed as paramount to achieving a positive school climate (Cohen
& Brown, 2013).

Supportive relationships, or the lack thereof, impact the development of
professional learning communities (Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010). Efforts
concentrated on reducing isolation of teachers by building a caring, collaborative
environment resulted in the reduction of natural boundaries found between teachers and
departments in schools (Boyd-Dimock, & Hord, 1994; Hord, 1997b). Roundtree and Hipp (2010) discovered a noticeable change in staff and student morale when the staff was confident that positive collegial relationships were in place.

Similarly, in a study of the relationship between the frameworks of professional networks, supportive relational climates, and school innovation, Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleegers, (2011) found that the more closely connected teachers are with regard to work related issues, the more they perceived their school’s climate to be supportive of teaching innovations. It was found that schools with supportive professional interactions provided teachers with greater opportunity for involvement in decision making. Those social/professional ties, in combination with shared decision making, contributed to teacher learning and to developing a school-wide innovative climate (Moolenaar et al., 2011). In a related analysis of teachers’ professional interactions and relationships, extensive and fluid exchanges of information and expertise between the faculty led to greater social interaction and improved instruction, more so than bringing in outside experts for professional development (Penuel, Riel, Krause, & Frank, 2009).

**Developing Relationships**

Supporting the work of learning communities requires school leaders to address relationships in order to establish and reinforce a positive school climate and successful collaboration (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). “Creating the context for positive relations to exist between staff members is essential in order for PLCs to be successful” (E.F. Tobia, personal communication, June 26, 2013).

Schmoker (2006) justified the time that school leaders devote to cultivating relationships that support teacher collaboration by referring to its impact on student
learning. “The right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration and relations improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting” (p. 177). Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) agree that the single common factor to successful change in schools is improving relationships. Their research found that when relationships improved, schools improved and student achievement increased (Goleman et al., 2002). Relationships demonstrate a significant influence on school achievement as it is “abundantly clear that one of the keys to successful change is the improvement of relationships” (Fullan, 2007, p. 4).

Steyn (2013) indicated that professional relationships create a sense of shared responsibility and common language that support meaningful learning among teachers. Those relationships must include intensive interactions among teachers so that their practices and beliefs can be shared, debated, and adopted. Steyn emphasizes implications for school leaders, such as developing appropriate collaborative structures to support collegial conditions that provide exposure to new ideas, strategies, and opportunities for teachers to learn together. Cohen and Brown (2013) also advocate that principals who share leadership by leading from within the group, rather than from the top, develop trusting relationships, and solicit teacher insights and input allow collaboration to occur. The principal of a school with PLCs understands the importance of supporting teachers in a collaborative culture, and supports the emotional needs of each staff member (Ontario Principals’ Council, 2009)

The establishment of supportive relationships among educators lowers teaching colleagues’ sense of vulnerability as they engage in “the new and uncertain tasks of
reform to advance the best interests of children” (Brewster & Railsback, 2003, p. 7). However, creating the conditions in which teachers feel safe enough to share deeply and openly with colleagues about the challenges they face in their classrooms can be a daunting task for administrators (Hord & Tobia, 2012).

**Attributes of Supportive Relational Conditions**

Supportive relational conditions are characterized as conditions within the school environment which foster relationships and human capacity to improve student learning (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). Those conditions were found to impact all of the other dimensions of PLCs (Hipp & Huffman, 2003). Supportive conditions are necessary throughout all the other dimensions in order for PLCs to be effective (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). A culture of trust, respect, and inclusiveness with a focus on relationships must exist in order for any of the dimensions of PLCs to have an effect on a community of learners (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). An atmosphere of collegiality that leads to supportive relational conditions includes the following attributes:

- caring relationships;
- trust and respect;
- recognition and celebrations;
- risk-taking; and
- unified efforts to embed change (Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Hipp & Huffman, 2010).

**Caring relationships.** Megan Tschannen-Moran (2004) wrote extensively about caring relationships in schools. Her work emphasized that a tone of caring is exemplified in a faculty’s care for one another and is extended to their care for the students. “The
impetus for school improvement stems from a caring atmosphere. Caring fuels the enormous effort needed to sustain a positive school environment…” (Tschannen-Moran, 2004, p. 6) Tschannen-Moran also advocates that the work of schools occurs mainly through relationships, so principals should invest time and resources into fostering and nurturing those relationships. Structuring time for faculty to work together to share ideas and resources develops a strong sense of community to support staff in overcoming inevitable differences and to promote student learning (Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Tschannen-Moran (2004) also asserts that adults within the community of learners who support each other through positive relationships model for their students what is expected and create a culture which supports high levels of student achievement. “Teachers and students are most productive when they work in a context of caring, support, and trust” (Paterson & Paterson, 2004, p. 76).

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) agree that socially and emotionally competent teachers set a caring tone in the entire school by developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their colleagues. The school staff members in their research study encouraged cooperation among colleagues and acted as role models for students and staff for respectful and appropriate communication and social behavior. Faculty and staff behaviors that demonstrate caring relationships are associated with an optimal social and emotional school climate (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). La Paro, Pianta, and Stuhlman (2004) characterized those staff behaviors as including appropriate expressions of emotions, strong interest and focus on task, low levels of conflict, supportiveness and responsiveness to individual differences, and respectful communication and problem solving.
Communications that model integrity and honesty also demonstrate a level of concern and caring for others (Combs, Edmondson, & Harris, 2013). Caring and concern can further include appreciation, attention, acts of service, and active listening (Combs et al., 2013). Additionally, keeping one’s word and acting in the best interest of others are included in measures of caring relationships (Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011).

**Trust and respect.** If professional learning communities are to be effective, the elements of trust and respect are requirements among teachers, between teachers and administrators, between campus and district-level personnel, and between all school personnel (Hord et al., 2000). Trust is defined as one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another and includes the components of benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competency (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000). Educational research has long advocated that in order to be productive and accomplish goals, schools need cooperative relationships. Trust and respect are essential in forming those relationships (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996).

**Absence of trust.** Hord and her colleagues (Hord et al., 2000) found that high levels of trust promote risk-taking, honest communication, and deep commitments to school initiatives. Conversely, their study also discovered that the absence of trust can cause personnel to focus on conflicts of personality and practice, rather than issues of instruction. Tschannen-Moran (2004) contends that when faculty members do not trust one another, they will attempt to minimize their vulnerability, which will eliminate collaboration among school staff. She asserts that in the absence of trust, vulnerability is increased and fear causes people to take self-protective actions, such as withholding information, refusing to share ideas, or using excessive monitoring and control systems.
People become unwilling to take risks and instead, try to create greater protective systems (Tschannen-Moran, 2004). The lack of trust and respect in the work environment not only creates discomfort and unpleasantness, it also has a negative impact on the organization’s effectiveness and progress (Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

Palmer (2007) contends that the biggest challenge to developing a culture of trust in an organization is the problem of fear. He believes that many teachers live with fear on a daily basis. The greatest of their fears, according to Palmer, is the fear of changing their idea of what constitutes good teaching. As they work through their fear, they no longer blame the failure to learn on students, but begin to more deeply assess their own skills as educators (Palmer, 2007). Hord and Tobia (2012) recommend gaining the support of teaching colleagues to overcome the fear and develop a culture of openness, respect, and trust that is the basic premise of PLCs.

*Efficacy.* Trust is the foundation on which teachers can be open and honest enough to collaborate and gain a sense of collective efficacy (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000). Efficacy, as defined by Bandura (1993), is a "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute a course of action required to produce a given attainment" (p. 3). In the case of a collective faculty, this can be an attitude of confidence that as a team, they can competently teach students and overcome obstacles to learning (Hord & Tobia, 2012). This attitude develops the culture of openness, trust, and respect that is foundational to PLCs and becomes a critical value across all of the dimensions of PLCs (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).
Sharing practices. Conscious efforts to build trust and respect characterize many initiatives to create professional learning communities (Hord et al., 2000). When teachers share their instructional practices by inviting the process of peer review by colleagues, they must feel safe in order for the sharing of personal practices to be successful and effective toward improved student learning (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Interactions which involve teachers observing each other require a high level of mutual trust and respect among staff members. This is the reason that shared personal practice may be lacking in all but the most advanced schools in the continuum of professional learning community development (Cowan, 2003).

Trust and respect provide the basis for teachers in giving and accepting the feedback from each other in order to improve their instruction (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Routman (2012) advocates for teacher coaches who are willing to work side-by-side with other educators to share teaching experiences, give feedback, and coach each other. Yet, she also underscores the high level of trust that is necessary for teachers to collaborate, coach, and mentor each other in this approach.

Culture change. Trust and respect, although critical, are elements of organizational culture that are often overlooked when PLCs are being introduced (Louis, 2008). PLCs represent a change in culture in many schools where collaboration is not the norm. Louis contends that change decreases trust and creates additional tensions because it disrupts existing norms of functioning. The problem of trust and respect in schools is that relationships between teachers and administrators are often less trusting than those among teachers (Louis, 2008). Louis advises educational leaders to insure high levels of trust before trying to implement a change of culture, such as a professional learning
community. Those high levels of trust take time, something our educational accountability does not always afford us, in order to re-culture our schools into learning organizations (Louis, 2006).

**Implications and recommendations regarding trust and respect.** Implications and recommendations for principals are plentiful in the literature in regards to developing the trust and respect necessary for the successful functioning of PLCs. Hord and Tobia (2012) recommend that principals set an example within the school by caring for students and adults, protecting collaboration time, informing teachers that they are held in high regard, and deferring often to teachers’ professional judgment. In their discussion of collective trust which focuses on faculty trust in principals, Forsyth, Adams, and Hoy (2011) recommend that the principal be honest and authentic, build school structures that enable and preserve trust and respect, nurture trust before initiating school reform, and develop an attitude of academic optimism.

Tschannen-Moran (2004) agrees that trust in schools can be fostered by the behavior of the leader. She advises principals to develop shared values, engage in open and honest discussion with staff members, and exhibit genuine caring and commitment, combined with thoughtful actions and initiatives. Louis (2008) suggests that principals emphasize the ideas and behaviors that are fundamentally agreed upon by all staff members and make trust and respect reciprocal, by trusting the motives and abilities of teachers.

Depasquale (2012) discusses leadership behavior and faculty trust and contends that a key factor in establishing and sustaining a positive school environment is the development of trust and respect in the leadership of the organization. Depasquale
(2012) offers four core variables of principal behavior that effect levels of faculty trust. He advises principals to display genuine concern and caring for the welfare of teachers, make efforts to involve faculty in the decision-making process, protect teachers from undue loss of instructional time, and recognize and celebrate faculty members for their contributions to the organization.

**Recognition and celebrations.** Hipp & Huffman (2010) recommend that achievement should be celebrated regularly and teachers and students recognized for success. Celebrations and recognition reflect a positive climate and culture which promotes high quality teaching and learning. The pride and tone of a building of learners “can be set for success to happen daily” (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 114).

The Ralph H. Metcalfe School promoted a positive school climate and culture by instilling feelings of hope and a belief that teachers can make a difference when they work together (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). Teachers and administrators recognized individual staff members and groups of teachers monthly for their outstanding and commendable efforts toward student achievement. “Creating a sense of hope in the adults in the school motivates them to develop and maintain confidence and high expectations for students” (Hipp & Huffman, p. 114). The positive impact of recognition was observed in those who received it, while those not recognized for contributions that month worked harder for their students.

Hipp and Huffman (2010) also advise school staff to offer praise and affirmation to students on a daily basis. Many children encounter repressive conditions before coming to school each day, so instilling pride and confidence will impact the learning for all students. The principals of schools in Hipp and Huffman’s (2010) study met with all
students and teachers as a group each day to share words of praise and commend students and teachers on their accomplishments. Those principals believed that this practice demonstrated their worth as a caring, concerned, and engaged team player involved in promoting high quality teaching and learning.

By taking the time to observe and recognize talent in teachers, principals can indirectly reveal what they value (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013). Recognizing and acknowledging achievement takes time and requires a focus on the other person; however, sharing discussion about the strengths of another person builds a positive connection between people (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris 2013). Rewarding and recognizing the skills and talents of staff members builds teacher efficacy and the level of trust and respect that is so vital to professional learning communities (Hord, 2004). Successful organizational leaders, regardless of whether they are in the private or public sectors, need to be competent at recognizing skills and offering authentic rewards and recognition (Fink, 2013).

Regular recognition and celebration of outstanding achievement is a practice evident in schools which foster the building of relationships (Louis, 2008). Sharing appreciations at staff meetings, Monday morning assemblies, and special teacher recognitions were mentioned as ways principals recognized and celebrated the achievements of staff (Combs et al., 2013). The implication is that principals who consistently recognize and reward staff members for outstanding work will support a positive school climate and the work of PLCs (Louis, 2008).

**Risk-taking.** According to Hipp and Huffman (2010), schools in which strong relationships exist have cultures characterized by the understanding that risk-taking, or
experimenting with new approaches, programs, or strategies, is acceptable and even encouraged. Teachers and administrators in these schools believe that the environment is safe for innovative activities. An innovative climate can be viewed as a resource within a social network that comprises creative teachers, the ideas they initiate, and the ties connecting them (Penuel, Riel, Krause, & Frank, 2009).

In a study (Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2011) of the relationship between professional networks, supportive relational climates, and school innovation, the researchers found that the closer the relationships of school staff, the more they perceived their school’s climate to be supportive of teaching innovations. This research also revealed that leadership behaviors were important in creating environments where innovation is encouraged and is oriented toward relationships and collegiality. The school leaders in these studies were able to develop the innovative climate that supported the social needs of individuals and the intellectual stimulation that is vital to sharing personal practices in professional learning communities (Moolenaar et al., 2011).

However, Tobia suggests, “Teachers can often be fearful of negative responses or feedback that their instruction is less than outstanding when sharing practices with colleagues” (personal communication, June 27, 2013). Davenport (2006) found that a culture of respect and trust provided an environment where teachers were comfortable enough to take risks, share practices, and offer input. She contends that it is the principal’s responsibility to establish that trusting environment where staff members are “risk takers, experimenters, and display a willingness to learn together” (p. 142). Leaders boost trust by supporting risk taking, but occasionally risk takers experience
failure. Allowing people to fail with dignity and using the failure as a learning tool is a practical way to maintain trust (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013).

Cohen and Brown (2013) similarly suggest that principals encourage adults in schools to identify and pursue their own learning goals and engage the school staff in collaborative problem-solving by adopting a no-fault framework, an approach that offers safety in risk-taking and encourages innovative instruction. They advise principals to communicate frequently with staff member and to create a PLC which encourages reflection, inquiry, and risk taking. Moolenaar, Daly, and Sleegers (2010) also contend that the more staff members seek out principals for professional and personal advice and the more closely connected principals are to their teachers, the more willing teachers will be to invest in change, the creation of new knowledge, and the development of a school-wide innovative climate.

Patterson and Patterson (2004) noted that principals are crucial in encouraging risk taking as well as reflection and inquiry; thus, supporting these attributes within the school community through shared leadership practices promotes the professional learning community concept. School principals who value and support teachers in developing their skills recognize that school goals only can be accomplished “with a committed cadre of innovative teacher leaders” (Patterson & Patterson, 2004, p. 77). Sharing responsibility and rewarding for innovation is a practice that was more highly developed at schools with the highest levels of shared and supportive leadership (Bolem et al., 2005).

Providing the supportive structures and processes for staff members to engage in risk-taking and to be involved in the social activities of developing new knowledge is
essential for PLCs to be effective (Frank, Zhao, & Borman, 2004). Supportive relationships developed over time can foster climates that encourage innovation, which are critical in the creation of knowledge (Bryk & Schneider, 2005; Frank et al., 2004). Hargreaves (2001) argued that to create innovative educational institutions, educators must be the creators of professional knowledge. To accomplish this they must be provided with opportunities to collaboratively refine and deepen practice in an environment that is conducive to change and innovation (Hargreaves, 2001).

A recommended method to increase the organizational capacity for innovation and improve instructional performance is building and sustaining relationships which support risk-taking and informed participation (Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2011). It is through the ties of relationships that the development and generation of new knowledge and practices flow and hold the promise of building capacities toward improvement (Moolenaar et al., 2011).

**Unified efforts to embed change.** The success of any innovation or change in schools depends on how well all staff members sustain their efforts to embed those changes into the culture of their school (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). If changes are perceived as a *quick fix* or short term, the impact will most likely be ineffective (Hord, 1997a; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Persistence and consistency with change efforts, as well as maintaining momentum and long-term success in the change process may be challenging for many schools (Easton, 2011).

Fullan (2007) identified three phases of change in maintaining long term success during the process of organizational transformation - initiation, implementation, and institutionalization. The initiation phase connects a change initiative to student needs
and is based on the schools values and norms (Fullan, 2007). The staff and leader advocate for a shared vision and begin to share information and seek knowledge to achieve their goals. During the next phase of change - implementation, the principal begins to share leadership and authority (Fullan, 2007). Feedback and support are related to instruction which leads to improved student outcomes. During the implementation phase, progress is not always smooth and setbacks can occur that hinder progress, causing frustration and anxiety (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). The setbacks may be due to lack of resources or technical assistance and, in some cases, lack of trust (Hord & Sommers, 2008). It is at this point that many PLCs disappear in disappointment and a sense of hopelessness (Easton, 2011).

Those PLCs that prevail during these uncertain times move on to the next change phase - institutionalization (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). In this phase the change initiative becomes embedded into the culture of the school, and becomes a way of functioning for the staff (Fullan, 2007; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997a; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). The school community is guided by their shared vision as “they become committed and accountable for student learning” (Huffman & Hipp, 2003, p. 24). They identify and solve problems in a climate of trust that honors risk-taking and continual change. The research of Huffman and Hipp (2003) has revealed that institutionalization is the phase of a change process that has not yet been achieved by the majority of schools. This embedding and internalization of change must be a unified effort by all school staff members across all dimensions of a PLC in order to achieve sustainability (Hipp & Huffman, 2010).
“As visionary leaders, administrators can incorporate the professional learning community model in their schools to increase understanding and communication, improve problem-solving, and develop an organized change process for collectively building community in the organizational structure of the school” (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003, p. 248). Developing and sustaining professional learning communities in schools requires leadership and direction. As the school leaders, principals have the opportunity to play a vital role in developing and embedding the concept of change in order to bring about transformation that can lead to school improvement (Hord, 2008).

Summary of Chapter 2

Change and reform are critical factors influencing school life in today’s world due to imposed federal and state mandates, as well as new teaching and learning standards (Hord & Sommers, 2008). Improvement in schools and the school’s ability to adapt to change so that students may achieve is determined by a variety of factors of which culture is extremely important (Fullan & Ballew, 2001; Sergiovanni, 2004).

The professional learning community (PLC) model is presented in the literature as a potential organizational structure for a culture which sustains continued growth for teacher and student learning (DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997a, 1997b; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Professional learning communities are also described as creating a school culture that fosters collaboration and collegiality (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). According to Schmoker (2004), “Developing the capacity of educators to function as members of learning communities is the best known means by
which we might achieve truly historic, wide scale improvement in teaching and learning” (p. 428).

The conceptual frameworks underlying learning communities that were considered in the historical context for this review were Vygotsky’s (1987) social constructivist theory of learning, Senge’s (1990) five disciplines of learning organizations, and Hord’s (1997a) dimensions of professional learning communities. Although all three frameworks offered a means of understanding the literature, Hord’s dimensions provided the best lens for this study for filtering the research on professional learning communities. Hord’s (1997a) original review of the literature defined five dimensions of PLCs. However, the recent research of Hord and Tobia (2012) redefined the five dimensions into six to better clarify the separate components.

The six key dimensions of a professional learning community identified by research and investigated in this review of literature are: (a) shared and supportive leadership; (b) shared beliefs, values, and vision; (c) collective learning and application; (d) shared personal and collective practice; (e) supportive structural conditions; and (f) supportive relational conditions (Hord, 1997a, 2004, 2008; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006).

This review of literature listed benefits and challenges to implementing and sustaining professional learning communities and pointed to the principal as one who plays many roles in the professional learning community concept (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Levine, 2005; Wells & Feun, 2007). The six dimensions of PLCs were utilized to organize the information on the school principal’s role in developing and sustaining PLCs.
Because supportive relational conditions have been described as the essential base that supports the other five dimensions (Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Routman, 2012), those conditions were closely examined in this review. Supportive relational conditions consist of the attributes of caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Without these attributes present, professional learning communities will not be effective (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Routman, 2012; Tschannen-Moran, 2004).

The research has shown the importance of the role of the principal in effective implementation of PLCs, as well as the conditions necessary for their success. “While the literature exalting the promises and importance of PLCs increases, the road to actual implementation of a PLC is less clear” (Wells & Keane, 2008, p. 25). Part of that lack of clarity is in the specific ways in which the principal can foster the successful establishment and sustainability of the supportive relational conditions dimension of professional learning communities.

Research further indicated that the principal could establish and foster the implementation of supportive relational conditions. Caring relationships, trust and respect, recognitions and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change must be supported by the school principal in order for PLCs to be effective and for the other five PLC dimensions to exist (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2004). While the need for principal support and leadership in the process was evident, questions
about specific ways in which the principal can foster supportive relational conditions continued to rise.

How does the principal cultivate the attributes of supportive relational conditions within a school staff? What are the strategies principals use in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools? What exactly do principals do to foster caring relationships, trust and respect, recognitions and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change in an elementary school staff?

Suggestions for how the principal could positively impact PLCs were found, but I found little research devoted to specifically examining the actions and strategies used in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions in elementary schools. Thus, the need to extend previous research by conducting a study focused on examining the actions and strategies used by principals in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools is warranted. A focused look at the ways in which supportive relational conditions for PLCs are established, fostered, and sustained by the principal could provide insight for future leaders as they seek to successfully implement professional learning communities.
Meaningful collaboration and engagement in collegial intellectual work is one of the factors which allows teachers to thrive, in light of the many challenges they face (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Nieto, 2003). Collegial, intellectual work can encompass a variety of formats including participation in inquiry groups, the basic structure of professional learning communities (Nieto, 2003). Teachers learn best from and with each other in learning communities that support ongoing, onsite, job-embedded professional development activities which build capacity and collegiality, improve teaching quality, and focus on student achievement (Hord, 1997a; Jolly, 2008). Various definitions of professional learning communities (PLCs) exist; however, they all incorporate collaborative work to reflect on and improve teachers’ practice as a foundation of increased student learning (McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006).

Shirley Hord (1997a) describes PLCs as communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. Professional learning communities have distinct dimensions, including: (a) shared and supportive leadership; (b) shared beliefs, values, and vision; (c) collective learning; (d) shared personal practice; (e) supportive structural conditions; and (f) supportive relational conditions (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012). The dimension identified as supportive relational conditions is the essential underpinning of all the other dimensions (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Without trust and caring relationships, professional learning communities will not be effective (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012, Huffman & Hipp, 2003; Moolenaar, Daly, & Sleegers, 2010; Routman, 2012).
Hord and Tobia (2012) refer to the relationships among school staff which are encompassed in supportive relational conditions as being the “soul of professional learning communities” (p. 87). Fostering those relationships creates an environment where teachers can collaborate without fear, allowing PLCs to thrive on the respect that teachers have for one another (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Supportive relational conditions include caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

The role of the school principal is essential in the successful implementation of professional learning communities (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert 2006). The principal should be involved in the implementation of all dimensions of PLCs (Sparks, 2005). Providing the supportive relational conditions which will cultivate effective professional learning communities is one of the principal’s responsibilities (Hord, 2008). When principals support positive relationships among the school staff, they develop the collegiality which sustains a culture of trust (Hord & Sommers, 2008).

**Problem and Purposes Overview**

While researchers (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Hipp & Huffman, 2007; Hord, 1997a; Hord & Sommers, 2008; Huffman, 2003; Wells & Feun, 2007; York-Barr & Duke, 2004) have described the principal’s role as important for successful implementation and sustainability of PLCs, focused examinations of the actions and strategies used by the principal in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions are lacking in the literature related to professional learning communities.
Because supportive relational conditions are instrumental in the success of PLCs in conjunction with the vital role of the school principal, I examined the actions and strategies used by principals to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary school settings. The five essential attributes necessary to sustain supportive relational conditions provided the basis for the examination. Those attributes are: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk-taking, and a unified effort to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

**Research Questions**

Considering the important role research (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997a; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert 2006) suggests the principal plays in establishing, fostering and sustaining supportive relational conditions which lead to a positive school culture, the questions this study examined are:

1. How do principals establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools? Those conditions include five attributes: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

2. What strategies and actions do principals report using in developing the five attributes of supportive relational conditions of professional learning communities?
3. What, if any, evidence exists that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) exist in the schools’ professional learning communities?

**Methodology**

**Qualitative Research**

This research study falls under the broad scope of qualitative research. Qualitative research is an inquiry process which explores a social or human problem (Creswell, 2013). The researcher conducts the data collection in a natural setting and builds a holistic picture by analyzing reports and views of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Analysis is conducted through the sorting of data allowing themes or categories to emerge (Creswell, 2013). Patton (2002) agrees that qualitative methods should be chosen in order to understand the human experience, to construct meaning in specific settings, and “to facilitate the study of issues in depth and detail” (p. 14). Fieldwork in data collection should be approached in a manner which allows themes to emerge from the data, without the constraints of predetermined categories (Patton, 2002). The analysis evolves in a discovery mode, where the evaluator identifies pervasive themes and sifts out meaningful categories of information (Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007).

Creswell (2013) contends that the rationale for using a qualitative approach to research should be based on the need for an exploration of a topic, the research questions which explore the *how* and *what* nature of the phenomenon, and a need to present a detailed report of the topic from the viewpoint of the participants. The rationale for using qualitative inquiry in this study is justified because it was an exploration of the experiences of principals concerning *how* they establish, foster, and sustain supportive
relational conditions and what actions and strategies they have used. Furthermore, data was gathered directly from principals and reported in detail from the researcher’s role as an active learner recounting the participants’ views, rather than from the standpoint of an expert (Creswell, 2013). The rationale for the methodology decision which follows examined the choice from several perspectives.

Creswell (2013) presents five major traditions or approaches to qualitative research. He suggests that gaining a sense for the best selection of approaches comes through an examination of the various traditions. His discussion of those traditions includes; biography/narrative research, grounded theory, ethnography, case study, and phenomenology (Creswell, 2013).

**Biography/Narrative Research**

A biographical investigation is the study of an individual and his or her experiences as told to the researcher or found in documents (Creswell, 1998). It describes turning point moments in the individual’s life. The genre includes individual biographies, autobiographies, life histories, and oral biographies or personal narratives (Creswell, 1998). These approaches are all forms of narrative analysis which “assumes that storytelling is integral to understanding lives and that all people construct narratives as a process of constructing identity” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 6). Biographical studies describe the experiences in an individual’s life and the story that can be told from these experiences (Creswell, 1998).

I examined the actions and the strategies used by principals to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary school settings. It is not about the life of any particular individual, but about
the experiences of multiple individuals related to a particular phenomenon. Therefore, a biographical study was not the appropriate choice for this research.

**Grounded Theory**

The intent of a grounded theory study is to generate or discover a theory which relates to a particular situation (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). It is the development of inductive theory which is *grounded* directly in the empirical data, especially in the actions, interactions, and social processes of people (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory studies describe the theory which emerges from an analysis of the data collected about the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). It is usually used to generate theories that tell the researcher how and why something operates as it does and provides explanations (Patton, 2002). The researcher needs to set aside any prior theoretical ideas, allow the substantive theory to emerge, recognize that this is a systematic approach with a specific set of steps in data analysis, deal with the difficulty of determining when categories are saturated or sufficiently detailed, and recognize that the outcome of the study is a theory of prescribed components (Creswell, 2013). The grounded theory process is complete when no new concepts are emerging from the data and the theory is well validated. The final report should include a detailed and clear description of the grounded theory (Creswell, 2013). Grounded theory can also be used to test or elaborate upon previously grounded theories, as long as the approach continues to be one of constantly grounding any changes in the new data (Patton, 2002).

Grounded theory was not the appropriate choice of methodology for this study as no theory was being sought. I explored actions and strategies employed by elementary school principals which establish, foster, and sustain supportive relationships among
school staff. The purpose of this research was to uncover what has already been implemented, not to develop any new theories based on the data.

**Ethnography**

A third major approach to qualitative research is ethnography, the discovery and description of the culture of a group of people, social group, or system (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). Ethnographic studies describe the cultural characteristics of a group of people or of a cultural scene (Creswell, 2013). Because ethnography originates in the discipline of anthropology, the concept of culture is of central importance (Patton, 2002). Culture is the system of shared beliefs, values, practices, language, norms, rituals, and material things which group members use to understand their world (Creswell, 2013). Ethnography involves prolonged observation of a group, typically through participant observation where the researcher is immersed in the day-to-day lives of the participants (Creswell, 2013). The ethnographer engages in extensive fieldwork, gathering data by gaining access to the group. The ethnographic researcher needs to have a solid understanding of cultural anthropology and be willing to participate as part of the group being studied (Patton, 2002). The final ethnographic report should provide a rich and holistic description of the culture of the group under study (Patton, 2002).

As the researcher, I did not participate in the day-to-day lives of the principals involved in this study. It was not be feasible or practical for me to participate at any school as a member of the group under study. Being that I was an elementary school principal, the possibility of using my own school as a site for research existed. Using one’s own setting could offer the option of selecting an ethnographic study.

However, Marshall and Rossman (2006) list a number of concerns with
conducting research in one’s own setting. Familiarity with the setting and participants can be a disadvantage, because it has the potential to establish prior expectations for the researcher. Additionally, transitioning from a previous role within the setting to that of researcher can present another challenge (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Although teachers and administrators at my site have implemented many elements of PLCs over a number of years, the choice of this researcher’s own setting in an ethnographic study was not feasible. I instead, sought descriptions of other principals’ lived experiences related to establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for PLCs through interviews, surveys, and document examination. Therefore, an ethnographic study was not be the optimal choice for this research.

**Case Study**

Another major approach to qualitative inquiry is case study research, the detailed account and analysis of the characteristics of one or more cases (Creswell, 2013). A case is a bounded system, such as a person, a group, an activity, or a process (Creswell, 2013). Because the roots of case study are interdisciplinary, many different concepts and theories can be used to describe and explain the case (Patton, 2002). Robert Stake (in Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2007) classifies case study research into three types: intrinsic case study where the interest is only in understanding the particulars of the case; instrumental case study where the interest is in understanding something more general than the case; and collective case study, where interest is in studying and comparing multiple cases in a single research study.

Multiple methods of data collection are often used in case study research, such as interviews, observation, documents, or questionnaires (Creswell, 2013). The case study
final report should provide a rich, detailed, and holistic description of the case and its context (Patton, 2002). This researcher interviewed and surveyed multiple principals in various settings to determine a range of actions and strategies being implemented which support positive relational conditions for professional learning communities. If a case study were selected, the collective case study would be the type that would have best applied. However, I did not seek to make comparisons between settings or participants. Therefore, a case study was not an appropriate method of research for this study.

**Phenomenology**

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) was a German philosopher who established the school of study known as phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). Husserl believed that the starting point for knowledge was the self’s experience of a phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The emphasis is on the “phenomenon to be explored, in terms of a concept or idea” (Creswell, 2013, p. 78) which is common to a group of individuals who have all experienced the same phenomenon. Husserl saw the phenomenological inquiry method as a way of reaching true meaning by penetrating deeper into reality through stories told of the human experience (Laverty, 2003).

Phenomenology is a tradition of qualitative inquiry which describes the meaning of the lived experiences of individuals about a concept or phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). It is the descriptive study of how individuals experience a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology examines the meaning or essence of the lived experience of a phenomenon by an individual or by many individuals (Creswell, 2013). As researchers try to gain access to individuals’ *lifeworlds* (van Manen, 2007), the
participants’ world of experience, they utilize interviews, the participants' written or oral self-report, or even their aesthetic expressions, such as art, narratives, or poetry.

With several approaches to phenomenology available to the qualitative researcher, the determination must be based on the method which is best suited to the research problem and to the researcher. All approaches draw on German philosophy and seek to understand the life world or human experience as it is lived (Laverty, 2003). Two major approaches, transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology, represent philosophical assumptions about experience and ways to organize and analyze phenomenological data (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008). These two approaches differ in their historical advocates and methodological procedures, yet are the two classical approaches which guide the majority of phenomenological research (Langdridge, 2007; Laverty, 2003).

**Transcendental phenomenology.** Meaning is the core of transcendental phenomenology, a design for acquiring and collecting data which explains the essences of human experience (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008). Transcendental phenomenology involves the researcher in searching for an understanding of the meaning of the participants’ experiences (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008). Moustakas (1994) emphasizes the common features of human science research including the value of qualitative research, a focus on the wholeness of experience, a search for essences of experiences, and viewing experience and behavior as integrated and inseparable.

**Bracketing and epoche.** The transcendental emphasis includes the features of human science research, but begins a phenomenological study with the researcher setting aside prejudgments as much as possible and using systematic procedures for analyzing
the data (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008). Edmund Husserl presented transcendental phenomenology as an attempt to eliminate everything which represents a prejudgment or presupposition (Moustakas, 1994). This setting aside of prejudgments and knowledge is called *bracketing* (Chan, Fung, & Chien, 2013). Thus, the process is called transcendental because the researcher sees the phenomenon freshly, as if for the first time (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008). Through the fundamental methodology of bracketing the researcher’s own experiences, the investigator does not influence the participant’s understanding of the phenomenon. Although the concept of bracketing is well-suited in research that aims to explore human experience, the application and operation of bracketing remain vague and often perplexing (Gearing, 2004).

*Epoche*, a Greek word meaning to refrain from judgment (Moerer-Urdahl & Creswell, 2008), also involves setting judgments aside, but it still allows the researcher to become aware of any prejudices related to the phenomenon under investigation (Merriam, 2009). Epoche is the first step of the phenomenological reduction process; it is an approach taken at the beginning of the study by the researcher that allows for an awareness of views or pre-understandings of the phenomenon and a focusing on those views reported by the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

It is important to note that I did not attempt to *bracket*, or exclude, my previous knowledge, but instead attempted to achieve *epoche* by acknowledging and understanding that my past experiences have influenced my thinking. *Epoche* allowed me to set aside any prejudgments regarding the participants’ views, yet still integrate my knowledge of PLCs into the interview, analysis, and interpretive experience. In this study, I chose to bring my past experiences with and knowledge of professional learning
communities into the interaction between me, the primary researcher, and the participants. I believe my knowledge and experience helped me to establish relationships with the interviewees, as well as assisted in the co-creation and interpretation of data, and the recognition of themes.

Hermeneutic phenomenology, conversely, acknowledges that the pre-understanding of the investigator cannot be excluded from the research process, but becomes a part of it (Koch, 1996). Therefore, I implemented hermeneutic phenomenology as a research methodology.

**Hermeneutic phenomenology.** Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a German philosopher and follower of Husserl, is credited with the development of hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003). He is associated with the use of hermeneutics in philosophy, the study of interpretation (Laverty, 2003). Heidegger created a methodology which differed from Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology, preferring to focus on the lived reality of existence (Langdridge, 2007). The hermeneutic phenomenological approach to research also differs from transcendental phenomenology because it acknowledges that pre-understanding cannot be eliminated or bracketed (Koch, 1996); the technique of bracketing is found inconsistent and problematic within hermeneutic phenomenology (LeVasseur, 2003).

**Hans-Georg Gadamer.** Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), a philosopher who was influenced by the work of both Husserl and Heidegger, moved to extend Heidegger’s work into practical application (Gadamer, 1983). Gadamer saw the work of hermeneutics not as developing a procedure of understanding, but to clarify further the conditions in which understanding itself takes place (Laverty, 2003). He believed that hermeneutics
must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to
the subject matter which develops into language through the text and has, or acquires, a
connection with the phenomenon being investigated (Laverty, 2003). Gadamer viewed
bracketing not only as impossible, but attempts to do so “manifestly absurd” (Laverty,
2003, p.25). Koch (1996) described Gadamer’s position supporting prejudice, as
knowledge that determines what we find explicit in any situation. These understandings
are based on our experiences and all understanding will involve some prejudice or
judgment (Koch, 1996). Gadamer did not support the notion that a researcher can set
aside life experiences, prior knowledge, and prejudices merely by adopting an attitude.
His view acknowledged the unquestionable presence of a history of understanding and he
worked to extend the perspective that prior experiences and knowledge play a positive
role in the search for meaning (Gadamer, 1990).

**Further differences: Transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology.** In
addition to the use of bracketing or epoche, there are other differences between
transcendental and hermeneutic phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenological
research is descriptive and focuses on the structure of experience, “the organizing
principles that give form and meaning to the life world” (Laverty, 2003, p. 27).
Hermeneutic research is interpretive and concentrates on historical meanings of
experiences and the developmental and cumulative effects on individuals or groups
(Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012). This interpretive process includes information
about the prior experiences or viewpoints which are guiding the data interpretation, as
well as the presuppositions which motivate the researcher making the interpretations
(Barclay, 1992).
While Allen (1995) argued that a clear distinction between transcendental phenomenology and hermeneutic phenomenology does not exist, he describes transcendental phenomenology as seeking a correct answer or valid interpretation of texts which is independent of the social or historical experiences of the interpreter/researcher. Hermeneutic phenomenology, in contrast, is described as focusing on meaning which arises from the interpretive interaction between the history of the researcher and the reader (Laverty, 2003).

Hermeneutic phenomenology, sometimes called interpretive phenomenology, is an interpretive method that involves a thematic analysis of data, which also builds on the lifeworld philosophy (Langdridge, 2007; van Manen, 2007). This approach is growing in popularity, especially among applied researchers, often in nursing and education (Langdridge, 2007). Max van Manen (1984; 2007), a professor of education in Canada, has been one of the key figures in the development of this approach (Langdridge, 2007).

**Language.** Interpretive hermeneutic understanding is rooted in a historical encounter and concerns itself with personal experiences of being in the world (Langdridge, 2007). In hermeneutic interpretation, language is pivotal because it shapes all situations and experiences (Langdridge, 2007). Language and understanding are inseparable structural aspects of the human experience (Laverty, 2003) and are the foundation of social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1987). Langdridge (2007) agrees that much, if not all, of experience can be best understood through the stories told of that experience and that much is learned through those stories. That is, “life as experienced is narratively structured, produced and re-produced” (Langdridge, 2007, p. 41).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is defined as the study of human lived experience
together with its meanings that is open to revision and reinterpretation (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012). As more data is gathered, the researcher may interpret and reinterpret, allowing themes to emerge and change as influenced by the new data.

**Hermeneutic circle and role of the researcher.** The interpretive process is achieved through a *hermeneutic circle* which moves from the parts of experience, to the whole of experience, and back and forth again and again to increase the depth of engagement with and the understanding of the information collected as data (Laverty, 2003). The information is understood through a fusion of experiences of the participants and the researcher through the language of the interviews as it moves in a circular fashion (the hermeneutic circle) between parts and whole (Langdridge, 2007).

The cyclical nature of the hermeneutic circle is shown in Figure 1 as it pertains to the interview process between the researcher and participants.

**Figure 1. Hermeneutic Circle**

![Figure 1. Hermeneutic Circle](image)

Through conversations between the researcher and participants, the whole and parts of an experience or phenomenon are discussed and reviewed repeatedly until the researcher arrives at a new understanding (Laverty, 2003).
Gadamer (1983) understood hermeneutics as a process of co-creation between the researcher and participant. The process is one of co-construction of the data as the researcher and the participant engage in a circle of understanding (Laverty, 2003). They work together to bring life to the experiences being investigated, through the use of imagination, the hermeneutic circle, and attention to language and writing (Laverty, 2003).

**Role of the researcher.** Identifying the role played by the investigator in any research is important to aid the reader’s understanding. During the interviews with principals, my role was to interact with the interviewees using open-ended questions in order to gather data on the participants’ perceptions regarding the actions and strategies used to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions in PLCs. Throughout the research process, my role included maintaining the confidentiality of the participants.

The researcher needs to identify personal values, assumptions, and biases at the beginning of a qualitative research study (Creswell, 2013). Disclosure of my role as an elementary public school principal for over 16 years is important for the reader and participants. As an elementary school principal, I had participated in and also trained colleagues in the practices of professional learning communities. My work as an educator led to an interest in developing and sustaining PLCs and also to an interest in establishing and fostering supportive relational conditions that lead to a positive school culture (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord, 1997a, 2004, 2008; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Additionally, as a doctoral student, I also had an opportunity to work and research directly with Shirley Hord and Edward Tobia, authors and researchers in the field of PLCs. These experiences have influenced my
thinking and beliefs. Approaching the research with an open mind, understanding how previous experiences influenced the researcher’s thinking and interpretations (epoche), and being able to state those influences assisted the process of reflection and co-construction of meaning with the participants (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Laverty, 2003).

A researcher’s historical experiences also help to build the trusting relationships which are so necessary to gathering data through the face-to-face interview process (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). An environment of safety and trust needs to be established at the outset and maintained throughout the project (Laverty, 2003). The interaction in the interview takes place within the context of a relationship which is central to what is ultimately created (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012) and the presence of a caring relationship is critical to this type of exploration (Laverty, 2003).

It seems ironic that I explored how principals establish, foster, and sustain caring relationships for PLCs, and had to concurrently establish a caring relationship with those principals in order to successfully gather the data. As I had much in common with the participating principals, she was able to effectively establish caring relationships and an atmosphere of trust. While my personal and professional interest led me to pursue this research, it is important that I maintained the role of a researcher in order to ensure ethical and nonjudgmental procedures were followed.

**Research steps in hermeneutic phenomenology.** If one is interested in understanding experiences of the lifeworld, there is a need to explore the stories people tell of their experiences, often with the help of some specific hermeneutic or method of interpretation to find meaning (Langdridge, 2007). In order to discover meanings in the
data, one needs an attitude open enough to let unexpected meanings emerge (Giorgi, 1997).

Gadamer (1983) agrees with keeping an open attitude to allow new meanings to emerge, and he was also somewhat skeptical of specific methods of research, looking to steer clear of providing rules for analysis. van Manen (1990), however, proposes six basic steps for hermeneutic phenomenological research, which follows Gadamer’s (1983) interpretation of hermeneutic investigation:

1. investigating a phenomenon which seriously interests us;
2. investigating experience as it is lived, rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. maintaining a strong and oriented relation to the phenomenon;
6. balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

Data is collected mainly through open-ended interview questions. Interviewers may contribute their own views to the process to better encourage the production of meaning between interviewer and interviewee (Gadamer, 1990; Langdridge, 2007).

**Selection of a methodology.** This study examined the stories of the lived experiences of principals and the strategies they use in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools. Hermeneutic phenomenology explores the stories told from the lifeworld or experiences of the participants (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012). This study involved descriptions from active participants of their subjective knowledge and personal impressions of the phenomenon (Friesen et al, 2012) of supportive relational
conditions. Through in-depth interviews, information was gathered on the stories of principals who have effectively implemented supportive relational conditions for PLCs in their schools. Phenomenological researchers look for commonalities across individuals which highlight the essences of their experiences, rather than only focusing on what is unique to a single individual (Patton, 2002). This study extrapolated the themes which emerged from those commonalities. Analysis summarizes the essence of what the individuals have experienced and how they have experienced it (Creswell, 2013); in this case, the principals’ lived experiences regarding developing supportive relational conditions was examined. A phenomenological research report provides a rich description of the phenomenon from the view of the participants (Marshall, & Rossman, 2006). The data gathered in this study provided the field with rich descriptions of the behaviors and actions of principals as they established, fostered, and sustained professional learning communities.

Although hermeneutic phenomenology has been used in educational research (Myers, 2004), few studies have applied this methodology to the investigation of professional learning communities. However, using open-ended questioning and allowing the data and commonalities to emerge best allowed access to the information sought from the lived experiences under examination. Therefore, a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological design was most suitable and appropriate for this study and was selected based on the strengths of the design to illuminate the phenomena.

**Population and Sample**

Merriam (2009) lists probability and non-probability as the two basic types of sampling. Probability sampling, of which simple random sampling is the most familiar
example, allows the investigator to generalize the results from the sample to the population from which it was drawn (Merriam, 2009). Generalization is not a goal of qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), so probability sampling was not appropriate for this qualitative study.

Non-probability sampling is the choice for most qualitative research (Merriam, 2009), the most common form of which is called purposeful or purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). Rubin and Rubin (2011) advise the researcher to look for participants who have relevant knowledge and experience, can present a variety of views, and are amenable to interviewing.

The population for this study was elementary school principals in New Hampshire involved in the implementation of the professional learning community (PLC) concept, as this was the sample from which the most could be learned. This study sought the stories of those principals as they established, fostered, and sustained supportive relational conditions for PLCs. The actions and strategies which were most successful in developing relationships were also explored.

Since implementation of professional learning communities is a criterion for participation, a purposeful sampling procedure was used to select participants (Merriam, 2009). The purposeful sampling procedures for this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study are outlined below.
Surveying Participants

Principals of New Hampshire elementary schools were surveyed by an email through a principals’ network to determine if they have PLCs functioning in their schools and if they would be willing to participate in this study. The survey (Appendix A) consisted of questions describing PLCs and asked if the principals would be willing to consent to an interview and further survey completion. Included in the information were the expectations and estimated amount of time needed for interviewing and survey completion. Moustakas (1994) listed criteria for selection of participants in phenomenological research. He included that participants must have: experience with the phenomenon, an intense interest in understanding its nature and meanings, willingness to participate in recorded interview sessions and, an understanding and agreement that data may be published (Moustakas, 1994).

According to the New Hampshire Association of School Principals (NHASP) (2011), there are 202 elementary school principals in the state of New Hampshire. The NHASP definition of elementary school principals includes those who supervise schools with grade levels which encompass preschool to grade 6. There are various configurations and divisions of grade levels among the schools; however, this study focused on schools covering only those grade levels as elementary schools. Participants included principals from elementary schools located in the State’s five geographical regions that are indicated by the NHASP. The study included at least one participant from each of the five regions and also included both male and female participants. The five geographical regions as defined by the NHASP are North Country, Lakes Region, South Central, South East, and South West.
It was necessary for those principal participants to have had experience with the implementation of PLCs at their schools and have an interest in sustaining PLCs. Questions related to experience with implementation of PLCs were asked via the *Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised* (Olivier & Hipp, 2010) survey to assist in purposeful sampling. This survey is further described in the instrumentation portion of this chapter and is included as Appendix D.

Although the conceptual underpinnings of this study are based on the work of Vygotsky (1987), Senge (1990), and Hord (1997a), consideration was given to the fact that many principals may have received training with Richard and Rebecca DuFour of *Solution Tree* (http://www.solution-tree.com). The New Hampshire Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (NHASCD) (http://www.nhascd.net) has sponsored several PLC presentations by the DuFours which were attended by many NH school principals. The conceptual framework of the PLCs the DuFours describe may diverge from Hord’s (1997a), as the characteristics of PLCs outlined by DuFour and Eaker (1998) differ slightly from Hord and Tobia’s (2012) dimensions. DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) six characteristics include: (a) shared mission, vision, and values, (b) collective inquiry, (c) collaborative teams, (d) action orientation and experimentation, (e) continuous improvement, and (f) results orientation. Although these characteristics and Hord’s (1997a) dimensions share commonalities, establishing supportive relational conditions is not included in DuFour and Eaker’s (1998) six characteristics. Interview questions inquired about principals’ training for implementation of PLCs in order to determine if specific training or professional development influenced the strategies used to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions.
Ethical Considerations

Research using human participants must always identify and address ethical considerations (Creswell, 2009; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2006). Disclosure is an issue which should be decided at the onset of the data collection process and Patton (2002) advises full and complete disclosure of the study and how the results will be used. The details of this study were fully disclosed to all of the principals who participated through initial email communication, discussion, and through informed consent documents which identified the purpose of the study, its voluntary nature, any potential risks and benefits to participants, procedures for recruitment, means of maintaining confidentiality of participants, and details about methodology that were incorporated into the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Stufflebeam & Shinkfield, 2006). The time commitment of participants and duration of the study were also clarified in the initial email communication (Appendix A) and in the Informed Consent document (Appendix F).

The American Evaluation Association (AEA) has established the following guiding principles for evaluators, which were followed in this study (American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 2004). Included is information as to how these standards were met by this researcher.

- **Systematic Inquiry:** Evaluators conduct systematic, data-based inquiries about whatever is being evaluated. A variety of data sources, such as surveys, interviews, and artifact examination were used to ensure a systematic inquiry in this study. Collecting data from multiple sources supported corroboration of the phenomenon and the validity of the study (Creswell, 2013). Methods and approaches were communicated accurately and in sufficient detail to allow others
to understand, interpret, and critique the work. Limitations of the study and its results were also presented clearly (American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 2004).

- **Competence**: Evaluators provide competent performance to stakeholders. Evaluators should possess the education, abilities, skills, and experience appropriate to undertake the tasks proposed in the evaluation. (American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 2004). Through my research and coursework I have become knowledgeable and competent on the topic of PLCs and supportive relational conditions, as well as how to conduct related research.

- **Integrity/Honesty**: Evaluators ensure the honesty and integrity of the entire evaluation process. Researchers should honestly communicate tasks to be undertaken, limitations of methodology, scope of results likely to be obtained, and uses of data resulting from a specific evaluation. It is primarily the evaluator's responsibility to initiate discussion and clarification of these matters (American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 2004). The purposes and methodology of this study were made clear to all involved through discussion and the use of Informed Consent forms.

- **Respect for People**: Evaluators respect the security, dignity and self-worth of the respondents, program participants, clients, and other stakeholders with whom they interact. (American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 2004). There was no potential risk of harm to participants in this study. The benefits of the study contribute to a better understanding of how
principals develop and sustain supportive relational conditions for PLCs, which offers the participating principals insight into further support of PLCs in their schools. It was clarified to all participants that their personally identifiable information will remain confidential through concealment of names or use of pseudonyms and a coding process of any information that is shared (Saldana, 2010). They were informed that they may terminate their participation at any time, for any reason without consequence. Additionally, mutually agreeable interview times were arranged in order to minimize intrusions on their time. All participants in this study were treated fairly, as they all completed the same surveys and were asked the same interview questions.

- **Responsibilities for General and Public Welfare:** Evaluators articulate and take into account the diversity of interests and values that may be related to the general and public welfare. All participant views were included in the research report; all information was treated equally and nonjudgmentally (American Evaluation Association Guiding Principles for Evaluators, 2004).

**Data Collection and Instrumentation**

The purpose of this research was to examine the actions and strategies used by principals to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools. This researcher examined specific strategies and practices used by principals in building supportive relational conditions. The questions this researcher examined are:
• How do principals establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools? Those conditions include five attributes: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

• What strategies do principals report using in developing the five attributes of supportive relational conditions of professional learning communities?

• What, if any, evidence exists that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) occur in the schools’ professional learning communities?

This researcher predominantly used two sources of data, which included responses to survey questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. Another form of data included examination of artifacts in the form of documents, texts, or correspondence that principals used in developing and implementing professional learning communities, specifically those related to developing supportive relational conditions. Detailed information about the sources of data follows.

**Initial Email Information and Survey Questions**

The initial source of data included information and survey questions that were emailed to elementary principals through the NHASP principals’ network. These questions in addition to a follow-up survey assisted in purposeful sampling of participants. The email included an explanation of the study, definition of PLCs, identifying information about the researcher, university affiliations, and dissertation chair. The message also included information about the expected time commitment and
steps of the data collection process (see Appendix A). The following questions were included:

1. Do you have active professional learning communities (PLCs) at your elementary school?
2. If so, would you be interested in participating in a study on PLCs in elementary schools in NH?
3. May I contact you? (If yes, please provide your contact information.)

**Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised**

The next source of data was the participating principals’ responses to a survey questionnaire entitled *Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R)* (Olivier & Hipp, 2010). The PLCA-R (Olivier & Hipp, 2010) was administered in an online format to principals from the NH elementary schools which are implementing the PLC concept and those that responded to the initial email with interest in participating. The PLCA-R instrument can be found in Appendix D, with request and permission for its use in Appendix B and Appendix C. The PLCA-R is a diagnostic instrument, designed around the dimensions of professional learning communities as proposed by Hord (1997a). The assessment tool is used to determine school level practices which support Hord’s (1997a) PLC dimensions. The PLCA-R assessment tool helped to determine the principals’ perspectives as to the level of implementation of the dimensions of PLCs. The PLCA-R provided quantitative information about the fidelity of the implementation of the dimensions and how advanced principals believed their schools to be in the implementation of PLCs.
The instrument’s relationship to the dimensions of professional learning communities, outlined by Hord’s (1997a) original work and Hord and Tobia’s (2012) later work, constituted the rationale for using this instrument. This relationship is demonstrated in Table 2.

Table 2

*Relationship Between the Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised and the Dimensions of a Professional Learning Community*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions of PLCs</th>
<th><em>PLCA-R</em> Descriptors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared and Supportive Leadership</td>
<td>Items 1-11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Values and Visions</td>
<td>Items 12-20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Learning and Application</td>
<td>Items 21-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared Personal Practice</td>
<td>Items 31-37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Relational Conditions</td>
<td>Items 38-42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supportive Structural Conditions</td>
<td>Items 43-52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Hipp and Huffman (2010)

The *PLCA-R* instrument is organized into six sections based on Hord’s (1997a) dimensions. Within each section, participants were given 5-11 descriptors and asked to use a four-point Likert-type scale to record their perceptions about practices which occur in their school. Responses range from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” for each of the 52 items. Items have been designed to address specific school and classroom practices found to be common aspects of schools implementing the PLC concept with fidelity (Olivier & Hipp, 2010). Particular attention was given to the section related to supportive relational conditions, covering items 38-42. The descriptors for this section include the five attributes of supportive relational conditions: caring relationships, trust and respect, risk taking, recognition and celebrations, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).
The creation of the *PLCA-R* is an extension of the early work of Hord (1997a) at the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) (Olivier, 2003). Hord developed a questionnaire as a result of the professional learning community dimensions defined in her synthesis and interpretation of literature (Hipp & Huffman, 2002). Through continued field research including interviews and observations conducted in schools, it was determined that the dimensions and critical attributes of professional learning communities should be modified (Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Consequently, there was a need to create a new tool for assessing the emergent dimensions and overall development of professional learning communities (Olivier, 2003).

Validity for the *PLCA-R* was evaluated through the use of an expert opinion questionnaire, and feedback from researchers and doctoral students who had used the instrument. This information confirmed the internal consistency, the relevance of items, and the usability of the *PLCA-R* as a measure to assess school practices related to professional learning community dimensions (Hipp & Huffman, 2007).

**Interviews**

Some aspects of the mode of understanding in the hermeneutic phenomenological research interview are described by Kvale (1983) as being: (1) centered on the interviewee's lifeworld, (2) in search of the meaning of phenomena in his/her lifeworld, (3) qualitative, (4) descriptive, (5) specific, (6) presuppositionless, (7) focused on certain themes, (8) open for ambiguities, (9) open for changes, (10) dependent on the sensitivity of the interviewer, (11) an interpersonal interaction, and (12) a positive experience.
These aspects were taken into consideration during the interview process of this study, with the goals of gaining information, as well as providing a positive experience for both the participants and me, as the researcher.

**Face to face interviews.** Some researchers rely on qualitative approaches to investigate a topic by interviewing with a few individuals who have had relevant experience, asking questions, listening to their answers, and then asking more questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Interviewing is a purposeful conversation where the researcher “enters the lives of the participants” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p.72) in order to gain information. The researcher’s role is to gather narratives, descriptions, and interpretations from a variety of conversational partners and put them together in a way which describes the commonalities of the differing conversations (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Many researchers follow a naturalistic perspective in data collection, guided by a social construction approach which focuses on how people perceive their world and how they interpret their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

When using in-depth interviewing, one of the key naturalistic research methods (Rubin & Rubin, 2011), researchers explore the experiences as if from the participants’ viewpoints. Studies using in-depth interviewing have become common in many fields, including education (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Rubin and Rubin (2011) suggest responsive interviewing, which allows researchers to explore new areas and to suggest interpretations. Stake (2010) also advocates for a responsive approach to investigation because it places importance on personalizing and humanizing the process. This seems appropriate for a hermeneutic phenomenological investigation where meanings are
sought through interpretation of the human lived experience (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012).

Responsive interviewing is an approach which involves choosing participants who are knowledgeable, listening to what they say, and asking new questions based on the answers they provide (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). The researcher must later be prepared with follow-up questions or prompts in order to ensure that optimal responses are obtained from participants (Turner, 2010). Asking those new questions could occur in the initial interview, in a second interview, or in a focus group format.

**Focus groups.** Focus groups have been used to gather further information from participants and to clarify previously gathered information, extend the understanding, or to allow new information to emerge (Kruger & Casey, 2010). Focus groups are conducted to gather a range of opinions and experiences, where coming to agreement is not necessarily the goal (Kruger & Casey, 2010). The advantage of focus groups is that interaction between interviewees may produce the best information (Creswell, 2013). Focus groups are particularly well suited for understanding how people think or feel about something, such as an idea or experience (Turner, 2010). Focus groups may be used in this research study. The decision as to whether a focus group interview or individual interviews would be most appropriate as a follow-up data collection method will depend on the original information gathered and the participants’ sentiments.

**Interview questions.** According to Merriam (2009), the key to getting good data in an interview is to ask good questions, and the questions asked depend on the focus of the study. Experience or behavior questions elicit information about what a person
does or did, the behaviors, actions, and activities (Patton, 2002; Merriam, 2009).

Experience questions often begin with “Tell me about…” (Merriam, 2009, p. 96).

Because hermeneutic phenomenological research is interpretive study of human lived experience (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012), interpretive questioning also serves to elicit deeper responses, especially in a second interview situation or in follow-up, clarifying questions (Merriam, 2009). In interpretive and responsive questioning, the researcher advances tentative explanations or interpretations of what the participant has been saying and asks for a reaction (Merriam, 2009; Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Experience interview questions were an appropriate choice for this hermeneutic phenomenological study that examined the lived experiences of elementary principals who have nurtured professional learning communities to determine the strategies they used to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions. In-depth interviewing was the primary data collection method of this qualitative research approach. One to one interviews were conducted with the principals from each selected school, with follow-up interviews or extended questions as an option for clarification, enrichment, and further depth of information. Stories and perceptions were collected from each of the participants to verify, describe, and interpret in their own words their views of the strategies used to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for PLCs. The five attributes of supportive relational conditions served as the foundation for the development of the interview questions, as well as the type of training the staff or principal had received. Those five attributes of supportive relational conditions are: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk-
taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Interview questions (Appendix E) are:

1. Tell me about the relationships that exist among the staff at your school. How do you think you, as the principal, have developed caring relationships among your school staff?

2. In your opinion, what actions of a principal could develop trust and respect among a school staff? Could you give an example of a time when you believe you contributed to building trust and respect among your staff?

3. What do recognition and celebrations of success and accomplishment look like in your school? Can you tell me about examples for students and also for staff members?

4. What do you envision when you think about risk taking in education? Tell me how you might react to a teacher who wanted to implement some sort of innovation?

5. Tell me what I might see your staff doing to change and improve teacher and student learning?

6. Tell me about any training or professional development you or your staff have received in implementing PLCs?

7. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with PLCs in your school? Is there something that perhaps I didn’t ask you that you would like to speak about?
Documents

Data collected through a variety of methods complements that which is collected through in-depth interviews (Charmaz, 2006). Validity is better established through data collection and analysis from multiple sources (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, & Waldron, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

Archival data are the routinely gathered records of groups or organizations that can supplement other qualitative data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The gathering and analyzing of documents or archival records should be linked to the research questions of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002).

Like Merriam (2009), this researcher uses the term document to refer to a “wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical materials relevant to the study” (p. 139). As with interviews, document data collection is guided by questions, hunches, and emerging findings (Merriam, 2009), thus the researcher must keep an open mind. Documents may reveal information that occurred before the study began, however, access to those documents will need to be negotiated with participants (Patton, 2002). Documents can prove valuable not only in what can be learned directly from them, but in the questions of inquiry that may be stimulated by them (Patton, 2002).

In judging the value of documents as a data source, researchers need to be mindful of information or insights relevant to the research questions, and whether the documents can be “acquired in a reasonably practical, yet systematic manner” (Merriam, 2009, p. 153). Limitations to document use include the possibility of incomplete information presented in the documents, forms that may not be useful or understandable for the research, and determination of authenticity or accuracy (Merriam, 2009). Despite
the limitations, documents can be a good source of data because they may be free, easily accessible, and offer information that might take an investigator much longer to gather through another source (Merriam, 2009).

As documents are “products of the context in which they were produced and are therefore grounded in the real world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 155), documentary material is stable. Unlike interviewing or observation, the presence of the researcher does not change what is being studied (Patton, 2002). I used artifacts in the form of documents, texts, or written and digital correspondence that principals may have used in developing and implementing professional learning communities, specifically those related to developing supportive relational conditions. The participants were asked to share what they view as relevant documents and the research questions guided the selection of the documents used for data.

Data Analysis

The process of bringing structure, order, and interpretation to the collected data is not always an orderly process. It is often “messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating” (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 154). Qualitative data analysis is a search for general statements about relationships and underlying themes and does not usually proceed in a linear fashion (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Qualitative data is complex and is not easily converted to measurable units; however, a fundamental operation of the analysis is the discovery of specific classes or categories that characterize the data (Creswell, 2013). A researcher should use the research questions as a basis for description, analysis, interpretation, and organization of the data (Patton, 2002).
In phenomenological research, analysis of the data actually begins during data collection as the primary researcher acts as a thinker and co-researcher with participants (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher begins with a description of his or her own experiences with the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Next the researcher carefully attends to the verbatim transcript of the interview, finds statements about the experiences of the participants related to the phenomenon and lists those statements that are nonrepetitive and nonoverlapping; this is called horizontalization of the data, recognizing that every statement has equal value (Moustakas, 1994). These types of statements are called invariant horizons of the experience (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, those statements were related to the establishing, fostering, and sustaining of supportive relational conditions of PLCs.

The statements are then grouped into meaning units and synthesized into themes, around which the researcher then writes a textural description of what happened including examples (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then reflects on the textural descriptions and develops a structural description of all possible meanings and divergent perspectives of the phenomenon, so that the underlying structures that account for the experience being what it is are understood for each participant (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Descriptive coding of the data throughout would support organization of descriptions and themes, which would assist in organizing the data and summarizing the primary topic of the phenomenon (Saldana, 2010).

A researcher does what Moustakas (1994) describes as imaginative variation, which means considering the varying frames of reference that may be attached to the phenomenon. The next step is to develop an overall description of the meaning or
essence of the experience for the group as a whole by integrating all the descriptions into
a composite (Creswell, 2013). In this way the researcher considers parts of the data
gathered, as well as considering the data as a whole in developing the universal
description of the essence of the phenomenon for the group. The process is illustrated in
Table 3, below.

Table 3

*Phenomenological Data Analysis and Representation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data Analysis and Representation</th>
<th>Phenomenology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Data managing</td>
<td>Create and organize data files</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading and note taking of data</td>
<td>Read through text, making notes, for initial codes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Describe the meaning of the experience for the researcher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classifying</td>
<td>1. Find and list statements of meaning for individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Group statements into meaning units or themes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting</td>
<td>1. Develop and textural description “What happened”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Develop a structural description “How the phenomenon was experienced”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Develop a composite description of the experience, the “essence”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representing, visualizing</td>
<td>Present a narration (report) of the “essence” of the experience, use tables or figures of statements and themes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from Creswell (2013, p. 190-191)

Creswell (2013) contends that qualitative analysis is custom-built and tailored for
each research investigation and study. Qualitative researchers learn as their study
progresses, however, the process is circular (Creswell, 2013). Just as with the
hermeneutic circle, the process moves through analysis back and forth, interpreting and
reinterpreting, until the essence of the experience is determined, rather than using a fixed linear approach (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Interpretations are repeatedly evaluated in order to probe deeper into the essence of the phenomenon (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012).

**Summary of Chapter 3**

In this chapter the research design and methodologies that were used to investigate the research questions proposed in this study were described. The purpose, problem statement, and research questions were stated and the research design, location, sampling, instrumentation, data collection procedure, and analysis methods were described.

After consideration of several qualitative methodologies for addressing the research questions and achieving the purpose of the study, Chapter 3 described hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry as the best approach for illuminating the phenomenon under investigation. Hermeneutic phenomenology is defined as the study of human lived experience together with its meanings that is open to revision and reinterpretation (Friesen, Henriksson, & Saevi, 2012). The purpose of examining the actions and strategies used by principals in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools, was best explored through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach.

Participants in the study consisted of elementary principals involved in the implementation of PLCs in New Hampshire’s elementary schools located in each of the State’s five geographical regions determined by the NH Association of School Principals (2011). The process began with an email information statement and
questionnaire that assisted in participant selection. The research process involved gathering data utilizing a quantitative instrument, the *Professional Learning Community Assessment - Revised* (Olivier & Hipp, 2010). Data collection also involved one to one interviews, with follow-up clarifying questions. The researcher and participants together determined the content of follow-up questions.

Document examination comprised the third source of data collected in this study. Participants were asked to share documents produced at their schools related to PLCs, specifically those which addressed supportive relational conditions. The surveys, interviews, and documents supported triangulation of data sources that offers greater validity, rigor, and quality of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002).

Data analysis was achieved through steps described by Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994) that involve interpreting and reinterpreting until the essence or themes of the phenomenon emerged and were reported by the researcher. In Chapter 4, the analysis of the data from the surveys will be detailed for the reader through the use of tables and written description. Analysis of the qualitative data, including a rich, thick description of the one to one interviews provided insight into the thematic findings from the elementary principals’ perspectives.
Chapter 4: Data Collection, Analysis, and Findings

During the beginning of a hermeneutic phenomenological study the researcher seeks to identify the topic clearly and, through questioning, research, and literature reviews, expresses his/her own understanding of the topic - a process that constitutes “the forward arc of the hermeneutic circle” (Anderson in Wertz et al., 2011, p. 252). During this next phase, that of data collection, “the return of the arc of the hermeneutic circle begins and the researcher’s focus shifts to understanding the topic in light of the experiences of others” (Anderson in Wertz et al., 2011, p. 252).

Chapter 4 presents an overview account of this study’s research data collection and analysis as related to how the participants experienced the phenomenon. The chapter is divided into two broad sections. The first section is comprised of a study overview including the purpose, problem statement, research questions, and design of the study. A description of how the data collection was conducted and descriptive information about the participants and their schools is included in this section. This section also describes the data produced by the administration of the Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) (Olivier & Hipp, 2010) questionnaire to each of the responding principals with detailed information of how the final participants were selected. The second section of this chapter describes the findings and includes the coding process with related research on coding, the analysis process of the qualitative data from the principal interviews as related to the preset and emergent themes, the findings from the interviews, as well as the document review and findings.
Study Overview

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to investigate the actions and strategies the principals use to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools.

As administrators, principals play an important role in building and extending the professional learning community concept in order to bring about transformation that can lead to school improvement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Easton, 2011; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2008; Sergiovanni, 2004). Principals have a responsibility of developing and supporting the dimensions of a PLC: shared and supportive leadership; shared beliefs, values, and vision; collective learning and application; shared personal practice; supportive structural conditions; and supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Statement of the Problem

The literature describes the dimension of supportive relational conditions as being essential in supporting the other five dimensions, if PLCs are to be effective (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003, Hord & Tobia, 2012; Routman, 2012). Supportive relational conditions consist of the attributes of caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2003; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Because questions about specific ways in which the principal can establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions continued to rise during the research, the
ways in which an elementary principal can foster the five attributes of supportive relational conditions became the focus of this study.

**Research Questions and Design**

Considering the key role research (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hargreaves, 2008; Hord, 1997a; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert 2006) suggests the principal plays in establishing supportive relational conditions that lead to a positive school culture, the questions this researcher examined were:

1. How do principals establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools? Those conditions include five attributes: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).
2. What strategies and actions do principals report using in developing the five attributes of supportive relational conditions of professional learning communities?
3. What, if any, evidence exists that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) occur in the schools’ professional learning communities?

The sections related to data collection through the use of surveys and face to face interviews address the first two research questions. The process began with an email information statement and questionnaire that assisted in participant selection (Appendix A). The research process involved gathering data utilizing a survey instrument, the
Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) (Olivier & Hipp, 2010) (Appendix D). The questionnaire produced data and demographic information which was used in the selection of principals to be interviewed. Data collection involved face to face semi-structured interviews with principals at six selected elementary schools, with follow-up clarifying questions. As noted by Merriam (2009), a semi-structured interview format includes “a mix of more and less structured interview questions that are used flexibly and allow for probing questions to be asked based on participants’ responses” (p. 89). The semi-structured principal interviews were conducted with open-ended questions that could be followed up with requests for more detail (Merriam, 2009).

Face to face interviews. A qualitative research interview can be described as a conversation with a purpose that is informed by a research question (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). The aim of the interview is to allow participants to “tell their own stories in their own words” (Smith et al., 2013, p. 56).

Interview questions should be open and expansive, so that participants are encouraged to talk at length (Smith et al., 2013). The five attributes of supportive relational conditions served as the foundation for the development of these interview questions, as well as one question concerning the type of training the staff or principal had received. Those five attributes of supportive relational conditions are: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk-taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Interview questions (Appendix E) included:

1. Tell me about the relationships that exist among the staff at your school.
How do you think you, as the principal, have developed caring relationships among your school staff?

2. In your opinion, what actions of a principal could develop trust and respect among a school staff? Could you give an example of a time when you believe you contributed to building trust and respect among your staff?

3. What do recognition and celebrations of success and accomplishment look like in your school? Can you tell me about examples for students and also for staff members?

4. What do you envision when you think about risk taking in education? Tell me how you might react to a teacher who wanted to implement some sort of innovation?

5. Tell me what I might see your staff doing to change and improve teacher and student learning?

6. Tell me about any training or professional development you or your staff have received in implementing PLCs?

7. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with PLCs in your school? Is there something that perhaps I didn’t ask you that you would like to speak about?

Together with the participants I determined the content of follow-up questions and information tailored according to what the principals wanted to share or based on previous discussion during the interview process. I audio-taped and transcribed the interviews and then sent each principal a transcription of his/her interview to check the
accuracy and make corrections as needed to the conversations. This check by the principals provided validity of the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

Artificial review. Document examination comprised the third source of data collected in this study. Participants were asked to share documents produced at their schools related to PLCs, specifically those which possibly addressed supportive relational conditions. The documents were collected and analyzed to add contextual information and enrich research findings (Merriam, 2009). The surveys, interviews, and documents supported triangulation of data sources that offered greater validity, rigor, and quality of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002).

Data Collection

Initial survey. Seventeen New Hampshire principals responded to the initial email information statement and three-item survey questionnaire (Appendix A). The three questions included in this first contact were:

1. Do you have active professional learning communities (PLCs) at your elementary school?
2. If so, would you be interested in participating in a study on PLCs?
3. May I contact you? (If yes, please include contact information)

Each of the seventeen responding principals indicated that they had active PLCs at their schools; they were interested in participating in the study, and gave their contact information.

PLCA-R. The next step in the data collection process was to send the principals a link to the Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (Olivier & Hipp, 2010) (Appendix D) at www.sedl.org so they could take the assessment survey online.
Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) offers an option to customize demographic questions in addition to the PLCA-R standard questionnaire. Demographic data was collected with the survey through four customized questions offering responses within ranges, including:

1. Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school (1-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10 or more)
2. Number of years as principal at current school (1-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10 or more)
3. Student enrollment at your school (100-199, 200-399, 400-600)
4. Grade levels at your school (PK, K, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 click all that apply)

The PLCA-R instrument is organized into six sections based on Hord’s (1997a) PLC dimensions. Within each section, participants are presented 5-11 descriptors and asked to use a four-point Likert-type scale to record their perceptions relative to practices which occur in their school. Responses range from “strongly disagree” (1) to “strongly agree” (4) for each of the 52 items. Items have been designed to address specific school and classroom practices found to be common aspects of schools implementing the PLC concept with fidelity (Olivier & Hipp, 2010).

One principal withdrew from the study before taking the survey, stating that it was too extensive and time-consuming. Sixteen of the seventeen remaining principals completed the PLCA-R questionnaire. I created a spreadsheet with contact information for the principals, school locations within the State’s five regions as designated by the New Hampshire Association of School Principals (NHASP), grade levels of the schools, and PLCA-R survey identification numbers. The spreadsheet was used for record keeping purposes only relative to this study.
Selection of the Participants

**Initial selection.** Merriam (2009) advises that the participants for a study be selected purposefully; meaning that the participants must be able to inform the research question (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2007). In a hermeneutic study, only those who have lived the experience under investigation can be included as a participant from which the most can be learned (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009; van Manen, 2007); in this case, the principals’ lived experiences regarding developing supportive relational conditions was examined.

While the state of New Hampshire is small geographically, it is extremely diverse in population clusters. The pool of the sixteen available principals was narrowed to six in order to achieve geographical representation, gender equality, and an equal number of principals from cities and towns. The participants for this study were six public elementary school principals involved in the implementation of professional learning communities. Location of the schools was an important factor in selection as the study was designed to include participants from elementary schools located in each of the State’s five geographical regions; North Country, Lakes Region, South Central, South East, and South West. At least one participant from each of the five regions was selected, with two being located in the Lakes Region. These variations may allow for more generalizability of findings to other elementary schools in New Hampshire.

The NHASP definition of elementary schools includes schools with grade levels which encompass preschool to grade 6. There are various configurations and divisions of grade levels among the schools; however, this study focused on schools covering only those grade levels as elementary schools. Three of the responding principal’s schools
included grade levels to grade 8. Although those principals participated in the PLCA-R, they were not chosen for face to face interviews.

**Final participant pool.** Information gathered from the PLCA-R determined school level practices that support Hord and Tobia’s (2012) PLC dimensions. The PLCA-R assessment tool helped to determine the principals’ perspectives as to the level of implementation of the dimensions of PLCs. In order to select participants who had *lived* the PLC experience with supportive relational conditions, a measure of their experience was necessary. The selected participants’ scores ranged from 2.86 to 3.80 from a possible 4.00 on statements from all six dimensions (Hord & Tobia, 2012) of PLCs as measured by the PLCA-R.

Particular attention was given to the responses in the section of the PLCA-R regarding supportive relational conditions, covering items 38-42. The descriptors for this section include the five attributes of supportive relational conditions: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003); those attributes formed the basis of the interview questions. This section of the PLCA-R was used to select the final participants.

Those principals selected for face to face interviews scored their schools at a 3 or 4 on the Likert scale in all questions on the PLCA-R section related to supportive relational conditions, items 38-42. Table 4 shows questions 38-42. A *perfect* mean score in this section would have been 4.00 or raw score of 16. These principals scored their schools at a mean score of 3.00 or above, or a raw score of 15 or above.
Table 4

**PLCA-R Supportive Relational Conditions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Relationships</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>D</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>38. Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42. Relationships among staff members support honest and respectful examination of data to enhance teaching and learning.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Adapted from *Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised* (Olivier & Hipp, 2010).

The PLCA-R Participant Records for those principals selected for face to face interviews, as well as the summarized report of the 16 principal cohort, are included as Appendices G-M with all identifying information removed.

The principal’s longevity at his/her school was also a factor in selection, because the number of years of experience with PLCs constitutes the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2007). Lived experience with a PLC was a requirement in this hermeneutic study (See Table 5 for information on participating principals).

Principal #1 is a female with seven years’ experience as the principal of an elementary school located in the South Central Region of the State (NHASP, 2011). The
school enrollment is approximately 380 students in preschool to grade 5 (New Hampshire Dept. of Education, 2013). She has had six years’ experience with implementing PLCs.

Principal #2 is a male with fourteen years’ experience as the principal of an elementary school located in the Lakes Region of the State (NHASP, 2011). The school enrollment is approximately 245 students in grade 3-5 (New Hampshire Dept. of Education, 2013). He has had six years’ experience implementing PLCs.

Principal #3 is a female with five years’ experience as the principal of an elementary school located in the North Country Region of the State (NHASP, 2011). The school enrollment is approximately 280 students in kindergarten to grade 2 (New Hampshire Dept. of Education, 2013). She has had three years’ experience implementing PLCs.

Principal #4 is a female with five years’ experience as the principal of an elementary school located in the South East Region of the State (NHASP, 2011). The school enrollment is approximately 300 students in kindergarten to grade 5 (New Hampshire Dept. of Education, 2013). She has had nine years’ experience implementing PLCs as she was previously a principal in another school that implemented PLCs.

Principal #5 is a male with fifteen years’ experience as the principal of an elementary school located in the Lakes Region of the State (NHASP, 2011). The school enrollment is approximately 450 students in kindergarten to grade 4 (New Hampshire Dept. of Education, 2013). He has had four years’ experience implementing PLCs.

Principal #6 is a male with fifteen years’ experience as the principal of an elementary school located in the South West Region of the State (NHASP, 2011). The
school enrollment is approximately 260 students in preschool to grade 3 (New Hampshire Dept. of Education, 2013). He has had three years’ experience implementing PLCs.

Table 5 can be used as a quick reference for information on principals selected for the face to face interviews.

Table 5

*Demographic Information for Interview Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal #</th>
<th>Male or Female</th>
<th># Yrs. as principal in current school</th>
<th>Region</th>
<th>School enrollment and grade levels</th>
<th>#Yrs implementing PLCs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>#1</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>380 PK-5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#2</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>LR</td>
<td>245 3-5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>NC</td>
<td>280 K-2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#4</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>300 K-5</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>LR</td>
<td>450 K-4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#6</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>SW</td>
<td>260 PK-3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Information adapted from New Hampshire Association of School Principals (2011); New Hampshire Department of Education (2013); PLCA-R Report

Interviews were conducted with each of the six selected participants. Each interview lasted approximately one to one and one half hours. A responsive, semi-structured interviewing technique was utilized, an approach which involves choosing participants who are knowledgeable, listening to what they say, and asking new or follow-up questions based on the answers they provide (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Turner (2010) suggests that those new or follow-up questions could be asked in a second interview or in focus group interviews. However, I chose to ask clarifying or follow-up
questions during the initial interview because principals shared an abundance of information and there was sufficient time for clarification and follow-up questions to insure clear understanding. Focus groups were not used, as originally planned, because validity was established by having the participants read the transcripts and correct or elaborate them as needed. Themes were common enough not to require the need for follow-up data collection. After the interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and validated by the participating principals, the process of data analysis began.

**Coding Procedure**

Qualitative data is complex and is not easily converted to measurable units; however, a fundamental operation of the analysis is the discovery of specific classes or categories that characterize the data (Creswell, 2013). The process moves through analysis back and forth, interpreting and reinterpreting (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

**First cycle coding.** The supportive relational conditions dimension is comprised of five attributes (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003); caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change. As the face to face interview questions were based on these five attributes, in addition to one question regarding training in PLC approaches, those attributes and participant training were used as preset codes for organizing the interview data. Having a preset list of codes enables the data to harmonize with the study’s conceptual framework and supports analysis that directly answers the research questions (Saldana, 2010). See Table 6 for the preset codes for this study.
Table 6

Preset Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preset Code 1</th>
<th>Caring Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preset Code 2</td>
<td>Trust and Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preset Code 3</td>
<td>Recognition and Celebrations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preset Code 4</td>
<td>Risk Taking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preset Code 5</td>
<td>Unified Efforts to Embed Change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preset Code 6</td>
<td>PLC Training</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Information adapted from Hipp and Huffman (2010)

In phenomenological studies the researcher carefully attends to the verbatim transcripts of the interviews and finds statements about the experiences of the participants related to the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The first step in this study was to read through all interview transcripts and note the passages or statements that were related to the preset codes of the phenomenon. This allowed me to begin analyzing, interpreting, and making meaning of the data (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013; Saldana, 2010). Like Saldana, Creswell (2013) also encourages a researcher to first read through the text making notes related to the codes, finding and listing the statements of meaning for the individuals.

Coding throughout the process was achieved manually on paper rather than electronically, as there is a difference in the mediums of screen and paper that affects the message the viewer retrieves (Seidman, 2013). Seidman recommends working on a paper copy initially and Saldana (2010) also advises that manipulating qualitative data on paper and handwriting codes gives the researcher more control over and ownership of the work.

Both initial and descriptive coding were employed in this first cycle of the coding process. Initial coding is breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, examining
and comparing them for similarities or differences (Saldana, 2010). Charmaz (2006) advises that detailed, line-by-line initial coding is suitable for interview transcripts. Descriptive coding analyzes and classifies the data’s basic categories summarizing in a word or phrase the topic of each passage or statement of qualitative data (Saldana, 2010). This was accomplished by making notes in the margins of each of the interview transcripts, which allowed for grouping or classifying of the statements into meaning units or themes related to the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) and the training component for PLCs.

Thematic analysis of data is involved in hermeneutic phenomenology (Langdridge, 2007; van Manen, 2007), which was the selected methodology for this study. The interpretive process is achieved through a hermeneutic circle which moves from the parts of experience, to the whole of experience, and back and forth again and again to increase the depth of engagement with and understanding of the information collected (Laverty, 2003). The researcher examines and reexamines the data “hovering low like a hummingbird, over the data and relaying what you see from that vantage point” (Anderson in Wertz et al., 2011, p. 254). Grasping themes that may have emerged from the data required a revisiting and reexamination of the interview transcripts in a second cycle of coding. Just as with the hermeneutic circle, the process moves through analysis back and forth, interpreting and reinterpreting, until the essence of the experience is determined, rather than using a fixed linear approach (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

**Second cycle coding.** In order to achieve a fuller grasp of the meaning and themes of the data, a second cycle of coding was implemented in this study during
reexamination. Second cycle coding methods are advanced ways of reorganizing and reanalyzing the data “fitting categories one within another to develop a coherent synthesis” (Saldana, 2010, p. 149). Through this analysis, I searched “for connecting threads and patterns among the excerpts within those categories and for connections between the various categories that may be called themes” (Seidman, 2013, p. 127). According to Saldana, themes are outcomes of coding achieved through analytic reflection. A variety of second cycle themes emerged from the reexamination or recoding of the interview data that will be called emergent themes of this study, as “thematic analysis allows categories to emerge from the data” (Saldana, 2010, p. 140).

In order to discover categories or themes that emerged from the data, I employed focused coding in this second round of examination. Focused coding follows initial coding as a researcher searches for the most significant codes to develop the most salient categories from the data (Saldana, 2010). See Table 7, Emergent Themes, for themes of supportive relational conditions for PLCs that emerged from the interview data.

Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emergent Theme 1</th>
<th>Central Office Support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Theme 2</td>
<td>Structural Supports to help Team Functioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent Theme 3</td>
<td>Establishing a Culture of Collegiality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some categories that appeared to be emergent themes initially, were later integrated within one of the original preset themes of caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). For example, shared leadership, decision making, and vision seemed like an emergent theme in the second cycle focused
coding process. However, upon further reflection this theme was viewed as part of the trust and respect coding because principals must trust and respect staff members’ expertise in order to feel secure in allowing them to share in the leadership and decision making process. This demonstrates the nature of the hermeneutic circle, as the researcher contemplates and revisits the data repeatedly making connections and viewing the parts as they relate to the whole in order to deepen understanding (Laverty, 2003).

After the preset codes, categories, and themes were noted in the margins of each interview transcript, I separated each statement from the transcript and placed the related statements together under the various topics. I identified the individual principals by printing each interview transcript on a different colored paper, as well as writing the principal’s number next to each separate statement. The statements were then cut from the transcriptions and the strips of paper were adhered to large chart papers designated for each category and emergent theme. The separate statements that were related within each code or category were placed in close proximity on the chart paper.

This process enabled me “to see the smaller pieces to a larger puzzle” (Saldana, 2010, p.22). This visual categorization allowed me to see commonalities or differences (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) among the principals as to how they establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for PLCs, in addition to the strategies they use.

**Document Review**

Charmaz (2006) offers that data collected through a variety of methods complements that which is collected through in-depth interviews. As validity is better established through data collection and analysis from multiple sources (Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, & Waldron, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 2009;
Patton, 2002), I chose to use artifacts in the form of documents, texts, or written and digital correspondence that principals may have used in developing relational supports for PLCs. The document or artifact review in this study addressed the third research question:

3. What, if any, evidence exists that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) occur in the schools’ professional learning communities?

Documents were offered by each of the six interview participants (100%), with five of the principals giving me the documents to take with me at the time of the interview or sending them to me electronically after the interview. The other principal allowed me to look through a manual that was used in the training of his staff in PLCs. The manual contents were copyrighted, so review was done on site at the principal’s school and notes were taken regarding the contents. Other documents included agendas and minutes of PLC meetings, email correspondence from the principals to staff members, protocol materials for PLC meetings, student data evaluation sheets, planning materials for meeting student academic needs, celebration ideas, PLC surveys, and steering group notes.

The same procedure was used in reviewing the documents as was followed in reviewing and coding the interview transcripts. As I read through the documents, I made marginal notes that related various parts of the documents to the preset codes and/or the themes that emerged from the analysis of the interviews. However, one difference in the document review was that I did not cut apart the documents by statements, as this was not necessary in order to see the relationship of the document contents to the codes and
emergent themes. No new themes emerged from the document review, however, the
documents served to support and validate the information the principals had shared
during their interviews.

**Analysis of the Data**

The interview questions were based on the five attributes of the PLC supportive
relational conditions dimension (Hord & Tobia, 2012), which then became the preset
codes or themes for classification of the data. In review, the five attributes are: caring
relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified
efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Interview
questions were asked in that order. Findings from the interview data are presented in the
order of the interview questions or preset codes, with findings related to any emergent
themes following.

**Preset Codes**

**Preset Code 1: Caring Relationships**

Supportive and caring relationships are paramount to achieving a positive school
environment (Cohen & Brown, 2013). Additionally, school leaders need to address
relationships in order to establish and reinforce a positive school climate and successful
collaboration, making all members of the community feel cared for and respected.
(Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Sparks, 2005). Hargreaves (2008) describes the nature of
sustainable PLCs as a way of life that focuses on all aspects of learning, as well as on
caring for others within the school.

The first interview question related to caring relationships (*Tell me about the
relationships that exist among the staff at your school. How do you think you, as the*
principal, have developed caring relationships among your school staff?) elicited the following responses, which are presented by themes:

**Modeling.** Four of the six principals (67%), stated that they modeled caring relationships for their staff members. They expressed that they wanted staff members to feel that they genuinely cared about them and believed that their example would set the tone.

“…I knew when I came here, these folks needed to know that I knew them, that I cared about them, and that was the first thing I had to do so they would feel that same caring for others” (Principal #1). Principal #3 said something similar when declaring, “If I care about them, they will care about me and in turn, each other.”

The theme of modeling was further evident in statements from Principals #4 and #6. “I have really modeled that caring for my teachers, so when we come together as a staff, it is truly a PLC” (Principal #4). “Caring is a reciprocal thing and obviously it starts with us. We as administrators have to be completely respectful and caring of others” (Principal #6).

**Social activities.** Four of the six principals, (67%) also mentioned that their school staff members built caring relationships by participating in social activities together beyond and within their professional contacts at school.

Principal #2 said that some social activities were built into staff meetings and trainings, “…ice breakers that make people feel a little better and make that personal connection.” His staff members learned about the activities in their PLC training and continue to participate in them regularly, such as taking time to talk about hobbies that they enjoy. “Sometimes you learn something you didn’t know about a person that you’ve
known for 30 years!” (Principal #2). Principals #4 and #5 echoed these sentiments. Principal #5 used these words, “Here we have a lot of people that get together and go out on the weekends….because personally they get along well with each other…”

Although Principal #6 stated that he and his staff are close “like family,” he also believes that there could be some problems associated with relationships that are too friendly, such as when he has to deal with school-related issues that are not positive. He experienced that the closeness of his relationships with staff members caused some hurt feelings in certain circumstances. He stated, “There’s an advantage, in a sense, to the standoffish sort of thing, which some administrators have, because you can give bad news or corrections and there’s no heart really, it’s just straight” (Principal #6).

Laughter and humor. One of the six principals (17%) made several comments about laughter and humor among and between the staff.

Laughter is big…they laugh and joke a lot together, so that to me is evidence that they are supporting each other and having a good time together, people don’t do that unless they like each other. If you don’t have fun and laugh together, you are not going to have a well-functioning team. By and large I think laughter makes for caring relationships, people are able to enjoy each other when they laugh and if people enjoy each other, they have a greater commitment to each other and my teams like each other (Principal #6).

Interdependence. Two of the six principals (33%) mentioned staff members depending on one another as an impetus for relationships.

Principal #1 related that the lack of a relationship with the former principals fostered an even closer relationship among the staff members in her school saying,
“…before I came here they had seven principals in five years, what that did was to develop a climate where they were really dependent on one another, they were very tight…they had to be to survive.”

Principal #4 spoke about a teacher that was having a really tough start to the year and how others had supported her.

We had two kids with real behavior problems… and the teacher wasn’t mentally prepared for that, and so they would have team meetings and the others would bring up ideas for behavioral systems. They would also bring her coffee and other little nice things to make her day better…the behaviors and helping each other with them is a huge piece in PLCs (Principal #4).

**Equality.** Helping staff members to feel that they are on an equal level with each other helped two of the six principals (33%) support caring relationships.

Principal #3 structured her staff meetings like the morning meetings of *Responsive Classroom* (Charney, 1993), which had been implemented at her school. Staff members would sit in a circle for meetings, “…I had been having the traditional staff meetings where I talked from the front and they looked at me and listened…” She laughed before continuing, “After we started sitting in a circle, it made all the difference in nurturing those relationships when we all had to look at each other. They talked more and I talked less, it seemed like we were all equals.” She proudly announced, “Our meetings have become so much more productive and our relationships closer.”

Principal #6 spoke about his concern that staff members feel equal to one another and that there not be a perception that he favored anyone. “There’s even one teacher in the building, an outstanding teacher, that I don’t spend too much time with because she
doesn’t want to be seen as a brown-noser and I don’t want others to think of her that way.” He demonstrated his desire for equality in the building by adding, “I have to be careful about the image of favoring the young as versus the older teachers, I don’t think I do, but some people probably perceive that, so I am careful.”

**Longevity.** Each of the six principals (100%) mentioned longevity as a factor in building caring relationships. The notion of stability within the building was echoed repeatedly. Each mentioned the importance of longevity to building relations. One even made the analogy to a family. Principal #5 articulated what the group was thinking.

I think the big thing with us is that we have been together for an extended period, it makes an incredible difference. That longevity builds relationships and that is extremely useful because people know each other and care about each other (Principal #5).

**Preset Code 2: Trust and Respect**

The principal plays a vital role in the development of the culture of a school and in building the trust that is crucial for successful implementation of the PLC concept (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2008; Hord, 1997a; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, & Valentine, 1999). Tschannen-Moran (2004) contends that it is the responsibility of the person with greater authority in schools to initiate and sustain trusting relationships. As a researcher I anticipated the participants would discuss the six dimensions of PLCs (Hord & Tobia, 2012). The challenge in coding the data was the interconnectivity of the dimensions, especially concerning trust and respect. The second interview question related to trust and respect (In your opinion, what actions of a principal could develop trust and respect among a school staff? Could
you give an example of a time when you believe you contributed to building trust and respect among your staff?) elicited the responses that follow.

**Communication.** When asked about the actions used to develop trust and respect, communication was repeatedly mentioned. Within the notion of communication, honesty, communicating school news, communicating clear expectations, and being nonjudgmental were discussed by the principals.

**Communicating honestly.** Each of the six principals (100%) made comments about open, honest communication with their staff members. In their comments about open and honest communications the phrase “up front” was used repeatedly. Two of the principals talked about the mistakes they have made and admitting them to the staff. “When I make a mistake, I am not afraid to apologize, I think there is strength in that, in letting people know that you’re are not perfect…” (Principal #6).

Principal #4 added this,

I am the first to say, I don’t know or I need help, and I think I have modeled that for my teachers. I also need to be direct with them, unless I lay it out for them, I cannot expect them to understand my expectations. I can give really hard feedback and honest feedback, and I think because that has become the norm, there is this level of trust (Principal #4).

Principal #4 also told me the story of when a teacher took a sick day, although the principal knew she wasn’t really sick. The principal went on to say that she discussed the matter of being open and honest with the teacher and told the teacher if she needed a mental health day that was OK. She ended by saying, “And that kind of honesty has
gone a long way for me, so when I have to go into difficult conversations, they know I am being straight with them.”

**Communicating school news.** Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1994) found that leaders have the capacity to promote patterns of interaction and communication among faculty. Efforts concentrated on reducing isolation of teachers by building a caring, collaborative environment resulted in the reduction of natural boundaries found between teachers (Boyd-Dimock & Hord, 1994). Communication comments from the principals also related to how they communicated with staff members, such as giving information about what was occurring within the schools, which resulted in greater communications between teachers. For example, three of the six principals (50%) sent electronic communications to their staff members on a weekly basis. The day of the week didn’t matter, as one principal sent out the email on Monday mornings, while two sent it out before the school week began. Principal #6 joked that the staff calls it “The Sunday Blast.”

Principal #1 sent out her email on Monday morning giving kudos and listing interesting things that were happening throughout the school. She said, “This gets the staff interested and they start talking to each other about the classroom strategies that I mention in the email” (Principal #1). This is just one example that typifies how the principals reduce isolation within the building.

**Communicating clear expectations.** The expectations communicated by school leaders are critical influences on teachers’ participation in communities of practice (Printy, 2008). Two of the six (33%) principals spoke repeatedly about setting clear expectations for PLC meetings.
Principal #4 developed documents for PLC groups to use at their meetings in order to convey her expectations for what should be happening in the meetings. She stated, “They just sat there and said, we need help, we don’t know what to do in these PLC meetings.” It was the teachers who helped the principal to recognize that the PLC would not be successful without clear expectations. Her interpretation of clear expectations was a format that would be used by all teams. She also related that she had asked the teachers to build the agenda for one of the staff meetings; however, they came with no agenda. “I realized that I wasn’t as direct as I needed to be, I wanted items from them and they were just thinking they would talk about anything that came up” (Principal #4).

On the other hand, Principal #3 did not think that having structured documents was helpful to her staff. “We have tried this new document this year for PLC meetings, but I think it is inhibiting their discussions. They seem to be too worried about following the format.”

**Communicating nonjudgmentally.** Each of the six principals (100%) gave examples of information that referred to their nonjudgmental communications with staff. Much of the discussion in the interviews related to communication referring to classroom observations and evaluations. The message that the principals were trying to convey was not a movement towards dismissal, but that of improvement in instruction. Principal #1 put it this way, “Let’s face it, there are areas for improvement for all of us, I didn’t allow them to feel as if they are bad teachers, only that they needed to improve in one or two areas.”
As an elementary principal myself, I understood their concern for nonjudgmental communication, as well as the misinterpretation of many staff members related to evaluations. Principal #5 articulated it in this manner,

I talk to teachers individually after I have observed them, they feel safer that way. And I have had to put people on improvement plans and we have talked together and they have made some changes for the better. They know I am not just putting down marks to try to get rid of somebody, that it’s not a ‘gotcha’. I think they know how much time we put in as administrators hiring and supervising, we don’t want to get rid of them, we want them to grow. I think that has to do with trust (Principal #5).

**Norms for Respect.** Three of the principals (50%) mentioned expectations and norms for respect among each educator in the building. The concept of working together as a team for the good of the students was mentioned.

We all understand, PLCs are just the way we do things, it just takes over. We show respect, it is part of our agreement with one another, we have our rules and we refer to them, this is the way all the meetings work (Principal #2).

**Principal Presence.** Morrissey (2000) says that school leaders can support and sustain PLCs by maintaining a visible presence in the school and visiting classrooms frequently. Each of the principals (100%) spoke of being present with their staff and showing a physical presence frequently in the school as contributing to trust and respect. “We have a walk-through model for evaluations now, so the staff is seeing administrators a lot more in classrooms. That’s a big piece of trust, staff knowing that we are invested in what they are doing” (Principal #3).
Time to Develop Trust. Each of the six of the principals (100%) discussed time, related to longevity, as an important factor in building trust. Several mentioned that about three years or more are required to build a trusting relationship.

Principal #1, “It takes at least three years to build the trust to create a cohesive team… This is our third year and it has been our best ever…” Principal #3 agreed, “It took the first three years before people felt they could trust me enough to come to me about something that was bothering them and they knew I wasn’t going to be evaluative.”

Principal #6 spoke of a lack of trust as a problem for new administrators, “That might be part of the problem for new administrators trying to build trusting relationships… they come in and they want to make change so quickly…People have to trust you before they will follow you to make a change.” Principal #5 summed it up in this manner, “I think the biggest factor we have here related to trust is the longevity of the staff. They are really committed to the school, and to each other, but it takes a long time to build that kind of trust.”

Change in culture. Trust and respect, although critical, are elements of organizational culture that are often overlooked when PLCs are being introduced (Louis, 2008). PLCs represent a change in culture in many schools where collaboration is not the norm. Three of the six principals (50%) spoke of some of the difficulties they encountered in attempting to change the culture of their schools to PLCs and to overcome a lack of trust. Isolationism, views of professional development, and a disharmony among staff members were mentioned as obstacles to changing the culture.

Principal #1 expressed it in this manner, “They had a lot of respect for one another, but then they would go inside their classrooms, shut the door, and become
isolationists.” She added “The problem is, they had been this way for many years so getting them to share practices and talk about their data in teams was a major step for them.”

Principal #3 was concerned about her staff members’ view of professional development activities, “We have to change the culture in this school because teachers see professional development as something that is imposed upon them, not as a growth and learning process.”

Principal #4 described her problem with disharmony in the building, “When I first came here there were two camps, the A camp and the B camp, and it all depended on the kind of relationship that the teacher had with the previous principal.” She mentioned the time required for the repair process, “It took a long time to eliminate that rift…they had to trust that I was not going to turn against them. I had a lot of repairing to do with relationships, and some left because of lack of trust.”

**Safety and Vulnerability.** Hord and Tobia (2012) contend that teachers must feel safe in order for the sharing of personal practices to be successful and effective toward improved student learning. Three of the six principals (50%) spoke about feelings of safety as being a factor in building trusting relationships.

Principal #1 spoke of the vulnerability of teachers sharing practices, “…being able to trust one another and be vulnerable, that’s an ongoing thing. It is risky and maybe it’s too much vulnerability.” Her strategy was to build their self-confidence, so they felt comfort in trusting colleagues, “Some of those people feel insecure and need a lot of positive feedback, so that’s what I’m trying to do to make them feel safe, build their self-confidence to share what they are doing…” She went on about the differences in sharing
between large and small groups, “Sometimes they will share with their own small team, but not always with the whole staff. Even myself as a teacher, I didn’t often say anything in front of the whole group” (Principal #1).

Principal #2 spoke similarly regarding safety, “Trusting is a big piece in all of this, you don’t feel safe with people you don’t trust.” His strategy for building that trust involved setting an expectation, “I think we, as principals, can set that climate, create that tone between teachers by setting the expectation for sharing.”

Principal #6 also discussed trust as playing a large role in the comfort level of his teachers observing one another and offering feedback, “That’s a tough one; it’s difficult for teachers, they feel vulnerable to that kind of exposure. I think it’s a safety thing.”

The principals alluded to feelings of safety, or lack thereof, as affecting the sharing of practices between teachers.

**Shared Personal Practice.** Inviting others to observe teaching and give feedback requires trust and multiple opportunities for practice before members become completely comfortable with this activity (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Meier, 2002). Each of the six principals (100%) talked about strategies they use to encourage shared practice among their staff. The stress of having other teachers visit one’s classroom has been alleviated by some of these strategies, such as paying compliments after a visit, holding drop-by discussions, giving teachers choices about where they will visit, using humor, refocusing visiting teachers’ attention to students, using professional development time to share, having teachers share data, and building teacher confidence.

“We do learning walks in our building; they have to do at least two and fill out a little exit ticket and leave it in my mailbox. The learning walk is about compliments
only, which builds teacher confidence” (Principal #1). Principal #4 also asks her teachers to leave compliments, as well as wonderings when they visit another teachers’ classroom. The wonderings are questions that start more conversations.

However, Principal #1 did relate that the learning walks or visits were not comfortable initially. “Originally the learning walks were all very structured and modeled…Oh God, it was so uncomfortable at first, but now that they know what they are doing, I let them have free reign to observe what they want” (Principal #1). Principal #3 agreed that choice for teachers is an important factor in building trust between them. She stated, “I let them choose who they wanted to observe. I had wished I could have made that decision for them, but I knew it was a first step in building trust amongst the staff members.” Principal #5 facilitates this choice for observation by obtaining substitutes.

Sending out information about what other teachers are doing in their classrooms through school news email or letters has initiated some shared practices as well. Principal #1 discussed an after-school drop by discussion model. “At first I put it out in an email, now teachers themselves post what they will demonstrate and then other teachers just drop by the classroom for discussion” (Principal #1). Principal #3 added, “When I send out emails about practices that are going on in the classrooms… teachers ask each other about it …or ask if they can watch it in action…they really don’t know what’s happening in other people’s classrooms.” She went on to expand upon how much her school news supports sharing, but also added her regrets, “If I can recognize them all in a way that’s nonthreatening…then it offers a great opportunity for sharing. The sad
part is that some of them are still afraid to share because they feel like it is almost boasting.”

Principal #2 used humor to relieve the fear and stress of sharing by telling a teacher’s colleagues that he had forced her to share. He joked, “I asked her to share her approach… She didn’t want to, but finally agreed because I told everyone that I had pulled her arm behind her back and forced her to do it. That alleviated some of the tension.” He went on to describe the positive reaction from her colleagues, “…and afterwards they all thanked her for sharing because they knew she was uncomfortable” (Principal #2).

Principals #2 and #5 ask visiting teachers to focus on the students, and not on the teachers as a method to alleviate nervousness and help teachers feel less intimidated when they are observed. “We have walk throughs with small teams… I ask them to focus on what students are doing, rather than on the teachers, and that relieved some stress, but they can’t help but observe what the teacher is doing” (Principal #5).

Sharing student data has acted as the impetus for teacher discussion as well as for shared practice in the schools of Principals #5 and #3. “…they share data, bringing it to meetings and discussing why one teacher’s kids did better than others and then asking her for help and advice” (Principal #3).

Combs, Edmonson, and Harris (2013) found that sharing discussion about the strengths of another person builds a positive connection between people. Principal #4 understands this and said she tries to build her teachers’ self-confidence by emphasizing strengths. “I have spent time just talking to people about their strengths, or the strengths
of the team, and I encourage them to come to a staff meeting and showcase that strength to the faculty, it has been pretty successful” (Principal #4).

However, Principals #5 and #6 have found that asking teachers to share with the full faculty has made them ill at ease. They mentioned the differences in teacher’s comfort level between sharing in small teams as versus sharing with the entire faculty. Principal #6 said it in this manner, “They do OK sharing with their small groups, but there’s some stress and fear in sharing with the whole staff. I think it is intimidation, just like in teaching. Kids feel more comfortable working and learning in small groups.”

**Principal’s Trust in Teachers’ Abilities.** Trusting relationships develop when teachers trust a principal’s competence (Tschannen-Moran, 2004) and in turn principals trust their teachers’ abilities. Each of the principals (100%) talked about trusting the abilities of their staff members.

Principal #1 discussed allowing teachers some flexibility, “…when they ask if they can try something, I will tell them… they have to get their students to point A in X amount of time, they can structure that however they want…” She went on to relate how trust is involved in allowing this flexibility “… and I would say things like, I trust you to make the right decision. And they think, she trusts me to do my job!” (Principal #1).

Principals #3 and #4 mentioned trusting teachers’ abilities and knowledge to develop high quality instructional materials, instead of endlessly depending on programs from publishers. Principal #3 explained,

We have done the route of unit designs, taking the reading and math curriculum and aligning them to the Common Core. We use them as resources instead of following a scripted teacher’s manual. I have trusted their expertise and
professionalism to be able to create instructional materials and assessments to meet the standards. I trust that they are going to make the right decisions for their students (Principal #3).

Principal #5 talked about learning from the expertise of his teachers. “I came from a secondary background and knew little about K-2, so I went in and watched and observed good people in the classrooms doing things that make a difference with kids and that’s how I learned.” Principal #6 does not require his teachers to prove that they know what good instruction and lesson plans encompass, “…they know what they are doing and they don’t have to prove it through lesson plans, I just watch them and I know.”

**Shared Leadership, Decision Making, and Vision.** Trust in their teachers’ abilities has led the six interviewed principals to share authority and decision making, topics which emerged many times during the interviews. Today’s educational leaders participate in nurturing relationships that allow for shared leadership, shared power, shared authority, and shared responsibility (Hord, 1997a; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

**Shared leadership and teacher empowerment.** Each of the six principals (100%) discussed empowering their staff in various ways. For example, rather than deal with every problem situation themselves, Principals #1, #2, and #5 acknowledged empowering their teams to deal with issues. Principal #2 said it in this fashion, “…I find that sometimes I don’t have to go the one-on-one route when there are problems, because I encourage the team to work it out in a more congenial way, and they do most of the time.”
Creating shared documents was one way Principals #3 and #6 offered leadership capabilities to their staff members. Principal #3 exemplified this in her statement, “We create a lot of documents on Google docs and everyone has editing rights. This has given them a sense of power and shared authority… and I trust that they can do this as well as me.” Principal #6 also commented on these documents as a way of sharing leadership tasks. “They [the teachers] have the knowledge and ability, and I don’t worry that what they write will not be of top quality, they know their stuff.”

While principals must be responsible for ensuring leadership in critical areas, they do not have to be the sole provider (Portin, Schnelder, DeArmond, & Gundlach, 2003). Principal #4 expressed this concept, “A big piece for me in the past years has been to empower people to become leaders… they do not have to wait for me to make all the decisions.” She also discussed a problem with a teacher coming back after a year’s leave that would change the whole dynamic of one of her PLC teams. “… it might be difficult, however, I have to empower them to work that out on their own because I can’t do that for them” (Principal #4). She continued by explaining her focus for increasing shared leadership, “Right now I am formulating next year’s plan to continue the empowerment for teachers. I want them to drive our PD work, make decisions about what they need and want.”

Steering groups and team leaders. Four of the six principals (67%) mentioned steering groups or leadership teams, as well as having team leaders for their PLCs who are currently receiving or will receive a stipend in the future. Principals #4 and #5 do not have specific team leaders or a leadership team for PLCs. However, comments from
Principal #6 typify those from Principals #1, #2, and #3 who have also implemented leadership teams and stipends for team leaders.

We have a core steering group made up of a person from each grade level, plus specialists, and myself. One thing that we did differently this year is that we have made provisions to pay each one of the team leaders a stipend. The stipend is a little bit of a thank you, something that makes them feel that it is not an added burden, but is part of a job…and I am hoping the positions will rotate through the years so everyone has a chance to receive the same stipend. The team leaders create an agenda and take notes and then share the notes through google docs (Principal #6).

*Shared decision making and taking advice from staff.* Five of the six principals (83%) discussed how they share decision making and take input or advice from their staff members. Most agreed that they are more often inviting staff input into as many decisions as possible.

Principal #3 discussed the new state requirement that teacher evaluations must be based on student assessment results, “My teachers will absolutely have a choice about what assessments will be used for the 20% of their evaluation, we will do that in our team meetings.” Principal #4 often gains her staff members’ input electronically, “We vote a lot, I do a lot of survey monkeys, ask for feedback about what they would like. I let them make decisions about when they would have meetings and how they would report to me.”

Principal #6 laughed about how you could determine if your school is really functioning as a PLC and engaging in shared decision making, “…just try making a top down decision and see what happens, there will be a million questions from the rank and
file...why are you doing this without our input?” Principal #5 encapsulated the benefits of shared decision making this way,

When you take the opinion of your teachers, especially about initiatives, it shows an amount of trust in them. Yes, we as principals have to make the final decision sometimes, but having the input from everyone is key in PLCs. I have found that as principal, I haven’t really had to sell people on things, because when we make decisions as a team they are already on board (Principal #5).

**Shared vision and goals.** Shared beliefs, values, and vision serve as a way to bind the norms of the school culture and become the focus of the work that has to be done (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Five of the six principals (83%) discussed the importance of a shared vision at their schools in terms of goal-setting, as well as envisioning and articulating what the school should become. Principal #1 verbalized her thoughts on the importance of the vision, “I want to show them that this vision is a single focus and everything else are just tools to help us get there.” Principals #3 and #4 considered the concept of vision as everyone heading in the same direction. Principal #3 stated her teachers’ PLC vision in this way, “An absolute ultimate goal for everyone is that the learning in our PLC meetings changes instruction. I think having a clear vision supports relationships, because it’s like we are all headed in the same direction together.”

Principal #5 expressed the idea that common goals made planning for professional development much easier as there was a universal focus. While Principal #6 was reminded of something a former leader had said about a shared vision that he thinks of often, “I had a superintendent who used to say, a really good leader can lead without being there, because everybody knows the vision so well.”
Preset Code 3: Recognition and Celebrations

Achievement should be celebrated regularly and teachers and students recognized for success. Celebrations and recognition reflect a positive climate and culture which promotes high quality teaching and learning (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). The third interview question related to recognition and celebrations (What do recognition and celebrations of success and accomplishment look like in your school? Can you tell me about examples for staff and also for students?) elicited the responses that follow.

Recognition and Celebrations for Staff by the Principal. Each of the principals (100%) discussed different types of recognition and celebrations that they do for staff in their buildings. Principal #1 told me about a celebration she created based on a rise in state assessment scores. “…when they came to the staff meeting I had chips and salsa, and little plastic margarita glasses that I filled with lemonade with a lime slice to celebrate. We raised our glasses in a toast to celebrate student achievement.” She did, however, express her concern about placing too much emphasis on test scores, “But I don’t always want it to be about test scores, because where you put your emphasis, they are going to think that’s what is important” (Principal #1).

Four of the principals send out emails recognizing staff members for achievement, which they believed helped to begin discussions and shared practices. Principal #3 expressed this idea, “I send out emails about my walk throughs….putting in people’s names when they have done something outstanding, then others want to go see what they are doing.” Principal #3 also told of recognizing staff members based on a particular theme in the school such as their character trait of the month, “I recognize the staff members based upon our character ed program for students. I recognize teachers when
they display that monthly trait. We take pictures for the bulletin board, the same things we do for the kids.” She felt that this placed everyone, staff and students, on an equal basis for recognition.

Principal #4 listed the many ways in which she recognizes and thanks her staff members and to her surprise they sometimes reciprocate. She explained, “One of my teachers gave me a card recently that said, ‘You do a freakin’ good job’, along with a super sweet note, so I feel validated that it is a two-way street now.”

Principals #1, #5, and #6 expressed their concerns about staff members’ feelings of being left out when others are recognized. “…sometimes when the principal recognizes somebody, others feel bad and I didn’t want to start that. I am subtle about it and try to recognize teams rather than individuals (Principal #1). Likewise, Principal #5 said, “I like to celebrate the whole staff so that they all know we have accomplished this together and how we did it.” Principal #6 talked about nominating his staff members for the NH Edies awards in education. However, he only nominates someone who is the one and only in the building, like the guidance counselor or the nurse, so that the nomination would not engender jealousy. “Nominating someone for teacher of the year, now that could create jealousy, so I haven’t done that. The Edies are a funny thing, they can work both ways” (Principal #6).

Principal #1 believed that regardless of how one celebrates the accomplishments of the staff, “It has to be genuine and sincere; you can’t keep doing the same thing over and over again without feeling worn out.”

**Recognition and Celebrations by Staff for Each Other.** Each principal (100%) discussed recognition and celebrations that staff members do for each other. The
principals listed several ways in which recognition is given by colleagues, such as putting on a special breakfasts to honor or acknowledge something that was done by a group, making announcements of recognition over the PA, putting a team member’s photo on the wall for recognition, putting personal thank you notes in each other’s mailboxes, submitting names for recognition that are put on school written announcements, or they showcase each other and encourage each other to share their work. Principal #2 summed it up by saying, “They really come out in support of other team members.”

Principal #3 was feeling overwhelmed trying to keep up with recognizing her many staff members. She explained her solution which involved shared responsibility, “We created a culture and climate committee this year, because I didn’t feel like I was doing enough on my own and that committee recognizes lots of people.”

Principal #1 related how she supports staff members in recognizing each other and that she feels it is more meaningful coming from colleagues, rather than from her. “I buy little plastic Oscar statuettes, staff members are invited and encouraged to present these to one another and someone always does it. But I stay out of it; I think it changes it if it comes from me.” Principal #6 told of a similar situation involving an award that is presented at his school that is named after a woman who passed away a number of years ago. “It is for the top teacher of the year and that is done completely by the former winners, so that works out as an opportunity for them to recognize each other. I have no say in who receives it.”

**Recognition and Celebrations for Students.** Three of the six principals (50%) discussed strategies they use to recognize and celebrate student success, as well as some of the challenges they face and the reasons they may not have school-wide recognition.
Principal #1 told me that at her school they don’t do a lot of school-wide recognition of students and that is purposeful. “…when you give somebody an award, somebody else doesn’t get one.” She was bothered about that situation and went on, “Learning in public education is not always a level playing field. Some kids are just dealt a crumby hand of cards, and then to penalize them…it just doesn’t feel good to recognize others and leave them out.” She added that her teachers did a good job of recognizing students individually and celebrating kids in different ways in their classrooms.

Principal #6 discussed a different type of challenge at his school. His school is located in an affluent community, “There are so many kids who are privileged in this town, so we try to limit the recognition for the kids who are the ones going to the Bahamas every vacation.” He added that many of the students get an abundance of recognition outside of school, “So we tend to recognize those that don’t get as much attention and recognition from families and activities outside of school.”

Principal #5 related that students and teachers are recognized together in his school, “We have assemblies that recognize student performance, but at the same time acknowledges that their teachers have played a big part in getting them there.” They also try to get as much recognition for activities that occur in the school by getting coverage from local news media people who come in and talk with the teachers and students and feature them in news articles. “We try to focus mostly on accomplishments of groups or grade levels of kids, so no one feels overlooked” (Principal #5).

**Preset Code 4: Risk Taking**

Schools in which strong relationships exist have cultures characterized by the understanding that risk-taking, or experimenting with new approaches, programs, or
strategies, is acceptable and even encouraged (Hipp & Huffman, 2010). Davenport (2006) contends that it is the principal’s responsibility to establish that trusting environment where staff members are risk takers and experimenters. Each of the six principals (100%) described their reactions, responses, and support of innovation and risk-taking by staff members.

The fourth interview question related to risk taking (What do you envision when you think about risk taking in education? Tell me how you might react to a teacher who wanted to implement some sort of innovation?) evoked the responses that follow.

**Support and Monitoring.** Each principal supported risk-taking and innovation concerning teaching strategies. Principal #1 expressed her thoughts thusly, “I think innovation is to be celebrated. If it’s working then I say, hallelujah!” Principal #5 added, “If they can convince me that their ideas may help kids, I am willing to try it.” He went on to describe how a teacher had come up with a career day idea that has expanded to involve the community. “It has been very beneficial for children in showing them possibilities for their lives and we have done it ever since, so I am glad she came up with the idea” (Principal #5).

Although principals offered support, most added caveats related to accountability, such as that from Principal #4. “Sometimes I am very supportive if they want to try something new and I say run with it, but they know I am going to come in with a critical eye to look at student progress in that area.” Similarly, Principal #2 stated, “When they come with something new, they automatically know they have to come back to me with the data. They have to show me.”
Principals #2 and #3 discussed their thoughts and approaches when such an innovation fails or does not elicit the response the teacher desired. Principal #2 described his experiences, “…if something didn’t quite work we talk about why and how it could be done differently so that it does work next time, then it becomes a learning experience for both of us.” He explained further, “And if it’s a good idea, I don’t want them to lose the whole thing, just tweak it so it’s more successful.”

Principal #3 expressed her desire to have her teachers do more risk taking as they seem inhibited by their fear of failure. “We need to know that failure is OK for us…that we are not going to do something right the first time…but we learn from that.” Her idea to encourage more risk taking involved teacher evaluations, “I wish risk taking was a category on their evaluations, because I think that might make it OK for them to make mistakes.” She also brought up an impediment to innovation that may stifle risk-taking and interfere with collegiality.

They are more worried about what it’s [innovation] going to look like to others. It is sort of…and I hate to say this, a union mentality. You know, like if they go over and above, others will be upset because they will think administrators expect that from them as well (Principal #3).

Principal #6 expressed a concern about risk-taking. “When someone comes to me with an innovative idea, I think it is wonderful. But, you know, the first thing you think about is the type of support they might need to make it successful.” Sometimes the support required for something new is too much. Principal #4 presented her approach when she could not support innovators’ ideas saying, “…right now I am not ready to take this on to support you, so can we table it for now and try it at another time?” She went on
to say that this doesn’t mean no forever and that she tries to give hope for the future.

“Right now your idea is not in the best interests of the school, or the team isn’t ready
now, and maybe next year we can think about it” (Principal #4). Principal #6 summed up
his concerns about risk taking.

And they don’t think of this, but I always do, is it going to spread like wildfire
and how much will that cost? Sometimes cost is not a factor and that’s good,
because I want to honor their excitement and their ideas, you don’t want to
squelch (Principal #6).

**Preset Code 5: Unified Efforts to Embed Change**

Embedding and internalizing change must be a unified effort by all school staff
members across all dimensions of a PLC in order to achieve sustainability (Hipp &
Huffman, 2010). The fifth interview question related to unified efforts to embed change
*(Tell me what I might see your staff doing to change and improve teacher and student
learning?)* gained the following information related to both student and adult learning.

**Student Learning.** Each of the six principals (100%) began their responses by
addressing the student learning portion of this question regarding changes. Their
responses often included the use of data review and analysis to drive instruction.

Principal #2 described the approach to data used in his school. The staff began by
not attaching names to the data, in order to avoid placing any blame, but only reviewing it
by trends. Recently they have started attaching student names and carefully reviewing
progress so everyone is aware of which teacher is involved. “They have been willing to
seek help and to support each other. This gradual approach has worked for my staff in
developing open and honest data review and efforts toward change” (Principal #2). The
teachers at his school are also having students work on questions from the *Smarter Balanced* site (www.smarterbalanced.org) and bringing that data to the group to review.

He explained that they keep focusing teaching on the types of questions that involve several standards. Principal #2 proudly related that the students are getting better and better at answering them and that he gives the staff credit for their consolidated efforts toward improved instruction. “We really try to stretch each other in coming up with higher level thinking questions.”

Principal #4 described how she and her staff are very focused on student data, she helps them extract the data so they can look at trends over time. The data ties into their student placements for the next year.

They are beginning to understand that PLC time is really time to look at the data, and after three years I think they are beginning to do it well. The documents that I have created help them collect and analyze the data and then move their instruction forward according to the data. Our focus this year with our PLCs is really math and that came from the data, our NECAP data. Finding a balance to use the data to inform our day to day instruction, as well as small group instruction has helped us meet the needs (Principal #4).

Principal #4 did go on to explain, however, that she was somewhat concerned that data might be too much of a focus in the school. “Data analysis can get out of control, and I don’t want to get so consumed by data that we forget why we are here with kids.”

Principal #6 said that I might see his teachers planning for curriculum and talking about pacing in reference to small group instruction to improve student learning during their PLC meetings. His faculty is just beginning to use data to plan instruction,
“Performance Pathways…is a monster and not user friendly for teachers. We want to look at data more closely sometimes, so we have developed a spreadsheet that tracks data on individual students.” He explained that the spreadsheet is on Google docs so it is easy for teachers to access, use, and understand. Supplying student data that is easily accessible for teachers is a structural support of PLCs that falls under the principal’s responsibilities (Hord & Tobia, 2012).

Principals #1 and #5 focused on activities that did not include student data when they spoke of improved instruction. Principal #1 described how her staff was working together for improvement in student learning. Small group differentiated instruction is the biggest change that has been happening in her building, “…it is a huge change in practice for us over the last five years. They plan and work together on specific skills and the interventionists also work on that very same skill with them.”

Principal #5 works in an impoverished community and explained it like this, “I think anyone who has been here a while understands how difficult that can be with the lack of funding.” But, he made it clear that his staff has not surrendered to the excuse of poverty. “We have a system of continuous growth; we’re always looking at how to make things better. We are always evaluating what we do, the biggest thing is that everybody knows that student achievement is the most important thing.”

**Adult Learning.** Structuring professional development opportunities that help teachers reflect on their teaching practice and develop increased skills will support principals in creating a culture of intellectual quality (Hord, 1997a).

Four of the six principals (67%) responded regarding the adult learning and professional development portion of question five related to changes for improvement.
They spoke of many professional development activities that have been a school-wide focus for collective teacher learning and how this learning has united their staff.

Principal #1 hired a consultant with the money the school received from the state when they were classified as a School in Need of Improvement (SINI), “We used the money we received to hire a consultant to teach us about guided reading. It turned out to be really good for us in improving reading instruction and in terms of relationships, it started our work together.”

Principal #2 told about his staff working with a specific learning goal in mind. The goal was to incorporate writing into the math curriculum, so he explained that two of the teams worked together using a specific approach. “… and they are getting some good results with students, and, again, it is pulling them all together to learn this way and work on the same thing.” He also talked of the excitement his teachers have exhibited in learning together. They have requested follow-up activities after their training sessions. He has sought help from the superintendent in obtaining a consultant who worked with his staff several times, “…and now the teachers tell me, this is great, but we want more!”

Principal #5 explained the important role that teacher training has played in building trust with his staff.

We also have gotten interactive white boards in every classroom and right from the get go we had the training, so everyone knew how to use them. I think the trainings and all of us learning together, in a way, is helping me to build trust with the teachers. They see that I am not going to just dump something on them, they know I will make sure that we all know how to use it and that there is specific training before we implement changes (Principal #5).
Preset Code 6: PLC Training

“The community, of course, has multiple skills to be learned and practiced and this is a responsibility of the principal, to see that they have the opportunity to learn how to conduct their PLC” (S.M. Hord, personal communication, July 22, 2014).

Each of the principals (100%) discussed training for PLCs through various approaches in responding to question six (Tell me about any training or professional development you or your staff have received in implementing PLCs?). As there have been some PLC conferences offered in New Hampshire featuring the DuFours of Solution Tree (http://www.solution-tree.com), some principals had attended and were influenced by that approach to developing PLCs. Principals #1, #4 and #6, along with their staff members, had experienced training with Richard and Rebecca DuFour. All three principals agreed that adjusting the structured approach better fit the needs of their schools.

Principal #1 explained that they had started with the DuFour’s product and then found it didn’t really work for them. “PLC is a concept, you know, not a formula. Schools are so different in terms of personnel, time, schedules, needs… so I don’t think you can impose the same structure on every school.” Principal #4 echoed these sentiments regarding the DuFour training, “I have taken different pieces that we have needed, so it’s not as scripted. It has to be tailored for each school, I think, as to what a staff needs and wants; it can’t be the same for everyone.” Principal #6 agreed, “…some things work for some schools and not for others, and that may be something that the DuFours have overlooked in creating such a structured step-by-step model. We have adjusted it for our school.”
Principal #2 related that he felt fortunate to be able to have his entire staff trained in PLCs on site by bringing in a consultant through the Center for Collaborative Education. “Right from the very beginning we had a superb consultant from the Center…I saw how she reacted with our staff, it was so positive…” He gives credit for the continued success of PLCs in his school to the ongoing training the staff received together. “We kept going and she kept on coming back and she worked both with the small teams and the whole group, so we have continued with PLCs” (Principal #2).

Principal #3 explained that she and her staff have had no training at all in PLCs, but have been trying to learn on their own. She is also intrigued by the Critical Friends (Krelle, Seal, Drew, & Trafford, 2011) approach and wants to seek some training in that area. Like Principal #3, Principal #5 also related that he and his staff have had very little formal training for PLCs, “As a district we had a one-day workshop where we went through things from soup to nuts. There were articles and things and group activities, but there’s been no follow up.”

In order to transform a school into a PLC, the principal needs to actively support the faculty’s development as a learning community. Seeking staff training to support the PLC in doing its work is a responsibility of the administration (The Ontario Principals’ Council, 2009).

**Emergent Themes**

Saldana contends that thematic analysis allows categories to *emerge* from the data (2010). Through my coding and analysis process other themes emerged that did not fit under the categories of the preset themes or codes.
Emergent Theme 1: Central Office Support

Even the most effective school leader can struggle to maintain focus if districts do not support the work of PLCs (Rasberry & Majahan, 2008). Professional learning communities are being deployed across the education system to build the capacity for change, “but system transformation will only be successful if the capacity for change, at all levels in the system, is established and sustained” (Harris, 2010, p.1). The following ideas regarding the importance of central office support emerged during the interviews with each of the six principals (100%).

Principal #1, expressed her opinion that cohesiveness K-12 is extremely important and in her district. She described this, “...the four principals in our district work very closely with the superintendent in a PLC of administrators. I think every superintendent needs to be responsible for creating PLCs among administrators.” Principal #2 agrees that central office support is vital and related that his superintendent has informed everyone in the district that working in teams is required. The administrators in his district work together, “The administrative team works closely with the superintendent… we come to consensus and make decisions together. The superintendent is an advocate of team functioning.”

However, Principal #4 also presented some challenges that can occur when implementing district-wide PLCs, as they are different at each level.

Our teachers have the same kids all day for all subjects and I think that makes them feel a greater responsibility for their learning. I also think we go deeper into PLCs, and I personally struggle when we have administrators’ PLCs. What the middle and high school are doing is far from my understanding of what a PLC
should be. Their ideas are so drastically different than mine and when they talk [about PLCs] it just seems like committees are formed to accomplish something. When we describe what we are doing to the school board it creates conflict as to how we message that PLCs look different at the elementary level than at the middle and high school (Principal #4).

Principal #5 expressed his ideas in a discussion about superintendents understanding that schools are all different, “…when you have leadership that realizes that and allows some individual identity, then it plays a big part in the trust factor…” He spoke of how his superintendent differentiated between the schools, “Sometimes the superintendent has given us choices as to whether we will attend certain district sponsored workshops. If we have already received training, we don’t always have to attend. This shows that he realizes our time is valuable.”

Principal #6 talked about a district-wide theme based on caring relationships and the work of Nel Noddings (2013), who’s writing is based on the importance of caring relationships as a factor of learning. He felt that a district-wide understanding of the importance of caring relationships was very supportive of his work, “I think I am blessed to have leadership both at the SAU level and board level that understands how important relationships can be.”

**Emergent Theme 2: Structural Supports to Help Team Functioning**

One of Hord and Tobia’s (2012) six dimensions of PLCs, supportive structural conditions, held importance as it surfaced many times as an emergent theme during the interviews. Supportive structural conditions are defined as time, data, location, and resources provided for the community to do their learning work (Hord, 1997a; Hord &
Tobia, 2012). The principals mentioned the usual structural supports they provide that are noted in the literature (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012), such as common time and location for meetings, or providing data, materials, and resources. However, there were other components of structural supports that the principals had implemented to help team functioning, such as required paperwork and hiring, dismissal, and placement practices.

Principal #4 thought required structured forms in a binder that are used by all PLC teams in her school helped to support communications between the teams and acted as a resource for interventions. “The paperwork actually forces them to have conversations…” Although some teams in her school think the forms are not helpful, she disagrees, “…the results have shown that the forms have helped because it gives them a place to go to reflect and to stay on task.” She continued by explaining the reason she first developed the forms, “They [the teachers] did not know what to do in a PLC meeting, so I created the forms to help structure their time.”

Each of the six principals (100%) talked about hiring, dismissal, and placement practices that they had implemented to support teamwork in their schools. Comments about sharing leadership during hiring practices from Principal #1 exemplify those made by the other principals.

We hire with relationships in mind. You could have someone come in who seems like a great teacher, but you know it’s not the right fit for the team…the personality, it won’t blend. That’s one of the reasons I gather the team together for hiring, they are as much a part of the process as I am (Principal #1).
Although principals had tried to help teams work out their differences by coaching them on discussion techniques, working with them during team meetings to keep them focused on student achievement, or allowing them to observe other teams in action, sometimes their supports were unsuccessful and team members still did not work well together. This resulted in the principals taking further actions related to staff members’ employment status or placements.

Each of the principals discussed letting people go through encouraged retirement, dismissal, or nonrenewal as part of supporting the team functioning. Principal #2 typified this concept in his comment about nonrenewal of a teacher who was not working well with her team when stating, “After trying several different times and making recommendations in evaluations…you’ve got to take the hard road.”

Knowing the staff members, their personalities and strengths, has helped Principal #3 make decisions about moving people to different grade levels or teams in order to promote positive team functioning. “I have had to move people around to create better relationships and the ruffles that causes when people don’t understand why you are moving them…It has to do with building a good team.”

**Emergent Theme 3: Establishing a Culture of Collegiality**

School climate and culture are described as the quality and character of school life and are in part, based on patterns of people’s experiences, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Some difficulties principals encountered in attempting to change school culture were previously discussed in the preset code of trust and respect. However, four of the six principals (67%) mentioned the benefits their staff members
experience from working in a culture of collegiality. The four principals, however, agreed with Louis (2006) that establishing a culture of collegiality and learning, *re-*cultur**ing**, in their schools requires time, effort, and patience. Establishing history and traditions has helped the principals achieve the kind of culture that embodies positive relationships where staff members work in concert with one another to facilitate student learning. “Traditions are really good for any school, they create your climate and bring people together” (Principal #6).

Comments from Principal #5 depict the benefits mentioned by the other principals once the staff begins working as a cohesive, collegial team.

I think teachers feel that it is not just them in the classroom anymore, they are not alone, there are other people who are supportive of what they are doing. It makes it easier if you feel like it is a team situation. If you are lying awake at night trying to figure out what to do with a child, it’s a lot more comforting and supportive if you have others to lean on and go to for advice (Principal #5).

**Summary of Chapter 4**

This chapter described the study’s research data collection, analysis, and findings as related to how the participants experienced the phenomenon of establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools. The chapter was divided into two sections. The first section encompassed the study overview including the purpose, problem statement, research questions, and design of the study. A description of how the data collection was conducted through surveys, interviews, and document review was included. This section also described the data produced by the administration of the *Professional Learning*
Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) (Olivier & Hipp, 2010) questionnaire to each of the responding principals with detailed information of how the final participants were selected. Descriptive information about the six interview participants and their schools was included in the first section.

The second section of this chapter described the findings about the strategies used by elementary principals in New Hampshire to establish and foster supportive relational conditions among their staff members. This section also described the coding process using initial, descriptive, and focus coding methods. Included also was the analysis process of the qualitative data from the principal interviews as related to preset codes and emergent themes. The findings were presented in order of the interview questions. Preset codes were based on the interview questions that included attributes of the supportive relational conditions dimension of PLCs (Hord, 1997a; Hipp & Huffman, 2010), in addition to a question regarding training for implementation of PLCs. The attributes of supportive relational conditions include; caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebrations, risk taking, and unified efforts to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Emergent themes were those that arose during the interviewing that could not be integrated into the preset codes. These emergent themes were emphasized by the principals as important to supporting positive school climates. These themes included; central office support, structural supports to help team functioning, and benefits to establishing a culture of collegiality.

In Chapter 5, conclusions and implications for this study will be presented. The discussion will bring together the findings of this study in light of the conceptual
framework and related research. Recommendations for further research will also be discussed.

Chapter 5 – Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Chapter 5 presents the findings, conclusions and implications of this study, as well as recommendations for future study based upon the findings of this research. This hermeneutic phenomenological study investigated the actions and strategies principals use to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities (PLCs) in elementary schools. This chapter is divided into four broad sections. The first section provides the context of the study by summarizing the research design including the purpose and problem statements, research questions, design perspective, and participant selection. The second section presents the findings and conclusions based upon my interpretations of the data from this study and research discovered in the literature. The sub-sections within this segment of the chapter focus on the codes and themes of the data that emerged from the interview questions posed to the six selected principals with my conclusions throughout. Additionally, there is a final conclusion section at the end. The third section of this chapter focuses on the implications the results of this study have for establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools. The last section provides insight into possible recommendations for future study.
Context of the Study

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the actions and strategies principals use to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools. The review of literature on this topic revealed that principals play an important role in building and extending the professional learning community concept in order to bring about transformation that can lead to school improvement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Easton, 2011, Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2008; Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Sergiovanni, 2004). Principals have a responsibility of developing and supporting the dimensions of a PLC: shared and supportive leadership; shared beliefs, values, and vision; collective learning and application; shared personal practice; supportive structural conditions; and supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

Supportive relational conditions are defined as encouragement and supports which sustain an atmosphere of collegial learning and positive relationships (Hord & Tobia, 2012). The literature described the dimension of supportive relational conditions as being essential in supporting the other five dimensions, if PLCs are to be effective (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003, Hord & Tobia, 2012; Routman, 2012). Hipp and Huffman (2010) further delineated supportive relational conditions in schools as encompassing five essential attributes: Caring relationships, trust and respect, recognitions and celebrations, risk-taking, and a unified effort to embed change.

Statement of the Problem
While the need for a supportive principal was evident throughout the literature on PLCs, questions about specific ways in which the principal can establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions continued to rise. The five essential attributes necessary to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions provided the basis for this examination. Greater insight and understanding into the ways in which an elementary principal can foster the five attributes of supportive relational conditions has been gained from a focused look at the principal’s behavior and actions.

**Research Questions**

Due to the key role research (Combs, Edmonson, & Harris, 2013; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hargreaves, 2008; Hord, 1997a; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010; McLaughlin & Talbert 2006) suggests the principal plays in establishing supportive relational conditions that lead to a positive school culture, the questions this researcher examined were:

1. How do principals establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools?

2. What strategies and actions do principals report using in developing the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) of professional learning communities?

3. What, if any, evidence exists that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) occur in the schools’ professional learning communities?

**Research Design**
The design of this study followed a qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological approach where data collection was achieved through the use of surveys, face to face interviews, and document review.

**Participant selection.** The process began with an email information statement and questionnaire that assisted in participant selection (Appendix A). The research process also involved gathering data utilizing a survey questionnaire instrument, the *Professional Learning Community Assessment - Revised (PLCA-R)* (Olivier & Hipp, 2010) (Appendix D). The questionnaire produced data and demographic information which was used in the selection of principals to be interviewed. Principals were selected for interviews through purposeful sampling based on their responses to survey questions related to supportive relational conditions, school location, and gender. The principal’s longevity at his/her school was also a factor in selection, because the number of years of experience with PLCs constitutes the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2007). Lived experience with a PLC was a requirement in this hermeneutic study. The participants for this study were six public elementary school principals involved in the implementation of professional learning communities.

**Interviews.** Data collection also involved face to face semi-structured interviews with follow-up clarifying questions. The 60 - 90 minute interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and analyzed for patterns and themes eliciting the perceptions of principals regarding the strategies and actions they reported using in establishing, fostering, and sustaining the five attributes of supportive relational conditions of professional learning communities at their schools.
Interview questions were open-ended, encouraging participants to talk at length (Smith et al., 2013). The five attributes of supportive relational conditions served as the foundation for the development of these interview questions (Appendix E), as well as one question concerning the type of training the staff or principal had received.

**Document review.** Document examination comprised the third source of data collected in this study. Participants shared documents produced at their schools related to PLCs. The documents were collected and analyzed to add contextual information and enrich research findings (Merriam, 2009). Documents substantiated and validated information received from the principals during the interviews. The surveys, interviews, and documents supported triangulation of data sources that offers greater validity, rigor, and quality of the findings (Creswell, 2013; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 2002).

**Data analysis.** Hermeneutic phenomenological analysis is designed so the researcher is involved in reflective engagement with the participants and their accounts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2013). Descriptive coding of the data throughout supports organization of descriptions and themes, and assists in interpreting the data and summarizing the primary topics of the phenomenon (Saldana, 2010). There were six preset codes for analyzing the data. Those preset codes corresponded to the interview questions that were based on the five attributes of supportive relational conditions (Hipp & Huffman, 2010), with one additional code related to PLC training. Three separate themes also emerged from the data that did not integrate into the preset codes. Those preset codes and emergent themes are addressed as subheadings in the findings and conclusions section of this chapter.
The information from the data in a phenomenological study is understood through a synthesis of experiences of the participants and the researcher, as it moves in a circular fashion through the language between the parts and the whole of the interview process (Langdridge, 2007). This circular revisiting and interaction with the language of the data, referred to as the *hermeneutic circle*, increases the depth of engagement and understanding for the researcher (Laverty, 2003).

My interpretation and comparisons of the data progressed in this back and forth movement of initial, descriptive, and focused coding in an attempt to illuminate connections between the parts and the whole of the participants’ stories. The following passage from Smith (2007) describes the close interpretive engagement on the part of the hermeneutic researcher, as well as describing my experiences in the data analysis process.

I start where I am at one point on the hermeneutic circle, caught up in my concerns, influenced by my preconceptions, shaped by my experience and expertise… I go round to an encounter with a research participant at the other side of the circle. Whatever my previous concerns or positions, I have moved from a point where I am the focus, to one where the participant is the focus as I attend closely to the participant’s story, facilitate the participant uncovering his/her experience. Having concluded the conversation, I continue the journey round the circle, back to where I started. So I return home to analyze the materials I collected from the perspective I started from, influenced by my prior conceptions and experiences. However, I am irretrievably changed because of my encounter with the new, my participant and his/her account… then I engage in a movement round the circle… where I mentally take on a conversation with my participant, as
I rehear the story, ask questions of it, try to make sense of it. Indeed, the various actions inherent in the hermeneutic circle between part and whole take place in this cognitive space at home base (Smith, 2007, p. 6).

**Findings, Interpretations, and Conclusions**

This section of chapter 5 presents the findings supported by the analysis of data collected from the principal interviews, which was later substantiated by the review of the documents. Findings are presented in the sequence of the interview questions which address the five attributes of the supportive relational conditions dimension of PLCs (Hord & Tobia, 2012), with an additional question pertaining to training for PLCs. The five attributes of supportive relational conditions include: Caring relationships, trust and respect, recognitions and celebrations, risk-taking, and a unified effort to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). Research questions 1 and 2 are addressed by the data extrapolated from the interviews with the six participating principals. Data obtained from the document review, which substantiated information gained in the interviews, responds to research question 3. The interconnected findings are accompanied by my interpretations and conclusions, as the researcher, and supported by research findings from the literature with final supplemental conclusions.

**Preset Codes**

**Preset Code 1: Caring Relationships**

Relationships demonstrate a significant influence on school achievement as it is “abundantly clear that one of the keys to successful change is the improvement of relationships” (Fullan, 2007, p. 4). I found through the review of the literature that making efforts to reduce teacher isolation through relationships is one method of
developing a positive school culture (Boyd-Dimock, & Hord, 1994; Hord, 1997b).

School culture is defined as the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norm for the school and that shape how the staff thinks, feels, and acts (Olivier, Hipp, & Huffman, 2003). Supportive relationships are paramount to achieving a positive school environment (Cohen & Brown, 2013).

The first interview question regarding caring relationships generated themes related to various strategies the principals used to develop and sustain those relationships, as well as activities they supported. Those strategies and activities that the principals attributed to the development and continuation of caring relationships included; modeling caring relationships, staff participation in social activities, laughter and humor among staff members, cultivating interdependence among the staff members, and conveying feelings of equality for all members of the staff.

Although the review of literature did not uncover specific strategies that elementary principals use to cultivate caring relationships, the research agrees with the importance these principals placed on this attribute of supportive relational conditions. Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) agree that the single common factor to successful change in schools is improving relationships and when those relationships improved, schools in their study experienced increases in student achievement.

Tschannen-Moran (2004) states that benevolence or a sense of caring is the most essential element in trusting relationships. Modeling those sincere acts of caring for staff members seemed to be a major focus on the part of the principals in creating an atmosphere of positive relationships. Tschannen-Moran agrees that school leaders can promote relationships by demonstrating benevolence.
Each of the six principals interviewed mentioned longevity as a factor in building caring relationships. They believed that longevity evolved into long-term caring relationships where staff members knew each other well. Some of the principals even admitted that they thought of the staff members as family. I recalled John Dewey’s (1980) observation that a good elementary school was more like a family than a factory.

I understand and agree with their thoughts, as I have experienced being a principal in the same school for 17 years and a member of that staff for 26 years. Relationships endured and grew over time as staff members became more committed to one another and stability increased in the building. Tschannen-Moran (2004) offers that people make emotional investments in on-going relationships, she further contends that caring nurtures the effort needed to sustain a positive school environment. Bryk and Schneider (2005) agree that teachers must sustain positive, cooperative relationships with each other over time in order for “coherent school-wide practices to emerge” (p. 20). Tschannen-Moran also advocates that the work of schools occurs mainly through relationships, so advises principals to invest time and resources into fostering and nurturing those relationships.

**Preset Code 2: Trust and Respect**

I had anticipated that the principals might discuss the various dimensions of PLCs. However, I found the interconnectivity of the dimensions, especially concerning trust and respect, to be challenging in interpreting and analyzing the data. The preset code of trust and respect encompassed multiple dimensions of PLCs, as well as many of the attributes Hord (1997a) and Hipp and Huffman (2010) assign to those dimensions. This interconnectivity made data extrapolation and interpretation difficult. The second interview question regarding trust and respect elicited several themes.
**Communication.** When I asked the principals how they cultivated trust and respect among staff members, their first response was through communication. Communication held importance for these principals in building trust and respect with and among their staff members. Additionally, keeping one’s word and acting in the best interest of others are included in measures of caring relationships (Forsyth, Adams, & Hoy, 2011). Communicating school news, in addition to being honest, open, nonjudgmental, and conveying clear expectations were methods principals used to create climates of trust and respect in their schools. Combs, Edmondson, and Harris (2013) acknowledge that communications that model integrity and honesty build trust, as well as demonstrate a level of concern and caring for others. Tschannen-Moran (2004) concurs that fostering open communication leads to greater levels of trust where problems can be discussed and corrected before they become compounded.

**Norms of Respect.** Establishing rules and norms of respect for one another as an agreement for working together was also discussed as a method of supporting the PLCs. Setting the expectation for respectful dialog (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009) was addressed by three of the six principals. Team accountability is about “the promises we make to ourselves and others, promises that underpin two critical aspects of teams: commitment and trust” (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p.116). It is crucial that the staff members in a PLC culture treat each other and dialog with one another with respect or they will not be able to learn from each other. Principal #2 echoed the beliefs of the other principals in this study and the assertion of Katzenbach and Smith concerning promises, when he stated that his staff members show respect for one another, “…it is part of our agreement with one another” (Principal #2). Although the principals stated that their staff members
learned to dialog respectfully with one another from workshops and trainings on PLC behavior, teaching and reinforcing positive discussion skills is one of the principal’s responsibilities (Hord & Hirsch, 2009). Hord and Hirsh further suggest that principals should teach the staff to use dialogue, where members share knowledge and practices, feelings, biases, or disagreements in a respectful manner. Achinstein (2002) contends that conflict is a natural part of the learning community experience and, as such, allows teachers the opportunity to embrace and understand their differences – ultimately, to learn from one another. I would agree; however, those discussion skills need to be taught and could easily be modeled by the principal during PLC meetings, if the principal is present.

**Principal Presence.** Maintaining a visible presence in the school and visiting classrooms frequently was reported by each principal as contributing to trust and respect. Principals declared that the staff members thought the administrators were more invested in what teachers were doing when principals were present at meetings and in classrooms.

Although each of the principals spoke of the importance of being present with their staff and showing a physical presence frequently in the school as a contributing factor to trust and respect, some reported that they do not attend all PLC meetings. Those principals read minutes of the meetings or reviewed documentation in order to stay informed as to what occurred. It is understandable that a principal’s time is limited, however, a principal’s influence and ability to model expected behavior would greatly increase by being present at meetings as contributing members of the PLC teams. Two of the principals found that when they were not present at the meetings, members did not always follow expected protocols and it became necessary for them to reteach appropriate PLC norms and behaviors at follow-up meetings.
The literature supports principals’ participation in PLC meetings. Some administrators provide the supports necessary for PLCs to function, “…then say, go to it, without actually guiding the groups and helping them to understand their mission and how to function as a PLC. The principal needs to be a participant, not leading the PLCs, but collaborating with the teachers” (S.M. Hord, personal communication, June 27, 2013). Similarly, Hord, Roussin, and Sommers (2010) offer that the principal should play a strong directing role at the initiation of the PLC, then step back to support leadership opportunities and leadership development in the staff, while still participating in the professional learning community. Additionally, Hirsh and Hord (2008) offer that participating in professional learning communities is one of the most powerful ways for principals to extend their learning. Dufour and Mattos (2013) agree that in a PLC, principals and teachers engage together in collective inquiry to decide on the work that will most benefit their students.

Time. Each of the six of the principals also discussed time, related to longevity, as an important factor in building trust. Longevity of the staff, as well as the principal, was interpreted as a commitment to the success of the school. Longevity was also a factor mentioned in developing caring relationships. Time can help to build trust and respect between individual staff members. After 17 years as a principal, I came to believe that trust increases with a history of gained experience, because it is easier to predict the behaviors of others when you have witnessed their actions over time. The principals I interviewed supported that belief when they addressed longevity as a factor in staff trust. This perspective is also supported by Tschannen-Moran’s (2004) statement, “A self-reinforcing pattern of trust emerges as repeated cycles of exchange….strengthen
the willingness of trusting parties to rely upon each other” (p. 56). High levels of trust take time, something our educational accountability does not always afford us, in order to re-culture our schools into learning organizations (Louis, 2006).

**Reculturing.** Isolationism, disengaged views of professional development, and a disharmony among staff members were mentioned during the interviews as obstacles to changing the school cultures to PLCs.

Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) describe change as belonging in one of two categories, first order or second order change. First order change involves incremental change that does “not depart radically from the past” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 66). Teams or committees assembled to accomplish a specific task in a school would exemplify first order change. They are not changing the system or beliefs of the organization, but simply involve a change in procedure or process. In contrast, second order change is described as “deep change that alters the system in fundamental ways” (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005, p. 66). Changing the culture of the school, transforming it into a culture of collaboration, requires a change in mindset that is labor intensive (Fullan, 2001). Changing the mindset to a culture of PLCs meets the description of second order change, as it alters the educators’ paradigm and ideology of operation and requires school-wide transformation (Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000).

Transformation to PLCs requires a deeper collaborative culture than the isolationism viewpoint that has been the traditional mindset in American schools (Spillane & Louis, 2002). Hord and Sommers (2008) agree that the collaboration required in a culture of PLCs is not the typical way that schools operate. Isolationism has been the traditional mode of operation and is often referred to as an *egg carton*
environment (Spillane & Louis, 2002) where separated classrooms make it difficult for teachers to learn collaborative skills. Principals have to work together with teachers to develop opportunities that allow them to learn from one another. DuFour and Eaker (1998), as well as Fullan (2001), remind leaders of the difficulty involved in transforming schools into professional learning communities. While change initiatives may be uncomfortable, they are not impossible. One factor that led to a lack of trust among teaching staff was the fear and vulnerability they felt in sharing teaching practices.

**Shared Practices.** The principals spoke about feelings of safety and vulnerability as related to sharing practices as a factor in building trusting relationships. “Engaging in learning and trusting relationships can be risky, especially when working with colleagues” (E. F. Tobia, personal communication, June 26, 2013). Building teachers’ self-confidence, allowing numerous opportunities for sharing, and setting a trusting tone and culture within the school helped to create feelings of safety, according to the interviewed principals. Offering teachers opportunities for observation and feedback on instructional strategies by colleagues is one method used by principals to develop a collegial environment (Louis, Kruse, & Bryk, 1995).

As a principal, I was not able to help my staff overcome their feelings of insecurity when sharing practices with the entire staff. They were comfortable when sharing in their own small PLC teams, but that comfort level did not extend to the full staff. Two of the principals I interviewed had encountered the same challenges in their schools. One of the principals agreed that it was very uncomfortable when they first began visiting other classrooms, observing, and giving input; but their continued efforts
paid off in higher levels of comfort while engaging with one another about their practices.

Perhaps allowing more time and practice in sharing would have fostered greater confidence for my teachers. This is reinforced by researchers (Hord & Tobia, 2012; Meier, 2002) who have found that inviting others to observe teaching and give feedback requires trust and multiple opportunities for practice before members become completely comfortable with this activity. Each of the six principals shared strategies for building teacher self-confidence that led to an increase in shared practices among their staff members. One of those strategies was assuring teachers that the principal had trust in their abilities.

**Principal’s Trust in Teachers’ Abilities.** Just as caring relationships are reciprocal, so is trust and respect. Tschannen-Moran (2004) supports this view that trusting relationships develop when teachers trust a principal’s competence and in turn principals trust their teachers’ abilities. Most of the principals in the interviews expressed that their trust in and reassurance of teachers regarding their expertise, transferred into a greater confidence for the teacher to share his/her work with colleagues. I also experienced this with an outstanding teacher who had little confidence in her own abilities. Throughout the course of a long-term principal/teacher relationship, during which I had repeatedly reassured her of my trust in her abilities, she has become a teacher leader in the building. By asking her to mentor new teachers, as well as share her educational experiences with colleagues, I was able to nurture a sense of efficacy in this teacher. This experience is supported by research (Goddard, Hoy, & Woolfolk Hoy, 2000) that addresses trust as the foundation on which teachers can be open and honest
enough to collaborate and gain a sense of efficacy. The principals I interviewed were also able to convey trust in their staff members through discussion related to their strengths, as well as sharing leadership and decision-making opportunities.

**Shared Leadership, Decision Making, and Vision.** Conveying trust in their teachers’ abilities and expertise has led the six interviewed principals to share authority and decision making in various ways. The topic of strategies, such as seeking staff members’ advice and input, emerged many times throughout the interview conversations. The principals also discussed the importance of a shared vision at their schools in terms of goal-setting, as well as envisioning and articulating what the school should become.

Shared leadership and decision making, as well as establishing a common vision and goals, has been supported throughout the literature as one of the vital dimensions of PLCs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, 2001; Hargreaves, 2007; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Huffman & Hipp, 2003) Schools immersed in the professional learning community concept have utilized shared leadership and decision-making to bring about school improvement that positively impact teacher morale, as well as the learning of students (Cowan, 2003; Fleming & Leo, 1999; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

The interviewed principals spoke of teams that shouldered leadership responsibilities and also of individuals who had become team leaders in their schools. Offering leadership and decision-making opportunities are examples of supportive relational conditions of PLCs (Depasquale, 2012; Strosberg, 2010). Four of the six principals mentioned steering groups or leadership teams, as well as having team leaders for their PLCs who are currently receiving or will receive a stipend in the future.
According to the interviewed principals, team leaders were often designated by the principals, elected by team members, or appointed by other district administrators.

Offering a stipend for a position of leadership designates individuals as having greater authority in the decision-making process, which is inconsistent with the definition of professional learning communities. True PLCs should practice distributed leadership that is equally shared among team members. Hord and Tobia (2012) describe a PLC as a self-organizing group, determining its own norms and distribution of leadership (Hord & Tobia, 2012). According to Hord, this practice contradicts the essence of what a PLC should be.

“One of the research-based attributes of an effective PLC is shared leadership …the group makes the decisions…If this self-regulating and shared dimension is aborted, a true essence of the PLC is deleted, and it is no longer a PLC… if the upper administration, at whatever level, calls the shots, it is not a PLC - it is just another bureaucratic structure whereby the powers tell the participants what/how to do” (S.M. Hord, personal communication, July 22, 2014).

DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) support Hord’s viewpoint in their description of shared leadership and decision making as: PLC members make collective decisions about their learning, which includes delegating authority, enlisting the faculty in critical decisions, posing questions rather than solutions, and creating an environment where teachers can continually grow.

**Preset Code 3: Recognition and Celebrations**

Regular recognition and celebration of outstanding achievement is a practice evident in schools which foster the building of relationships (Louis, 2008). The
information gained from principals in their interviews supported that which was investigated by Combs, Edmonson, and Harris (2013) regarding recognition and celebrations. Sharing appreciations at staff meetings, assemblies, and special teacher recognitions, in addition to emails and newsletters, were mentioned as ways principals recognized and celebrated the achievements of staff. Staff members in the schools of the interviewed principals also recognized students in a variety of ways for their achievements and accomplishments. Heath and Heath (2010) contend that acknowledgement and appreciation by the principal are vital to sustaining a continual improvement effort.

However, in opposition, in a truly collaborative climate it would seem more meaningful to be recognized by one’s colleagues. Two of the principals I interviewed said that along with all of their other responsibilities, they were feeling overwhelmed by the task of recognizing staff and students for accomplishments and had delegated this responsibility to other teams or individuals within the school. Two other principals agreed and in addition, revealed that they had concerns about people suspecting favoritism if they alone were recognizing achievements. Those principals had requested that staff members recognize each other and stated they thought it meant more coming from colleagues. Combs, Edmonson, and Harris (2013) found that by taking the time to observe and recognize talent in teachers, principals can indirectly reveal what they value. Therefore, principals can reveal that they value collegiality and teamwork by delegating recognition and celebration to a collaborative effort. Hord (2004) discovered that rewarding and recognizing the skills and talents of staff members builds teacher efficacy and the level of trust and respect that is so vital to professional learning communities.
Rewards and recognition from teammates and co-workers would better support trust and respect between colleagues. That climate of trust and respect can create a learning environment where staff members feel supported in becoming risk-takers and innovators.

**Preset Code 4: Risk Taking**

Each of the principals spoke about their enthusiasm and support of teacher innovations. Conversely, there were times when the innovation was not quite right for their schools and one principal discussed her responses when she could not support risk taking. Most of the principals, however, relayed stories of successful risk takers in their schools. Yet, they also discussed the fact that they needed assurance that the innovation was supporting student learning and addressing needs. They requested data or some sort of reporting information from the teacher demonstrating that students had experienced success with the new approach to teaching or learning. This seemed appropriate in order to discourage random experimentation.

Decisions regarding innovations should become a team responsibility. Not that all members of a team would need to try the innovation, but they could at least be informed, gain from the innovator’s experiences, or join the innovator in the attempt at something new if they chose to do so. This approach would extend the shared leadership within the building. This view is also accepted by Phillips (2003), who found that the shared leadership approach creates a supportive learning environment in which teachers feel comfortable experimenting with innovative curriculum and instructional strategies.

**Preset Code 5: Unified Efforts to Embed Change**

Each principal in the interviews discussed unified efforts to improve student and adult learning. Four of the principals addressed improvement of student learning in terms
of using data to drive instruction and decision making. One school staff in particular
focused all of their PLC efforts on reviewing student data for instructional decisions. The
assessment results did influence some professional development activities, but much of
that was also focused on interpreting data.

Data is important in making instructional decisions; however, there are many
instructional strategies and approaches that adults in schools need or want to learn that
are not centered solely on student testing results. Bascia and Hargreaves (2000) define
school reform as educational changes implemented to raise student achievement levels.
However, Hargreaves (2008) also describes the nature of sustainable PLCs as “…a way
of life that does not focus only or always on tested literacy, but on all aspects of learning
and also caring for others within the school” (p. 188). Hargreaves (2007) further
contends that if the team’s only purpose is to analyze data, it would be more appropriately
called a data team, rather than a PLC. We may be so focused on student data in today’s
school environments that we lose sight of the concept that PLCs are about adult learning.

PLCs operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students
is continuous job-embedded learning for educators (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many,
2010; Hord, 1997a; Jolly, 2008). During the interviews, the principals described
professional learning activities that have united their staff members. One principal spoke
of collective learning as a method of building the staff members’ trust in a principal. The
group learning together helped to build trust with the teachers because it demonstrated
that the principal would make sure they were trained and ready to implement changes
before adopting innovations. I have experienced professional learning activities in the
school where I was principal as uniting the staff through common learning. It supports
familiar language and a united vision that creates a sense of community among the staff members.

**Preset Code 6: PLC Training**

Hord and Tobia (2012) offer that principals need to provide learning opportunities for developing a culture within a school that leads to the incorporation of professional learning communities as a method of functioning (Hord & Tobia, 2012). Additionally, the Ontario Principals’ Council (2009) describes staff training to support the PLC in doing its work is a responsibility of the administration.

Five of the principals who were interviewed for this study had provided some sort of training for their staff members in the implementation of PLCs. One principal had been fortunate to obtain on-going, on-site training with a familiar presenter. This was ideal, in my opinion, as the training was tailored to that specific school’s needs and staff members’ goals. Three of the principals had attended workshops with Richard and Rebecca DuFour of Solution Tree (www.solution-tree.com), as they had presented in New Hampshire several times. Those principals and their staff members were influenced by that approach to developing PLCs, yet all three had adjusted the approach to better fit the needs of their schools.

Supportive relational conditions have been found to be an important element in the development, implementation, and sustaining of a PLC. My review of the DuFour approach revealed that supportive relational conditions were not included as a major characteristic of professional learning communities. My review of the literature addressed positive relationships as a major factor in the success of any other characteristic or dimension of PLCs. Not all published models, including the work of the
DuFours, emphasize the positive relationships as a major factor in the success of a PLC. Additionally, some models, including that of DuFour and Eaker are too structured. Some of the principals I interviewed had adjusted the DuFour PLC design to meet the needs of their individual schools. Both Easton (2011) and Hord and Tobia (2012) describe PLCs as a “self-organizing group,” a description that does not correspond to the regimented approach of the DuFour program.

**Emergent Themes**

**Emergent Theme 1: Central Office Support**

Research (Harris, 2010; Rasberry & Majahan, 2008) has shown that without support at all levels of the organization, a system change, such as transforming schools into professional learning communities, can fail. Each of the six principals involved in this study emphasized the need for support from central office personnel in order to develop and sustain a successful PLC environment in their schools. They described administrators’ PLCs in their districts that engaged in shared leadership and decision making. One principal stated that his superintendent even informed all district staff members that there was an expectation to engage in the work of PLCs and function as teams throughout the district.

Superintendents who have become knowledgeable in the concept of PLCs and support PLC work, have made the transformation of their schools less demanding for principals. The understanding and expectations of the central office district leaders have supported principals in their PLC process. As a principal, I have experienced that support from central office staff and know that it can make the difference between the success or failure of PLCs in becoming a way of functioning for schools. One principal referred to
PLC time on several occasions during the interview. Dufour (2004) supports the idea that PLCs are a way of functioning and should not be allotted to a specific time in his statement, “The structures and culture of the school should resonate with the message that collaboration is nondiscretionary; it is the way we do things around here” (p. 64). Hargreaves, in an interview with Sparks (2004), further elaborated this idea in his description of a PLC as an “…ethos that infuses every single aspect of a school’s operation” (p. 48), rather than PLCs being a staff activity earmarked for a designated time frame. Central office staff members have the opportunity to communicate that message of continual collaboration district-wide.

Emergent Theme 2: Structural Supports to Help Team Functioning

Although the principals discussed the usual structural supports they provide that are typically addressed in the research (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2010; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012), such as common time and location for meetings, providing data, materials, and resources, there were some unexpected supports that emerged during our conversations. Those structural supports included required paperwork for the PLC teams, as well as hiring, dismissal, and placement practices.

One principal required structured forms in a binder to be completed by all PLC teams in her school. She believed it helped to support communications between the teams, as well as acting as a resource for interventions. The principal thought that the paperwork was needed because the PLC teams were unsure of what to do during their meetings. However, another principal had introduced structured forms for PLC meetings this past year and thought the forms restricted conversations between team members. Although some authors may support the use of structured forms, the research of Easton
(2011), as well as that of Hord and Tobia (2012), disagrees with PLCs that are too structured and contends that some PLCs are successful because they remain self-organizing. Easton suggests that the reason some PLCs may not have been sustainable is that they were not allowed to become a self-organizing community, but were subjected to rigid structures and rules.

Hiring new staff members in a team approach, as well as dismissing or non-renewing staff members for lack of teamwork, seemed common practice among the principals. Moving teachers to create more collegial relationships also emerged as common practice. The principals who moved personnel knew their staff members’ personalities because they had previously established relationships with them. Those relationships informed their decisions to move teachers in order to develop better functioning teams and support collaboration in their schools.

In my experience as a principal for 17 years, I have moved staff to different grade levels several times in order to create more collaborative teams. Sometimes those teachers were not in agreement with the move, as was similarly experienced by one principal I interviewed. However, ultimately, the teachers established more collaborative relationships with their new teammates and did not want to return to their previous teams.

**Emergent Theme 3: Establishing a Culture of Collegiality**

Four of the principals explained the advantages their staff members had encountered in working collaboratively in PLCs teams with colleagues. Both Fullan (2001) and Louis (2006) offer that establishing a culture of collaborative work and learning in a school, *reculturing*, requires time, effort, and patience. Those four principals confirmed that establishing a history and traditions has helped them achieve...
the kind of culture that exemplifies positive relationships where teachers work together toward the common goal of student learning. Fullan (2001) supports the principals’ beliefs that it is relationships in an organization that make the difference for success. Discussion of the time, effort, and patience required to establish this type of culture, suggests that longevity with their staff members is an advantageous element for principals in developing relationships.

**Final Overview of Conclusions**

It is evident from the discussions during the six principal interviews that professional learning communities are successfully operating in elementary schools in New Hampshire. Additionally, the six dimensions of professional learning communities (Hord & Tobia, 2012) are being implemented in the schools. Although the six principals selected as interview participants scored high on the PLCA-R questionnaire and have given evidence that the five attributes of supportive relational conditions exist in their schools, there are differences in their interpretations of the five attributes and how the attributes are manifested in their school’s PLCs.

**Caring Relationships.** This study supported the importance of caring relationships in developing successful PLC practices. The significance of relationships was found to encompass both professional working relationships and personal relationships among the staff. In order to develop caring and trusting relationships among the educators in a school, principals expressed the belief that they must serve as a model of benevolence. Longevity of the staff and principal emerged as an important factor in developing caring relationships.
**Trust and Respect.** Throughout each of the interviews, the principals expressed the importance of relationships built upon trust and respect. The greatest number of statements from the interviews were related to the attribute of trust and respect. Honesty in communication and established norms of respect received emphasis in the discussions. The presence of the principal in maintaining visibility emerged as an important factor in garnering respect and trust from the staff. The safety and vulnerability of the staff can be alleviated by the principal in relation to sharing teaching practices. Additionally, principals’ trust in teachers’ expertise is related to shared leadership and decision making. Although viewed by the principals as shared leadership, offering stipends to teachers for the position of PLC team leader opposes much research that supports distributed and shared leadership among team members. Furthermore, the time required to nurture and develop trust and respect among staff members was similar to that mentioned in cultivating caring relationships. Longevity plays a major role in trusting relationships.

**Recognition and Celebrations.** The interviewed principals believed that their staff members thought recognition and celebrations were more meaningful when awarded by colleagues. Principals were conscientious not to appear to favor staff members or students with recognition and celebrations.

**Risk Taking.** Principals believed that support for risk taking must be tempered with practices that are in the best interests of students. The principals wanted to monitor student progress with any new innovations.

**Unified Efforts to Embed Change.** Although student data is important, some school staff members are placing most of their PLCs efforts in this area, often neglecting and limiting teacher learning in other areas.
PLC Training. Regardless of the training received for PLCs, most principals thought that implementation of PLCs had to be tailored to meet the needs of their individual schools.

Central Office Support. Support from central office plays a vital role in supporting principals in the development and continuation of PLCs.

Structural Supports to Help Team Functioning. Principals identified the importance of hiring or dismissing staff members who could not or would not collaborate with colleagues. Moving teachers to different PLCs teams was also a vital aspect in supporting collaboration and collegiality. Requiring completion of structured forms to direct PLC activities was practiced by some principals, yet is not supported by research as allowing for self-organizing PLCs.

Establishing a Culture of Collegiality. Time, effort, and patience are required in reculturing a school to an ideology of a professional learning community. Longevity of the relationships principals developed between and among themselves and staff members greatly influenced the success of their efforts.

Figure 2 depicts the degree of importance the principals placed on each of the attributes of supportive relational conditions. The size of each circle corresponds to the number of statements and topics related to that attribute, while the overlap of the circles illustrates the interconnectedness of the attributes. Related topics that emerged within each attribute are listed on the interior of the designated circles. The three emergent themes, as well as training for PLCs, are interpreted as exerting influence on supportive relational conditions of PLCs and are therefore portrayed on the exterior of the supportive relational conditions circle.
Figure 2. Attributes of Supportive Relational Conditions

Supportive Relational Conditions

PLC Training

Recognitions & Celebration
- By principal for staff
- By staff for colleagues
- For students

Caring Relationships
- Modeling
- Social Activities
- Laughter & Humor
- Interdependence
- Equality
- Longevity

Unified Efforts to Embed Change
- Student Learning
- Adult Learning

Risk Taking
- Support Monitoring

Trust & Respect
- Communication
- Norms of Respect
- Principal Presence
- Time
- Changing Culture
- Safety & Vulnerability
- Shared Personal Practice
- Principal’s Trust in Teachers’ Abilities
- Shared Leadership, Decision Making & Vision

Establishing a Culture of Collegiality

Central Office Support

Interventions to Support Teams

Figure 2. Attributes of Supportive Relational Conditions. The degree of importance the principals placed on each of the attributes of supportive relational conditions is indicated by the size of the circle. The overlap of the circles illustrates the interconnectedness of the attributes.
Implications

The implications of this study are presented in this section of Chapter 5. The research findings support these implications and present these conclusions within the framework of educational research focused on the professional learning community (PLC) model. These implications are significant in that each contributes to the field of educational research and illuminates “…the experience of PLCs in a greater variety of schools…raises the cumulative worth of research studies through the…infusion of more abundant data” (Hord, 2004, p. 4). Learning more about the culture of successful schools adds to the educational research by identifying and elaborating upon the practices which support the success of these schools by investigating them through the conceptual framework of the supportive relational conditions of the PLC model (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Hord & Tobia, 2012).

1. The significant findings of this study suggest that it is essential for caring relationships to exist among staff members. For professional learning communities to be effective in the elementary schools in this study, these relationships must be built on trust and respect. Trust is defined as one’s willingness to be vulnerable to another and includes the components of benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competency (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2000).

2. With each of the participants interviewed using the words family or team to describe staff relationships, principals should examine the extent to which personal relationships are encouraged among colleagues.

3. Principals can benefit from understanding that they set the tone for the professional and personal interactions that occur within their schools. Price (2012)
asserted that the relationships principals have with their teachers affect the teachers’ relationships with colleagues as well as their satisfaction, cohesion, and commitment levels. Matching the right people with the right positions supports the personal and professional interactions necessary for PLCs (Collins, 2001).

4. Principals should consider fostering trusting and caring relationships by providing and supporting opportunities for the staff to interact with each other such as, participating in and giving feedback to classroom observations or celebrate each other’s achievements.

5. The findings pointed to the longevity of the relationships between the principals and their staff members as significant in cultivating relationships of trust. When the principal possesses a deep knowledge of the staff, both personally and professionally, he/she can support trust and caring and promote a PLC culture of collegiality. With rapid turnover in school administrator positions, principals will not have an opportunity to develop long-term relationships with staff members if they change positions frequently.

6. The principal’s frequent visibility and presence in classrooms and at meetings supports his/her knowledge of staff members and increases the trust teachers have for their principals (Morrissey, 2000).

7. Some principals indicated recognition received from colleagues was more meaningful than that received from the principal. Additionally, singling out individuals tended to hurt the feelings of other staff members or students. Therefore, it could prove more beneficial toward building collegiality if principals leave individual recognition to the staff members and recognize only large groups of staff or students.
8. PLCs cannot be achieved; it is a way of operating and functioning and requires ongoing efforts and time to institute in a school (Dufour 2004; Hargreaves, 2008; Hord, 1997a). Some of the interviewed principals’ statements indicated that they understood that there is no such thing as having arrived at PLCs. Principals should have a firm understanding of this concept before implementing PLCs in their buildings.

9. School administrators should be aware that PLCs are not solely about student data and should not be developed for that purpose alone. PLCs are about adult learning that supports student achievement (Hord 1997a; Hargreaves, 2008; Louis, Dretzke, & Wahlstrom, 2010).

10. Further learning and understanding need to occur related to the practice of appointing team leaders and offering stipends. This practice undermines the basic premise of shared and distributed leadership among PLC teammates (S.M. Hord, personal communication, July 22, 2014).

11. PLCs cannot be tightly structured by the principal on an ongoing basis. They should be left to evolve into self-organizing units. Researchers (Easton, 2011; Hord, Roussin, & Sommers, 2010) offer that the principal should play a strong directing role at the initiation of the PLC, then step back to support leadership opportunities and development in the staff, while still participating in the professional learning community.

12. Support from central office personnel makes implementing and sustaining PLCs, as well as supportive relationships, in schools more manageable for principals. Superintendents should become knowledgeable regarding the ideology of PLCs and support their implementation.
13. Practicing and aspiring principals would benefit if principals of schools with ongoing PLCs shared best practices about supportive relational conditions, as well as the other dimensions of PLCs, in forums sponsored by their state organizations.

14. Traditional training and roles for principals have leaned more toward the managerial side of the position. With evidence to support the impact of developing trusting and caring relationships, the implication arises for principal preparation programs to address the emotional side of the principal’s role. The work of Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee (2002) supports the concept that it is not enough for school leaders to have pedagogical competence; emotional and cultural competencies must be present as well. Providing training related to developing the culture and climate of the schools should be considered. If principal preparation fails to acknowledge the need to develop supportive relationships, principals lack a valuable tool for fostering collaborative work.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

This research has provided data and findings which describe some of the strategies used by principals to establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for PLCs in elementary schools. Although the research on PLCs pointed to the principal as playing an important role in PLCs, there was a lack of research focused on the strategies used by principal related to supportive relational conditions of PLCs. While this study was designed to address the gap in the literature, the need for further studies continues to exist to extend the understanding of this phenomenon. As the data was analyzed and findings were presented, other areas that should be addressed surfaced.

1. The first implication for further research is tied to the limitations of this study. The study was limited to a purposeful sample of public elementary school principals in...
New Hampshire that were implementing the concept of professional learning communities and focused on their lived experiences with supportive relational conditions. The six selected public school principals contributed a wealth of data in their interviews that was supported by documentation from their schools. A broader understanding of the role of the principal in establishing, fostering, and sustaining supportive relational conditions for PLCs could be gained by expanding the study to additional schools within this or other states, as well as schools at other levels both public and private.

2. Another recommendation for further study is based upon the theme of longevity that emerged both in the caring relationships and the trust and respect categories of supportive relational conditions. A further study might compare and contrast the development of the five attributes of supportive relational conditions or of the attributes of another of the six dimensions of Hord & Tobia’s (2012) PLC model within elementary schools with principals of varying lengths of tenure. A study of this nature could enrich the findings and identify characteristics and practices which may be different between schools.

3. A third recommendation for further study could be an investigation into the role central office staff have in supporting successful PLC schools. Supports were touched upon in this study; however, a deeper investigation could inform superintendents of the practices that might be uncovered to support PLCs in their schools.

4. There was emphasis in the data from this study placed on the trust that was experienced and enhanced by the principal’s presence with staff members in the classrooms and in PLC activities. Further study of the effects of that presence might be
of benefit to principals in establishing and sustaining the trust required for the relationships within PLCs to be nurtured.

**Summary of Chapter 5**

In 1997, Hord published her seminal research that identified professional learning communities as *Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*. Since then, PLCs have been considered to be “the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. xi) and a method to bring about sustainable change. Today, PLCs are no longer “unusual or controversial” (Hargreaves, 2008, p. 175) and are accepted as part of school life.

Although the term professional learning community has become commonplace, its original meaning is becoming diminished and some of its essence is being lost (Hargreaves, 2007). The danger is that PLCs in some schools are becoming add-on teams that are data driven in order to meet the demands of the current accountability of *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB, 2001). Unfortunately, in the rush to meet that accountability, the vital element of trusted relationships in PLCs has often been overlooked.

Relationships have been viewed as an important and contributing factor in the success of PLCs. Those trusted relationships are addressed as supportive relational conditions of PLCs (Hord, 1997a; Hord & Tobia, 2012; Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003). It is within this context that I investigated how elementary principals establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for PLCs. This study was researched through the conceptual framework of the PLC model developed by Hord (1997a) and later refined by Hipp and Huffman (2010) and Hord and Tobia (2012).
Seeking greater understanding of how the principals can establish, foster, and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities has been a worthwhile endeavor.

Investigating the lived experiences of principals in elementary schools through this conceptual framework provided the potential for documenting and describing the culture and practices of principals in developing caring and trusting relationships in sustainable professional learning communities. This hermeneutic phenomenological examination adds to the research that illustrates the continued potential for relationships that support professional learning communities within schools.

This study shares the insight gained from principals who are practicing in the field establishing, fostering, and sustaining relational conditions that help to make their PLCs function successfully. I found that relationships matter when educators are asked to work collectively to support student learning and those relationships are at the heart of these schools. Without the principal’s support that is demonstrated in beliefs and actions, the development of relationships can be defeated, hence PLCs are not sustainable. One of the most important insights gleaned from this study is that principals must model the relationships at are needed in their setting to cultivate supportive relationships among the staff. The principal must be committed to developing those collegial relationships that support PLCs so that the learning needs of students remain at the center of the collaborative work of the educators in a building.
References


& R. DuFour (Eds.), *On common ground: The power of professional learning communities* (pp. 114-133). Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.


(Eds.). *Professionalism and community: Perspectives on reforming urban schools*, (pp. 3-24). Long Oaks, CA: Corwin.


New Hampshire State Constitution (1784, amended 2007) Article 83


Siegrist, G. R., Weeks, W. C., Pate, J. L., & Monetti, D. R. (2009). Principals' experience, educational level, and leadership practices as predictors of Georgia high school graduation test results. *Journal of Philosophy & History of Education,*


316. doi: 10.3102/00346543074003255
Appendix A

*Initial Email Information and Survey Questions*

Dear NH Elementary Principals,

My name is Emily Spear, I am the principal of Belmont Elementary School, Belmont, NH. I am also a doctoral candidate at Plymouth State University. I have focused my area of study on one component of professional learning communities (PLCs). I am interested in how elementary principals establish positive relationships among staff members in order for PLCs to be effective.

I would be delighted to gain some information from elementary principals on this topic. My study defines elementary principals as those supervising preschool – grade 6. There are various configurations and divisions of grade levels among the schools in NH, however, this study will focus on schools covering any combination of those grade levels.

My study defines PLCs as communities of continuous inquiry and improvement where the following dimensions are present: (a) supportive and shared leadership; (b) shared beliefs, values, and vision; (c) intentional collective learning; (d) shared personal and collective practice; (e) supportive structural conditions; and (f) supportive relational conditions (Hord & Tobia, 2012).

I would so appreciate your participation in my research project. Being a participant would first involve answering 3 brief initial survey questions (below). The next step involves responding to a Likert scale survey that requires about 15-20 minutes to complete. If you are selected through purposeful sampling to become a focus participant in this study, I would also request a recorded face-to-face interview with you of about an hour in length at a site convenient for you, with the possibility of a follow-up interview. If you agree, I would also request permission to review documents you may have developed at your school related to PLCs. The knowledge received from participating in this study may be of value to participants because it will offer information gleaned from the field about what has been identified as enabling PLC work with regards to positive relationships among staff members.

All surveys, interviews, and document reviews are expected to be completed by June, 2014. All of your information would remain confidential, neither you nor your school will be identified in the collected data, and you will have an option to withdraw at any time for any reason. The information you share with me will become a part of my study, which will be made available to you upon completion. Expected time of completion is July-August, 2014.

If you have any questions, you may contact me at: espear@sau80.org Tel: 267-6568 or 286-8383

You may also contact my dissertation chair with questions: Kathleen McCabe, Ph.D., Plymouth State University, Graduate Faculty, Educational Leadership, College of Graduate Studies. kathleenmccabe@gmail.com Tel: 279-4753

The following are the initial survey questions. If you are interested in participating in my study, simply respond to the questions and send them back to me through email. Thank you so much for your participation. Sincerely, Emily Spear
1. Do you have active professional learning communities (PLCs) at your elementary school?
2. If so, would you be interested in participating in a study on PLCs?
3. May I contact you? (If yes, please include contact information)
Appendix B

**Professional Learning Community Assessment – Revised**

Request Form

**CONTACT INFORMATION:**

First Name: Emily
Last Name: Spear
E-mail: espear@sau80.org
Mailing Address: 22 Bay Street
City: Northfield
State: New Hampshire
Zip: 03276
Country: USA
Tel: 603-286-8383 (h) 603-267-6568 (w)
Fax: 603-267-6136
Job Title: Elementary School Principal
Organization: Belmont Elementary School
University (if applicable): Plymouth State University

Send form to: Dr. Dianne F. Olivier, 225 Ogden Avenue, Breaux Bridge, LA 70517
or email to dolivier@louisiana.edu

**DESCRIPTION OF REQUESTED MATERIAL:**

Title = Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised
Source = Demystifying Professional Learning Communities: School Leadership at Its Best
Pages = 32-35
Authors = Olivier D. F., Hipp, K. K., & Huffman, J. B.
Pub Date = 2010

**PROPOSED USE:**

(Complete according to specific study or other data gathering/analysis and subsequent use)

I am very interested in how elementary principals establish supportive relational conditions among staff members for professional learning communities and plan to do my dissertation research in this area. My study so far, is entitled, *An Examination of the Role of the Principal and the Strategies Principals Use in Developing and Sustaining Supportive Relational Conditions for Professional Learning Communities in Elementary Schools*. I would like to use the *Professional Learning Community Assessment- Revised* with elementary principals to determine the strength of practices within their schools regarding the PLC dimensions.
TIME FRAME:
(Complete according to specific *duration of study only* with approval of IRB when relevant; Ex. until the completion a dissertation).
I will begin research and use of the PLCA-R during February of 2014 surveying elementary principals in NH, which will be completed with my dissertation defense in August or September of 2014. (IRB will be approved in February 2014)

**Signature of Requester:** (not required if form is emailed; just type name)

__Emily K. Spear___________________________ 10/23/2013

(Date)
Appendix C

Emily Spear
22 Bay Street
Northfield, New Hampshire

Dear Ms. Spear:

This correspondence is to grant permission to utilize the Professional Learning Community Assessment-Revised (PLCA-R) as your instrument for data collection for your doctoral study through Plymouth State University. I believe your research examining how elementary principals establish supportive relational conditions within professional learning communities will contribute to the PLC literature and provide valuable information related to overall development of the PLC process. I am pleased that you are interested in using the PLCA-R measure in your research.

This permission letter allows use of the PLCA-R through paper/pencil administration, as well as permission for the PLCA-R online version. For administration of the PLCA-R online version, services must be secured through our online host, SEDL in Austin, TX. Additional information for online administration can be found at www.sedl.org.

While this letter provides permission to use the measure in your study, authorship of the measure will remain as Olivier, Hipp, and Huffman (exact citation on the following page). This permission does not allow renaming the measure or claiming authorship.

Upon completion of your study, I would be interested in learning about your entire study and would welcome the opportunity to receive an electronic version of your completed dissertation research.

Thank you for your interest in our research and measure for assessing professional learning community attributes within schools. Should you require any additional information, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

Dianne F. Olivier

Dianne F. Olivier, Ph. D.
Assistant Professor
Joan D. and Alexander S. Haig/BORSF Professor
Department of Educational Foundations and Leadership
Appendix D

Professional Learning Communities Assessment – Revised

Directions:
This questionnaire assesses your perceptions about your principal, staff, and stakeholders based on the dimensions of a professional learning community (PLC) and related attributes. This questionnaire contains a number of statements about practices which occur in some schools. Read each statement and then use the scale below to select the scale point that best reflects your personal degree of agreement with the statement. Shade the appropriate oval provided to the right of each statement. Be certain to select only one response for each statement. Comments after each dimension section are optional.

Key Terms:
- Principal = Principal, not Associate or Assistant Principal
- Staff/Staff Members = All adult staff directly associated with curriculum, instruction, and assessment of students
- Stakeholders = Parents and community members

Scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree (SD)
2 = Disagree (D)
3 = Agree (A)
4 = Strongly Agree (SA)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENTS</th>
<th>SCALE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared and Supportive Leadership</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Staff members are consistently involved in discussing and making decisions about most school issues.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The principal incorporates advice from staff members to make decisions.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Staff members have accessibility to key information.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. The principal is proactive and addresses areas where support is needed.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Opportunities are provided for staff members to initiate change.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. The principal shares responsibility and rewards for innovative actions.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. The principal participates democratically with staff sharing power and authority.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Leadership is promoted and nurtured among staff members.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Decision-making takes place through committees and communication across grade and subject areas.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Stakeholders assume shared responsibility and accountability for student learning without evidence of imposed power and authority.</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Staff members use multiple sources of data to make decisions about teaching and</td>
<td>SD 0  D 0  A 0  SA 0</td>
</tr>
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</table>
### COMMENTS:

#### STATEMENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statements</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<th>SA</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared sense of values among staff.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Shared values support norms of behavior that guide decisions about teaching and learning.</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Staff members share visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Decisions are made in alignment with the school’s values and vision.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>16. A collaborative process exists for developing a shared vision among staff.</td>
<td>0</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>17. School goals focus on student learning beyond test scores and grades.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>18. Policies and programs are aligned to the school’s vision.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>19. Stakeholders are actively involved in creating high expectations that serve to increase student achievement.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>20. Data are used to prioritize actions to reach a shared vision.</td>
<td>0</td>
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#### COMMENTS:

#### Collective Learning and Application

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<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>21. Staff members work together to seek knowledge, skills and strategies and apply this new learning to their work.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Collegial relationships exist among staff members that reflect commitment to school improvement efforts.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Staff members plan and work together to search for solutions to address diverse student needs.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. A variety of opportunities and structures exist for collective learning through open dialogue.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Staff members engage in dialogue that reflects a respect for diverse ideas that lead to continued inquiry.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>26.</td>
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### Comments:
Professional development focuses on teaching and learning.  

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<thead>
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<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>STATEMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>27.</td>
<td>School staff members and stakeholders learn together and apply new knowledge to solve problems.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28.</td>
<td>School staff members are committed to programs that enhance learning.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Staff members collaboratively analyze multiple sources of data to assess the effectiveness of instructional practices.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Staff members collaboratively analyze student work to improve teaching and learning.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
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COMMENTS:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared Personal Practice</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31. Opportunities exist for staff members to observe peers and offer encouragement.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32. Staff members provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33. Staff members informally share ideas and suggestions for improving student learning.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34. Staff members collaboratively review student work to share and improve instructional practices.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35. Opportunities exist for coaching and mentoring.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36. Individuals and teams have the opportunity to apply learning and share the results of their practices.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37. Staff members regularly share student work to guide overall school improvement.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
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COMMENTS:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>STATEMENTS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supportive Conditions - Relationships</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38. Caring relationships exist among staff and students that are built on trust and respect.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39. A culture of trust and respect exists for taking risks.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40. Outstanding achievement is recognized and celebrated regularly in our school.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41. School staff and stakeholders exhibit a sustained and unified effort to embed change into the culture of the school.</td>
<td>0 0 0 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>42.</td>
<td>Relationships among staff members support honest and respectful examination of data to enhance teaching and learning.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**COMMENTS:**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Time is provided to facilitate collaborative work.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>44.</td>
<td>The school schedule promotes collective learning and shared practice.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45.</td>
<td>Fiscal resources are available for professional development.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>Appropriate technology and instructional materials are available to staff.</td>
<td>0</td>
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**Supportive Conditions - Structures**

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Resource people provide expertise and support for continuous learning.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>The school facility is clean, attractive and inviting.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>The proximity of grade level and department personnel allows for ease in collaborating with colleagues.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Communication systems promote a flow of information among staff members.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>Communication systems promote a flow of information across the entire school community including: central office personnel, parents, and community members.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>Data are organized and made available to provide easy access to staff members.</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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**COMMENTS:**

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Appendix E

Face to Face Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the relationships that exist among the staff at your school. How do you think you, as the principal, have developed caring relationships among your school staff?

2. In your opinion, what actions of a principal could develop trust and respect among a school staff? Could you give an example of a time when you believe you contributed to building trust and respect among your staff?

3. What do recognition and celebrations of success and accomplishment look like in your school? Can you tell me about examples for students and also for staff members?

4. What do you envision when you think about risk taking in education? Tell me how you might react to a teacher who wanted to implement some sort of innovation?

5. Tell me what I might see your staff doing to change and improve teacher and student learning?

6. Tell me about any training or professional development you or your staff have received in implementing PLCs?

7. Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about your experiences with PLCs in your school? Is there something that perhaps I didn’t ask you that you would like to speak about?
Appendix F

PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

INVESTIGATOR(S) NAME: Emily K. Spear, M.Ed. C.A.G.S.

STUDY TITLE: An Examination of the Role of the Principal and the Strategies Principals Use in Developing and Sustaining Supportive Relational Conditions (SRC) for Professional Learning Communities in Elementary Schools

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this research is to examine the role of the principal and the strategies used to develop and sustain supportive relational conditions for professional learning communities in elementary schools. This research will examine specific strategies and practices used by principals in building supportive relational conditions. The five essential attributes necessary to sustain supportive relational conditions will provide the basis for the examination. Those attributes are: caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebration, risk-taking, and a unified effort to embed change (Hipp & Huffman, 2010; Huffman & Hipp, 2003).

I am being asked to be a participant in the study because I am an elementary school principal in NH and the researcher wants to hear about my experience.

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY
This study focuses on one component of professional learning communities (PLCs). This study will examine how elementary principals establish positive relationships among staff members in order for PLCs to be effective. Being a participant would involve answering 3 brief initial survey questions (below). The next step involves responding to a Likert scale survey that requires about 15-20 minutes to complete. If you are selected through purposeful sampling to become a focus participant in this study, I would also request a recorded face-to-face interview with you of about an hour in length at a site convenient for you, with the possibility of a follow-up interview. If you agree, I would also request permission to review documents you may have developed at your school related to PLCs. All surveys, interviews, and document reviews are expected to be completed by June, 2014. The information you share with me will become a part of my study, which will be
made available to you upon completion. Expected time of completion is July-August, 2014.

There will be no known costs to you associated with this study.

**RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no known risks or discomforts of any kind to participants.

**BENEFITS**

The knowledge received from participating in this study may be of value to participants because it will offer information gleaned from the field about what has been identified as enabling or impeding PLC work with regards to supportive relationships. School staffs that are working in PLCS will benefit from this study as the findings inform and influence the practices of their principals. Thus, school districts, school leaders, and teachers can profit from what the principals in this study will learned from their experiences establishing and fostering supportive relational conditions.

The information gathered will also be useful for practicing and aspiring principals, to offer them strategies and techniques for developing a positive school climate that allows for supportive relational conditions for PLCs. The information could be useful as well, to institutions for school administrator certification to be included in coursework for school leadership training programs. A closer examination of the role of the principal in developing and sustaining supportive relational conditions for PLCs could provide understanding for future leaders as they seek to successfully implement professional learning communities.

**ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES**

This study does not involve an intervention. The alternative would be not to participate.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

All documents and information pertaining to this research study will be kept confidential in accordance with all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations. I understand that data generated by the study may be reviewed by Plymouth State University's Institutional Review Board, which is the committee responsible for ensuring my welfare and rights as a research participant, to assure proper conduct of the study and compliance with
university regulations. If any presentations or publication result from this research, I will not be identified by name.

The information collected during my participation in this study will be kept for three years in a locked file cabinet drawer in the researcher’s home; after which the files will be destroyed. In addition, my confidentiality will be further protected by having my name and all identifying labels (name of school, grade levels, name of district, etc…) removed from the records prior to storing them in the locked file drawer.

**TERMINATION OF PARTICIPATION**

I may choose to withdraw from this study at any time and for any reason. If I choose to drop out of the study, I will contact the investigator and my research records will be destroyed. If this is an anonymous survey, research records cannot be destroyed following submission of the survey.

**COMPENSATION**

I will not receive payment for being in this study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. There will be no cost to me for participating in this research.

**INJURY COMPENSATION**

Neither Plymouth State University nor any government or other agency funding this research project will provide special services, free care, or compensation for any injuries resulting from this research. I understand that treatment for such injuries will be at my expense and/or paid through my medical plan.

**QUESTIONS**

All of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction and if I have further questions about this study, I may contact Emily K. Spear, at 603-286-8383 or espear@sau80.org. If I have any questions about the rights of research participants, I may call the Chairperson of the Plymouth State University’s Institutional Review Board at 603-535-3193 or damackey@plymouth.edu.

**VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION**

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to me. I am free to withdraw or refuse consent, or to discontinue my participation in this study at any time without penalty or consequence.
I voluntarily give my consent to participate / for my child to participate in this research study. I understand that I will be given a copy of this consent form.

Signatures:

________________________
Participant’s Name (Print)

________________________
Participant’s Signature       Date

I, the undersigned, certify that to the best of my knowledge, the subject signing this consent form has had the study fully and carefully explained by me and have been given an opportunity to ask any questions regarding the nature, risks, and benefits of participation in this research study.

Emily K. Spear
Investigator’s Name (Print)

________________________
Investigator’s Signature       Date

Plymouth State University’s IRB has approved the solicitation of participants for the study until ________________Leave blank, date will be one year from IRB approval.
# Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised Administration

## Individual PLCA-R Reports from a Cohort

**Cohort:** Principal Participants
- 16 questionnaires have been received for this cohort.

### How to use this page:
- Click on a response number in the left-hand column to view the PLCA-R graph for that individual.
- You can quickly compare mean scores across all participants by viewing the numbers in columns 3-8 below. The lowest mean for each individual is highlighted in yellow.

### Table: PLC Mean Scores by Dimension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response #</th>
<th>Subgroup Data</th>
<th>PLC Mean Scores by Dimension</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Structures</th>
<th>Custom? #1</th>
<th>PLCA-R System Record #</th>
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<td><strong>Response 1</strong></td>
<td>Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school: 3-6</td>
<td>Shared and Supportive Leadership</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Shared Values and Practices</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student enrollment at your school: 400-640</td>
<td>Collaborative Learning and Application</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): P&lt;1, 2, 3, 4, 5</td>
<td>Shared Personal Practice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Response 2</strong></td>
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<td>Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): 1, 2, 3, 4</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): K-12</td>
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<td>Student enrollment at your school: 200-399</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): 1, 2, 3, 4</td>
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https://www.sedi.org/doc/curriculum/index.cpl?location=report_individual&shox_code=6mm2&shon=espear@isu40.org/0310104540
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<td>Grade levels at your school:</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of years as principal at current school:</td>
<td>9-10: 2.91</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>3.10</td>
<td>2.43</td>
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<td>03/10/2014 3:02 PM</td>
<td>5913</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student enrollment at your school:</td>
<td>400-600: 3.55</td>
<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.40</td>
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<td>Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply):</td>
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<td>RESPONSE 14</td>
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<td>2.43</td>
<td>2.80</td>
<td>2.70</td>
<td>03/10/2014 9:01 AM</td>
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<td>9-10: 2.91</td>
<td>2.78</td>
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<td>2.70</td>
<td>03/10/2014 3:02 PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student enrollment at your school:</td>
<td>400-600: 3.55</td>
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<td>3.40</td>
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<tr>
<td>Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply):</td>
<td>PK: 2.64</td>
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https://www.sdm.gsa/survey/admin/index.cgi?location=report_indis&show_code=6emm55&expania@pauco.org20101014549
Appendix H - *PLCA-R* Principal #1 Report

**Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised Scoring Device**

*Report for Individual PLCA-R Participant (record ID: 5949)*

**A: Individual Participant Description (record ID: 5949)**

**Cohort name:** Principal Participants

**Demographics Questions**

- Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school: 4-6
- Number of years as principal at current school: 7-9
- Student enrollment at your school: 200-399
- Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): PK;K;1;2;3;4;5

**Custom Question(s)**

1. Please add your email address

**PLC Dimensions:**

![Image of PLC Dimensions graph]

**Mean and Standard Deviation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Dimensions</th>
<th>Shared and Supportive Leadership</th>
<th>Shared Values and Visions</th>
<th>Collective Learning and Application</th>
<th>Shared Personal Practice</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Relationships</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Structures</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mean: (Avg. raw score / num statements)</td>
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<td>3.11</td>
<td>3.20</td>
<td>2.86</td>
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<td>0.33</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.69</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>0.67</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Appendix I - *PLCA-R* Principal #2 Report

**Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised Scoring Device Report for Individual PLCA-R Participant (record ID: 5896)**

**Cohort name:** Principal Participants

**Demographics Questions**

- Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school: 4-6
- Number of years as principal at current school: 10 or more
- Student enrollment at your school: 200-399
- Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): 3; 4; 5

**Custom Question(s)**

1. Please add your email address: [ ]

**PLC Dimensions:**

**Professional Learning Community**

![Chart showing the six PLC dimensions with scores ranging from 1 to 4.](chart)

**The Six PLC Dimensions**

**Mean and Standard Deviation**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Dimensions</th>
<th>Shared and Supportive Leadership</th>
<th>Shared Values and Visions</th>
<th>Collective Learning and Application</th>
<th>Shared Personal Practice</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Relationships</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Structures</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>mean (Avg. raw score / num statements)</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>3.14</td>
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<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.52</td>
<td>0.38</td>
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</table>
Appendix J - PLCA-R Principal #3 Report

Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised Scoring Device
Report for Individual PLCA-R Participant (record ID: 5722)

Cohort name: Principal Participants

Demographics Questions
- Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school: 1-3
- Number of years as principal at current school: 4-6
- Student enrollment at your school: 200-399
- Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): K; 1; 2

Custom Question(s) Response: 3
1. Please add your email address

PLC Dimensions:

The Six PLC Dimensions

Mean and Standard Deviation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Dimensions</th>
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<th>Shared Values and Visions</th>
<th>Collective Learning and Application</th>
<th>Shared Personal Practice</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Relationships</th>
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<tr>
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</table>
Appendix K - PLCA-R Principal #4 Report

Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised Scoring Device Report for Individual PLCA-R Participant (record ID: 5944)

A: Individual Participant Description (record ID: 5944)

Cohort name: Principal Participants

Demographics Questions

Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school: 7-9
Number of years as principal at current school: 4-6
Student enrollment at your school: 200-399
Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): K; 1; 2; 3; 4; 5

Custom Question(s)

1. Please add your email address

PLC Dimensions:

Mean and Standard Deviation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Dimensions</th>
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<th>Collective Learning and Application</th>
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Appendix L- PLCA-R Principal #5 Report

Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised Scoring Device
Report for Individual PLCA-R Participant (record ID: 5887)

A: Individual Participant Description (record ID: 5887)

Cohort name: Principal Participants

Demographics Questions
Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school: 4-6
Number of years as principal at current school: 10 or more
Student enrollment at your school: 400-600
Grade levels at your school (Click all that apply): K; 1; 2; 3; 4

Custom Question(s)
1. Please add your email address

PLC Dimensions:

The Six PLC Dimensions

Mean and Standard Deviation

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<tr>
<th>PLC Dimensions</th>
<th>Shared and Supportive Leadership</th>
<th>Shared Values and Visions</th>
<th>Collective Learning and Application</th>
<th>Shared Personal Practice</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Relationships</th>
<th>Supportive Conditions - Structures</th>
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<tr>
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Appendix M - PLCA-R Principal #1 Report

Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised Scoring Device Report for Individual PLCA-R Participant (record ID: 5758)

A: Individual Participant Description (record ID: 5758)

Cohort name: Principal Participants

Demographics Questions

- Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school: 1-3
- Number of years as principal at current school: 10 or more
- Student enrollment at your school: 200-399

Custom Question(s) Response

1. Please add your email address

PLC Dimensions:

![Graph showing PLC dimensions with Mean Score and Standard Deviation](image)

Mean and Standard Deviation

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLC Dimensions</th>
<th>Shared and Supportive Leadership</th>
<th>Shared Values and Visions</th>
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Appendix M

Professional Learning Communities Assessment-Revised Scoring Device
Report for Individual PLCA-R Participant (record ID: 5758)

A: Individual Participant Description (record ID: 5758)

Cohort name: Principal Participants

Demographics Questions

- Number of years implementing PLCs as a principal in any school: 1-3
- Number of years as principal at current school: 10 or more
- Student enrollment at your school: 200-399

Custom Question(s)  Response

1. Please add your email address

PLC Dimensions:

The Six PLC Dimensions

Mean and Standard Deviation

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