



A STUDY OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER EFFICACY AND  
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL

A Dissertation Presented to the  
Faculty of the College of Education  
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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

By

Steven Douglas Shetzer

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### **Abstract**

This study explored the relationship between teacher efficacy and professional learning communities. Specifically, this study utilized a mixed design encompassing quantitative and qualitative aspects of the professional lives of 27 teachers in an urban high school.

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive learning theory of self-efficacy provided the framework for the construct of self-efficacy. Hord's (1997) dimensions of professional learning community served as the framework for the exploration of professional learning communities for this study.

For the quantitative segment of this study, two survey instruments were utilized to assess whether a relationship exists between dimensions of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and dimensions of teachers' perceptions of professional learning community. With the permission of the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, the School Professional Staff as Learning Community (SPSLCQ) questionnaire (1997) and the Teacher Self-Efficacy Survey were administered to the participating teachers.

A Pearson correlation was calculated for the data. For this study, the results revealed that dimensions of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are not correlated at all to the dimensions of professional learning community.

For the qualitative aspect of this study, the researcher employed a phenomenological design. Using primarily interviews, data were collected from the

sample participants who had experienced being a part of professional learning communities; thereafter, a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals was synthesized. This description consists of “what” they experienced and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants were asked two broad, general questions (Moustakas, 1994): What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? These guided attention on gathering data that led to a textural description and structural description of the experiences, and they ultimately provided an understanding of the common experiences across participants.

Through the use of phenomenological research methods, the researcher found that the participants had the same general experiences pertaining to professional learning communities. All of the participants stated that there was a sense of frustration, a lack of vision and direction, and a lack of collaboration when participating in a professional learning community.

The results of this study showed that there exists a gap in the knowledge of the impact that correct, systemic implementation of professional learning communities has on participating teachers’ self-efficacy. Given the results of the study, further research on the impact professional learning communities have on teacher self-efficacy should be conducted with consideration given to how professional learning communities are implemented and supported in order to add to the knowledge base in future research.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

According to Thomas Friedman “the world is flat,” and therefore, global economies are “leveling the playing field” and we, Americans, must change our thinking and our actions. Friedman points out that when the world began flattening, “Americans weren’t ready” (Pink, 2005, p.5). As Americans, we cannot afford to not be ready. Thus, we must enter a new era of systems change.

In order for America and its citizens to survive, our system has to change. America must present a clear description of the issues associated with this new order of communication, interconnectedness, and immediacy for the system’s elements to change. Currently, there are many systems that are at work that make up the global economy. Americans must be adaptable to the changing world through “equifinality,” which means that systems can arrive at the same goals through different means (Lyle, 1997). Thus, in America, it can be the educational system that answers the call of society’s changing system while in other parts of the world it is through other means, such as business. The systems’ change that must occur can be spearheaded by educators, and it is imperative that they rise to the challenge of preparing future generations to compete in a flat world. We must not only be ready, but we must prepare.

The great flatteners of the new world encourage a cultural shift toward collaboration through such events as the fall of the Berlin Wall, the rise of Netscape, the trillion dollar fiber optic cable investment because of the dotcom boom, and the appearance of common software platforms (Friedman, 2006). Additionally, the rise of outsourcing, off-shoring, supply chaining and in-sourcing allows technical work to be

done in other countries for a lesser cost than in America (Friedman, 2006). Friedman (2006) believes that it is these flatteners, which “created a flat world: a global, web-enabled platform for multiple forms of sharing knowledge and work, irrespective of time, distance, geography and increasingly, language” (p. 263). And, it is not only understanding and internalizing the impact of such flatteners that will enable America to compete in the same capacity as other countries, such as China, India, and the former Soviet Union, but it is the response through action in the educational system that will cause the systems’ change to prove effective and successful in a global market.

### **Educational Response to Change the System**

The United States faces increasing challenges and international competition in maintaining educational excellence. According to a 2010 report by the National Center for Education Statistics, American high schools graduated 75% of their students in 2008, at great cost to both the nation and the students (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010). Given the global competition from first world nations and emerging third world countries, it is clearly time for the United States to focus its attention on redesigning the American high school in order to address the changing labor skills that workers must have to compete in the global job market. The world demands a response to the changes that are happening, and it is the role of the schools to prepare our young citizens to meet those demands.

In order to respond, we must spearhead a systems change, and to do that we must call to action our educators. In *Schooling America* (2005), Patricia Graham describes the American educational system through different eras, which are centered themes relating to the needs of society at that given time: Assimilation, Adjustment, Access, and

Achievement. As we entered a more flat and globalized world, it is again necessary for education to respond to the needs of society. Thus, this new, current era could be termed the “action” era. The action era will be marked by Americans committing to the values of what it means to compete in a flat world and taking charge to make the necessary systematic changes in our way of thinking and educating our young people.

Complacency has no place in the action era. Developing the individuals’ and staffs’ capacity to engage in meaningful reform and restructuring in order to benefit students remains one of the greatest challenges for schools.

### **Outcome-based Learning**

With technology enabling everyone to participate in the global market and competition, technical skills once grounded in the United States are now being outsourced overseas to places such as India and China (Friedman, 2006). Jobs involving tedious, technical, rote skills are able to be given to individuals in these countries to be completed at a faster pace and at a lower price. Many students today are encouraged to attend technical or vocational schools to be trained in those very jobs that are now being done in India, China, and the former Soviet Union. With these jobs being completed elsewhere, our youth are left with those jobs that require more higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills. Friedman (2006) states that outsourcing “clears away a lot of the extraneous stuff so you can focus on what really matters” (p. 307). The bureaucratic parts of jobs are now being outsourced, leaving more time and room for those here to improve upon what we currently have. Ultimately, this requires more knowledge and skills for more of the population, and this has serious implications on how we educate our children and maintain the professional development of our teachers. We can only

understand what has been done and how to do it differently through evaluating our current programs in place.

Individuals and businesses will have to find a way to differentiate their products and services from others by adding something special to make them unique from the next. Something must be added to make the product or service stand out. This can be challenging and will require a new way of thinking. Businesses and individuals will have to be equipped with creativity and promise in order to compete. As the flat world operates, very quickly the new becomes the old and thus, the cycle of enhancing the present never stops, and those who become satisfied with the present will be the last ones to the finish line.

Outcome-based learning means that the actual work learned, produced, and applied in school needs a change. No longer can we teach the basic core subjects in elementary school the way we have been teaching them or rather the way we teach them for the test. This does not produce an outcome effective enough to compete in the global market today and in the future. This cultural shift in education results in curricular and instructional transformations through which teachers must collaborate and plan instruction with the end in mind where students and teachers are charged with producing desired outcomes. It is the interaction of curriculum and instruction through collaboration that has been lost and needs to be found again. Connecting what is intended to be learned, how it is delivered, and then how it is learned communicates clearly to students why they are learning such curriculum and how they should apply this learned knowledge. Since curriculum drives instruction, if our curriculum must change then, so too, must our delivery of instruction.

**Culture: A new way of thinking**

We have come to realize over the years that the development of a learning community of educators is itself a major cultural change that will spawn many others (Joyce & Showers, 1995, p. 3).

In the flat and globalized world, the individual is not as important as the group. To succeed in the new world, it is imperative that one be able to work collaboratively with those who may be very different from oneself (Friedman, 2006). Because of the way businesses will be able to collaborate with others, it is of urgency that those here in the United States understand that working as a team and knowing how to do so effectively will be a necessity in the field of teaching.

In order to have a proactive citizenry in this flat, globalized world, the culture of the American education system must move in the direction of more fundamental changes in which we must focus on changing our thinking and priorities from learners who pass specific tests to learners who critically think and problem-solve; from individuals being promoted through the grades to groups of students moving together; from using computers for writing term papers to using computers to write new software that will enable students to interact with the global economy in their classrooms; and from thinking the environment is one in which change takes a long time to thinking about the immediate consequences of our choices on our current environment. This way of thinking and these new priorities dictate the necessity of collaboration among educators.

In this light, the culture of the American education system must become proactive about more fundamental changes. Ultimately, if twenty years from now our students are unable to compete in a global economy, we will be responsible. We must become aware

of the challenges the students will face in their future and do our best to give them the tools with which to prepare them. According to DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005), “substantive and lasting change will ultimately require a transformation of culture – the beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for the people throughout the organization” (p. 11). Thus, in our effort to create systems’ change, we must focus on changing various ways of thinking and highlight new priorities.

### **Overview of the Literature**

Since the turn of the century, schools have been bureaucratic organizations that place more emphasis on the enforcement of rules than on the learning of teachers and students (Seyfarth & Bost, 1986). In these bureaucratic organizations, teacher autonomy and isolation from peers was accepted as normative (Cuban, 1993). Although autonomy is purported to be a function of a professional position, researchers have questioned the benefits of teacher autonomy (Pearson, 1995, 1998); the framework of teacher autonomy (Pearson, 1995, 1998); and the impact teacher autonomy has on student learning (Anderson, 1987). According to Anderson (1987), teacher autonomy is derived from the nature of the formal structure of schools which leads teachers to work in isolation within the classroom. This leads to teachers having little professional contact with other teachers or school administration. This limited contact with other school professionals often results in lower teacher commitment to the mission and goals of the school (Anderson, 1987). Cuban (1993) believes that there must be a balance achieved between autonomous and collective work with both aimed at improving student learning. Such a balance has been achieved in many schools’ structure as professional learning communities (Cuban, 1993).

In his article *How Schools Change Reforms: Redefining Reform Success and Failure*, Cuban (1998) categorized school reforms as first- or second- order changes. First-order changes are those surface changes that improve current practices through improved efficiency and more effective strategies. Second-order changes are those that attempt to alter the basic components of schools such as structures, goals, and roles. The professional learning community model represents a second-order change as reflected by the substantial and significant changes that occur in relationships, culture, roles, norms, communication patterns, and practices (Huffman, 2001).

Unfortunately, most reform efforts have been generally unsuccessful in providing the leadership, understanding, and motivation required to empower the school's staff to make significant and lasting changes (Fullan, 1995; Lindle, 1995/1996; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). Research over the past few decades suggests that the implementation of professional learning communities as an organizational strategy could make school reform more successful (Louis & Kruse, 1995; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

### **Professional Learning Community**

A professional learning community provides staff development that has as its goal high levels of learning for all students, teachers, and administrators. It is a form of professional learning that is quite different from the workshop-driven approach. This powerful form of staff development occurs in ongoing teams that meet on a regular basis, preferably several times a week, for the purposes of learning, joint lesson planning and problem solving. These teams, often called learning communities or communities of practice, operate with a commitment to

the norms of continuous improvement and experimentation and engage their members in improving their daily work to advance the achievement of school district and school goals for student learning (Greene, 2006, p. 2).

The term “professional learning community” (PLC) appeared in educational research as early as the 1960s, when researchers offered the concept as an alternative to the isolation in which most teachers worked. Over the past two decades more schools have implemented PLCs, and the concept has gained wider acceptance among educational circles. Professional learning communities are not simply teams of teachers coming together that focus on procedures, facilities, or operational issues. DuFour and DuFour (2010) state that a professional learning community consists of “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve ( p. 18).

According to the research (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Printy, 2008), schools can be transformed into collegial environments by structuring the school as a professional learning community. When collaborative time is structured into the work day, teachers have time to seek advice on teaching practices from their peers and to work with peers to develop and implement instructional innovations.

In her 1997 publication, *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*, Hord noted that there was no universal definition of a professional learning community. In an interview conducted by Dennis Sparks (2004), Andy Hargreaves stated that 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).

Often teachers view professional learning communities as a waste of time and simply go through the motions of participating in them (DuFour & Eaker, 1998); however, for professional learning communities to work effectively. Teachers must work collaboratively by planning together, analyzing data, and sharing a mission and/or vision. Newmann (1994) and Printy (2008) suggested that a learning community consists of professional staff members who take collective responsibility for a shared educational purpose and collaborate with one another in order to achieve this purpose.

Many schools operate professional learning communities incorrectly (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Schools and other learning institutions tend to think that grouping teachers by content area constitutes a professional learning community; however, it is more than that. A true professional learning community includes not only the horizontal alignment but also the vertical alignment of content areas. Everyone in the school or learning institution should become part of the professional learning community.

### **Purpose of the Study**

By properly collaborating, teachers can begin the process of critical analysis, and conversations can occur that allow for improved and exciting curriculum and instruction. Collaboration empowers teachers with the knowledge of multiple perspectives that give them a broader understanding of their content and instructional delivery methods. These new perspectives translate into better teaching and thus can impact student achievement in a positive way. Professional learning communities provide the framework and process for ongoing learning and professional growth for teachers. Most of the research

agrees that professional learning community teams have shared mission and vision as well as a commitment to collective learning and capacity building (Hord, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, 2004). Creating learning environments that improve instruction for all students is essential. The purpose of the proposed study was to examine the perceptions of professional learning communities and the impact professional learning communities have on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs.

### **Research Questions**

This study examined the following research questions:

1. What relationships exist between the dimensions of professional learning communities and teachers' self-efficacy?
2. What impact does the implementation of professional learning communities have on teachers' ontological orientation to teaching?

### **Definition of Terms**

Several constructs important to the study comprising this dissertation are defined conceptually and operationally as follows:

1. Professional Learning Community (PLCs): According to Astuto (1993), a professional learning community can be conceptualized as an organizational arrangement in which the teachers and administrators within a school continuously seek and share learning and transform their learning into action. PLCs consist of groups of educators committed to working and learning collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry into best practices and current reality; action orientation in order to achieve better results for the students they serve; a commitment to continuous improvement; and a focus on results to

gather ongoing artifacts of learning. They operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous, job-embedded learning for teachers (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006).

2. **Teacher Self-Efficacy:** Bandura (1997) referred to teachers' efficacy as the belief in one's capability to organize and execute courses of action required to produce given attainments.
3. **Collaboration:** "A systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006, p. 3).
4. **Collective inquiry:** The process of teams of teachers working together to build shared knowledge of their current practices and developing vital questions that the group will explore together (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006).

### **Locating the Researcher in the Study**

In research studies, researchers bring biases to their work whether the design of the study is qualitative or quantitative. Therefore, it is necessary for the researcher to locate him/herself in the study. At the time of this study, I was a high school Social Studies teacher and department chair in an inner-city school that had implemented the PLC framework.

I began my teaching career seven years ago at the same school where this study took place. Coming from a corporate environment where people collaborated, I found myself questioning why teachers at my school worked in such isolation. There was no

common time for us to plan or collaborate with one another – leading me to question my decision to enter the teaching profession.

During my second year of teaching, I was introduced to the concept of professional learning communities. Our School Improvement Facilitator pressed for teachers to begin collaborating within their departments. It was the first time I felt like I was part of a team.

It wasn't until my third year that PLCs actually took shape at our school. We arranged our schedule so that every Wednesday the school day ended at 1:30, leaving the teachers with two hours to collaborate in their PLCs. This was the beginning of a transformation for our school and for me as a teacher.

Prior to my departure from this school to accept a promotion, I was the department chair and was charged with running PLC meetings for the department. We implemented a new schedule, in addition to our Wednesday time slot, in which teachers from each core department (Math, Science, Social Studies, and English) had a common conference period to continue their collaboration.

During our Wednesday PLC meetings and our every-other-day conference period PLCs, discussions were centered on sharing best practices as well as analyzing student data from common assessments given periodically throughout the grading cycle. These discussions helped improve each of our crafts, thus resulting in increased student achievement as shown by the increase in standardized test scores over a period of two years. As both a teacher and department chair, I have a strong bias regarding the positive implications that a professional learning community has on teachers' self-efficacy and the impact professional learning communities have on student achievement.

## **Organization of the Study**

The study is presented using the traditional five chapter structure. The research for this study draws attention to the dimensions of a professional learning community and the impact on teacher self-efficacy. Chapter 1 provides an introductory section that describes the issue and states the research problem. Included are the purpose of the study, the key terms, and brief overview of the literature.

Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive review of the literature in respect to the early organization of schools; the learning organization; the historical and theoretical perspective of professional learning communities; the impact of professional learning communities on student learning; and the impact of professional learning communities on teacher self-efficacy.

Chapter 3 describes the research methodology and the process for data collection and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the findings of the study, while Chapter 5 addresses the findings through a discussion as well as the limitations, implications, and suggestions for future research.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter presents a review of the literature related to the major components of this study. The chapter is divided so that each section presents a review of the pertinent literature and relates it to this study.

#### **Early Organizational Structure of Schools**

Our schools are, in a sense, factories in which the raw materials (children) are to be shaped and fashioned in order to meet the various demands of life. The specifications for manufacturing come from the demands of the twentieth century civilization, and it is the business of the school to build its pupils according to the specifications laid down (Harris as quoted in Fiske, 1992, p. 32-33).

Public schools in America were originally organized according to the concepts and principles of Fredrick Taylor's late nineteenth century factory model and Henry Ford's assembly line applications. These philosophies led schools into a "doing to" method of education (Owen, 2004). The schools were based upon the principle that "one best system" could be identified to complete any task or resolve any organizational problem. Taylor's (1911) philosophy of scientific management suggested that it was management's job to identify the one best way, train workers, and then provide the supervision and monitoring needed to ensure that workers followed the prescribed model. This model demanded centralization, standardization, hierarchical top-down management, and a rigid sense of time and accountability – all based on adherence to the

prescribed system. Contrary to the belief that Americans must be adaptable to the changing world by arriving at the same goals through different means, many business leaders and politicians continue to argue that schools should assume a similar model in order to produce the kinds of workers that industry required (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

This model has led to the thinkers of the organization specifying exactly what and how to teach at each grade level. Decisions about schooling flowed from state boards of education down through the levels of the educational bureaucracy to the local school boards, superintendents, and principals. The decisions would finally reach the teachers who were viewed as mere subordinates responsible for carrying out the decisions of their superiors. Like an assembly line, this educational model simply moves students from grade to grade, prepared to function in the industrial world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Many of the factory model principles are found in today's twenty-first century schools. Schools and teachers follow the assumption that students will learn what they need to know if there is adherence to the rules. Ellwood Cubberly (1934) once wrote:

The public schools of the United States are, in a sense, a manufactory, doing a two billion dollar business each year in trying to prepare future citizens for usefulness and efficiency in life. As such we have recently been engaged in revising our manufacturing specifications and in applying to the conduct of our business some of the same principles of specialized production and manufacturing efficiency which control in other parts of the manufacturing world (p. 528).

Teachers and their opinions are still considered to be insignificant (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Above all, the factory model has led a conservative tradition in American schools. Schools continue to focus on procedures rather than results. The belief is that students will learn what they need to know if teachers adhere to the rules – teaching the prescribed curriculum, using the appropriate textbooks, maintaining correct class sizes, teaching aimed at a rigid and prescriptive curriculum, and otherwise adhering to a litany of preset schemas that are largely driven top-down with little consideration for who teachers and their students are or for what needs they have in the teaching-learning equation.

In the early nineteenth century when schools were not expected to educate large numbers of diverse students to high academic levels, the factory model served its purpose. Today, with the passing of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and high-stakes testing, the factory model is inadequate for meeting the educational goals of the United States. If educators are going to meet the new challenges of a global world, we must abandon such an outdated educational model, and we must embrace a new conceptual model for schools in which students master rigorous content, learn how to learn, pursue productive employment, and compete in a global economy (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). The need for continuous improvement within schools has pressured educational researchers to focus on developing a successful culture and for leadership to be transformed and substantially reinvented to meet the needs of all students in an ever-changing world (Sergiovanni, 2000; Fullan, 2001; DuFour, 2004).

## **Professional Learning Communities and School Reform**

We argue, however, that when schools attempt significant reform, efforts to form a school wide professional community are critical (Louis, Kruse, & Raywid, 1996, p. 13)

For many decades schools have experienced reform initiatives that have focused on the premise that the paired concepts of national goals and local, site-based autonomy offered the best hope for genuine change. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), past efforts to improve schools have not had the anticipated results for a number of reasons: the complexity of the task; misplaced focus and ineffective strategies; lack of clarity on the intended results; failure to persist; and lack of understanding of the change process.

Over the past 20 years researchers have explored the professional learning community model as an organizational framework for school reform. Fullan (1993) suggests that the way teachers are trained and the way that political decision-makers treat education results in a system that is more likely to retain the status quo than to change. If schools are to be significantly more effective, they must break from the early notion of an industrial model and embrace a new model that enables them to function as learning organizations (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The idea of learning organization was brought to the forefront in the business world by Senge's work, *The Fifth Discipline*, (1990). Senge (1990) concluded that the most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization; and as business leaders investigated the potential of the learning organization model to support organizations in a rapidly changing environment, the educational community began to forge its definition of the professional learning community.

Sergiovanni (1994) defined 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). It is through group bonding and sharing vision that schools can develop a growth and change oriented culture.

Wald and Castleberry (1999) stated that community provides the context for growth and change by becoming a:

composite of people...who are aligned around common goals, shared values, and an agreed upon way of being and doing. This alignment of ideology forms the unique identity of the community. It is from this ideological base that communities take action. (p. 12)

Newman and Wehlage (1995) concluded that if schools want to enhance their student learning, they should work on building a professional community that is characterized by a shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff.

Kruse, Louis, and Bryk's (1995) work in urban schools allowed them to begin formulating their definition of professional community. Many of the characteristics they formulated closely overlapped with those identified by Newman and Wehlage (1995). Kruse, Louis, and Bryk (1995) defined the professional community as sharing five characteristics: shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, collective focus on student learning, and collaboration. These characteristics formed the foundation for future research on professional learning communities.

During the late 1990s, researchers looking at school reform noted that teachers and other school staff were becoming more engaged in more collaboration and collegial conversations than in the past. Linda Darling-Hammond (1996) noted a significant

increase in attention to redesigning the way teachers spend their time, as well as rethinking teacher responsibilities. In addition, Darling-Hammond (1996) concluded that schools should be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers.

### **Hord's Dimensions of Professional Learning Communities**

Hord (1997) further explored the concept of learning community by identifying characteristics of schools that encourage the development of a professional learning community. Based on an extensive literature review (Kleine-Kracht, 1993; Leithwood, Leonard, & Sharratt, 1997; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Sergiovanni, 1994; Snyder, Acker-Hocevar & Snyder, 1996), she conceptualized professional learning communities as schools in which the professional staff as a whole consistently operates along five dimensions: 1) supportive and shared leadership, 2) shared values and vision, 3) collective learning and application of learning (formerly identified as collective creativity), 4) supportive conditions, and 5) shared personal practice.

*Supportive and shared leadership* is characterized by school administrators who participate democratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision making. All staff grow professionally and learn to work together to reach shared goals. This dimension is exemplified in a principal who uses a facilitative and collegial leadership style. They seek teacher input, engage them in decision-making, and provide them with leadership opportunities.

The second dimension is *shared values and vision*. A fundamental characteristic of the professional learning community's vision is its unwavering focus on student learning. The values are embedded in the day-to-day actions of the school staff – which

in turn create the norms of a self-aware, self-critical, and increasingly effective professional organization, utilizing the commitment of its members to seek ongoing renewal and improvement (Sirotnik, 1999; Little, 1997). In *The Fifth Discipline* Peter Senge (1990) defined shared vision as:

...not an idea. It is rather, a force in people's hearts, a force of impressive power. It may be inspired by an idea, but once it goes further – if it is compelling enough to acquire the support of more than one person – then it is no longer an abstraction. It is palpable. People begin to see it as if it exists. Few, if any, forces in human affairs are as powerful as shared vision (p. 206).

Hord (1997) suggests that *collective learning and application of learning* is the third dimension of a professional learning community. Professional learning communities engage school staff at all levels in processes that collectively seek new knowledge and ways of applying that knowledge to their work. Such schools move beyond discussions of revising the schedule or establishing new governance procedures to focus on areas that can contribute to significant school improvement – curriculum, instruction, assessment, and the school's culture. Success is evidenced through professional staff's focus on learning based on reflective dialogues and joint inquiry rather than teaching. Talbert and McLaughlin (2002) found that teachers who do not team up regularly with colleagues are reticent about sharing their experiences and resources with their peers.

*Supportive conditions*, Hord's (1997) fourth dimension, suggests that structures that support the vision of a school and learning community are vital to the effectiveness

and innovation of teaching at the classroom level. Creating supportive structures has been described as “the single most important factor” for successful school improvement and “the first order of business” for those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their school (Eastwood & Louis, 1992, p.215).

Hord’s (1997) last dimension is *shared personal practice*. Elmore (2000) stated that ‘schools and school systems that are improving directly and explicitly confront the issue of isolation’ by creating multiple avenues of interaction among educators and promoting inquiry-oriented practices while working toward high standards of student performance (p. 32). Teacher interaction within a formalized structure for collegial coaching provides the means for confronting the issue of isolation in professional learning communities. Darling-Hammond (1998) cites research reporting that teachers who spend more time collectively studying teaching practices are more effective overall at developing high-order thinking skills and meeting the needs of diverse learners. Teachers engaged in successful learning communities have indicated shared practice “sustains their personal commitment and effort...they also see that collaborating with colleagues on classroom practice translates into academic success of their students” (Talbert & McLaughlin, 2002, p. 338). In order to share personal practices, we must first complete a paradigm shift from traditional roles in education.

Schools today should prepare all students to think creatively and critically, should prepare them for life-long learning, and prepare them for life in an information-based, knowledge-work society. Previous periods in U.S. history believed that all students were not expected to attend and receive a rigorous education (Schlechty, 1990), a much different perspective from today. Current reform movements like “All students can

learn,” asks schools to “make challenging learning available to a much broader segment of students than they have in the past (Elmore, 2004, p. 13).

In order to achieve this, schools must search for methods which will improve learning for all students and implies that reform-based change must impact the teacher and student in the classroom to make a difference in achievement. Professional learning communities, as an organizational structure, can influence the required change in American schools.

It should be noted here that professional learning communities are not meant to be an improvement program or plan. Instead, professional learning communities are an infrastructure that provides a context for collegiality, which supports both teachers and administrators in improving their practice through learning new curriculum and instructional strategies and the methods for interacting meaningfully with each child.

Literature related to professional learning communities often times refers to them as a framework for schools to employ. This framework allows schools to continuously improve by building teacher capacity for learning and change – a systems change. Hord’s (1997) research concludes that “as an organizational arrangement, the PLC is seen as a powerful staff development approach and a potent strategy for school change and improvement.”

### **The Learning Organization: Basis of the Professional Learning Community Model**

Throughout the 1900s, the factory model was the primary operating structure of most American schools. The belief was that one system fit all. DuFour and his colleagues (2002), noted that the twenty-first century concept of the learning organization is a model that will improve the effectiveness of organizations and the people within

them. According to Kofman and Senge (1995), learning organizations are those which are capable of thriving in a world of interdependence and change, and require a “Galilean” mind shift in how we think and interact as members of the organization. The need is for a shift from a primacy of pieces to a primacy of the whole, from self to community, and from problem solving to creating. Kofman and Senge (1995) suggest that it is imperative for people to recognize those things that they do not know and also recognize those things which they do know.

In 2002, Silins, Mulford, and Zarins suggested that schools that function as learning organizations employ processes of environmental scanning, develop shared goals, establish collaborative teaching and learning environments, encourage initiative and risk taking, regularly review all aspects related to and influencing the work of the school, recognize and reinforce hard work, and provide opportunities for continuing professional development. Newmann and Wehlage (1995) found that “if schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff” (p. 37). Research and evidence suggests that higher performing schools are functioning as learning organizations (Fullan, 1995; Leithwood, et al., 1998, Printy & Marks, 2006). The belief is that schools that actively engage in organizational learning enable staff at all levels to learn collaboratively and continuously put that knowledge to use in response to school needs. This type of activity exists within schools that operate as professional learning communities.

Louis and Marks (1998) found that when a school is organized into a professional community, the following changes occur:

1. Teachers set higher expectations for student achievement.
2. Students can count on the help of their teachers and peers in achieving ambitious learning goals.
3. The quality of classroom pedagogy is considerably higher.
4. Achievement levels are significantly higher.

Darling-Hammond (1996) recommended that schools should be restructured to become genuine learning organizations for both students and teachers: organizations that respect learning, honor teaching, and teach for understanding (p. 198). If we are to compete in a global world, we must implement learning organizations. Senge (1990) stated that “the most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization” (p. 4).

According to Covey, Merrill, and Merrill (1996), “only the organizations that have a passion for learning will have an enduring influence” (p. 149). This research shows that many esteemed experts and respected professional organizations in education endorse and advocate the development of learning communities, thus it is imperative that we change our current structure of schooling to that of a learning community.

### **Learning Communities**

It is important to begin by looking at what the “community” in the term professional learning community represents and how it is expected to function as an organizational framework within a school. Some schools view it as extending the classroom into the community, through the utilization of community resources. Others see it as bringing community resources into the school. Astuto (1993) defines a “professional community of learners” as a place in which the teachers and administrators continuously seek and share learning and act on that learning. Astuto’s work describing a

“professional community of learners” has provided the foundation for defining a professional learning community for the purpose of this study.

The term “community” suggests that a group of individuals is joined by a common interest where an emphasis on the relationships, shared ideals, and strong culture exist. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998) all of these factors are critical to school improvement. Such communities are sustained by a commitment to share the journey of exploration with others (Ryan, 1995).

In *Building Community in Schools*, Sergiovanni (1994) describes community as a place where there exists community of kinship, of place, of mind, and of memory. He proposed that schools as communities must be characterized by a “bonding together of people in special ways and the binding of them to shared values and ideas” (p. 4). By becoming a community, school members share a common understanding of what is important to each other, their students, and parents.

As the concept of learning organization became more prevalent in education journals, it became known as learning communities (Hord, 1997) or professional learning communities (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). In 1998, DuFour and Eaker conveyed strong support for establishing professional learning communities as an organizational framework of schools and suggested that the most promising strategy for sustained, substantive school improvement is developing the ability of school faculty to function as a professional learning community. This belief was reiterated by Senge, who suggested that the learning community organization is comprised of people who see themselves as connected to each other and the world, where creative thinking is nurtured and “where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p.3).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) described the school community in relation to learning organization and defined the nature of the professional learning community by examining each part:

Each word of the phrase “professional learning community” has been chosen purposefully. A “professional” is someone with expertise in a specialized field, an individual who has not only pursued advanced training to enter the field, but who is also expected to remain current in its evolving knowledge base... “Learning” suggests ongoing action and perpetual curiosity... “community” suggests group linked by common interest...In a professional learning community all of these characteristics are evident. Educators create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone (pp. xi-xii).

Stoll and Seashore Louis (2007) elaborate on the significance of the evolution of the term professional learning community:

During the 1990s much of the emphasis was on ‘professional community’. It is not insignificant that the word ‘learning’ now appears between ‘professional’ and ‘communities’, because it connotes a shift in emphasis away from a focus on process towards the objective of improvement (p. 2).

In a professional learning community, educators create an environment that fosters collaboration, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone. According to Mike Schmoker (2004), the capacity

of educators to function as members of professional learning communities is the “best known means by which we might achieve truly historic, wide-scale improvements in teaching and learning” (p. 432).

### **Professional Learning Communities: Historical and Theoretical Perspective**

Learning communities intentionally build webs of relationships around the collective work of the participants. These relationships and supportive conditions help people build trust and openly talk about what they know and what they need to know and create a foundation for inquiry into new ideas, new ways of thinking and being in their world (Lieberman, 2007, p. 201).

The term professional learning communities (PLCs) emerged from organizational theory and human relations literature. Professional learning communities are linked to Senge’s (1990) description of a learning organization in which “people continually expand their capacity to create desired results, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free...” (p.3). Modified to fit the world of education, the concept of a learning organization became that of a learning community that would strive to develop collaborative work cultures for teachers (Thompson, Gregg, & Niska, 2004).

The spotlight became focused on the idea of engaging teachers in teams that create and develop a shared vision that would guide their work, function as collaborative groups in order to improve their teaching and evaluate the effectiveness of their instruction.

This concept of teacher teams took on many forms across the country. Astuto and her colleagues (1993) labeled the process of *professional communities of learners*, “in

which teachers in a school and its administrators seek and share learning and then act on what they learn” (p.1).

From 1990 to 1995, research conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995) investigated the most effective way to restructure schools in order to boost student achievement. The organization studied data from 1,500 elementary, middle, and high schools throughout the United States over a five year period. In their report, the researchers found that professional communities could improve student learning and that “the level of professional community in a school had significant effects on student achievement whether achievement was measured as authentic performance or tested in more conventional ways” (p. 32). To foster improved student outcomes, the study identified four integrated qualities: 1) a vision of high quality, authentic, intellectual and rigorous learning, 2) authentic pedagogy providing high-quality student learning, 3) organizational capacity where teachers worked well together, and 4) essential political, financial, and technical support (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995). They concluded that:

The main implication from these finding is that if schools want to enhance organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity and collective responsibility among students and staff (p. 37).

During a three-year longitudinal study examining urban schools considered to be at risk of low-performance, Louis, Kruse and Bryk (1995) focused on investigating schools that were restructuring and determining whether or not these schools could become learning

organizations. Using “emerging framework” (Louis et al., 1995, p. 25), the five characteristics of the school-based professional community included shared norms and values, reflective dialogue, deprivatization of practice, focus on student learning, and collaboration.

Shared norms and values, as defined by Louis, Kruse and Bryk (1995) were identified as the “core of shared beliefs about institutional purposes, practices, and desired behavior” (p. 29) that formed the foundation for developing all other aspects of the professional learning community.

The second dimension, reflective dialogue, initiates conversations between all members of the school community. This dialogue becomes the “bridge between educational values and improved practice in schools” (Louis et al., 1995, p. 30).

Deprivatization of practice:

allows teachers to be analytical in their planning and thinking and to use observation from others about student effort and achievement that cannot be obtained while in the act of teaching...teachers grow in their teaching practice by developing skills for describing, analyzing, and executing the instructional act (Louis et al., 1995, p. 31).

The fourth dimension, collective focus on student learning, holds the expectation that all students are capable of learning and that the learning environment will be “responsive to and supportive of student achievement” (Louis et al., 1995, p. 32).

The fifth dimension of the professional learning community framework, collaboration, is described by a relationship that fosters “mutual learning and discussion of classroom practice and student performance” (Louis et al., 1995, p. 33). This

collaboration is “critical for the development of school-wide professional communities” (p. 33).

The findings from Louis, Kruse, and Bryk (1995) paralleled Newmann and Wehlage (1995) in that the studies showed common characteristics that began defining professional community. These early characterizations of shared norms and values focused on learning, collaboration, reflective dialogue, and empowered teachers helped conceptualize professional communities.

Hord’s (1997) publication *Professional Learning Communities: Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement*, is based on the work of several researchers which led to the operationalization of the professional learning community concept. According to Hord (1997) there was no universal definition of a professional learning community; however, she found that certain practices were essential to the development of professional learning communities:

- The collegial and facilitative participation of the principal who shares leadership, power and authority through inviting staff input in decision making;
- A shared vision that is developed from an unswerving commitment to students’ learning and that is consistently articulated and referenced for the staff’s work;
- Collective learning among staff and application of the learning to solutions that address students’ needs;
- The visitation and review of each teacher’s classroom behavior by peers as a feedback and assistance activity to support individual and community improvement;
- Physical conditions and human capacities that support an operation (p. 24).

In an interview with Sparks (1999), Lieberman described professional learning communities as “places in which teachers pursue clear, shared purposes for student learning, engage in collaborative activities to achieve their purposes, and take collective responsibility for students learning” (p.53). In an interview with Sparks (2004) six-years later, Hargreaves stated that 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).

### **DuFour and Eaker’s Dimensions of Professional Learning Communities**

At the same time Hord and her colleagues were creating PLCs using the new conceptual model, DuFour and Eaker (1998) published *Professional Learning Communities at Work: Best Practices for Enhancing Student Achievement*. The book described a “new model” (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 19) of organizational structure for public schools. This “new model” emerged from research and the experiences of DuFour as superintendent of Adlai Stevenson High School District 125 in Lincolnshire, Illinois. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998) there are six characteristics of the professional learning community:

1. Shared mission, vision, and values.
2. Collective inquiry.
3. Collaborative teams.
4. Action orientation and experimentation.
5. Continuous improvement.
6. Results oriented.

*Shared mission, vision and values* suggests that there is a collective commitment by the entire staff to the guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create. Furthermore, these guiding principles are not just articulated by those in positions of leadership; even more important, they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school. Second is *collective inquiry*. This is the engine of improvement, growth, and renewal. Members within the professional learning community are encouraged to question the status quo, to seek new methods, test those methods, and then reflect on the results. Ross, Smith, and Roberts (1994) refer to the collective inquiry process as “the team learning wheel” and identify four steps in that process: a) public reflection, b) shared meaning, c) joint planning, and d) coordinated action. This process enables team members to benefit from what Senge et al. (1994) have called “the deep learning cycle...the essence of the learning organization” (p. 18).

Third is the basic structure of the professional learning community: *collaborative teams*. Professional learning communities are comprised of a group of collaborative teams that share a common purpose. Through these collaborative teams, schools are able to build their capacity to learn as a collaborative rather than as an individual task. DuFour and Eaker (1998) point out that team learning is not the same as team building. Team building focuses on creating courteous protocols, improving communication, building stronger relationships, or enhancing the group’s ability to perform routine tasks together. Team learning focuses on organizational renewal and a willingness to work together in continuous improvement processes.

The fourth characteristic of PLCs identified by DuFour and Eaker (1998) is *action orientation and experimentation*. Organizations that are focused on action orientation and experimentation recognize that learning always occurs in the context of taking action, and they believe engagement and experience are the most effective teachers. *Continuous improvement* characterizes the heart of a professional learning community. There is a persistent discomfort with the status quo and a constant search for a better way. Continuous improvement requires that each member consider key questions such as: a) what is our fundamental purpose?, b) what do we hope to achieve?, c) what are our strategies for becoming better?, and d) what criteria will we use to assess our improvement efforts? (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 28).

Finally, all professional learning communities are *results oriented*. In order for a professional learning community to develop shared mission, vision, and values; engage in collective inquiry; build collaborative teams, take action; and focus on continuous improvement, they must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions. Peter Senge (1996) notes that “the rationale for any strategy for building a learning organization revolves around the premise that such organizations will produce dramatically improved results” (p. 44).

In *Learning by Doing* (2006), DuFour, Eaker, DuFour, and Many defined professional learning communities as “educators are committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research in order to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 217). Often teachers view professional learning communities as a waste of time and simply go through the motions of a professional learning community; however for professional learning communities to

truly work effectively teachers must work collaboratively by planning together, analyzing data, and sharing a mission and/or vision.

Haberman (2004) argues that learning outcomes should be the primary criteria for teachers and schools to measure their success. This criterion requires a shift from teacher-centered to student-centered practices. He identifies key characteristics of successful learning communities that must exist:

- *Modeling* – in guiding student learning and development, teachers apply the same principles that guided their own learning and development.
- *Continual sharing of ideas* – teachers share ideas daily regarding vital issues of equity, instruction, curriculum, testing, school organization, and the value of specific kinds of knowledge.
- *Collaboration* – teachers become involved in team teaching and other collaborative efforts in program development, writing, and research.
- *Egalitarianism* – teachers dispense with formalities. Any member of the team would take an interest can vote in department meetings, especially students. The quality of ideas is more important than their source.
- *High productivity* – teachers continually increase their workloads. They continually pressure themselves to create new programs, develop new courses, publish books and articles, and produce more research.
- *Community* – faculty members value community more than promotion. Finding more stimulating learning communities drives them.

- *Practical applications* – teachers ask themselves, “How does what we are doing help students, teachers, and schools? What did we do this week to help?”

(Haberman, 2004, p. 53).

Themes continue to emerge in the development of the various models for professional community (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Louis and Kruse, 1995) and professional learning community (Hord, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998) as each dimension was defined. Shared values and vision, and collaborative, collective, and reflective learning focused on improving results in the form of student learning became more evident as characteristics defining school culture supporting the professional learning community model.

Schools and other learning institutions tend to think that grouping teachers by content area constitutes a professional learning community; however it is more than that. A true professional learning community includes not only the horizontal alignment but also the vertical alignment of content areas. Everyone in the school or learning institution should become part of the professional learning community.

### **Benefits of Professional Learning Communities**

The literature supports the notion that professional learning communities produce positive outcomes for both staff and students. Hord (1997) proposed that schools that have an organizational framework that supports professional learning communities reduced teacher isolation. As stated previously, professional learning communities are not an improvement program or plan, but instead a structure for schools to continuously improve by building staff capacity for learning and change. The evidence suggests that schools in which teachers act in collaborative settings to deeply examine teaching and

learning, and then discuss effective instructional practices, show academic results for students improve more quickly than schools that do not.

The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools reported its results from four longitudinal case-studies, including survey data and student test data. The results indicated that comprehensive redesign of schools, including decentralization, shared decision-making, schools within schools, teacher teaming, and/or professional communities of staff, can improve student learning (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Some researchers are trying to reconcile the conflicts between the artisan model of teaching and the call for a collaborative teacher community. Michael Huberman (1993) took a devil's advocate position on professional learning communities. In his work, Huberman argued against the notion that collaboration with school colleagues benefits teachers' instructional practice and careers. From his extensive research on individual teachers over the course of their careers, Huberman argued that teachers seek conditions of isolation after tenure, and that school community and collaboration are unlikely to lead to lasting instructional changes (1993).

Talbert and McLaughlin (2002) suggest otherwise. They found that "teachers who work in isolation from their colleagues and lack other instructional supports are more likely to give up on their non-traditional students (p. 331). In addition, they found that teachers who collaborate on instruction are more likely to hold high expectations for students and for their colleagues, to innovate in their classrooms, and to have strong commitments to the teaching profession. They also found, in an examination of various professional community models within high schools, that teachers thrived in the collaborative teacher communities where teachers shared knowledge, critiqued each

other's work, invented and evaluated new practices, and together crafted a shared repertoire of practice.

This notion demonstrates that we as educators do not always take the time to reflect on our professional practice. We need to take time to develop the skills of collective inquiry and action research in our educators in order for them to reflect on their professional practice.

The standards that have guided the operation of schools since the late nineteenth century were based on the factory model. That model is no longer valid in a post-industrial, knowledge-based society. It is necessary for schools and educators to adopt the new model in which schools are required to function as professional learning communities.

### **Professional Learning Communities and Student Achievement**

In a climate where the demands of accountability are increasing, the viability of professional learning communities will be determined by their success in enhancing student achievement. Hord (1997) suggests that there are a number of student outcomes derived from the influence of professional learning communities. These outcomes include a decreased dropout rate; lower rates of absenteeism; increased learning that is distributed more equitably in the smaller high schools; larger academic gains in math, science, history, and reading than in traditional schools; and smaller achievement gaps between students from different backgrounds.

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) identified three factors leading to improved student outcomes: 1) student learning; 2) authentic pedagogy; and 3) organizational capacity. The first factor, *student learning*, includes teachers agreeing on a vision of

authentic and high quality intellectual work for students to pursue. *Authentic pedagogy* leads to high quality student learning. Regardless of students' social background, race, gender, economic status, etc., authentic pedagogy surpasses these boundaries. Finally, the third factor is *organizational capacity*. In order for teachers to provide high intellectual learning, the capacity of the staff to work well as a unit must be developed. Schools that function as a professional learning community are those that help teachers help one another; therefore reducing the feeling of isolation. Teachers in these types of schools take collective responsibility for student learning by following the characteristics mentioned early in this chapter.

In an attempt to make connections between professional learning communities and their impact on student achievement, six studies were located for inclusion in this paper. All six studies (Supovitz, 2002; Phillips, 2003; Strahan, 2003; Supovitz & Christman, 2003; Hollins et al., 2004; Berry et al., 2005) that examined the relationship between professional learning communities and student achievement found that student learning improved.

The studies conducted by Supovitz (2002) and Supovitz and Christman (2003) showed the value of professional learning communities and their impact on student achievement. In the studies, results of student achievement gains varied with the specific focus of the efforts of teams or small communities of teachers. The studies, completed in Cincinnati and Philadelphia suggested that, "there was evidence to suggest that those communities that did engage in structure, sustained, and supported instructional discussions and that investigated the relationships between instructional practices and student work produce significant gains in student learning" (p. 5). As for those sites

where teachers worked together but did not engage in structured work that was highly focused around student learning, similar gains were not evident.

Phillips (2003) completed a case study documenting the efforts of a middle school faculty engaged in learning communities targeting low and underachieving students. He found that achievement scores increased dramatically over a three-year period – sending the school from an acceptable state rating in 1999-2000 with 50% of the students passing subject area tests to exemplary in 2001-2002 with over 90% of the students passing each subject area test.

In Strahan's (2003) study of three low-performing elementary schools, results showed dramatic improvement over a three-year period. In each school, student test scores on state exams rose from 50% proficiency to more than 75%. Studies by Hollins, McIntyre, DeBose, Hollins, and Towner (2004) also documented improvement in achievement. Focusing on African American students, the target schools showed that these students increased their achievement significantly more than comparable students in the district.

Berry, Johnson, and Montgomery (2005) documented the progress of a rural elementary school over a four-year period. Results of grade level testing showed that students improved from struggling – with slightly more than 50% performing at or above grade level – to rapidly improving with more than 80% of students meeting grade level standards. While few in number, the collective results of studies focusing on student achievement and professional learning communities offer an unequivocal answer to the question about whether the literature supports the assumption that student learning increased when teachers participate in professional learning communities.

## Teacher Efficacy

When reviewing the literature on teacher efficacy, one of the major problems is the lack of a consistent definition of the construct of teacher efficacy (Hipp, 1997). Most of the research in the area of teacher efficacy comes from the work of Albert Bandura, whose work on self-efficacy has been forerunning in psychology. Efficacy is dealing with one's environment; it is not a fixed act or simply a matter of knowing what to do. Efficacy involves a generative capability in which component cognitive, social, and behavioral skills must be organized into integrated courses of action to serve numerous purposes (Bandura, 1982).

Bandura (1986) defined *self-efficacy* as people's judgments of their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance; their judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, and Hoy (1998) define teacher efficacy as "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context" (p. 233). Guskey and Passaro (1994) defined teacher efficacy as "teachers' belief or conviction that they can influence how well students learn, even those who may be considered difficult or unmotivated" (p. 628). Pajares and Schunk (2001) further described the behaviors that people exhibit known as self-efficacy. According to the authors, this belief in personal competence impacts a person's effort and resilience, as well as influences the degree of success an individual ultimately realizes.

Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory contends that people are more likely to perform tasks they believe they are capable of accomplishing and are less likely to

engage in tasks in which they feel less competent. Their beliefs about their competencies in a given area affect the choices they make, the effort they put forth, their persistence at certain tasks, and their resiliency in the face of failure. Social cognitive theory is grounded on the assumption that humans actively shape their lives, instead of being passive creatures upon whom environmental factors act (Bandura, 1986, 1997). Henson (2001) stated that “we are products of our interplay between the external, the internal, and our current and past behavior” (p. 3).

Bandura’s (1986, 1997) model of self-efficacy describes four sources of efficacy:

- Mastery experiences – teachers’ self-efficacy grows through personal successes;
- Vicarious experiences – observing others succeed who are similar to oneself, through sustained efforts, provides teachers with a social model and raises their beliefs that they possess the capabilities to master comparable activities as well;
- Social persuasion – coaching and persuasion can lead to greater effort and sustainability. Flourishing efficacy builders structure opportunities for teachers to be successful; and
- Reduced stress reactions and negative emotions.

Through cognitive processing, these four sources lead educators to an analysis of their teaching performance and to an assessment of their personal teaching competence.

“Although all four sources of information play roles in the creation of efficacy beliefs, it is the interpretation of this information that is critical” (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 230).

School-level variables, such as school climate, principal behavior, sense of school community, and decision-making structures within the school relate to a teacher's sense of efficacy. Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, and Hoy (1998) suggested that a teacher's efficacy beliefs can be weakened by professional isolation, alienation, and uncertainty; while efficacy beliefs can be increased with greater opportunity for collaboration with other adults and with increased observations made as to enhance the amount of feedback.

Collaborating to improve instructional effectiveness, such as that in professional learning community environments, can have a positive impact on teachers' sense of efficacy. According to Guskey (1998), there is a significant relationship between high teacher efficacy and teachers' positive attitudes toward the implementation of instructional innovations.

A number of studies have observed school-level factors or organizational variables that impact teachers' sense of efficacy. These studies (Newman, Rutter, & Smith, 1989; Goddard & Goddard, 2000) found that a teacher's sense of efficacy is related to such organizational factors as principal's leadership, the social organization of the school, and the organizational health of the school. Therefore, the implementation of professional learning communities can impact teachers' sense of efficacy.

### **Summary**

Professional learning communities are a critical element in restructuring schools, as presented in the literature examined in this chapter. While PLCs are not necessarily a reform plan, they do represent a model for continuous school improvement and higher-levels of student achievement. The literature supports the notion that schools that are

engaged in professional learning communities show greater gains in student achievement than those that are not. In addition, the implementation of professional learning communities has a positive effect on teachers' self-efficacy. The following chapter describes the methodology used in completing this study.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Overview

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in the study. The purpose of this mixed-methods investigation was to examine the impact of professional learning communities on teachers' ontological orientation to teaching and to explore the relationships exists between the dimensions of professional learning communities and teachers' efficacy. The study utilized a survey method design (quantitative) coupled with phenomenological research (qualitative).

#### Site Description

The location of the study was an urban high school in a major metropolitan area, which will be referred to as Barton High School to retain some degree of anonymity. Based on the 2009-2010 Texas Education Agency (2010) Academic Excellence Indicator System, Barton High School had a student body of 2096. Table 1 shows the grade-level breakdown of Barton High:

Table 1: Grade-level Distribution of Barton High School

Grade-level	Number of Students
9th	677
10th	586
11th	469
12th	364

Barton High School's student body is very diverse (Table 2) and serves economically disadvantaged, ESL, and At-Risk students (Table 3).

Table 2: Barton High School Ethnic Distribution

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>
African American	44%
Hispanic	46.9%
White	3.4%
Native American	.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	5.4%

Table 3: Barton High School Demographics by Program

<i>Program</i>	<i>Number of Students</i>
Economically Disadvantaged	70.7%
English as Second Language/LEP	13.8%
At-Risk	75%

Barton High School has 133 teachers, with years of experience ranging from beginning to over twenty years (Table 4).

Table 4: Teachers - Years of Experience

<i>Number of Years</i>	<i>Percent of Teachers</i>
Beginning	10.5%
1-5	28.1%
6-10	14.2%
11-20	23.6%
Over 20	23.6%

Barton High School received an Academically Acceptable rating from the Texas Education Agency in 2010 (Texas Education Agency, 2010). Academically Acceptable refers to campus ratings assigned by the 2010 state accountability system. Campuses are evaluated on performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), completion rate, and annual dropout rate (Texas Education Agency, 2010). In addition, Barton High School met Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) from the U.S. Department of Education. Adequate Yearly Progress is based on acceptable passing rates on the 10<sup>th</sup>

grade English and Math TAKS as well as attendance and graduation rates (Texas Education Agency, 2010)

Barton High School implemented Professional Learning Communities six years ago in an effort to improve the instruction. Each department is its own PLC, despite the fact that this structure violates the manner in which PLCs should be implemented.

According to Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002), “schools that function as professional learning communities are always characterized by a collaborative culture” (p. 5). They go on to say that “all members of the staff are assigned to one or more teams that are called upon to work interdependently to achieve one or more goals” (p. 5). At Barton High School, the teams do not work interdependently but rather independently from one another. Interdisciplinary alignment and the sharing of strategies across multiple subjects do not occur. The department chair oversees the weekly meetings of their department, which are held on Wednesday afternoons. During the PLC meetings, teachers meet to discuss instructional strategies, analyze test data, and engage in professional development.

### **Quantitative Measures**

The quantitative aspect of this study utilized a survey design. Creswell (2009) describes a survey design as one that “provides a quantitative or numeric description of trends, attitudes, or opinions of a population by studying a sample of that population” (p. 145). Using a survey allows the researcher to make generalizations about a sample of a population and to make general inferences about the sampled population’s behaviors, attitudes, or characteristics (Fink, 2002).

### *Sampling Procedures*

The sample design in this study was a non-probability strategy as defined by Creswell (2002). Specifically, convenience sampling was employed because participants were selected at the convenience of the researcher. I made no attempt to insure that this sample was an accurate representation of some larger group or population. From the school site, all certified classroom teachers were invited to participate in this study. Participation in this effort was completely anonymous and voluntary. No external rewards or offers were given, and a consent form was provided to all invited participants. To protect the identities of the participants the surveys did not ask for a name; however the surveys were assigned a number which were cross-referenced with the participant name in an Excel spreadsheet. This step was necessary for identifying participants who agreed to participate in the interview aspect of the study. Due to recent budget cuts in education, only 75 out of 133 teachers volunteered to participate in the research study. To reduce bias, 14 teachers in the social studies department in which the researcher was department chair were not included in the sample selection process.

### *Instrumentation*

Based on her research, Hord (1997, 2004) developed a framework that has been successfully used to examine staffs' efforts to create professional learning communities in schools. Following the five essential characteristics of professional learning communities, Hord created the School Professional Staff as a Learning Community Questionnaire (Hord, 1996). Although the characteristics are presented as distinct constructs (dimensions), they have been found to be developmentally overlapping and intertwined (Hord, 2000; Morrissey, 2000; Hipp & Huffman, 2002).

Two survey instruments were used in the study. The Schools as Professional Staff Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSLCQ) (Hord, 1997) was used under

license from the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory to assess teacher's perception of their school as a learning community. The second survey instrument was the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) which was used to help the researcher gain a better understanding of the efficacy teachers have when it comes to student engagement, instructional strategies, and classroom management.

All certified staff ( $N=133$ ) of the participating school were asked to complete the SPSLCQ and TSES. The survey instruments required about twenty minutes to complete. The SPSLCQ assesses the extent to which teachers believe their school is a positive learning environment and a supportive learning community. The SPSLCQ consists of five conceptual, not empirical, dimensions:

- shared leadership
- shared visions
- collective creativity
- peer review
- supportive conditions/capacities.

Each dimension contains items with individual Likert-type response scales of 5 (high) to 1 (low). The response scales on the SPSLCQ have anchor statements at both end-points and at the mid-point to differentiate the high, middle, and low points on the scale. The higher the total score the more aligned the school is with the principles of a PLC.

According to Meehan, Orletsky, and Sattes (1997), results of the field reliability and validity tests were satisfactorily met, indicating that the SPSLCQ was a useful gauge of staffs' perception of their school as a learning community. The field test, conducted

by the Appalachian Educational Laboratory (now known as Edvantia), included 690 teachers representing 21 schools. Satisfactory Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficients were found at both the full group (+.94) and the individual school levels (ranged from a low of +.62 to a high of +.95).

It was further determined that the instrument actually measures one overall construct rather than five distinct ones. Therefore, the individual items were combined into one total scale, and as a result, the total scale score is indicative of the extent to which teachers believe their school is a positive learning environment and is supportive as a learning community.

In addition to the SPSLCQ survey, each of the participants was given the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES), which was previously called the Ohio State Teacher Efficacy Scale (OSTES) (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) to measure teacher self-efficacy. The TSES was developed at The Ohio State University based on Bandura's Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale. The TSES instructs participants to rate (on a scale from 1 to 9, with anchors at 1 – nothing, 3 – very little, 5 – some influence, 7 – quite a bit, and 9 – a great deal) their personal efficacy or the extent to which he or she can demonstrate the capabilities in regards to three key areas: classroom management, instructional practices, and student engagement. The survey includes 24-item scale, as well as a 12-item short form. For this study, the 12-item short form was used. According to Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001), this teacher self-efficacy scale is considered better than previous measures of teacher efficacy given that it has a “unified and stable factor structure and assesses a broad range of capabilities that teachers consider important to good teaching without being so specific as to render it useless for comparisons of teachers across contexts, levels and subjects” (pp. 801-802).

A field test of the TSES was conducted to determine reliability and validity. The field test sample consisted of 410 participants from three universities (Ohio State, William and Mary, and Cincinnati). Participants included 103 pre-service teachers, 255 in-service teachers, and 38 respondents who failed to indicate their teaching experience. The field tests of the instrument consistently found three moderately correlated factors: efficacy in student engagement, efficacy in instructional practices, and efficacy in classroom management. (Table 5)

Table 5: Means for TSES subscales and total score

	Mean	SD	alpha
<b>TSES</b>	7.1	.94	.94
<b><i>Engagement</i></b>	7.3	1.1	.87
<b><i>Instruction</i></b>	7.3	1.1	.91
<b><i>Management</i></b>	6.7	1.1	.90

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

For the purpose of this study, participants were asked to complete two paper surveys - the SPSLCQ and TSES during their weekly PLC meeting. Directions were provided by the researcher on the procedure for completing the survey. Upon completion of the directions, I left the room and the department chair agreed to collect the completed surveys and place them in a secure envelope. The envelopes were returned to me within a day.

#### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Data collected from the SPSLCQ and TSES were analyzed using IBM's Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) to ascertain the correlation between the

dimensions of professional learning community and the constructs of teacher self-efficacy.

### **Qualitative Measures**

In addition to the survey instruments, phenomenological research methods were utilized to describe the meaning of six individuals and their lived experiences.

Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. The purpose of using phenomenological research methods is to explore a singular phenomenon: teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and the relationship to the dimensions of Professional Learning Communities.

Two approaches to phenomenology include hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1990) and empirical, transcendental, or psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (1990) is an educator who has written an instructive book on hermeneutical phenomenology in which he describes research as oriented toward lived experiences (phenomenology) and interpreting the "texts" of life (hermeneutics) (van Manen, 1990). Meanwhile, Moustakas's (1994) transcendental or psychological phenomenology is focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of participants. Given that the orientation of this study was on discerning the impact of professional learning communities on teachers' ontological orientation to teaching, Moustakas's psychological phenomenology was employed.

Researchers have concluded that teachers' self-efficacy is directly linked to student performance and achievement in the classroom (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Ashton & Webb, 1986; Tschannen-Moran, 1998); however, research on

the influence of PLCs, as an organizational framework for schools, on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs is limited and increases the need for research like that in this study.

### *Sampling Procedures*

Participants for the qualitative aspect of this study were selected using purposive sampling, considered by Welman and Kruger (1999) as the most important kind of non-probability sampling, to identify the primary participants. Participants were selected based on my judgment and the purpose of the research (Babbie, 1995; Greig & Taylor, 1999; Schwandt, 1997), looking for those who “have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched” (Kruger, 1988, p. 150).

### *Data Collection Procedures*

The purpose of the interviews was to collect data from the participants who have experienced being a part of professional learning communities and then develop a composite description of the essence of the experience for all individuals. This description consists of the noema and the noesis. Husserl (1931) introduced the concepts of noema and noesis. Moustakas (1994) offers the following:

The noesis refers to the act of perceiving, feeling, thinking, remembering, or judging – all of which are embedded with meaning that are concealed and hidden from consciousness. The meanings must be recognized and drawn out...The noema corresponds at all points to the noesis. Wherever a noesis exists it is always directly related to a noema. The noema, in perception, is its perceptual meaning or the perceived as such (p. 69).

Ihde (1977) offers this distinction: noema is *that* which is experienced, the *what* of experience, the object-correlate while noesis is the way in which the what is experienced, the subject-correlate (p. 43).

For the purpose of this study, participants were asked two broad, general questions (Moustakas, 1994): What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? Other open-ended questions were asked; however, these two focused attention on gathering data that will lead to a textural description and structural description of the experiences, and they ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants.

#### *Explication of the data*

The heading ‘data analysis’ is deliberately avoided here because Hycner (1999) cautions that ‘analysis’ has dangerous connotations for phenomenology. The “term [analysis] usually means a ‘breaking into parts’ and therefore often means a loss of the whole phenomenon...[whereas ‘explication’ implies an]...investigation of the constituents of a phenomenon while keeping the context of the whole” (p. 161). Explication is a way of transforming the data through interpretation.

The explication process for the Moustakas (1994) approach included the following steps:

1. Horizontalizing the data;
2. Clustering of meaning or meaning units into themes;
3. Development of the textural descriptions of the experience;

4. Construction of structural descriptions and an integration of textures and structures into the meanings and essences of the phenomenon.

Interview data were reported through the use of Moustakas's psychological phenomenological methods. Building on the data from the first and second questions, I examined the responses (e.g., interview transcripts) and highlighted "significant statements" – explicitly, sentences, or quotes that provide an understanding of how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) calls this step "horizontalizing." Horizontalizing requires the researcher to list every significant statement which is relevant to the topic. Each statement, or horizon of the experience, is given equal value. After highlighting these statements, "clusters of meaning" (p. 61) were developed into themes. Clusters of meaning are where the researcher groups the statements into clusters of similar meaning units, or themes. Repetitive and overlapping statements were deleted. The themes developed were then used to write a description of what the participants' experienced (textural description) along with a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon. Moustakas (1994) also adds that researchers should write about their own experiences and the context and situations that have influenced their experiences. Since I was the Social Studies department chair and participated in PLCs, I included my own experiences in Chapter Four.

According to Moustakas (1994), the researcher writes a "structural" description of the experience after the textural description is written. The structural description investigates how the phenomenon was experienced, looking at all possible alternate meanings and perspectives. Chapter Four includes a written composite description that

presents the “essence” of the phenomenon. This focuses on the common experiences of the participants.

To check the validity of phenomenological research, the researcher conducts a validity check by returning to the research participant to determine if the essence of the interview has been correctly “captured” (Hycner, 1999, p. 154). For this study, I asked research participants to review their statements to validate that they accurately reflected their perspectives regarding the phenomenon that was studied. Any modification necessary was made as a result of this “validity check.”

**Summary**

Chapter Three includes sampling, instrumentation, data collection, and the methodology required to answer the research questions. Chapter Four reports the results of the study, while Chapter Five offers an analysis, the implications, and recommendations for future research based on the results of the study.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

This study was carried out in two phases using quantitative and qualitative methods. Likert-scale surveys were used to gather data regarding teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and teachers' perceptions of professional learning community as an organizational structure. Interviews provided deeper understanding of the impact that a professional learning community has on a teacher's self-efficacy belief. The findings presented in this chapter include a quantitative analysis of the survey results for both survey instruments utilized for the study and a qualitative analysis of the post-survey interviews using Moustakas's phenomenological methods. For the survey results, a descriptive analysis was performed. A correlation analysis was conducted between the SPSLCQ and TSES results using Pearson's correlation. For the qualitative analysis, themes were developed based upon the responses of the participants.

### **Research Questions**

This study examined the following research questions:

1. What relationships exist between the dimensions of professional learning communities and teachers' self-efficacy?
2. What impact does the implementation of professional learning communities have on teachers' ontological orientation to teaching?

### **Descriptive Statistics**

All certified staff ( $N=133$ ) of the participating school were asked to complete the Schools as Professional Staff Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSLCQ) and the Teacher Self-Efficacy Survey. Of the 133 certified teachers who were invited to

participate in the study, only 70 agreed to participate. 39% ( $n=27$ ) of those who agreed to participate responded to the instrument.

## **Quantitative Measures**

### *Research Question 1*

What relationships exist between the dimensions of professional learning communities and teachers' self-efficacy?

To determine the relationship between teacher self-efficacy and professional learning communities, a Pearson correlation of the subscale scores for the SPSLCQ and TSES was calculated. When conducting a correlation analysis, a positive value for the correlation implies a positive association between two or more variables. On the other hand, a negative value for the correlation suggests an inverse or negative association between two or more variables. A perfect correlation would result in  $r=1$ .

In order to examine research question one, Pearson correlations were calculated to assess whether a relationship exists between dimensions of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs (Efficacy in Student Engagement, Efficacy in Instructional Strategies, Efficacy in Classroom Management) and dimensions of teachers' perceptions of professional learning community (shared and supportive leadership; shared vision and values; collective learning and application; supportive conditions; shared personal practice). The resulting correlation coefficients are presented in Table 6. These findings are reflective of the TSES dimensions as reported by Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2001) and the SPSLCQ dimensions as reported by Hord (1997).

**Table 6: Pearson Correlation SPSLCQ and TSES Subscales**

		Efficacy in Student Engagement	Efficacy in Instructional Strategies	Efficacy in Classroom Management
Shared & Supportive Leadership	Pearson Correlation	-.378	-.062	-.286
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.063	.769	.166
	N	25	25	25
Shared Values & Vision	Pearson Correlation	.002	.240	.025
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.993	.239	.903
	N	26	26	26
Collective Learning	Pearson Correlation	.268	.276	-.099
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.185	.172	.631
	N	26	26	26
Supportive Conditions	Pearson Correlation	.390	.203	.057
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.060	.341	.791
	N	24	24	24
Shared Personal Practice	Pearson Correlation	.246	.267	-.051
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.226	.188	.806
	N	26	26	26

Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed)

For this study, the results reveal that dimensions of teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are not correlated with the dimensions of professional learning community. This finding was not expected and may be attributed to the low number of respondents; however, it shows that professional learning communities do not impact teacher self-efficacy beliefs of the participants in this study.

### **Qualitative Measures**

In order to examine the impact the implementation of professional learning communities have on teachers' ontological orientation to teaching (Research Question Two), I interviewed six teachers from Barton High School.

Interview data were collected by using handwritten recording (by the interviewer) to open-ended questions. Data were analyzed through horizontalizing, clusters of meaning, and identification of patterns (themes).

The interviews began with introductions and basic interview guidelines. Participants were told that they would be asked two questions about the phenomenon of professional learning community as an organizational structure. I remained silent while the participants responded to each question. If the participant hesitated or requested clarification, a prompt was provided. No additional guidelines were outlined for the participants.

All of the interview participants were very professional and had experience with professional learning communities. The participants welcomed the opportunity to participate and made certain that they had a clear understanding of each question before giving their response

Each participant was asked two broad questions: What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?

### *Horizontalizing*

Participants responded to both interview questions, and all of the participants offered similar responses to the questions. When asked what they have experienced in terms of the phenomenon, one participant gave the following response:

Professional learning communities are frustrating and do not impact what or how I teach in my classroom...they are counterproductive and a waste of time. In seven years of teaching at this school I have yet to see how

participating in a professional learning community has helped me be a better teacher. I love my job, teaching...but professional learning communities are not a part of that.

She continued by offering the following to the question of what contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon:

Our professional learning community meetings just end up devolving into a venting session...and even if we are given tasks to complete, they are not useful to what I do in the classroom and they do not guide instruction. In the end, my students' scores did not increase because of me belonging to a professional learning community but rather because of my willingness to learn more about my profession and content on my own time. The bottom line is that the time lost in the lack of collaboration impacts my students. The school doesn't care about student learning...just test scores.

Another participant responded that:

...there is nothing wrong with the concept of professional learning community...the problem is how they have been implemented at this school. Professional learning communities can work if they are implemented properly. We had that a few years ago, but not now. Since then, the focus has been more on raising test scores without looking at how we can get there. There are no clear directions or tasks. We are told when to meet and told what to discuss. For me, I simply go through the motions of being a part of the professional learning community and then enter my classroom and ignore everything and focus on my students.

Professional learning communities do not influence or impact my values as a teacher...my instruction and classroom management comes from my caring about what I do and being the professional that I am.

She continued by discussing the administrations role in the professional learning community structure:

The administrators at this school pretend that we have input into decisions that need to be made to make our school successful; however in the end the input is ignored. The administration just says whatever they think I want to hear. They are simply going through the motions of shared leadership and decision making.

Another participant stated that:

...the administration doesn't care what we think. Part of being a professional learning community is shared decision making, yet our input isn't regarded by the administration. We are told what to do, how to do, and when to do it and if we don't it is reflected in our observation notes.

And yet another participant stated that in her professional learning community meetings:

...nothing gets done. We don't have a focused vision about student learning that is followed through on. It is supposed to be whole-staff; however there is no interactive function. Rather it is sit and listen...and everything bad that happens in the school is clearly the fault of the teachers. There is no trust or openness and certainly no communication.

She went on to say that she is quite happy when she is in her classroom interacting with her students. What matters to her is that her students learn and enjoy what they are learning. One of the teachers with over 30 years of experience stated that:

Professional learning communities are useless. We were told that we had to implement them and then given no direction. We meet for an hour a week, discuss an agenda that could have been handled via email, and then sent back to our rooms charged with increasing student achievement. If they really want professional learning communities to work they would have us meet in interdisciplinary teams in which we vertically and horizontally align our curriculum. The idea of being a part of a professional learning community and the lack of collaborative efforts has caused me to consider retiring in the next year or two. They are putting more work on us but not guiding us in a way that helps us become better teachers.

Another responded:

Six years ago we had a professional learning community model that worked. The professional learning community was made up of teachers from every subject and included an administrator and his/her clerk. We all taught the same students and when we met during our common planning period once per week, we discussed issues related to students and our vision for success. When the teachers of a particular student saw problems, we called that student in and met as a team with him or her. I left those meetings feeling like I wasn't alone when faced with a student.

We collaborated...we learned from each other. That is what a professional learning community is about. Since then, the professional learning community model at our school has devolved into meeting and being given a directive from the administration with no collaboration on our part. I just want to be able to go into my classroom, shut the door, and be the great teacher that I know I am without the added stress of a professional learning community.

### *Clusters of Meaning and Themes*

A review of the significant statements highlighted during the horizontalizing process was used to determine the significant, relevant, and invariant meanings that provide the descriptions or highlights of the experience. The following themes emerged and include the quotes that support the theme:

1. Sense of frustration
  - a. They are counterproductive and a waste of time.
  - b. Professional learning communities are useless.
  - c. We meet for an hour a week, discuss an agenda that could have been handled via email, and then sent back to our rooms charged with increasing student achievement.
  - d. Our professional learning communities just end up devolving into a venting session.
  - e. The lack of collaborative efforts has caused me to consider retiring in the next year or two.

## 2. Lack of vision and direction

- a. I have yet to see how participating in a professional learning community has helped me be a better teacher.
- b. We don't have a focused vision about student learning that is followed through on.
- c. We were told that we had to implement them and then given no direction.
- d. There are no clear directions or tasks.
- e. ...nothing gets done

## 3. Lack of collaboration

- a. The professional learning community model at our school has devolved into meeting and being given a directive from the administration with no collaboration on our part.
- b. It is supposed to be whole-staff; however there is no interactive function. Rather it is sit and listen...
- c. Part of being a professional learning community is shared decision making, yet our input isn't regarded by the administration.
- d. The bottom line is that the time lost in the lack of collaboration impacts my students.

After developing the themes above, I went back to the participants and asked them to review the clusters of meaning and themes I constructed based on their responses. All of the participants were in agreement with the themes and stated that the responses to the questions allowed them to reflect on what impact the professional learning community structure had on their teaching. This led to a follow-up question asking each participant to elaborate on the concept of the impact that the professional learning community had on

their ontological orientation to teaching. This follow-up discussion is presented in the textural description in the following section.

### *Composite Textural Description*

From the themes and delimited horizons of the research participants' experiences, a textural description is constructed. The textural description explains the participants' experiences along with a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon. The themes presented in the previous section were studied in order to depict the experiences of the group as a whole. The following textural description attempts to paint a picture of what the participants experienced.

Teaching involves more than just the knowledge of a particular subject and the passing on of information. It is about collaborating and finding meaning in what a teacher does. For those that are committed to the profession, there is a sense of pride and belonging. For certain individuals, the experiences associated with the implementation of a professional learning community have led to a sense of frustration. For the participants, belonging to a professional learning community was part of the job. Participants found themselves participating in professional learning communities to satisfy the administration, but found them to be meaningless. Administration pretended they were interested in student learning when in reality they were focused on increasing test scores.

Those problems which had been simmering for years and allegiances to particular belief systems which had been maintained but were no longer effective suddenly became clear to the participants. They

experienced new dimensions of meaning. The common feelings of frustration, lack of vision, direction, and collaboration gave way to a better sense of the individuals understanding of the impact they can have in the classroom regardless of the structural organization of the school.

An integral part of being a professional learning community is experiencing the five dimensions of shared and supportive leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. Participants mentioned that there was a lack of fidelity in the implementation of professional learning community on their campus. Sometimes, this awareness brought strong feelings of anger and meaninglessness.

For many participants it was not about the experience of belonging to a professional learning community that impacted their teaching. It was, rather, the idea that they could make a difference in the lives of our country's future. For many a deep sense of connectedness was a goal sometimes achieved in their search for meaning. In my own experiences with professional learning communities, I realized that I was experiencing the same phenomenon as those that I interviewed. My frustration with the lack of fidelity in the implementation of professional learning communities led me to believe that they were meaningless.

Research participants generally described feelings ranging from despair to anger and often they were acknowledged that they were unable to articulate a finite reason for their dislike of professional learning

communities, but experienced a felt clarity or certainty in pursuing what they believed to be the true purpose.

### *Composite Structural Description*

The next process of phenomenological explication employs a composite structural description, representing the group of participants as a whole. According to Moustakas (1994) the composite structural description “is a way of understanding how the [participants] as a group experience what they experience” (p. 142). The experience of professional learning communities and their impact on a teacher’s ontological orientation to teaching is presented in the following composite structural description.

Being part of a professional learning community is a disruption to teaching. It is a disruption that compels one to question themselves as a teacher, all the while anticipating consequences, planning, acting, and looking to others for assistance. Whether or not expressed immediately, the teacher experiences a general inner protest, withdrawal and anger.

This negativity expresses itself as a tear in the structure of a school. This gap may be a fissure, but it discloses an essential break in our connectedness with others. Essentially, the weekly professional learning community meetings are sort of a social gathering, formal or informal. But our own place within this circle is unclear, ambiguous; it requires a clarifying invitation from another. We look, with hesitation, to the other; but our appeal goes unheeded, even unnoticed. In this case, rather than finding the mutuality we sought, we discover instead that we are invisible to the others.

The experience of being a part of a professional learning community is the experience of questioning one's teaching ability. When we begin to question this, we are cast into a sense of uselessness. We begin to question whether we are the teacher we thought we were. In order for a positive relationship between professional learning communities and teachers' ontological orientation to teaching, the environment must over time demonstrate that the teachers' input is solicited and valued. And other persons must respond with concern and respect for the value that teachers have on the education of children.

It is the hidden meaning behind the façade that many teachers escape to in order to make sense of their purpose in a school. For some this façade may be their classroom; for others it may be the venting that takes place in meaningless meetings. Regardless, it is essential that there is development of a fuller sense of responsibility, reciprocity, and community in order for schools to succeed.

### **Summary**

In this chapter, quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed and presented in an effort to answer the research questions:

1. What relationships exist between the dimensions of professional learning communities and teachers' self-efficacy?
2. What impact does the implementation of professional learning communities have on teachers' ontological orientation to teaching?

Quantitative measures included the correlation analysis of two survey instruments, the SPSLCQ and TSES, using SPSS. It was found that no correlation exists between teacher self-efficacy beliefs and the dimensions of professional learning community.

Finally, qualitative data were gathered through teacher interviews. Teacher responses provided answers to research question one. Using phenomenological methodology – horizontalizing, clustering of meanings, composite textural description, and composite structural description, themes emerged that showed the implementation of professional learning communities impacted the participants' ontological orientation to teaching.

Chapter Five presents a summary, conclusions, and implications of the findings. In addition, recommendations for future research are offered.

## Chapter V

### Discussion and Recommendations

#### Overview of the Study

This chapter provides a discussion of the study results regarding the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and the dimensions of professional learning community. Historically, the organizational structure of schools has been a hierarchical configuration. This type of configuration typically concentrates decision making at the formal leadership level. If decision making is shared in hierarchical organizations, it is limited to a few individuals who hold positions of authority.

The education system in the United States has been under a microscope for decades. Many reports found that the educational system has failed to educate the youth of America successfully (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Frederick Taylor's late nineteenth century factory model and Henry Ford's assembly line applications were once the norm; however, a systems change has to occur in America's educational system.

One response, borrowed from the business sector, includes the idea of learning organizations brought to the forefront in the business world by Senge's work, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). Senge (1990) concluded that the most successful corporation of the future will be a learning organization, and as business leaders investigated the potential of the learning organization model to support organizations in a rapidly changing environment, the educational community began to forge its definition of the professional learning community.

According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), professional learning community, as an organizational structure for schools, will be the most promising strategy for school

improvement. Hargreaves (Sparks, 2004) stated that 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). This study attempted to examine the relationship between teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs and the dimensions of professional learning community at an urban high school.

### **Analysis of the Findings**

To examine the relationship between teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs and the dimensions of professional learning community, participants were asked to complete the Schools as Professional Staff Learning Community Questionnaire (SPSLCQ) and the Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale (TSES). To determine if there is a correlation between teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs and the dimensions of a professional learning community, a Pearson correlation statistical analysis was conducted on the survey results. That analysis revealed that there are no correlations between teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs and the dimensions of a professional learning community. While limited, studies have shown that professional learning communities affect teachers’ self-efficacy (Cowley & Meehan, 2001); however the present study does not confirm Cowley’s (2001) findings. While the results of this study were unexpected, it shows that teachers may have a high sense of self-efficacy regardless of whether or not they are a part of a professional learning community. Professional learning communities presume that there exists no significant professional collaboration already in place amongst the teachers.

One explanation for the results may be that some teachers perceive themselves to be efficacious, but they may not find that their perception of efficacy is dependent on the

relationship between teachers. Instead teachers may be self-driven and not even aware of the contributions of other teachers or administrative personnel because of their own strong feelings of efficaciousness and competence. Hence, it is possible that teachers who have strong efficacy beliefs do not necessarily identify with or are affected by the school's organizational structure.

To examine further the impact the implementation of a professional learning community has on the ontological orientation to teaching, a qualitative study was employed using phenomenological research methods. Analysis of that aspect of this study revealed that at this particular urban high school, professional learning communities were not implemented with fidelity, thus causing teachers to view them as useless and frustrating. While some teachers felt that the negative relationship with the professional learning community structure had no impact on their ontological orientation to teachers, some felt that it was having a negative impact on their ability to teach. In order for a positive relationship to exist between professional learning communities and teachers' ontological orientation to teaching, it is necessary for the school to examine its professional learning community structure and to develop a fuller sense of responsibility, reciprocity, and community.. Instead of being organic, professional learning communities are often "top-down." The findings suggest that teachers want to see less power and more leadership within the school. Based on the results of this study, Barton High School did not implement professional learning communities authentically. Campus-level implementation affects how well professional learning communities can be experienced. The fact that participants agreed that professional learning communities at Barton High School were not authentically implemented speaks to the notion of the

relationship between implementation of professional learning communities and the way that they experienced that implementation

Given the global competition, it is time for the United States to focus its attention on redesigning the American education system to address the changing labor skills that workers must have to compete in the global job market. As discussed in Chapter 1, the culture of the American education system must become proactive about more fundamental changes. We must become aware of the challenges the students will face in their future and do our best to give them the tools with which to prepare them. According to DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005), “substantive and lasting change will ultimately require a transformation of culture – the beliefs, assumptions, expectations, and habits that constitute the norm for the people throughout the organization” (p. 11). Thus, in our effort to create systems’ change, we must focus on improving various ways of thinking and highlight new priorities.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study was subject to the following limitations and assumptions:

1. The thought of budget cuts may have played a role in the willingness of participants to participate in the study.
2. Because of the narrow focus on one school, generalizations are limited for all other settings.
3. The study was conducted during a brief period of time and did not account for changes within the site due to pending budget cuts.

### **Implications**

This was an exploratory study because there exists a gap in the knowledge of the impact that correct, systemic implementation of professional learning communities has

on participating teachers' self-efficacy. From the results of this study, it is suggested that professional learning communities are not effective and have no significant relationship between teacher efficacy and the dimensions of professional learning communities. While contradictory to the results, this researcher believes that based on the review of the literature (Hord, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998), professional learning communities that are implemented with fidelity can have a positive impact on teachers' ontological orientation to teaching and their sense of self-efficacy.

The following implications for school districts, school leaders, and teachers paint a picture of how this study can impact the way schools can better organize themselves to meet the need for change in the education system.

*Implication for school districts and school leaders.*

School districts and school leaders who are looking for a proven process for engaging teachers in continual improvement could utilize the results from this study to develop a sustained professional learning community structure. Utilizing the sustained process of professional learning communities, while effective for improving instruction and teacher efficacy, does not itself incur long-term costs other than initial trainings. Through proper implementation, professional learning communities can reduce the amount of resources and funds necessary for traditional one-stop workshops and expert trainers by tapping into the resources they have within their organization – the teachers.

*Implication for teachers*

Teachers hoping to improve instructional practices and build on the capacity of their colleagues would benefit from establishing a professional learning community structure. In particular, new teachers or teachers who are in need of development may benefit from participating in professional learning communities.

Because this study was limited to one urban high school, it should be noted that decision makers should proceed with caution before making extensive policy decisions from these results. This study does suggest that instead of arbitrarily implementing a professional learning community model, some sort of assessment of the impact of the implementation on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs should be considered. Further, study on a broader population should be considered.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this study and a review of the literature, this researcher believes that in order for professional learning communities to be effective, they must be implemented authentically. To accomplish this, there must be a creation of a "sufficiently powerful guiding coalition" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 51). To change the culture successfully, there first must be a "guiding coalition and ultimately a critical number of people within the organization who will champion the change process together" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 51). One recommendation would be to hold whole-faculty focus groups that solicit input serving to guide the change process itself. This can be accomplished by having the faculty and administration read the literature about professional learning communities and with this deeper understanding, a coalition can be formed.

The next step is creating the vision. John Kotter (1996) of the Harvard Business School suggests that vision helps to direct, align, and inspire the actions of the members of an organization. Without this guiding vision, members of the organization are left to do things the way they always have. Senge, Ross, Smith, Roberts, and Kleiner (1994) suggest that the boss (principal) and members of the organization (faculty and staff),

through a collaborative process, build a shared vision together (p. 314). While not the most efficient strategy for developing a written vision statement, it is most likely to result in the shared vision critical to a learning community.

Based on the findings of this study, it is also recommended that short-term goals are established. With the countless number of reform initiatives forced upon schools, most are not willing to champion a change, such as professional learning communities, without seeing evidence that the change is working. Therefore, a periodic evaluation of whether these short-term goals are being met is necessary.

Too often change is considered successful without clear evidence. Kotter (1996) suggests that until the change initiative becomes anchored in the culture, victory cannot be declared. Change is only effective if it is firmly embraced and entrenched in the culture of the school. As Kotter concludes, “until new behaviors are rooted in social norms and shared values, they are always subject to degradation as soon as the pressures associated with a change effort are removed” (p. 14).

### **Suggested Areas for Further Research**

The following recommendations for further research are based upon the findings presented in Chapter Four and the conclusions presented in this chapter:

1. Given the results of the study, further research on the impact professional learning communities have on teacher self-efficacy should be conducted. Since this study had a small sample size, replicating it utilizing a larger sample and more than one school would increase the statistical power of the results.
2. Further research on how professional learning communities are implemented in various schools would add to the knowledge based.

3. Since schools implement professional learning communities differently, further research conducted on the on-going support for the professional learning community structure within a school is necessary.
4. This study focused only on teachers, therefore further research to determine the impact that school leaders have on professional learning communities would add to the knowledge base.

### **Conclusions**

Professional learning communities are an established structure of job-embedded professional development that has proven to improve student achievement (Hord, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998). To provide teachers with professional development experiences that will promote professional growth, teachers and leaders must begin with a clear vision of the purposes and goals of their school. Additionally, teachers must be viewed as learners for an effective experience (McLaughlin & Berman, 1977).

Similarly, increased teacher self-efficacy has been shown to be related to increased student academic achievement (Multon & Brown, 1991). This study examined the relationship between teacher self-efficacy beliefs and professional learning communities. Based on the findings, there is no correlation between the two.

Schools that organize themselves into professional learning communities and in particular find ways to develop a shared leadership structure, have the opportunity to increase teacher efficacy and more importantly have the opportunity to improve instruction for students. Given the current economic situation and the increased federal mandates for improving student achievement, educators could benefit from developing and implementing properly a professional learning community. Utilizing and supporting

professional learning communities may help schools and school leaders maximize their use of limited and valuable resources.

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**APPENDIX A**  
**SCHOOL PROFESSIONAL STAFF AS LEARNING COMMUNITY QUESTIONNAIRE (SPSLCQ)**

**Directions:** This questionnaire concerns your perceptions about your school staff as a learning organization. There are no right or wrong responses. Please consider where you believe your school is in its development of each of the five numbered descriptors shown in bold-faced type on the left. Each sub-tem has a five-point scale. On each scale, circle the number that best represents the degree to which you feel your school has developed.

**1. School administrators participate democratically with teachers sharing power, authority, and decision making.**

<b>1a</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Although there are some legal and fiscal decisions required of the principal, school administrators consistently involve the staff in discussing and making decisions about school issues			Administrators invite advice and counsel from staff and then make decisions themselves.		Administrators never share information with the staff nor provide opportunities to be involved in decision making.
<b>1b</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
Administrators involve the entire staff.			Administrators involve a small committee, council, or team of staff.		Administrators do not involve any staff.

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**2. The staff shares visions for school improvement that have an undeviating focus on student learning, and these visions are consistently referenced in the staff's work.**

	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>2a</b>	Visions for improvement are discussed by the entire staff such that consensus and a shared vision result.		Visions for improvement are not thoroughly explored; some staff members agree and other do not.		Visions for improvement held by the staff members are widely divergent.
<b>2b</b>	Visions for improvement are always focused on students, teaching, and learning.		Visions for improvement are sometimes focused on students, teaching, and learning.		Visions for improvement do not target students, teaching, and learning.
<b>2c</b>	Visions for improvement target high-quality learning experiences for all students.		Visions for improvement address quality learning experiences in terms of students' abilities.		Visions for improvement do not include concerns about the quality of learning experiences.

**3. The staff's collective learning and application of learnings (take action) create high intellectual learning tasks and solutions to address student needs**

	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3a</b>	The entire staff meets to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.		Subgroups of the staff meet to discuss issues, share information, and learn with and from one another.		Individuals randomly discuss issues, share information, and learn from one another.
<b>3b</b>	The staff meets regularly and frequently on substantive student-centered educational issues.		The staff meets occasionally on substantive student-centered educational issues.		The staff never meets to consider substantive student-centered educational issues.
<b>3c</b>	The staff discusses the quality of their teaching and students' learning.		The staff does not often discuss their instructional practices nor its influence on student learning.		The staff basically discusses non-teaching and non-learning issues.

	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>3d</b>	The staff, based on their learnings, makes and implements plans that address students' needs, more effective teaching and more successful student learning.		The staff occasionally acts on their learnings and makes and implements plans to improve teaching and learning.		The staff does not act on their learning.
<b>3e</b>	The staff debriefs and assesses the impact of their actions and makes revisions.		The staff infrequently assesses their actions and seldom makes revisions based on the results.		The staff does not assess their work.

**4. Peers review and give feedback based on observing one another's classroom behaviors in order to increase individual and organizational capacity.**

	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>4a</b>	Staff members regularly and frequently visit and observe one another's classroom teaching.		Staff members occasionally visit and observe one another's teaching.		Staff members never visit their peers' classrooms.

	5	4	3	2	1
4b	Staff members provide feedback to one another about teaching and learning based on their classroom observations.		Staff members discuss non-teaching issues after classroom observations.		Staff members do not interact after classroom observations.

**5. School conditions and capacities support the staffs' arrangement as a professional learning organization.**

	5	4	3	2	1
5a	Time is arranged and committed for whole staff interactions.		Time is arranged but frequently the staff fails to meet.		Staff cannot arrange time for interacting.
5b	The size, structure, and arrangements of the school facilitate staff proximity and interaction.		Considering the size, structure, and arrangements of the school, the staff are working to maximize interaction.		The staff takes no action to manage the facility and personnel for interaction.
5c	A variety of processes and procedures are used to encourage staff communication.		A single communication method exists and is sometimes used to share information.		Communication devices are not given attention.

	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>5d</b>	Trust and openness characterize all of the staff members.		Some of the staff members are trusting and open.		Trust and openness do not exist among the staff members.
<b>5e</b>	Caring, collaborative, and productive relationships exist among all staff members.		Caring and collaboration are inconsistently demonstrated among the staff members.		Staff members are isolated and work alone at their task.

## Appendix B

### Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (short form)

Teacher Beliefs		How much can you do?								
Directions: This questionnaire is designed to help us gain a better understanding of the kinds of things that create difficulties for teachers in their school activities. Please indicate your opinion about each of the statements below. Your answers are confidential		Nothing		Very Little		Some Influence		Quite A Bit		A Great Deal
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
1.	How much can you do to control disruptive behavior in the classroom?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
2.	How much can you do to motivate students who show low interest in school work?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
3.	How much can you do to get students to believe they can do well in school work?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
4.	How much can you do to help your students value learning?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
5.	To what extent can you craft good questions for your students?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
6.	How much can you do to get children to follow classroom rules?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
7.	How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
8.	How well can you establish a classroom management system with each group of students?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
9.	How much can you use a variety of assessment strategies?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
10.	To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when students are confused?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
11.	How much can you assist families in helping their children do well in school?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
12.	How well can you implement alternative strategies in your classroom?	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)

