Developing and Nurturing Professional Learning Communities:
Principles Used by Elementary Administrators

Mary J. Marshall, B.A., B.Ed.

Department of Graduate and Undergraduate Studies in Education

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education

Faculty of Education, Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario

© Mary J. Marshall 2007
Abstract

This study examined the strategies used by elementary school principals to facilitate and nurture the development of professional learning communities (PLC) within their school settings. Using a reputational sample of administrators whose schools were demonstrating observable characteristics of PLCs, this study documented and described the strategies and actions taken by the principals to move their schools forward. Data collection included the use of open-ended interviews as well as observations capturing the means by which the principals addressed the areas of culture, processes, and structures within their school setting. A grounded theory approach to data analysis uncovered 4 guiding principles used by the principals to facilitate the development of the PLCs within their school: (a) protecting the purpose; (b) attending to relationships; (c) sharing the responsibility; and (d) valuing the journey. The guiding principles were used by each administrator to anchor the decisions they made and develop responsive, context-specific strategies to support the PLC at their school. The results highlighted the complex role of the principal and the supports required to tackle the difficult work of facilitating PLCs.
Acknowledgements

This study would not have been possible without the tremendous support and guidance of a number of individuals.

First, I am appreciative of the participants in my study, who generously gave of their time and welcomed me into their schools, allowing me to immerse myself in their daily experiences.

I am thankful to my advisor, Dr. Coral Mitchell. Despite all of Coral’s own professional commitments, her support never strayed. She was there to challenge my assumptions, clarify my thinking, and encourage me to stretch further than I had imagined possible. I thank her for providing the guidance necessary to see this study through to completion.

Finally, I am most grateful for the support and encouragement my husband Peter provided throughout this lengthy pursuit. His unfailing willingness to take over so many of the home-front responsibilities and his positive reinforcement to keep at it provided both the opportunity and motivation to complete this study.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................. ii  
Acknowledgements ................................................... iii  

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY ......................... 1  
   Background of the Problem Situation .................................. 1  
   Purpose ........................................................................ 3  
   Rationale ....................................................................... 4  
   Scope and Limitations of the Study ..................................... 5  
   Organization of the Document .......................................... 7  

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .................................... 9  
   Professional Learning Communities .................................. 9  
   The Role of the Principal .............................................. 14  
   Summary ....................................................................... 27  

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES .................. 28  
   Research Methodology and Design .................................... 28  
   Selection and Invitation of Participants .............................. 30  
   Data Collection Instruments ......................................... 32  
   Data Collection ................................................................ 33  
   Data Processing and Analysis ......................................... 35  
   Methodological Assumptions ........................................... 39  
   Limitations ..................................................................... 39  
   Establishing Credibility ................................................. 41  
   Ethical Considerations .................................................. 42  
   Restatement of the Area of Study ....................................... 43  

CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS ......................... 44  
   Protecting the Purpose .................................................. 44  
   Attending to Relationships .............................................. 55  
   Sharing the Responsibility .............................................. 64  
   Valuing the Journey ...................................................... 71  
   Summary ....................................................................... 77  

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS ........ 79  
   Summary of the Study .................................................... 79  
   Discussion ..................................................................... 82  
   Implications .................................................................... 88  
   Conclusion ...................................................................... 95  

References ......................................................................... 97
Appendix A: Checklist of Professional Learning Communities Characteristics . . . 101
Appendix B: Interview Descriptive Codes .................................................... 102
Appendix C: Field Note Descriptive Codes .................................................. 103
Appendix D: Brock University Ethics Approval ............................................. 104
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

This is a study of the strategies used by elementary school principals to facilitate and nurture the development of professional learning communities (PLC) within their school settings. The PLC concept has been seen as a model for reform as schools struggle to balance increasingly complex curriculum, varied background experiences of students, and accountability expectations at the provincial level. The challenge for elementary administrators in this context is how to move their school toward the characteristics of a professional learning community. While the concept of a PLC is widely described in the literature, administrators are only beginning to discover how to bring this concept to life.

Background of the Problem Situation

In the past 15 years, the school reform movement has increasingly looked at developing schools as professional learning communities as a means to improve student learning. Gradually more school districts across Ontario are encouraging principals to develop their schools into ones that reflect the characteristics of a PLC. These characteristics include (a) shared values and vision, (b) collective responsibility for student learning, (c) mutual trust, (d) shared leadership, (e) collaboration, (f) reflective professional inquiry, and (g) a focus on staff learning (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). Facilitating the development of school culture, structures, and processes to reflect these characteristics is a challenging task for administrators. Given the unique context in which principals operate and the individual styles of leadership each brings to the role, specific approaches to creating professional learning communities may not be effective for all situations.
Eaker, DuFour and DuFour (2002) describe professional learning communities as a promising strategy for school improvement that administrators are eager to embrace. They note, however, that the response of administrators has been tempered by their uncertainty about how to facilitate the creation of this state. Starratt (1996) as quoted in Mitchell and Sackney (2000) observes that the challenge in creating a learning community is not that no one model for this task exists, but rather that “each school will have to invent itself as a learning community” (p. 11). Eaker et al. similarly argue that the cultural and structural changes required within a school in order for it to operate as a PLC are “inherently non-linear and complex” (p. 2). Further, they add that the process of moving along the continuum to becoming a PLC is “typically characterized more by starts and stops, messiness, and redundancy than sequential efficiency” (p. 2). Eaker et al. offer some hope for administrators in this seemingly overwhelming task by encouraging principals to use the strong conceptual framework of a PLC as a model of how to work effectively within the school setting (p. 3).

The conceptual framework Eaker et al. (2002) describe highlights school culture, processes, and structures as general areas to which principals should attend in facilitating the development of a PLC. However, there are limited examples of specific strategies that principals may draw on to support their work within these three areas. Even less evidence is available from the Canadian and Ontario contexts. This gap in available literature leaves local administrators struggling to identify and devise specific strategies they can utilize to support the development of professional learning communities in their schools.

The conceptual framework identified within this study will provide a broader foundation upon which principals may situate their work. Drawing on the role the
principal plays in the development of the organization, the practices, and the people within the school setting, I propose that principals enact their role through the use of guiding principles which influence their daily work. Through the analysis of data gathered within this study I have identified four guiding principles used by administrators who have moved their schools towards demonstrating the characteristics of PLCs. These guiding principles are: protecting the purpose, attending to relationships, sharing responsibility, and valuing the journey. Using these guiding principles, principals make situational-specific choices about how they will facilitate the development of the professional learning community within their unique schools.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to document specific strategies administrators in Ontario elementary schools incorporate in their daily work in order to support the development of professional learning communities. These specific strategies were then used as a basis for identifying guiding principles that can be applied across a range of unique situations to aid principals in the development of PLCs.

The general questions I used to guide this study were:

Question 1: What are the strategies used by elementary principals in order to support the development of a professional learning community in their school?

Question 2: What guiding principles are used in the daily work of elementary administrators as they engage in the development of the professional learning community in their school?

Question 3: How do principals apply the guiding principles as they facilitate the development of the PLC within their school?
Rationale

This study provides guiding principles illustrated with concrete strategies for administrators and school districts to consider utilizing as school principals face the challenge of implementing professional learning communities. Using the experiences of elementary principals who have been successful in moving their schools towards becoming professional learning communities, this study identifies the role of the principal in the process. This study provided me with an opportunity to document the specific strategies used by principals in unique contexts and to draw from these practices some guiding principles that influence the daily actions of these administrators. The guiding principles can provide a general foundation for enacting the role of the principal, while the specific strategies used by individual principals illustrate how these principles play out within unique situations.

From a principal’s perspective, the findings of this study provide insights for school administrators who face the task of transforming their schools into PLCs. The results of this study provide both specific examples and descriptions of strategies to consider for application in their situations as well as guiding principles that may be adopted and applied to different contexts. Administrators reading this research can be assured that others in similar roles have successfully used these approaches in order to develop a school that reflects the characteristics of a professional learning community. In addition, readers can anticipate challenges they may face based on the past experiences of others and thereby recognize that the process of becoming a PLC is not a clear and linear one. For administrators in the Ontario context, this will be especially beneficial given the
limited research done in the area of developing professional learning communities in the Canadian context.

School districts may benefit from this research by using the data to consider both contextual challenges and successful approaches to implementing system-wide changes. This research provides a framework of guiding principles that systems could use to focus the support they provide for principals who are engaged in this work. This study reinforces the need for schools and systems to work collaboratively as they take risks, share experiences, and move towards becoming professional learning communities.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study was motivated by my desire to identify specific strategies that administrators are currently using in the development of professional learning communities within the Ontario context and to draw from that the guiding principles that may be used as filters for daily operation within a school. Within my school district there is increasing pressure to move all schools towards working as PLCs. In my role as Literacy Coordinator, I observed many principals challenged by how and where to begin the development of a PLC, whereas other administrators appeared already to be working in a way that moved their school even further forward. Many administrators who wondered how to facilitate the development of PLCs grasped at formulas to create these conditions. This led to frustration on the part of some who found that suggestions or models developed elsewhere were ineffective in their unique settings. For some administrators faced with this system expectation, the process of developing a PLC became a checklist to work through rather than a process of reculturing the school. When the checklist was complete, but no perceived change in student learning was evident,
these principals felt unsuccessful in their attempt to develop a PLC. At the same time as schools were struggling, there were schools that were having success in demonstrating the characteristics of PLCs. I wanted to know what the principals in these schools were doing that was making a difference in the development of their PLCs. I wanted to know if there was something about what these principals were doing that could be shared with others to assist in the facilitation of PLCs across a broader range of schools. It was the documentation and identification of successful practices that I felt would be helpful to me as I worked with schools and principals intent on becoming PLCs.

The methodological approach I chose to use for this research was *grounded theory* as defined by Charmaz (2000). This choice was based on my desire to generate a theory that reflected the actual practices of school administrators as they attempted to move their schools toward the characteristics associated with professional learning communities. As Charmaz describes, grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data. The grounded theory approach led me to collect and analyze data that would contribute toward generating a theory of practice for elementary administrators to facilitate the development of PLCs. Grounded theory methods move through simultaneous collection and analysis of data to track the emerging themes and theoretical framework (Charmaz). This approach allowed me to document, describe, analyze, and understand the perspectives of the individuals involved while seeking a theoretical framework to represent their work.

The grounded theory method chosen for this study has some inherent characteristics that shape the utility of the results. First, the size of the sample was limited
to 3 elementary administrators, all from the same urban, southern Ontario school district. The data, therefore, are limited to this area. However, the data provided rich descriptions and examples of strategies that administrators in given situations have found beneficial in moving towards operating as a PLC. The descriptions and examples can offer insights to inform the work of other administrators in similar circumstances or with similar tasks.

Second, by limiting the data collection to one interview and an observation day per participant, the findings are representative of a small number of administrators’ experiences at one point in time. This approach limited the reflections of the participants to their perceptions at that time, and their responses could have been influenced by a wide range of external factors that were not apparent. Providing multiple opportunities for data collection allows participants to describe their situations over time and may better illustrate themes that come to light. Although this longitudinal approach was preferable from a research perspective, it would have been difficult to implement in practice, given the heavy workload and demanding schedules of elementary school principals.

Consequently, the results must be read with this limitation in mind.

Organization of the Document

Chapter Two positions this study in light of current literature describing the development of professional learning communities as an approach to improving student learning. In the chapter I discuss three main areas of literature regarding PLCs. I first examine the literature that demonstrates the evolution of learning communities from a business context into the educational realm. Second, I describe and discuss the characteristics of PLCs as articulated in recent literature. Finally, I review the literature
on the role of the administrator in developing the organization, the practices, and the individuals who comprise the PLC.

Chapter Three provides an overview of the methodology and methods used to conduct this study. Following a discussion of the methodological choices that influenced my design, I describe the study design, including site and participant selection, data gathering and analysis, my methodological assumptions, the limitations of the study, and some strategies for facilitating credibility of results. I conclude with an overview of the ethical considerations of the study.

Chapter Four contains the findings of the study. In this chapter I describe the strategies used by the principals as they developed their schools as professional learning communities. The findings are presented as viewed through four guiding principles that emerged from the data analysis: protecting the purpose, attending to relationships, sharing the responsibility, and valuing the journey.

Finally, in Chapter Five I discuss the results in light of the current interest in the development of schools as professional learning communities. Consistent with recent literature, the discussion focuses on the complexity of the role of the administrator and acknowledges the influence of local context in the development of a PLC. Implications for practice, theory, and further research are explored in light of my findings.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past 15 years the development of professional learning communities (PLCs), which incorporates teacher collaboration, continuous improvement, and a focus on student learning, has been identified as a powerful way to improve student achievement in a sustainable manner (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker et al., 2002; Fullan, 1991; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Lambert, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll et al., 2006). This tool is currently the focus of significant attention and energy within many school districts in Ontario and is being viewed as a means to improve student learning. The question for elementary principals is how to identify and utilize strategies in their daily work that will support the development of PLCs.

This chapter explores recent literature describing the characteristics of professional learning communities and the role of the principal in developing this manner of operation within a school. It provides a short background on the evolution of PLCs in the context of school improvement, highlights common characteristics of PLCs, and reviews the role of the principal in the development of PLCs.

Professional Learning Communities

The concept of professional learning communities emerged from business theories dealing with organizational learning. In an early conceptualization of the theory, Argyis and Schön’s (1977) model of organizational learning highlighted the need to focus on a clearly articulated purpose and vision as individuals worked through a process of collective inquiry and reflection to renew the organization and to sustain change. Senge (1990) expanded on this framework by describing how individuals within organizations work collaboratively to improve outcomes and by providing specific examples drawn
from a range of business fields. Senge reinforced the importance of shared vision and the collective capacity of the individuals to realize their goals. Both of these early models shifted the focus from individuals to team as a means to harness the creative and intellectual capacity of the organization and to maximize the success of the group.

In the educational sector, learning organizations were seen to hold the promise of significant, sustained school improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Shifting the learning organization model into the educational setting brought a change of terminology from organization to community, which placed people squarely at the heart of the teaching and learning enterprise (DuFour & Eaker; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). This shift required a corresponding cultural change from the traditional isolation within schools to a collaborative, open environment.

From an educational perspective, as members of a PLC learn together, they engage in a process of continual renewal with the view to improving student learning. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) define a learning community as "a group of people who take an active, reflective, collaborative, learning-oriented, and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems, and perplexities of teaching and learning" (p. 9). Bolam et al. (2005) extend the definition by adding the capacity to sustain this activity over time, which evolves along a continuum of "starter, developer, and mature" (p. 147). For the purposes of this study, a professional learning community refers to the professional groups who work with students as well as the school administrators, rather than more comprehensive definitions that include students, parents, and community members.
The literature identifies PLCs in terms of characteristics generally exhibited by schools that are held in high regard as learning communities. The seven key characteristics identified in the literature include (a) shared values and vision, (b) collective responsibility for student learning, (c) mutual trust, (d) shared leadership, (e) collaboration, (f) reflective professional inquiry, and (g) a focus on staff learning (Bolam et al., 2005; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). For the purposes of this study, these characteristics together provide the operating definition of a PLC.

The first feature of a PLC identified in the literature is a commonly understood vision and value statement that guides the work of the educators. The vision and values of a school reflect what the school stands for, what it intends to become, what the community members are committed to, and what drives their ongoing work and improvements (Bolam et al., 2005; Conzemius & O’Neill, 2001; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Lambert, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll et al., 2006). The collective development of mission, vision, values, and goals builds a common sense of purpose and direction that underpins inquiry and reflective practice (Eaker et al., 2002). Mitchell and Sackney (2006) highlight this important characteristic of PLCs when they state that “the existence of a shared school vision served to keep the staff from galloping off in all directions” (p. 630).

The collective responsibility for student learning is the second indicator of a PLC. This characteristic, demonstrated through joint responsibility for all pupils’ learning, is assumed to build sustained commitment, ease isolation, and encourage staff to fully participate in the school (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour, Eaker, &
The third characteristic of PLCs is mutual trust. This trust is demonstrated through positive, mutually respectful working relationships (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006) which create the conditions for staff to feel at ease with one another and with the school administrators (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll et al.). Mutual trust facilitates a working environment where individuals and groups feel safe to try innovative and creative solutions to the daily challenges they face.

A shared approach to leadership is the fourth feature of PLCs (Barth, 1990; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Examples of this approach to leadership include (a) staff direction teams that develop improvement plans and provide support for professional development, (b) deferral to individuals with expertise to provide input and guide school decision making, and (c) delegation of administrative responsibilities such as duty schedules and timetables to committees in which teachers and administrators are equal members. Mitchell and Sackney (2006) go further to describe PLCs as characterized by both "distributed leadership and by strong leadership from the school principal" (p. 628), which highlights the important role the administrator plays in this aspect of the school.

Collaboration is the fifth characteristic of PLCs. The type of powerful collaboration that characterizes PLCs provides teachers with a means to collectively develop their practice and to focus on deep learning that will make a difference for all learners (DuFour et al., 2004; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). In a professional learning community, collaboration and team work support teachers as they
build common understandings and share ideas about instructional practice (Mitchell, Sackney, & Walker, 2004). Examples of this type of collaboration include the development of common units of study and assessment tools, analysis of student data, and the development and revision of goals.

The use of reflective professional inquiry as a means to build new understanding and improve practice is the sixth characteristic of PLCs. This feature uses professional discourse, dialogue, and discussion to facilitate conversations about difficult educational issues (Bolam et al., 2005; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). In addition, professional inquiry incorporates the deprivatization of practice through joint analysis of emerging issues and collegial development of solutions to improve student learning (Bolam et al.; Stoll et al., 2006).

Staff learning, individual and collective, is the final characteristic of a PLC. In an early text, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) identified staff learning as a critical feature of a PLC. Since then the literature has expanded the role that staff learning, both formal and informal, plays in the development of a PLC (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2004; Stoll et al., 2006). Stoll et al., for example, contend that the professional learning of both individuals and groups plays a significant role in the development of the people on the staff. Other researchers (e.g., Bolam et al.; Mitchell & Sackney) argue that people not only learn with and from one other but also take responsibility for supporting each other's learning.

Although I have described each of the seven characteristics of PLCs individually, they do not stand in isolation but rather serve as interconnected methods of operation. Compounding this complexity is the developing recognition that no simple formula or
recipe can be followed to create a PLC. Rather, emerging research results demonstrate that the process of developing a PLC must be worked out within the specific conditions in which a school is situated (Bolam et al., 2005). This challenge targets the role the school principal plays in judging the current status of a school community, the strengths and needs of the community of learners, and the work that is required to move the development of the PLC forward.

The Role of the Principal

The role of the administrator is critical in the development of a professional learning community. Shifting a school from a traditional model of operation to one that has the characteristics of a PLC requires significant energy and skill on the part of the principal (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Huffman & Jacobson, 2003; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Stoll et al., 2006). Youngs and King (2002) argue that how administrators enact their role as principal “substantially influences the strength of the professional community” (p. 648). They contend that administrators must maintain a continued focus on developing a strong professional learning community if there is to be a sustained impact on school improvement.

The literature on professional learning communities describes three broad categories of tasks that require the focused attention of the administrator: developing the organization, developing the practices, and developing the people. While there is disagreement among authors as to which category is most critical, current research indicates that a combination of all three is necessary for improvement to be fostered and sustained (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker et al., 2002; Fullan, 1991;
Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006). By acting as a change agent, the principal skillfully and sensitively supports the development of the organization, the practices, and the school people to develop and sustain an effective PLC.

*Developing the Organization*

Attending to the development of the organization requires that the principal play a role in reculturing the school as well as facilitating the development of structures used to support the daily work of staff members. Mitchell and Sackney (2006) argue that “the direct involvement of the school principal is central to the successful development of a culture and set of systems that sustain a community of learners” (p. 628). The role of the principal in reculturing the school encompasses four broad areas of administrative attention: maintaining a focus on the school’s vision and values, developing a sense of collective responsibility for student learning amongst staff, promoting mutual trust, and sharing the leadership (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2004; Eaker et al., 2002; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Lambert, 2003; Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2006; Youngs & King, 2002). School administrators have the task of redesigning the structures within the school to foster the emergence of these four outcomes.

School culture includes the behaviours and beliefs of the school and is generally described as “how we do things around here” (Eaker et al., 2002, p. 9). Definitions of a school culture characteristic of a PLC include a focus on learning, trust, and leadership (Barth, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker et al.; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Without attention to each of these aspects, it is unlikely that staff members will engage in the
process, that strategies to address and change the existing state will be developed, or that a shift towards becoming a PLC will occur (DuFour & Eaker). Barth argues that changing the existing culture of a school is probably the most important and most difficult job a principal will face. Similarly, DuFour and Eaker and Eaker et al. identify reculturing schools as a fundamental step in moving away from traditional practices and towards operating as professional learning communities.

Development of the organization requires a vision that focuses on learning as the priority within the school. DuFour and Eaker (1998), for example, articulate the need to move from a focus on teaching to a focus on learning if schools are to become professional learning communities. DuFour et al. (2004) suggest that educators continually ask themselves three questions: What do we want students to know and be able to do? How will we know if they have learned it? How will we respond if students are not learning? These three questions and the resulting responses are intended to focus the work of the staff and the development of the organization. DuFour and Eaker argue that a relentless focus on student learning is what drives professional learning communities.

The principal plays a vital role in identifying and maintaining this primary focus on learning. In a study of elementary school principals, Mitchell and Castle (2005) found that the priorities of the principal became the priorities of the school and the level of importance that the administrators placed on learning and teaching sent a “distinct message about the importance of these activities” (p. 24). Mitchell and Sackney (2006) argue that the principal, as the “holder of the vision” (p. 630), keeps the shared vision and purpose central and visible in the daily work of the school.
A sense of collective responsibility for all students’ learning is another component that the principal must attend to in the development of the organization (Bolam et al., 2005; DuFour et al., 2004; Stoll et al., 2006). A broad strategy to encourage the development of this characteristic is for the principal to engage staff in the collective monitoring of student progress through the use of data (Bolam et al.; DuFour et al.; Stoll et al.). With the increased availability of student data, this strategy is becoming more accessible to principals. However, it requires that the principal is comfortable using data to examine student learning and facilitating target setting for student achievement (Stoll et al.).

Fostering an environment of mutual trust is the third aspect to which the principal should attend in order to develop the organization. According to Leithwood and Riehl (2003), collaboration, a key characteristic of PLCs, can be facilitated only when trust exists between members of the community. Sprenger (as cited in Stoll, 2006) describes trust as being both “horizontal” among staff and “vertical” between staff and administration. Stoll et al. (2006) argue that, without horizontal trust, there can be no transfer of knowledge; without vertical trust, there can be no willingness to take risks. The literature highlights a variety of specific strategies to facilitate the development of both types of trust. First, Garmston and Wellman (1999) suggest that principals can nurture trust by building relationships that move beyond being collegial to becoming collaborative. Second, Youngs and King (2002) indicate that trust develops between principals and staff when the school leaders’ beliefs and actions are consistent with school goals. Third, DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest that administrators can foster trust between themselves and staff by being open to suggestions and decisions made by staff
committees. Finally, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) suggest that administrators who are attempting to nurture trust should avoid direct and open confrontations with staff and that principals invite staff to participate in school processes instead of coercing people to move forward.

The fourth aspect that principals should attend to as they develop the organization is the use of shared leadership. This approach to leadership is widely accepted as a key characteristic of a professional learning community and one which the principal plays a critical role in developing. Youngs and King (2002) identify the opportunity for teachers to exert influence in the school as a fundamental characteristic of a learning community. Without the involvement of the staff in the decision making of the school, it is not possible to change the culture (Barth, 2002). Barth encourages administrators to "provide forms of leadership that invite others to join as observers of the old and architects of the new" (p.6).

How a principal enacts the concept of shared leadership is unique to the individual and the context in which they are working, but it is essential in the development of the organization (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). Lambert (2002) encourages administrators to seek and value teachers’ points of view, construct meaning through reflection and dialogue, and continually demonstrate leadership behaviours. In addition to these approaches, DuFour and Eaker (1998) suggest the use of collaborative decision making and individual and team empowerment as strategies to develop shared leadership. Collectively, these practices encourage teachers to think of themselves as leaders who influence others and who take charge of the complex challenges they encounter. Shared leadership requires administrators to have confidence in the staff to make wise and
informed decisions and to be willing to release to teachers the control traditionally held by their role. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) contend that shared leadership “takes considerable effort, attention, and commitment” (p. 109) to successfully implement. When principals are willing and able to demonstrate and practice shared leadership, when they act as role-models, and when they participate with staff in the decision making process, faculty will be more engaged and take greater responsibility for improving student achievement (DuFour et al., 2004).

Although shared leadership is a critical part of a professional learning community, current organizational limitations such as hierarchical and bureaucratic structures within education may impede the actualization of this practice in schools. Consequently, administrators need to review and implement structures that will support and facilitate the reculturing of the school. Mitchell and Castle (2005) highlight the important role structures play in supporting the work of administrators as instructional leaders. They identify structures as providing the architecture that supports administrators in their attempts to engage staff in intellectual discussions and educational endeavors. Mitchell and Castle go as far as stating, “to neglect, ignore, or marginalize structure is a risky and ill-conceived choice” (p. 24). Successful principals establish positive conditions for learning by making direct structural changes to support this important work (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Administrators play a critical role in reviewing and evaluating current structures with staff to ensure that existing structures are not acting as barriers to the work that needs to be done. Mitchell and Castle (2005), for example, found that principals who were successfully developing PLCs saw the need to incorporate structures that would
focus attention on learning. In a similar vein, Mitchell and Sackney (2006) argue that principals, in conjunction with staff, must consider how to eliminate the barriers that promote teacher isolation by reducing both “functional and emotional separations” (p. 632). These barriers include operational items such as timetables, course and teaching assignments, and common time to plan and meet during the school day. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) suggest some additional structures administrators can facilitate: common planning times for grade teams to meet; physical proximity of classrooms for teaching teams to provide greater opportunity for informal interaction and dialogue; professional dialogue within the staff room; and partnerships and mentoring situations.

Administrators need to engage staff in identifying existing barriers and finding solutions with the goal of eliminating current obstacles and developing new structures. Garmston and Wellman (1999) suggest that a collaborative problem solving process provides staff with the opportunity to address issues and assumptions about structures that will support their learning and to identify potential solutions to the challenges, with a collective responsibility for seeing the suggestions succeed. It is this opportunity to openly question and challenge existing conditions that they suggest will lead to new ways of operating. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) also highlight the importance of principals taking an active part in the problem-solving process. They argue that staff members are able to build structures that will facilitate the development of the organization when principals are engaged and supportive of the changes. It is the organizational structures that support principals and staff in schools to solve problems, develop shared understanding, and practice common approaches to classroom activities (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006).
Developing the organization is a complex role for a principal involved in reculturing a school to reflect the characteristics of a professional learning community. Equally difficult is modifying existing structures to facilitate and sustain the ongoing changes in the evolution of the culture. While the literature highlights the areas requiring the attention of the principal, administrators need to develop a unique approach to doing this work based on their own leadership style and the overt and covert context in which they operate.

**Developing the Practices**

The second category of work is the principal’s role in developing the practices used to carry out the daily work of the individuals within the school. The literature identifies processes that facilitate collective work and learning and the specific strategies that principals use to implement collaboration; reflection and inquiry; and professional discourse, including dialogue and discussion. It also establishes the use of personal guiding principles that frame the principal’s daily work.

The first practice principals must attend to is the development of collaboration as the primary method of working within the school. Slater (2005) argues that the ability to work collaboratively is one of the “core requisites” (p. 324) of school reform. The importance of staff members working in interdependent teams to pursue common goals is a priority for school administrators in reculturing the school (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, 2006). Mitchell and Sackney (2006) state that the principal plays a key role in the development of collaborative skills by acting as “a builder” who effectively facilitates the development of a collaborative culture and as a “role model” who consistently works in a collaborative manner. In addition, through daily interactions
that build relationships with staff and students, principals contribute to the overall collaborative culture of their schools (Castle, Mitchell, & Gupta, 2002).

Reflection and inquiry is the second set of processes that require the attention of school principals. These two processes facilitate the development of individual and collective knowledge within the PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker et al., 2002; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Mitchell and Sackney identify the need for teachers to practice descriptive, analytic, and evaluative reflection on their role in student learning as part of developing personal capacity or knowledge. It is therefore important for administrators to develop strategies that help staff become more effective in the use of reflection and inquiry processes (Bolam et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2006). Principals who provide safe opportunities for personal reflection and inquiry will be better able to support individuals as they challenge and change their existing practice (Mitchell & Sackney).

One practice to develop the use of reflection and inquiry is the principal’s active engagement in developing the cognitive climate of the school. Mitchell and Castle (2005) suggest that principals are “well positioned to create conditions that encourage intellectual conversations, stimulate new thinking, and energize teaching and learning” (p. 430). More specifically, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) identify skilful questioning as an effective strategy administrators can use to develop reflection and inquiry. Asking questions instead of providing answers requires principals to shift from seeing themselves as being in control to sharing the responsibility for decisions and problem solving, which requires the cognitive engagement of the staff. As Stoll et al. (2006) identify, it is the
principal's role to create a place of "questioning where you must ask the question and the answer questions you" (p.13.3).

A second practice principals can facilitate is the use of ongoing professional discourse among staff. Professional discourse incorporates both dialogue and discussion, which facilitate the development of deeper understanding and decision making. The effective use of dialogue and discussion is a critical process for collaborative groups to master (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Garmston & Wellman, 1999; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Senge, 1990). Senge describes dialogue as a method of communication that carries the collective understanding and insights of the group further ahead than could be achieved individually. Groups that are skilled in dialogue are able to tackle complex issues and problems and to reach unique and previously unidentified solutions. Mitchell and Sackney state that "dialogue requires the open and creative exploration of issues, intense listening to one another, and the suspension of one's own views" (p. 69), each of which involves an additional set of skills for group members to master.

In contrast to dialogue, Senge (1990) describes discussion by using the analogy of a ping-pong game (p. 240). His point is that discussion can be helpful to dissect an issue from various points of view, but ultimately a winner is declared and a decision reached. There are times when discussion is a necessary part of the decision-making process, but without the use of dialogue, groups may rush to decision without a deep understanding of the issue at hand (Garmston & Wellman, 1999). Mitchell and Sackney (2000) suggest the use of skillful discussion as a way for group members to reflect actively on an issue or problem and to develop creative and collaborative solutions and decisions. It is unlikely, however, that either dialogue or discussion will be used by individuals without guidance
and support to do so, and developing these processes within the school requires the direct attention of the principal.

Finally, the literature suggests that part of the principal’s role in developing the practices of the school is to develop a personal set of guiding principles that influence and direct the daily work of the administrator (Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). This process involves the enactment of daily work behaviours that reflect and embody their guiding principles (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Mitchell, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2006). Mitchell and Sackney identified two guiding principles from which administrators operated: “they focused their actions on teaching and learning, and they involved everyone who had a stake in a particular decision or initiative” (p. 634). Through these guiding principles, administrators who were working within effective PLCs made operational choices that were based in the context of their unique setting and that illustrated their personal style rather than attempting to fit within a prescriptive notion of the work. In addition, Stoll et al. (2006) note that the guiding principles can support administrators who change schools and who may need to adapt strategies that had been effective in their prior setting. In other words, their guiding principles serve as a compass by which they operate in any setting and as a guide for the ways in which they develop school-wide practices.

Developing the practices within the school requires that the principal attend to processes that facilitate the difficult and complex work of the individuals who comprise the PLC. The literature highlights three key processes: collaboration, reflection and inquiry, and professional discourse including dialogue and discussion. In addition, the literature suggests that principals who have been successful in developing a PLC also
have developed their own set of guiding principles that influences their daily practices. Knowing the current status of the development of these processes as well as some skills required for this type of work will assist principals as they make choices and develop practices within the school.

_Developing the People_

The third category of tasks describing the principal’s role is the development of the people who make up the community of learners. The literature in this category includes recognizing and strengthening the individual and collective capacity of the teachers, focusing on staff learning as a means to improving student learning, and providing a role model for staff. This aspect of the principal’s role is also termed _instructional leadership_ (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Mitchell & Castle, 2005).

Mitchell and Sackney (2006) describe the principal as providing a “centering function” (p. 628) for the school. The centering function highlights how the principal’s deep knowledge of the school facilitates a systemic understanding of the capacity across the school, which enables principals to make connections between individuals and to foster knowledge construction across the school. Leithwood and Riehl (2003) also highlighted the thorough understanding of the strengths across the school as a means by which principals provide individualized support for teachers or teams in order to move them forward in their knowledge and practice.

In addition to building connections and relationships between individuals within the school, principals are expected to contribute consciously to the knowledge development of individuals and groups. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) point to the role of the principal in encouraging and facilitating formal and informal professional learning.
opportunities. These learning opportunities could include mutual observation and feedback, inquiry into student data and works, teacher research, and networking within and beyond the school. While principals are not viewed in the literature as the primary provider of the knowledge, they are identified in a variety of sources (e.g., Bolam et al., 2005; Mitchell & Castle, 2005; Stoll et al., 2006) as the individual who is most able to facilitate access to all types of resources that promote learning for staff.

Serving as a role model is another behaviour that contributes to the principal’s role in developing the people in the school. By setting examples congruent with the school vision and goals, principals provide leadership in the development of a PLC (Leithwood & Richl, 2003; Mitchell, 2007). Mitchell and Sackney (2006) described the principals who were most successful in creating PLCs as those whose actions exemplified the characteristics of a learning community: “good teaching strategies, effective collegial processes, respectful treatment of students, and systemic approaches to practice” (p. 633). By demonstrating congruency between action and words, these principals provided a clear picture of how work was expected to be done in the school (Mitchell & Sackney).

Developing the people within the school is of primary importance in the role of the administrator, as it is these individuals who will ultimately move the school forward as a learning community. Garmston and Wellman (1999) identify that “the means for improvement exist within the school community” and not in external solutions (p. xiv). This statement implies that the faculty and administrators will muster the necessary energy and ability to work as a professional learning community if the leadership is effective in maintaining a clear focus on this outcome and channeling energy positively. The challenge for school-based administrators is to enact their role in developing the
people in a manner that nurtures and aligns the collective energy to facilitate the
development of a PLC.

Summary

Supporting the development of a professional learning community that
demonstrates the characteristics of shared values and vision, collective responsibility for
student learning, mutual trust, shared leadership, collaboration, reflective professional
inquiry, and a focus on staff learning is a complex task for principals. With increasing
pressure on principals to shift their schools from traditional models of operation to those
that reflect these characteristics, they face significant challenges. There is a sense in the
field that there is a recipe or formula for this difficult work. If becoming a PLC were so
clear and sequential, however, it would make sense that more schools would demonstrate
these characteristics of a PLC. This is not the case (Mitchell et al., 2004).

The literature describes the principal’s role in this work by means of areas
requiring their direct attention and energy: the development of the organization and
operational structures, the development of practices and processes used within the school,
and the development of the people and their knowledge base. Administrators are often
left to develop and use strategies that may work only for the unique contexts in which
they were constructed, but they should not be expected to undertake this difficult work
with no support. To help inform this administrative obligation, this study seeks to identify
and describe the range of practices used by elementary principals whose schools are
demonstrating the characteristics of a professional learning community. The next chapter
focuses on the study’s methodology.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This study investigated the strategies used by elementary school administrators to facilitate and nurture the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) within their school settings. This research involved a purposive, reputational sample of 3 elementary principals whose schools had been identified as having success in moving towards the observable characteristics of a learning community. Using a grounded theory approach, the work of these administrators was analyzed to determine the specific types of behaviours and approaches they used to move their schools forward as learning communities.

Research Methodology and Design

I have based this study on a constructivist perspective, which “assumes the relativism of multiple social realities, recognizes the mutual creation of knowledge by the viewer and the viewed, and aims towards interpretive understanding of subjects’ meanings” (Charmaz, 2000, p. 510). The constructivist perspective assumes further that it is the context and experiences individuals perceive that determine their actions and responses (Schwandt, 1994). Through unique experiences, individuals begin to construct and refine an understanding of their reality, and their responses will be as unique as the situations they perceive. In such a setting, the researcher is not a neutral observer but is also a participant in the negotiated construction of knowledge and understanding. As Fontana and Frey (2000) describe, “the interview context is one of interaction and relation; the result as much a product of this social dynamic as it is a product of accurate accounts and replies” (p. 647).
The constructivist perspective informs my view of my role in this research as a facilitator and interpreter. The construction of knowledge that comes from this research is a result of the data generated by the participants and me, and of the ensuing analysis. To accommodate this joint process, I adopted a methodological approach with sufficient flexibility to facilitate the exploration and interpretation of the participants’ experiences and meaning, which ultimately led to the identification of commonalities and emerging themes demonstrated by these school administrators.

My selection of constructivist grounded theory as my methodological approach was informed by Charmaz’s (2000) suggestion that this approach “presumes to look for views and values as well as acts and facts” (p. 525). As Charmaz describes, constructivist grounded theory provides systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build theoretical frameworks that explain the collected data. The use of a grounded theory approach enables the collection and analysis of data that facilitate the generation of a theory, which in this instance deals with the strategies and behaviours used by elementary administrators as they work with their schools to become professional learning communities. As noted in Charmaz, grounded theory methods move through a process of simultaneous collection and analysis of data to track emerging themes and to develop a theoretical framework. This approach allowed me to document, describe, analyze, and understand the perspectives of the individuals involved while representing their work within a theoretical framework. By using a grounded theory approach, I was able to gather and analyze data without “forcing either preconceived questions or frameworks upon it” (Charmaz, p. 512). Instead I was able to honour the unique
perspectives of the participants and the context in which they were working and to construct my own understanding through multiple reviews of the data.

Selection and Invitation of Participants

This study involved a purposive, reputational sample of 3 elementary school administrators from an urban, southern Ontario school district that currently has a system-wide focus on implementing professional learning communities as a way of working in all schools. I began the purposive sampling process by developing a checklist of 16 observable characteristics of professional learning communities (Appendix A) based on the work of Eaker et al. (2002). This checklist provided a filter for examining schools more objectively and for determining where observable progress had been made in the areas of improving school culture, developing effective processes, and establishing supportive structures.

To begin the purposive selection process, I used the checklist to review elementary schools I had worked with on a number of occasions. I considered my own experiences with staff and the administrator in determining potential participants. The personal data I used to narrow down the field of participants included anecdotal observations of the work of staff and administrators within and beyond their school, conversations with staff and administrators about student learning, and my own work with members of the staff. Using the observational checklist combined with my personal experiences, I generated a list of 10 potential schools and administrators that I felt would be appropriate participants for this study. Each school I identified had demonstrated observable growth in all areas described on the checklist.
I included reputational sampling to incorporate opinions and perspectives beyond my own. This sampling process began with an invitation to the five educational superintendents from the district with responsibilities for supervising schools and administrators to individually identify potential participants from their area. I provided the superintendents with the checklist of PLC characteristics and asked them to use this tool as they reviewed schools for potential inclusion in the study. I asked the superintendents to consider the elementary schools they felt had demonstrated observable improvement in the areas of school culture, processes, and structures. Each of the area superintendents provided me with completed checklists for 1 to 3 elementary schools they felt demonstrated growth in many of the characteristics of a PLC as described by the initial screening tool. In total, the superintendents identified 12 elementary schools and administrators they felt met the criteria outlined in the checklist.

Comparing the superintendents' list of 12 schools and my own list of 10 schools, I was able to establish a list of 6 elementary administrators whose school names had appeared on both lists. This list of 6 high-frequency schools and their administrators then became the list of potential participants who could be invited to participate in the study. Finally, I ranked the schools and administrators in descending order, 1 through 6, based on the consistency in ratings between the superintendents' analyses and my own.

In order to maintain a maximum size of 3 administrators in the study, I contacted the first 3 administrators on the ranked list by phone, explained the study and their potential involvement, invited them to consider participating, and asked them to take some time to consider the invitation before responding. Following those conversations, I e-mailed each of the administrators a copy of the letter outlining the study. All 3 of these
administrators responded quickly, each indicating they would be pleased to take part in this research project. The 3 principals who agreed to participate were subsequently provided with copies of the questions in advance of the interview time, which was arranged when they indicated their willingness to participate.

The 3 participants ranged in experience from 4 years to 8 years as a principal, each having been vice-principals within the same board prior to their current role. Each of the administrators involved in the study had worked in their current school for at least 3 years. Each was responsible for schools with a kindergarten to grade 8 configuration. Two of the schools were located in one city, approximately 5 kilometers apart, whereas the other was located in a neighboring city.

Data Collection Instruments

The data collected for the study included the transcript of one personal interview with each of the principals, which lasted approximately 1 hour, and the expanded field notes gathered during a full-day observation of each participant in his/her school. The interview questions were structured around a preliminary conceptual framework developed for this study. The open-ended questions addressed the areas of school culture, structures, and processes and were intended to probe the strategies the administrator used to address these areas.

No specific instrument was used to guide my observations during the day-long shadowing of the principals. During these observational visits I recorded (a) notes about the conversations the administrators were involved in; (b) documentation of the learning going on at the school for teachers and students; and (c) evidence of culture, processes, and structures displayed or demonstrated around the school. These observational field
notes then became the basis for an expanded set of field notes as I reflected on the visit to the school and added details that I had not had time to record during the visit.

Data Collection

For 2 of the 3 participants I began the data collection process by conducting the interview, arranged at a time and location convenient to them, and followed up with the observation at their school at a later date. With 1 participant I conducted the interview and observation on the same day at the participant's request. Immediately prior to the start of each interview I expressed hope that the interview would remain more conversational in tone than interrogational and warned them that I might veer away from the planned schedule of questions, if they began to talk about something I wanted to understand or document more clearly. Additionally, as the participants responded to each of the questions I probed more deeply into the stories they shared to illustrate their responses.

With the participants' permission, I audio-taped each of the interviews. Prior to beginning the taping I ensured that the participants understood that they could change anything they wished in the transcript. Taping the interviews allowed me to actively listen and attend to what the principal was saying and question further if clarification was required or if I felt that elaboration of a story might present helpful details and understandings. Within 3 weeks of the interviews I transcribed each of the audiotapes. As a member check, I forwarded electronic copies of the transcript to each of the participants. I asked the participants to read through the transcript carefully and indicate if they felt it accurately reflected the perspectives and experiences shared during our conversation. I also invited the principals to identify any changes they felt needed to be
made in order to clarify points they were making or stories they were sharing so that the transcript was an accurate reflection of what they had intended to communicate during the conversation. All 3 participants responded by saying that the transcript accurately reflected the content of our dialogue, that no changes were required, and that they felt comfortable with my proceeding with data analysis.

The second source of data came during the day I spent with each of the administrators, during which I shadowed them as they went about their regular routines within the school. I used a small notebook to capture my observations, which included (a) conversations the principals were involved in with staff, students, or parents; (b) artifacts and displays of student learning and achievement posted around the school; (c) the physical organization of the school plant and classrooms; and (d) routines and procedures observed in action. I intended to use these observations to fill in information that the interview data had provided in a limited way as well as to confirm descriptions the administrators had provided as they shared their stories. Throughout the observation period, I tried to remain as unobtrusive as possible. Except for a single instance when one of the administrators needed privacy to intervene with an upset parent, the principals were open and welcoming, including me in their daily activities such as conversations with staff regarding students, curriculum, duty schedules, as well as “walkabout” tours and observations of classroom teaching and learning. Times when I was alone with the principals in the hallway or office area allowed me to ask them about some of what I had observed and to clarify my understanding of events or artifacts in order to begin the interpretive process. My field notes ended up being comprised of both my observations and the discussion notes.
After each observation, I transcribed the recorded field notes and expanded on these to add details I could recall. The expanded field notes were sent to the principals along with the transcripts of the interviews as part of the member check. Again, all administrators felt comfortable that my field notes were truly a reflection of what had occurred that day.

Data Processing and Analysis

Following each of the interviews, I transcribed the audiotape of the conversations for closer analysis. The transcription process allowed me to begin to review and interpret what the administrators described during their interview and subsequently to begin the analysis process. It was during this initial transcription process that I was able to identify preliminary evidence of school culture, processes, and structures within each case. This initial review during transcription provided a preliminary lens or filter for viewing the school and principal during my observational visit.

With transcriptions completed, I conducted a within-case analysis of the data I had gathered for each subject. I coded the transcript at a variety of levels in order "to read and think about the data in a systematic and organized way" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 32). During the first analysis, I coded the individual conversations using descriptive labels in order to "unpack the data" (Freeman, 1998). At this stage of analysis I reviewed each transcript a number of times, as recommended by Creswell (2002), in order to become familiar with the descriptions the principals provided of their experiences as well as emerging themes that began to appear within the interviews.

I first coded the transcripts at a descriptive level by asking, "What is this about?" (Creswell, 2002, p. 266). Coding the text in this manner provided me with the "tools to
think with” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 32) and allowed me to describe specific actions and common themes a participant had discussed. During this initial coding I used specific descriptors, including some of the labels administrators had used during their interviews as they described their school and work. The data I had gathered during the interviews provided rich narrative descriptions of the work the administrators had been engaged in as they worked with their school communities towards becoming professional learning communities. Within the descriptions the principals provided and the examples they used to illustrate both successes and challenges, many of the labels they used to discuss their work seemed most fitting to use as the initial descriptive codes for analysis of the data. Some of the descriptive codes I applied to the transcripts at this level included time, professional knowledge, dialogue, visibility in school, measurable goals, student learning, staff learning, reflection, alignment, behavioural expectations, norms, inquiry, leadership, instruction, and facilitation. A complete list of the descriptive codes I applied during this initial analysis can be found in Appendix B.

These initial codes provided descriptive labels to capture specific actions, behaviours, and approaches the administrators had discussed during their interviews. The descriptive nature of this level of coding provided me with an opportunity to capture concrete strategies that the administrators felt were contributing to or challenging them as they worked towards nurturing the PLC that was developing in their school.

As I completed the initial descriptive coding for each transcript, I reviewed and coded the corresponding expanded observational field notes. I used the same approach to code these data, applying descriptive labels to what I had observed and heard as I reviewed my expanded field notes for the first time. In the same way that I had reviewed
the transcripts multiple times to become familiar with the content, I reviewed the field
notes multiple times. Some of the codes I had used to sort the data from the interviews I
also used to code the field notes. Some additional descriptive codes emerged from this
analysis that had not been present when analyzing the transcripts. The additional codes
were routines, schedules, respect, multitasking, relationships, trust, honesty, and student
safety. Again, this level of descriptive coding captured concrete examples of how the
school operated, how staff and students interacted, and how the administrators
operationalized their role during my brief observation. The full list of descriptive codes
used in the analysis of the field notes is included in Appendix C.

An explanation for the additional codes that emerged at this level of the analysis
of the field notes might be that, whereas the interview relied solely on the specific answer
by the administrator to a particular question, the focus of my observation was broader.
Bringing a fresh set of eyes to watching the school allowed me to make note of aspects
that, during the relatively brief interview, the administrators might have overlooked, were
no longer aware of in their daily patterns, or felt were not important.

The descriptive coding process yielded too many labels to easily identify themes
or categories of specific strategies principals were using. Although these descriptive
codes provided an initial way of documenting specific actions occurring at the school,
they did not provide a clear way of identifying and classifying the work of the
administrators as they moved their school toward becoming a professional learning
community. This circumstance indicated a need for a conceptual analysis of the data. To
begin this process, I reexamined the descriptive labels I had generated and clustered them
around common themes. During this secondary phase of coding, I looked for evidence of
concepts and broad categories that would shift my perspective from a concrete descriptive level to a conceptual level. The themes that emerged during this review included a focus on learning, goals and alignment, shared leadership, principal as learner, attention to school culture, collaboration, using data to inquire and learn, reflective practice and teacher inquiry, principal as lead learner, consistent structures, principal as instructional facilitator, and problem solving across the school. I was able to cluster the descriptive codes I had used in the first phase of analysis within these 12 broad categories.

Although these labels were consistent with the description of professional learning communities found in the literature, they did not provide insights about the principals' role in the development of a learning community. It was necessary, therefore, to go beyond this conceptual level and to uncover a foundation for the work of the administrators. Throughout this tertiary analysis, I searched for a broad interpretive framework that would capture the themes and underpinnings of how these principals operated. It was at this final stage of analysis that the notion of the principal as instructional facilitator emerged. The data pointed to a set of guiding principles by which each of the administrators served as the instructional facilitator within their setting. The four guiding principles that emerged across the individuals were (a) protecting the purpose, (b) attending to relationships, (c) sharing the responsibility, and (d) valuing the journey. These guiding principles provide an interpretive framework for a range of practices and anchor points for the work of these administrators.
Methodological Assumptions

The methodological approach taken in this study is based on some specific assumptions. First, it is assumed that the data, while providing a brief snapshot of 3 administrators' experiences at a given point in time, are accurate representations of their work. Second, the data represent the perceptions of the individual participants based on their recent experiences and contexts. That is, the principals' understanding of what they had been doing, the challenges and successes they had experienced, and their subsequent descriptions are the results of their own unique experiences. Finally, the data have been interpreted based on my own understanding and context. I acknowledge that my personal beliefs, values, and biases as well as my own context have influenced how the data were gathered, analyzed, and reported in this study.

Limitations

The grounded theory method used for this study has some limitations. First, the size of the sample was limited to 3 administrators, all from the same urban Ontario school district. The theory generated is therefore limited to this area. It will be left to the reader to make generalizations beyond the contexts explored in this study. The data, however, provide rich descriptions and examples of strategies that administrators in given situations have found beneficial in moving towards operating as a PLC. It is hoped that the study may provide descriptions similar to those experienced by others and therefore provide useful insights into the challenges that principals face.

A second limitation of this study is the small amount of data gathered at a single, limited point in time. This study took 1 month for recruitment, 6 weeks of data collection, and 3 months of data analysis. By limiting the data collection to one interview and one
observation per participant, the findings represent a small number of experiences at that point in time but not over a period of time. This approach limits the reflections of the participants to their perceptions at one point in time, which can be influenced by a wide range of external factors in the research context. Providing multiple opportunities for data collection would have allowed the participants to describe their situations over time and might have illustrated additional themes and new insights.

Another limitation was unanticipated and arose as a result of scheduling the interviews and observations. Two of the participants scheduled the observation day within 2 weeks of the interview. The third principal opted to conduct the interview and observation on the same day. Although combining the interview and the observation on the same day provided a convenience of time for both the administrator and me, it provided a marked disadvantage as well. For the two observations scheduled for days other than the interview day, I was able to conduct a preliminary interview analysis before the observation. This meant that I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the context of the school prior to my observation, which helped me to identify some early themes emerging from the interviews. This contextual understanding did not limit or narrow my observations, but rather it provided me with additional background knowledge to use as I interpreted what I was seeing and experiencing during the observation day. In the case of the observation occurring on the same day as the interview, I spent the first part of the day observing the principal, conducted the interview midway through the day, and then completed the day engaged in the observation process. This schedule was at the request of the principal. While the first part of the morning was of interest and I gathered a variety of observational data, I realized later that, without the background knowledge
provided by the interview, my understanding of what I was observing was more limited than in the two other settings. It had not occurred to me that sequencing the observation and interview in this manner would pose the challenge it did until I began to analyze the observational data. I felt my prior experience with the school and staff would have been adequate to provide a rich context for my observations. I came to realize that the content of the interview played a significant role in my interpretation and observation of the administrator’s actions.

Establishing Credibility

Checklists, interviews, and expanded field notes provided the opportunity to triangulate the data collected during this study. In addition, the expanded field notes I made during my observations along with the lengthy transcripts of the interviews provided thick descriptions of the contexts of the participants. By probing responses during the interviews, I was able to expand the initial descriptions and dig deeply into the work of the principals. The opportunity to spend a full day within the school provided an extended observation period to see how the principals operated within their setting over a wide range of situations. This extended engagement allowed me to watch for behaviour and interview consistency. For example, it helped me to question whether they acted the way they had described in the interview. Finally, I invited participants to be a part of the analysis process by providing them, as part of the member check, with the opportunity to review and make suggested changes to the transcripts of their interviews and the observational field notes. None of the participants felt changes were necessary to the documentation I provided for them and indicated that all materials accurately represented their perspectives and schools.
Ethical Considerations

This study was conducted in accordance with the expectations for ethical research with human participants as outlined by the Brock University Research Ethics Review Board. I received approval from the Research Ethics Board at Brock University in March 2005 (Appendix D). Simultaneously, I applied to the school district's Research Advisory Committee, who reviewed my application and also granted approval to conduct my study within the board. Once approval at both levels was granted, I approached the educational superintendents whose input I was seeking in the identification of elementary school administrators. By the end of April 2005, all superintendents had replied with their feedback and I was able to proceed.

At this point I began the process of contacting the first 3 administrators on the potential participants list. Once they indicated their willingness to participate, I sent electronic copies of the letter outlining the study and their invitation to participate, the letter of consent, and the schedule of interview questions. The interview and observation dates were arranged at a time and location convenient for the participant. Before beginning each interview, I collected one copy of the signed consent form and asked participants to keep the other copy in their files. I confirmed with them that they were comfortable with my making an audio recording of the interview and that the transcript of this would be shared with them and used for analysis. I also reminded them that at any time if they did not want to respond to a question or wanted to stop the entire process, they simply had to indicate that to me and we would cease the interview. On the day of my observation visit, I reminded the participants that I would be taking notes and would share my observations with them once these had been transcribed. Finally, in order to
protect the identity of the participants in the study, I assigned pseudonyms for each principal and their school.

Restatement of the Area of Study

The purpose of this study was to document specific strategies and approaches being used by elementary principals whose schools were seen as demonstrating growth in the characteristics of professional learning communities. Using a checklist of observable characteristics of PLCs as a screening tool, a list of 6 potential participants for this study was generated based on the input of five educational superintendents and me. From this list of potential participants, a purposive, reputational sample of 3 principals was identified, invited to participate, and included in this study. I interviewed each of the participants and captured the stories of their challenges and successes in the transcripts of the audiotapes of the interviews. In addition, each principal was observed over the course of one day. This observation provided me with the opportunity to document additional information about how the principals operationalized their role in the school. Multiple reviews of the data at different levels provided me with the opportunity to frame and describe the work of the principals in a manner that others would be able to relate to and perhaps find helpful in their own situations. The following chapter provides descriptions of the guiding principles the participants in this study used as they moved their schools towards functioning as learning communities.
CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

This study investigated the strategies used by elementary principals as they supported the development of professional learning communities (PLCs) within their schools. This study used a purposive, reputational sample of 3 school principals who were responsible for the administration of a kindergarten to grade 8 school, with populations ranging from 551 to 770 students, in an urban area of southern Ontario. Data were gathered for this study from an hour-long interview and one day-long observation of each principal in the school setting. The data were analyzed inductively, which yielded four guiding principles that informed and influenced the actions of the participating principals as they nurtured the development of a PLC in their schools: protecting the purpose, attending to relationships, sharing the responsibility, and valuing the journey. This chapter will present the data that illustrate the actions of the individuals as viewed through the four guiding principles.

Protecting the Purpose

My dialogue with each of the participants demonstrated that they felt the primary purpose of the school’s work was learning. Protecting the purpose of the school was reflected in three main strategies used by the administrators: the use of all types of data to track and monitor student learning; the optimization of time, energy, and resources to support learning; and a clear and unwavering protection of learning as a priority within the school setting. According to the participants, student and staff learning took priority over all other aspects of their work, and these strategies functioned to protect that purpose. Although enacted differently in each school setting, the guiding principle of
protecting the purpose was evident across the work of all 3 principals and the strategies they used in their daily work.

*Use of Data*

The first strategy was the use of data to inform the principals about what the students and staff needed to learn. The data attended to by the administrators covered a broad spectrum of types of assessment information going beyond the traditional report card and EQAO provincial assessment data. For Stephen¹, the thoughtful use of data was helpful in focusing on student learning. He described the way the staff was beginning to work with data to inform their teaching practice.

We are working more and more looking at data. The data can be soft and hard data, and we talk about that right up front. We need to get into a practice where everything you do with kids you are looking at the data, which a lot of teachers have been doing for years. But you need to be reflective on the data and say, “What this is telling me about the kids? How many kids aren’t getting this topic sentence idea? And then I need to change my practice so that they will learn.”

And so it’s getting the teachers to realize this. The question I always ask is how are you changing your practice? You’re not changing the kids; you’re changing your practice. I think teachers are really good with soft data. They need to get better at using that in a way that changes their own practice.

For Michael, data helped to engage professional dialogue as the staff looked at ways to support all students. The school had begun the process of using SMART goals (specific, measurable, attainable, results oriented, timebound) a few years earlier. The staff was

---

¹ All names are pseudonyms.
currently refining their use of data to inform classroom practice and challenge the status quo. Michael described his thoughts about this evolution in data use.

What I am feeling is that people are feeling comfortable about data now and we can look at data or look at a SMART goal, and it’s no longer, “Did you meet a target or not?” It’s, “OK-how did the kids do? Did they improve, and are there any clues about the ones who didn’t improve, and what can we do for them?” And so it just brings out more questions.

In Anne’s case, the use of data was facilitated by a whole-school focus on an initiative she described as “assessing for learning.” This approach provided a common focus for all staff as they explored instructional strategies to support learning. Anne felt it had been very successful and was “one of the best things we did.” She went on to describe how the focus on gathering a range of data and connecting to instructional practice maintained a focus on student learning.

We began the thinking around how to use some of the data and the work of Marzano to help us with the decisions around instruction....It was a constant focus on instruction and learning with the leadership team doing the presenting, with all the teams presenting during the staff meetings, with everyone having homework to go away with and bring back to share. It was really an exciting year in that way, because all the pieces came together.

*Optimizing Time, Energy, and Resources*

A second strategy used by each of the principals to protect the purpose was to optimize the use of time, energy, and resources to support student and staff learning in their school. Some of the specific examples of this strategy included balance between the
multiple demands of the job of principal, timetables that would support student learning, staff and classroom allocation, creative use of funding, and alignment of school priorities.

First, each of the principals identified their own struggle with never having enough time to do the job as well as they wished they could. That said, each of them also noted that using time wisely to focus energy on student and staff learning was a priority for them. From a personal perspective the principals each identified the challenge of balancing their work with staff and students with system and ministry requirements in order to maintain the focus on learning. Michael’s frustration was clear in this comment:

Then the challenge is, for me, how to support that and not get bogged down in the administrivia. And that’s always the fight for balance. That’s what I find frustrating. I mean, some days are good, and some days are not because you’re stuck in the office and you spend the whole day trying to get out in the school.

Anne also recognized the struggle to balance the demands on her time.

There’s lots of paper work and computer stuff that has to get done. And a lot of that doesn’t get done until after 4:00. And I find that a struggle, managing the paper and managing all the things that need to be done at the management level but knowing that if I’m not visible I’m not connected to the classroom and I don’t really know what’s going on.

All administrators had worked with their staff to find ways to make the most effective use of the available time and resources. Anne had made it a priority in her school’s timetable to ensure that staff at the same grade level had common planning time together every week. She and her vice-principal found additional blocks of common time
for teams to meet and discuss student progress by providing instructional coverage as needed.

In addition to shared planning time, Michael and his staff had chosen to timetable uninterrupted instructional time for the first 100 minutes in the day for grade 1 and 2 classes and the second 100 minutes for grade 3 and 4 classes.

In those early years, when students really need big blocks of time to do rich literacy and make it cross-curricular and really focus, they’ve got the time and the kids aren’t going here and there and everywhere because they’ve got music or French or other stuff. So those were things we put into the timetable and then built the timetable around it.

Another way principals optimized time, energy, and resources was through the conscious choice to utilize every available staff resource to support student learning. Michael and Stephen described similar approaches their schools were using to provide targeted, small-group instruction. In both schools students had been placed in small, needs-based instructional groups for some period of literacy instruction each week.

During this time, focused support was targeted at small groups of students by optimizing the use of staff available in the school. For Michael and his staff this approach meant involving additional personnel that were available including the vice-principal, principal, teacher-librarian, and itinerant communication teachers to work with groups of up to nine grade 1 students with similar learning needs. In Stephen’s school, all primary and junior grade teams had participated in the approach. Stephen acknowledged some reluctance on the part of a few individuals in the junior division but felt they had turned a corner when a teacher who had initially resisted the idea appeared in his office early in the process and
acknowledged that “this is awesome for kids. I’ve seen a big improvement in their reading in all areas we have focused on over the past 4 weeks.” This creative use of staff resources was felt by both Stephen and Michael to be positive in its impact on student learning.

For Anne, the staff at her school made structural changes to improve student learning by allocating existing staff resources differently in the intermediate division over the entire year. The intermediate team identified the need to limit the number of teacher contacts any student had in order to maintain a tighter sense of connection between staff and students.

What we have is one teacher who teaches math, science, and technology and then a core teacher teaching the rest of the subjects except for music and French. So we only have a group of four teachers teaching grade 8. So that means they are sharing those kids, and when they get together there isn’t a great huge group of them so they can talk about program and they can talk about kids and learning and they can talk about problem solving.

Beyond timetable and teaching assignments the principals were also attentive to classroom allocation. For Anne and Michael it was a case of ensuring physical proximity so that teams and assigned staff had optimum contact during the day. In the case of Michael’s school, classroom assignment was organized with like grades side by side in the hallways. In Anne’s school, she assigned double classrooms to the teams, who would use the space to focus on student learning by planning for whole group, small group, and individual differentiated instruction that met the needs of all students in two classes. When a request to reassign the double classrooms for the following year came to her
from a different team of teachers, Anne challenged them to consider how their physical proximity would support student learning.

One grade team who have not been working well together…came and said, “We want to be together.” My question to them was, “Why? How would being together help you in terms of your program planning for kids? If you really want to be together, what is it that you want to be together for?”

This comment indicates that, for Anne, the allocation of staff and classrooms was a thoughtfully made decision geared directly towards protecting the purpose of student learning.

The allocation of available funding was another example of how principals used resources to protect the purpose of the school. Stephen identified the filtering question he used when making decisions about purchasing or when staff requested a new resource in the school when he said, “You have to think how it is going to affect kids and their learning. It literally affects them if you don’t have enough money, but is it going to improve their learning?” For Anne the allocation of financial resources came down to how well the money could be used to support staff and student learning. Anne described how the staff had creatively used funding targeted at a small population of students to support all students in the intermediate division. The school used the staff learning money to release the entire intermediate teaching team for focused staff learning. Thinking outside the prescribed parameters of the initiative helped Anne and the teaching staff to optimize the financial resources to support all learners. As Anne noted, “By using that model we hope to get away from the concept of a special education kid, rather that different learners need differentiated instruction with a team of teachers to help them.”
The final example of the optimization of time, energy, and resources was at Michael’s school where the staff learning component was tightly aligned with the staff annual learning plan (ALP) process and school goals. By encouraging the staff to work collaboratively on common ALP goals, which in turn related to the school goals, Michael felt the collective energy of the staff was aligned.

What I go after all the time with the staff is make it smaller, make it a small goal, and make it one thing.... So that everything you do feeds into that, so you’ve got one plan, and that’s your ALP, and you’re not overloading yourself. Because there is so much coming-workshops on this, or that, everything coming at you all the time. So you could easily get off track. So you have to come back to what are we working on? Same with the kids, what do they need, and what can we do to keep focused on those things?

Michael felt that aligning the energy of the staff within a narrow span best served the learning needs of students and staff members.

*Focused Priorities*

The final strategy used by the principals to protect the purpose of the school was the identification of a small number of focused priorities for student and staff learning. For each of the principals this task was shared between themselves and a team of staff members who worked collaboratively to focus the work of the school. Although different in configuration and operation across the three settings, these consultative teams acted as the gate-keepers of the school’s purpose.

The leadership team in Stephen’s school was comprised of members of each division and the four priority learning areas of literacy, numeracy, culture, and
technology. This school growth team was responsible for running the staff meeting each month; determining the content; providing the staff learning component; and filtering priorities from the four learning teams, the district, and ministry initiatives. By setting a long-range plan for the year, the school growth team was able to make informed decisions about how different demands or opportunities either did or did not align with the school goals. Stephen described the work of the school growth team in the following:

I meet with the school growth team once a month and I ask them, “What do you think, are we on track?” They’re the gauge. They’re the ones talking to their people in their divisions as well as on the professional learning teams.... They’re the ones making the decision around professional development and what is important to them.

The school growth team provided Stephen with his barometer of the school and their needs as a community, which helped to maintain a focus on the learning priorities of the school. A protective focus on the priorities of the school came directly from Stephen as he described the need to be watchful of all of the pressures on a school.

You have key people who are looking at what is coming from the board and the ministry, but you have a single focus as a school professional learning community. It doesn’t mean those other things aren’t happening, because they have to happen. But you have to have one thing you are focusing on so that everyone is on the same page, talking the same language.... And in a staff meeting there is a common focus and topic we are all discussing because it is important to our kids and their learning.
Anne used a similar team structure to maintain the focus on the priorities of her school. The leadership team, which included members of each of the school committees, provided group direction for the school. According to Anne, prior to the conception of this team the school felt overwhelmed and unfocused by the enthusiasm and ideas generated by the various school committees. With the introduction of the leadership team, the focus had been narrowed and priorities aligned within the school.

The leadership team really co-ordinates all of the information that comes from system initiatives, ministry initiatives, or the committee initiatives. So people on the leadership team come from each of those committees. Because what was happening in the past was that the literacy committee would go off and create their initiatives, the numeracy committee would create their initiatives, and the Choices into Action team, which is now our culture team, create their initiatives. And we just found that there was too much happening. So this is a filter to bring the pieces together and to really focus on something, and we stick to it.

An additional strategy for maintaining alignment and focus was a clear articulation of the school priorities. For Michael the presence of clearly articulated priorities freed the staff to focus on specific learning needs. Michael contended that the simplicity of having three learning areas within the school, each aligned through the ALP process of the different grade teams, gave him permission to maintain a narrow focus.

You know what I like about this? I can say “No! This is our school plan. I don’t care if school programs are putting on another 100 workshops during report card time. You don’t have to go to them. You do what you were planning to do.” I just finished reading Good to Great, and the author talks about the hedgehog concept.
What's the one important thing you do well as an organization, and you keep going back to it. And it is so true. Only if you do that will this work. It takes pressure off people to do everything. I am doing what I am supposed to be doing; I am doing what I am supposed to be doing. This is my plan and I am going to see it through.

While learning was of primary importance to each administrator and each had strategies for protecting that purpose, they all identified the challenges of maintaining this focus. Michael articulated the struggle to keep learning front and centre in his work with staff and the community.

There are amazing extracurricular activities at this school. You know, we have 100 kids in our school band, for example. But when you add up all those events, they can get in the way of the real reason why we're here. Those things are important, and kids will remember them, and they're a part of education too, but, you know, we do need to get kids to read! And that's critical....And you know that's the other thing too. You have to fight perceptions of what people think. People have an idea of what they think is a great school and then you have your idea of what makes a great school, and how to get that across is hard. Those things are important, but other things, like learning, might be more important.

Through the use of a variety of strategies, these principals were effective in protecting the purpose of the school: a clearly articulated focus on staff and student learning. The administrators placed student and staff learning as the number one priority of the school and found the ways and means to maintain unwavering focus on this area, juggling administrative requirements of the role with the need to stay involved directly
with student learning. Using a variety of creative solutions, the principals were able to optimize the time, energy, and resources available to the school in order to maintain focus on a limited number of common goals addressing student and staff learning.

Attending to Relationships

The second guiding principle that influenced the work of the principals was attending to relationships. The strategies that demonstrated this guiding principle included trust in individuals, being attuned to the pulse of the school, and attending to group dynamics.

Trust

My dialogue with the principals illustrated that each had a high level of trust in the individuals working at the school. For Stephen trust meant confidence in knowing the people surrounding him were the right people doing the right job. He described this level of trust in terms of his beliefs about leadership and sharing responsibility with those more knowledgeable or experienced than himself. As Stephen stated, “it doesn’t mean that you aren’t ultimately responsible for decisions that are made by others, but you know you have people around you who can pick up those pieces and who will do them really well.”

Michael’s trust in the right people doing the right job was reflected two ways. First, using the metaphor of coaching a sports team and playing to individuals’ strengths, he described how he had made deliberate changes in the staffing assignments within the intermediate division. Using a semirotary model with teachers assigned to their area of strength, Michael believed all intermediate students benefited. Michael’s trust in the teachers assigned to particular teaching areas reflected what he believed to be the best combination available for the students. Second, Michael’s trust was reflected in the
confidence he had in the learning teams working within his school. He made it clear he
did not have the answers or knowledge to directly lead every team at the school. Instead
Michael trusted that the knowledgeable individuals on those teams would be better able
to lead the learning for the school; his role would be to provide support and resources to
facilitate the teams’ decisions.

Anne’s trust in her staff was revealed in her approach to engaging staff in
committee work. Anne would tap individuals on the shoulder and invite them directly to
join a committee; she would then extend the invitation to the entire staff. Her underlying
desire to have the right people doing the right work was reflected when she discussed the
approach she used to build the school leadership team.

I invite people to be on it, and then I invite anyone who would like to be on it to
join us. It’s nice to have continuity, and people with history, as well as people
with new ideas. It’s a real mix of the right people.

Trust in staff members to make significant positive contributions to the school helped the
principals to build effective professional relationships.

Pulse of the School

A second strategy used by the principals as they attended to relationships was
keeping a finger on the pulse of the school. The principals felt they needed to spend time
in classrooms and around the school on a daily basis in order to know what was
happening within the school. The principals all made reference to the need to build
relationships with individuals within the school by being visible and engaged in the
learning happening across the school. Each noted that the observations made during
walkabout visits, in the hallways, and on the playground deepened their relationships
with staff and students across the school and significantly influenced informed future
directions and problem solving.

Anne made it a priority in her daily work to get out to classrooms to see and hear what was happening between students and staff.

I think it’s a way to show that I value what they’re learning. I know what every kid is doing. I know that they’re working on an iMovie, and I know what it’s about. I can ask them questions. The grade 8s asked one day, “How can you always know what we’re doing?” [I replied,] “I just know and I’m really interested in what you’re doing.” But that’s what I love about the grade 7 and 8s. They think you know nothing about them.

Anne felt classroom visits were a vital way for her to be in touch with staff and students.

Michael’s desire to stay connected to the students and their learning led him to set a personal goal regarding classroom visits. To focus his time in the classroom, Michael kept a checklist with him that structured his conversations and observations of student learning, level of engagement, and support for differentiated instruction.

I call myself data-boy: some of the staff do too. I want to document at least 200 visits to classrooms this year. These cards help me track my visits and make sure I’m paying attention to what’s important and talking to kids about their learning. I have to be getting out where I need to and seeing everything. I want to make sure I’m not just out visiting hot spots.

While he joked about his need for structure in his observations, Michael noted that the checklist provided a reminder to him of what he needed to attend to during his time in classrooms in order to make the most of the visits.
Attention to Group Dynamics

A third strategy used by principals to attend to relationships was attention to group dynamics. This was demonstrated in three ways: the development of collaborative teams, the use of professional dialogue, and the orchestration of effective staff teams.

Both Anne and Michael had focused on shifting the culture from congenial to collaborative, and for both it had been a major challenge to overcome. When Anne was first appointed principal, she had found the conversations between staff to be congenial, not collaborative.

The talk wasn’t so much about learning, student learning, or teacher learning. It certainly was about the cocurricular life of the school because that was an important part of the school. It was important to the kids. It was important to the staff too. What you didn’t hear and what I was missing was the talk about kids learning, the talk about our learning, the talk about what we can do better, what’s making a difference in our kids’ learning.

Anne’s attention to group dynamics over her 4 years at the school had shifted the way staff worked with one another. She described the work the entire junior division had done during the previous summer to focus on student learning.

It’s one of the most exciting things...some of the junior teachers in grade 6 decided they wanted to find a way to more effectively use the First Steps indicators as part of their literacy program in the entire junior division. So they e-mailed and called everyone and had some planning meetings in August. When we met in September and they shared what they had done, I was absolutely blown away. They had met together, focused on where the students were on the continuum, developed a
program to support the students, and provided some real continuity between grades 4, 5, and 6.

For Michael, the realization that staff did not work collaboratively took almost 2 years.

I’d say it was very congenial at first. There weren’t any conversations and debates about student learning. It was all very nice, and they got along in the staff room and had great parties, but there wasn’t any team planning and developing units and assessing student learning together. It took a year and a half or 2 years to figure that out because they’re very receptive at staff meetings: you present something and everyone smiles and is receptive. But then everyone went away and closed their door and it wasn’t happening that way. That was the biggest thing to overcome—I just didn’t realize it right away.

Michael went on to describe how interactions between staff had changed over the 4 years since his arrival at the school. For him, the change was initiated by challenging some of the existing assumptions about the students and learning.

This is my fourth year here, and I feel like we’re all just beginning to row in the same direction and there are some good things going on. The one thing is it’s not always congenial any more, and that’s good. We had our improvement meetings the other night, and there was a raging debate in the numeracy committee. It was the contextual problem solvers against the drill and killers. It was really interesting, and it was great. That’s what we need to have, we need to have that debate sorted out and come together and figure out how we’re going to help kids.
Developing collaborative teams was a priority for Stephen. Hiring staff to open a new school gave Stephen the opportunity to build a collaborative culture from the ground up. One of the first tasks the staff focused on was establishing norms for working together. These norms structured how the staff worked together and the type of work they did, including using data to plan and prioritize their grade team programs and developing common programs for each grade team.

Incorporating the use of professional dialogue was another means by which principals were attentive to relationships. Anne noted that when she first arrived at her school there were no conversations about professional learning, which became a challenge for her: finding ways to incorporate professional dialogue as a way for teachers to interact with one another. Anne described how the staff meetings were structured to promote professional dialogue. She also noted evidence of this structure spilling into division and grade teams.

In the primary division they have all decided to read Debbie Miller’s book, *Reading with Meaning*. When I go into classrooms I can see that they’ve been learning and planning together. I’ll say to the teacher, “I see you’re working on schema,” for example. The kids know the term and can talk about it as well. Then I’ll go into the next room and they’d be talking schema and I’d say, whoa. There’s been some dialogue going on here. When you can see that happening in that whole grade team or across a division, it is very exciting.

Both Michael and Stephen described how staff members were spontaneously initiating opportunities for professional dialogue. For Michael, the discovery of teachers
taking responsibility for their own learning and creating a network of peers to learn with was an indication of professional dialogue occurring in the school.

I had one of those wow, great moments when I walked into the portable one day at lunch. Five of the primary teachers were sitting around. They had started their own book club and they were learning more about guided reading. They had bought their own books and were working through it. So when you go around the school and you’re starting to see that kind of thing happening, that’s an indicator to me, those conversations about what we are doing to help kids, that we’re moving forward as a learning community.

The intermediate teachers at Stephen’s school had requested funds to purchase books they felt would support their learning and integrate literacy learning across all subjects in the division.

It’s a little more difficult in intermediate because of the rotary assignments, but the teachers are all reading Strategies That Work, and they’ve talked about how they can use it in their programs. You walk into those classrooms and they’re all using the same language with the kids, making connections, and so on. So that’s what they are focusing on in their learning. Great conversations.

In addition to the deliberate use of structures to promote professional dialogue in formal situations such as staff meetings, Michael identified how professional dialogue was being used in spontaneous conversations between staff members.

One of our teachers got up in one of this year’s staff meetings and said, “You know, there is a lot of hallway talk in the intermediates now about how did you do that, and how did you get that, and what did you do there. We are really looking at
kids learning and talking about that like we’ve never done before.” So that kind of change in how we talk is very positive.

For Michael, this was an indication that the use of professional dialogue had transferred to settings in which teachers found it purposeful in developing a common understanding amongst themselves.

The final strategy used by principals as they attended to group dynamics was structuring effective teams. Each of the principals described the importance of a team approach and the impact on student learning. The teams described included teaching teams, committee teams, and learning teams. Working in isolation was not an option in any of these schools.

Michael’s belief in the power of effective teaching teams was tied to the professional reading he had done. His decisions regarding teaching assignments were based on his observations of individual strengths and his belief in building effective teams.

You’ve got to work in teams, and this goes back to any moves I’ve made in the staff. You know the whole Marzano research says that kids learn best when teachers are working in teams, so that’s an imperative. When I’ve had fights at school it’s been about that…I’ve moved teachers around and they wouldn’t talk to me. And that’s OK. But my reasons for it are that that team isn’t working, and I think this team will work better for the kids. If you’re not going to move on your own, I’m going to do it.
Anne described how grade teams had taken on a priority for the teachers. Regular grade-team meetings focused on program planning and student learning were an indication to her that teachers valued the support the team approach provided.

Every grade team has a night that they are designated to meet. And what I am really finding interesting this year is that when you try to plan an ad hoc committee meeting on a given night, they aren’t available. And I really like when they say this, “But that’s the grade 2 team meeting so we can’t have it that night.” And that tells me they value their meetings. It tells me that it’s important to them, and it tells me that they are doing important work. So that is now, in my fourth year, what I am hearing....That’s been a big transition in terms of the team piece.

Stephen described how the professional learning teams provided the structure for staff learning at the school. Putting the teams in place at the school provided the framework for staff learning and decision making.

Right from the get-go the professional learning teams for literacy, numeracy, culture, and information technology provided the focus for job-embedded learning....So those learning teams drive all of the work that we are doing at the school. They provide the focus and continuity for us as we move forward. They drive our school effectiveness plan, drive our data collection, and drive what resources we buy. It is all about the power of the team.

Each of the principals highlighted strategies used as they were attending to the relationships within their school. All demonstrated a high degree of trust in the individuals working within the school and used the strengths and knowledge of staff to support student learning. In addition, being present and visible in the school on a daily
basis provided the principals with the opportunity to stay attuned to the pulse of the school and further build relationships with staff and students. Finally, attending to group dynamics by listening to, observing, and facilitating how staff members worked together as well as what comprised the focus of staff work enabled the principals to support the development of collaborative teams and the use of professional dialogue. Each of these strategies played a role in how these principals supported the development of a PLC.

Sharing the Responsibility

Sharing the responsibility for learning was the third guiding principle illustrated in the work of the participants. This principle was reflected in three strategies used by the principals: collective responsibility for staff and student learning, the use of cognitive coaching to promote staff learning, and attention to developing leadership across the teaching staff.

**Collective Responsibility**

Developing a sense of collective responsibility for student and staff learning was one strategy used by the participants to engage staff in sharing responsibility. This involved including staff in a democratic manner to determine the learning priorities for students and staff, the development of opportunities to address learning needs, and individual responsibility for including all team members in the learning.

Collective responsibility was illustrated in the approach taken by the principals to identify, plan, and implement learning opportunities for the teaching staff. The three participants described how staff teams were responsible for the identification of gaps in student learning and the required staff learning necessary to address these needs. For
Stephen, collective responsibility for learning was illustrated in the work of the professional learning teams.

They’re making the decision around their professional development based on what the students are showing them and what is important to them. It doesn’t mean that the other things aren’t happening. It means that we’re really focused on what we are doing for kids, and especially kids that aren’t learning.

In Michael’s school the teachers worked together to identify gaps in instruction and the necessary steps they would take to address these gaps.

This is when the teachers took over and this is why it is probably working, because it was teacher driven and they could see the problem in their own classrooms.... They took one of the PD days and set up a huge chart on the wall, and everyone put in what they were doing in their program as far as writing was concerned. They found where there was a spiral across the years and where it was breaking down. Then they decided what they needed to do to fill in those gaps...so you know we’re starting to get a spiral where everyone is looking at the same thing at a grade-appropriate level.

The learning team at Anne’s school took on the responsibility of leading the learning of the other staff members.

We began the thinking around how to use some of the work of Marzano to help us with decisions around instruction. That team was instrumental in starting the dialogue, going to staff meetings, creating a professional development focus, because they did all the presenting. They planned it and presented it, and the teachers went away and practiced it and came back and shared. It was a constant
focus on instruction, with the leadership team doing the presenting and with all the grade teams sharing back and presenting and the follow-up meetings.

Utilizing staff teams to identify and develop learning opportunities for staff was one approach demonstrated by the principals to support the strategy of developing collective responsibility. In addition, Anne described how she encouraged smaller teams and individuals to take responsibility for one another’s role in the learning process.

I felt really good when the other day a grade team that has been struggling together decided they needed to plan together. They invited the other teacher who has been struggling to be part of their planning process. That’s what you want teams to do. When you can get a team to pull in those people who really can’t work that way, then you’ve got things working.

Finally, Anne described how she had encouraged staff members to look beyond classroom roles to developing broader teams that shared collective responsibility for all students’ learning.

We have a special education teacher, who is an awesome intermediate teacher, who is now drawn tighter into that team…. One of our goals for our special education teacher is to help teachers not think of her as a special education teacher but think of her as part of the intermediate team in terms of delivery of program, in terms of development of program. It’s not just about struggling students; it’s about all students.
Cognitive Coaching

A second strategy used by principals in sharing responsibility for learning was the use of cognitive coaching. The principals used this strategy to promote problem solving, changes in thinking, and articulation of practices amongst staff.

Stephen noted that teachers were becoming more effective at describing how their instructional decisions were linked to student learning.

I think we are becoming better communicators to the public and to students so we can say, "Your child was here when we started and now they are here. The reason they are here now is because of what we’ve done in the classroom between here and here. These are all the strategies I used, and here’s the difference it’s made."

Developing an understanding of deliberate instructional choices for students based on learning needs combined with the means to articulate these choices was how Stephen used cognitive coaching to support the development of sharing responsibility for student learning.

Anne used cognitive coaching to question and put the problem-solving process back into the hands of the teaching staff when they came to her looking for a solution.

I think one of the pieces that we always work hard towards is that whole shared thinking about how to make kids better people, not just better learners. And sometimes there’s that small group of people that want to hand that over to the administrator. And it’s one of the things we are really working at this year is turning those questions around. It’s all about asking good questions. So when they come to you and say to you there is a problem with whatever, you need to find a
way to turn that around so you are focused on the child...because it’s easy to take ownership for a problem, and it’s being careful that you don’t.

In addition to using questions to problem solve issues with students, Anne used this strategy to facilitate positive, collaborative staff relationships.

I’ve been evaluating an exemplary teacher, and there are three teachers on this team. One is exemplary, one is a first-year teacher who is really good, and one is a struggling, experienced teacher. And this group does not work together. They have all kinds of issues.... When I met with the exemplary teacher I talked with her about her role as a leader in the school, a leader in the instructional piece, and a leader in the cocurricular piece. I asked her, “What is your role in terms of this third person?” And she said, “What do you mean?” I said, “It’s just like a classroom. You’ve got a group of kids, and you’ve got struggling kids and more able kids, and so you have an expectation that all kids will work together. What’s your role in terms of making your team come together?”

Michael used cognitive coaching to drive the work of the learning teams. Through a feedback cycle incorporating clarifying and probing questions, he focused the team’s thinking and problem solving.

I want to figure out where the teachers want to take this learning because that’s what has worked. I just use the feedback from the committees and give them my questions about their work. “This is a question that has come to me.” Or “What do you think about this?” Or “Why did you decide to go this direction?” Then we create the feedback loop.
Through these probing questions Michael helped the teams refine their focus and clearly describe the choices made regarding student and staff learning.

*Leadership*

Another way principals encouraged a sharing of responsibility was through the development of leadership across the teaching staff. Each participant demonstrated how they incorporated this across a range of situations including working with grade and divisional chairs, fostering leadership ability, and using a democratic approach to identifying leaders for school teams.

Stephen saw the important role of staff leadership in ensuring the learning teams would be sustained after he was gone. "I knew I wanted to sustain this, and the only way I could sustain this was if they knew they were empowered to do this." The same was true for Michael, who recognized the power of engaging individuals in the leadership of the school.

I don’t mess with those things. Once you get a leader going, I step back and ask what they need and get it for them, but get out of their way. You have to. The more you do that, the more you build leaders in the school, and it starts to lessen my work too. When you have an upcoming half day for staff learning and the team are all saying to you, “We want to lead this and we want to do this”-giddy-up, let’s go! Then the learning comes back to me too.

Anne described how a nurturing, quiet leader was able to engage staff in sharing the responsibility for learning. In describing the impact of this individual, who was also a division chair, Anne said,
Because she is a close contact and she is a person who interacts with that division so well, it’s really changed the focus of the junior division. A quiet leader, who at first said to me, “I just can’t present” and now she presents. She facilitates, and she’s done workshops. And she came from a place and time where she said that wasn’t part of her repertoire. A solid teacher: a great team player. But now she is truly a leader on our staff. One of many leaders, but an outstanding leader.

Michael described how he approached leadership in formal settings in a democratic manner, allowing individuals to emerge through desire and necessity.

One thing with my committees is that I didn’t appoint chairs to them, and it was partly because I wanted people to emerge as leaders, and it was partly because I wanted to shake up some of the negativity that was going on in the primary, junior, and intermediate team meetings that I saw…. Then people emerged who wanted to lead, for different reasons…. So there have been different leaders emerge for different parts of it…. What I might say is, “Amongst you, chose someone who will be the communication person to communicate at staff meetings.” Or “Amongst you, could you find a volunteer who can be the person I can go to” because I don’t want to squash it now because it has worked this way so far.

For Stephen, confirmation that leadership was distributed across the staff was evident when a new vice-principal was appointed to the school midway through the year. He said, “You’ve allowed people to do it.” He said, “My experience has been that I was doing it with the principal, and we were leading the way, and the staff was hopefully following us. But we were doing the work, and they were coming
along. But I cannot believe that in staff meetings and division meetings and in everyday happenings, the staff lead. They’re the ones coming to us and saying, “Okay, I think we are ready to be doing this, I think we should be doing this now.”

The principals used three main types of strategies that facilitated sharing the responsibility for learning and supported the development of a PLC. First, each of them found ways to develop a collective sense of responsibility for student and staff learning including engaging staff in determining student learning needs and the corresponding staff learning needs. Second, each of them used a form of cognitive coaching to engage staff in reflective thinking about their own personal and collective role in student learning. This ranged from individual conversations that focused on the role the staff member played in the instructional process to whole school teams responsible for implementing plans to meet school effectiveness goals. Finally, each of the principals saw the key role that staff leadership played in sustaining the progress the school had made towards becoming a PLC. By engaging staff members in the leadership of the learning occurring at the school, each administrator was attending to the ongoing success of the school in meeting the learning needs of staff and students.

Valuing the Journey

The final guiding principle evident in the work of the participants was valuing the journey. This principle was reflected in four strategies: valuing the individuals making the journey, recognizing progress, acknowledging the journey is ongoing, and understanding there is no master plan. While each principal demonstrated that they valued the journey, different strategies were used by different principals.
Value the Individuals

The first strategy was valuing the individuals who were making the journey. The administrators observed that a school could have an effectiveness plan on paper, but it was the individuals in the school who brought it to life and moved the plan forward. Anne noted that “you can have a school direction plan, but it only exists on paper. It doesn’t really come alive unless you work on it as a whole staff.” Stephen identified that it was important to acknowledge the range of individuals and the various learning styles they brought to the process in order to value the views of all staff.

I think we always have to remember that when you are working with so many people, not everyone thinks like you, and I am a big picture person. I need to see the big picture. I had that big picture in my head, but the question was how do you express that to other people? We all needed to see where we were headed. By attending to individual styles, Stephen felt he was able to value the different perspectives being brought forward.

Anne also demonstrated the value she placed on the individuals making the journey by ensuring staff members were provided with opportunities to acquire the necessary skills to move the school forward.

The leadership team did some work on effective team skills.... And we used the work of Stephen Covey, and the concept was about different things you need to develop teams. So one of them was the team and trust building...and then the other is having the necessary skills and processes to work effectively together. Anne worked with the leadership team in an ongoing way to build the capabilities of staff members through structures and processes used in staff meetings and a
full range of learning opportunities. Her equal attention to the content of learning and the processes used to support learning were an investment she wanted to make in the staff. She was beginning to see these specific skills being transferred and applied to other settings such as division and grade teams. Anne felt that her investment in the individuals within the school benefited the school as a whole.

Recognize Progress

Recognizing progress was another strategy used by principals in valuing the journey. Each principal found different evidence of progress and acknowledged the importance of tracking the school’s development. In Anne’s case, the spontaneous sharing that individuals and teams did with her was an indication of the progress she felt the school was making in working as a PLC.

When teachers come and they say, "I want to show you this," or when the grade 1 team says, "I can’t believe we won’t be together next year, because we’ve done such great things together." Or you ask them for something in terms of assessment at a school team meeting, and they’ve got it. Now, not everybody is there yet; there are gaps here and there. But certainly we’re more of a team now doing those things.

Michael saw progress in the documentation he asked the learning teams to keep in order to track the work they were doing.

What’s nice about this artefact book is that this is all original. This is everything they wrote. This is all their work and what they put down.... And after the fact, they can look back and see what they’ve done. This was not imposed by me; it
was their ideas and their work. They can see the clear connections between where they started and where we are now.

Stephen described how important it was to publicly recognize the progress made to remind the staff of what they had accomplished. He saw part of his role as removing roadblocks which could be “detrimental, and you have to be the cheerleader.” By making the progress public, Stephen was able to focus on the many accomplishments of the staff.

In any business I think people will say, “Well, we haven’t done this and we haven’t done that.” They get fixated on what hasn’t been done, especially at the end of the year...and what happened out of that process was they realized how much they’ve done in 2 years. And when it came to writing the negatives, the list became very small. And it became manageable, and they could come up with the actions.

**Acknowledge the Process is a Journey**

A third strategy used by principals in valuing the journey was the acknowledgement that the process of becoming a PLC is ongoing: a journey rather than a destination. Michael acknowledged that this realization took some time for him as a first-time principal.

You begin your first year as a principal keen and eager, and you go in thinking you’re going to change the world in 8 weeks: have it all tidied up and then run it. Well, not 8 weeks, so you give yourself 6 months. And this year, my fourth year here, I am just feeling now like we are all rowing in the same direction and there are some good things going on, but we are just on our way.
For Michael it was about continually working towards moving from good to great. While acknowledging that his school was good, he admitted it wasn’t a great school. “Why aren’t we? There might be reasons beyond our control, but we can’t use it as an excuse. We have to always do better for the kids. We keep moving forward. That’s when we’ll be a great school.”

To Anne it was clear that the journey of learning together was an ongoing cyclical process involving the identification of learning needs, time to plan and learn, opportunities to practice and reflect, and then strategies to revisit the required learning. “We are asking teachers to take it away and practice it, and share. So there’s four blocks of time needed to create that process. And it keeps going over and over again.”

Continually revisiting the journey was a priority for Stephen. He made a point of asking teachers to reflect on progress, and their search to understand what worked and what didn’t work made the journey an evolving process.

To show that what we were doing was impacting kids, I’ve always said to them, right from the get-go, is what you have to do is collect predata, and then postdata and then show what you did in between to impact the kids. And if they didn’t make improvements, well, you’ve got a record of what you did, so you need to go back and look at it and figure out how to improve that.

No Master Plan

The final strategy used by principals in valuing the journey was an understanding that there is no master plan for becoming a PLC. Stephen described how in his experience he had no master plan for how some aspects of the process would evolve; rather he trusted in the process. “I think in the back of my mind I had some idea of what we needed
to do, but I can honestly say I wasn’t sure...and I was waiting to see what we’d come up with in the discussions.”

Anne appreciated that the journey needed to be fluid and responsive rather than fixed. This was always front and centre in her thinking.

I know there are gaps. Some of the things I know we have to do as a system we’ve gone through too quickly; “okay, we’ve got to do this and this and this.” And then we didn’t quite have it because we didn’t spend long enough getting it down to “I’m using it. I’m analyzing it. It works. It doesn’t work.”...And so there’s always other things we have to delve back into because there isn’t a fixed plan. There can’t be.

Michael described his understanding of the nature of the journey in terms of a musical metaphor.

The messiness of it, that’s the whole Margaret Wheatley piece, there are patterns in the chaos.... This is chaotic, but there are patterns and good things that happen. What I thought of...was jazz players. Jazz players are wired for exactly this because they have some structures in place, the 12 bar blues or whatever they are playing. But they are responding to everything that is thrown at them as it is thrown. They have an end goal, but they are navigating to get there as soon as they take off. Right!

The participants used a variety of strategies to demonstrate that they valued the journey of becoming a PLC. They acknowledged the strength that staff members brought to their roles and the part each one played in bringing learning to life. The principals also recognized their personal role in attending to
individuals’ ongoing professional growth in order to maintain forward progress towards developing as a PLC. In addition, the principals described the role they played in identifying, recognizing, and celebrating the progress that had been made and how this was structured into the ongoing journey of becoming a PLC. Finally, each of the participants demonstrated an understanding and appreciation that in the journey towards becoming a PLC there was no master plan to be followed, but rather an ongoing process of flexibility, reflection, and growth.

**Summary**

The purpose of this study was to identify strategies used by principals as they supported the development of PLCs in their schools. Through the data collection, each of the principals described and demonstrated how their schools worked on a day-to-day basis and highlighted what they felt were indicators of the challenges and successes they had encountered in their quest to develop as a PLC. The principals identified a wide range of strategies that they used as they worked with staff and students. While these strategies provided a description of how the principals were operating within their schools, specific strategies were limited to the specific situations and individuals involved, and it was difficult to isolate common strategies. Commonality across the participants became more evident with the identification of four guiding principles from an inductive analysis of the strategies shared by the administrators. The guiding principles that informed and influenced the work of the participants were protecting the purpose, attending to relationships, sharing the responsibility, and valuing the journey. Whereas the administrators used a range of strategies to enact these principles, it was these four guiding principles that guided their day-to-day work.
As I studied these guiding principles, I realized that these administrators viewed themselves as individuals whose role it was to facilitate the collective energies of those they worked with in order to be successful with the task ahead of them. These principals demonstrated that their primary task was to engage all members of the school community in making a positive learning difference for students and staff. They had a clear purpose, were aware and responsive to individuals in the school, enabled and engaged the majority of individuals in the school, were flexible and responsive to changes, and accepted the challenges this task would present. In these respects the individuals enacted their role of principal as instructional facilitator and reflected the four guiding principles identified in this chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

With the increasing interest in professional learning communities as a means to improving student learning, principals in many school districts are working to create cultures within their schools that demonstrate the characteristics of a learning community. The role of the principal in developing a PLC is complex and challenging, requiring that administrators be skilled in attending to the development of the organization, practices, and people within the school simultaneously. What is it about how principals enact their role that facilitates the development of a PLC within their school? How is it that some principals are able to develop PLCs while other administrators struggle to know where to begin or are continually searching for the magic recipe to PLCs? This was the starting point for my study. By identifying schools where evidence of a PLC was present, I undertook to describe the strategies used by elementary school principals to facilitate and nurture the development of professional learning communities within their school settings.

Summary of the Study

This study involved a reputational sample of 3 elementary school principals from an urban school district in southern Ontario whose schools had been identified as having success in moving towards the observable characteristics of a learning community. The identification of participants was based on a checklist that I had developed from existing literature, which included 16 observable characteristics of professional learning communities. Each of the participants was responsible for the administration of a kindergarten to grade 8 school, with populations ranging from 551 to 770 students, located in large urban communities.
The data collected for this study comprised the transcript of one personal interview with each principal lasting approximately one hour and the expanded field notes gathered during a full-day observation. The interviews drew from a series of open-ended questions addressing the areas of school culture, structures, and processes and the specific strategies the administrator used to address these areas. The field notes gathered during the observation day were comprised of my observations of the principals going about their daily routines as well as notes of private discussions I had with each administrator.

The first phase of data analysis involved a descriptive coding of the data under the categories of time, professional knowledge, dialogue, visibility in school, measurable goals, student learning, reflection, and alignment. These descriptive codes captured specific actions, behaviours, and approaches the administrators had used or described in their interviews. Additional codes that emerged from observational data included routines, schedules, respect, multitasking, relationships, and trust. The descriptive codes yielded concrete examples of how the school operated and, more specifically, what strategies the principals used in their daily work.

A second conceptual analysis yielded 12 broad themes, which included a focus on learning, goals and alignment, shared leadership, principal as learner, attention to school culture, collaboration, using data to inquire and learn, reflective practice and teacher inquiry, principal as lead learner, consistent structures, principal as instructional facilitator, and problem solving. Although consistent with the characteristics of PLCs found in the literature, these themes did not provide new insights into the role played by the principal in the development of a learning community.
At the interpretive level of analysis the notion of principal as instructional facilitator emerged. At this level the data pointed to a set of guiding principles by which each of the administrators served as the instructional facilitator within their setting. The four guiding principles identified were (a) protecting the purpose, (b) attending to relationships, (c) sharing the responsibility, and (d) valuing the journey. These guiding principles provided the interpretive framework for the daily work of these administrators.

*Protecting the purpose* was demonstrated in three main strategies used by the administrators: the use of all types of data to track and monitor student learning; the optimization of time, energy, and resources to support learning; and a clear and unwavering protection of learning as a priority within the school setting. The second guiding principle, *attending to relationships*, was demonstrated through trust in individuals, being attuned to the pulse of the school, and attending to group dynamics.

*Sharing the responsibility for learning*, the third guiding principle, was reflected in three strategies: collective responsibility for staff and student learning, the use of cognitive coaching to promote staff learning, and attention to developing leadership across the teaching staff. The final guiding principle, *valuing the journey*, was reflected in four strategies: valuing the individuals making the journey, recognizing progress, acknowledging the journey is ongoing, and understanding there is no master plan.

The administrators demonstrated the four guiding principles in their daily work with a unique perspective reflective of their personal style and the context of their school. These guiding principles informed the choices made by each of the principals within the school, influencing short-term and long-term decisions, discussions, and directions taken.
by the school. In addition, these guiding principles provided a framework for the way in which the administrators viewed themselves and their role in the school.

Discussion

This study speaks directly to one of the most hotly debated topics in current educational literature. Much of the literature about PLCs has described standard components that, when attended to explicitly, are expected to result in the development of a learning community. The process provided by DuFour et al. (2004), for example, holds great appeal for principals who are seeking a formula for creating a PLC. Dufour et al.'s work describes schools that have made rapid, significant shifts in their culture after addressing standard components. Recently, however, the literature has noted the complexity of the task and acknowledged the role the local context plays in shifting the culture of a school towards a PLC. Louis (2006), for example, describes the need for schools to look beyond "a primer and modest changes" (p. 485) in order to create a significant shift in the status quo. Louis goes on to suggest that schools need to understand "the local context and history" (p. 486) in order to develop strategies that will be effective and sensitive to each unique setting. Bolam et al. (2005) add to this developing discussion by highlighting the role that context and setting play in the evolution and look of each PLC, stating that, although PLCs have common characteristics and adopt similar processes, the challenges and implications for development are unique to each setting.

My results align with this recent shift in the literature. While each of the principals was working towards developing a school culture that demonstrated the common characteristics of a PLC, each was successful in doing so because they had
attentive to the local context in which they were operating. These principals inherently understood that solutions and strategies which had been developed outside of their school context were unlikely to move them forward in the way they needed to grow. Instead, each recognized the need to develop appropriate strategies that would support the development of the organization, practices, and people within their own school setting.

A second contribution of this study lies in its discovery of the power of guiding principles in focusing and directing the daily activities of the principals. Until recently the literature describing the role of the principal in the development of a PLC has focused primarily on the explicit and specific strategies or steps that could be implemented in order to develop the characteristics of a learning community in a school. For example, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) introduced the notion of a “core set of basic leadership practices” (p. 16) to highlight broad sets of skills and actions that effective principals should incorporate in their work. These practices provided a descriptive and prescriptive set of specific actions for administrators to use in their daily work and were intended to provide a model for others to follow, regardless of the context. However, the findings in this study do not support a set of universal strategies. Instead, the findings are consistent with a new discussion in the literature that describes the use of guiding principles as influences on the daily actions of individuals within learning communities. Mitchell (2007), for example, describes “principles of engagement... that bring coherence and sustainability to school improvement efforts” (p. 14). My study uncovered guiding principles that served a similar purpose. The guiding principles identified in this study provided the administrators with the foundation for making decisions and taking action. As in Mitchell’s research, I found that the guiding principles provided the administrators
with the anchor for making difficult decisions and acting in ways that would move their school forward. As an anchor, the guiding principles provided a means for the administrators to maintain focus and purpose as they faced the challenging task of developing their school as a learning community.

Although the existing literature is silent on the emotional toll on school administrators, throughout my study I began to recognize that the daunting task of nurturing a PLC can be overwhelming for principals and can be the reason for avoiding difficult decisions and choices. It is possible that, without a set of guiding principles, the avoidance of difficult issues is much simpler. That is, instead of facing the emotional issues and difficult choices required, principals might simply make minor adjustments to superficial components of their school organization, processes, or people. The guiding principles provide a clear and simple anchor for what is important in the school and are used to influence the choices that need to be made, but the decisions are still difficult. For the principals in this study, difficult decisions and actions were clarified, if not made easier, because they had a clear point of reference, an anchor, that confirmed the need to act in a particular manner. Using the guiding principles as an anchor, the principals were able to develop effective contextual strategies to tackle the difficult work that needed to be done before the school could move forward. Although the literature does not address the question of how school administrators face such difficulties, this question became a major theme in my study.

The third area this study highlights is the interrelatedness of the guiding principles as they function collectively to develop the learning community. The literature is in agreement that the areas of culture, processes, and structures all need to be addressed and
developed in order to facilitate the development of a PLC (e.g., Bolam et al., 2005; Louis, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006). There is less agreement about which area should receive more attention and in which sequence these areas should be addressed, but there is a shared understanding that adjustments in one area will have an impact on the others. Barth (2002), for example, contends that the first and most influential priority must be the school's culture. He argues that culture has "far more influence on the life and learning in the schoolhouse" (p. 6) than do any other factors. Mitchell and Castle (2005) argue that culture is a critical component of the development of the PLC, but they contend that it is through the development of effective structures that the difficult task of shifting the school culture can be accomplished. Without careful attention to structural supports, Mitchell and Castle warn that schools can be pulled off course and miss their intended target. Similarly, Olivier and Hipp (2006) describe processes such as collaboration and teamwork as having the most significant impact on the development of the PLC. Their stance is that structures are used to support the required processes that will in turn shift the culture of the school. These examples from recent literature illustrate the complex reciprocal relationship between the areas of culture, structures, and processes and the need to attend to all three areas collectively rather than in isolation.

This is where the challenge lies: knowing how and when to attend to each area. This study found that each of the principals was aware that all three areas needed to be attended to in order to make a significant shift in how the school was operating. They were also aware that their attention towards one area could impact others in both positive and negative ways. Each administrator used the guiding principles to establish priorities for their attention and their work. It was the guiding principles that provided them with a
filter to determine which area was in greatest need at any given time, which area required immediate attention, or which area would provide the most significant impact if it were attended to at that point in time. It was also the guiding principles that gave the administrators permission to take the focus off some areas while new or difficult work was being undertaken in other areas. These principals were attentive to developing the capacity of the staff across all four areas of the guiding principles and were responsive to the changes they were observing as well as the needs they saw developing. Their experience demonstrates that the challenge of knowing how and when to attend to different elements of school operations can be successfully met by relying on a set of principles that recognize the complex interplay among the systems within the school.

Finally, this study supports the developing view in the literature of the complexity of PLCs and the monumental task facing administrators as they attempt to support the development of a learning community. The complexity of PLCs requires principals to facilitate radical changes in their schools in order to demonstrate the significant, sustained shifts in student learning that PLCs can hope to offer. Stoll et al. (2006) position the challenge as the need for administrators to simultaneously address school culture, supportive structures, professional learning opportunities, leadership opportunities, and facilitative skills. Each of these aspects alone requires significant knowledge, time, energy, and commitment, but in combination they present an intimidating task set for principals. Similarly, Louis (2006) has noted that principals need to rethink their approach to developing PLCs from a short-term innovation to a long-term change that takes years to develop. Louis goes further to say that many schools do not recognize the changes that are essential “to create the intellectual ferment that
characterizes a learning organization” (p. 485). Mitchell (2007) supports the view that the type of significant shift in thinking and operating “requires profound shifts in how people think about their school, about colleagues and peers, and about teaching and learning” (p. 14). The results of this study support this view of the dramatic reconstruction needed in the schools and the complex and time-consuming tasks associated with the process of reconstruction.

The principals in this study would be the first to say that they had just begun the journey of moving their schools towards becoming a PLC. While each had been in their school a number of years, they all felt that the process was not close to complete, and they saw the continuing job ahead as complex and unclear. This is consistent with Louis’s (2006) findings that the longer principals had been working towards developing effective school practices, the longer they believed it would take to achieve the goal. This reinforces the notion that the development of a PLC is a learning journey, and the further along one is in the process, the more there is to learn and do. The principals in this study were far enough along in the process to realize the scope of what they had undertaken, and they were using the guiding principles to maintain their course and stay true to their purpose over time. Mitchell and Sackney (2006) describe this role of the principal as “the holder of the vision” (p. 630). They highlight the critical role the principal plays in developing and “sustaining a vibrant, viable vision” (p. 630). This can be particularly difficult over a long period of time and with many additional expectations being placed on the principal from outside sources. In this study, the administrators’ use of the guiding principles provided stability to the journey.
Implications

This study set out to examine the strategies used by elementary principals whose schools were demonstrating the observable characteristics of PLCs. In documenting the strategies of these principals, four guiding principles emerged that anchored and focused their daily work. These findings have implications for the work of principals and school districts, the evolving understanding of the complex role principals play in the development of a PLC, and further research into the role of the principal and the support they require in tackling the challenging task of nurturing PLCs.

Implications for Practice

The first implication for practice is that serious consideration needs to be given to the content of leadership preparation courses given the complex challenges awaiting future principals. Currently in Ontario, classroom teachers with as little as 5 years' teaching experience, qualifications in three divisions, and either a double specialist qualification or completion of half the courses for a master's degree completed may enrol in the Principals Qualification Program Part I (PQP I). Upon completion of PQP I and a practicum component generally involving a site-based action research project, individuals may enrol in PQP II. Once both components have been completed, an individual is qualified to apply for the role of a vice-principal in any school district in Ontario. Both of these programs may be completed within as little as one calendar year. Divided into modules for program delivery, the 100 to 125 hour, face-to-face courses focus on a range of topics including leadership style, decision making, communication, school councils and community involvement, collective agreements, school organization, hiring and legal
implications, legal issues, special education, staff supervision, and developing school work culture (Ontario College of Teachers, 2001).

There is no question that prospective administrators need to be knowledgeable in each of the areas addressed in both PQP I and II. What is noticeably absent is the attention given to student achievement and learning communities and the role the administrator plays in providing leadership and developing capacity in both of these areas. Although some providers of the PQP I program might ask that participants identify a practicum project in the area of student achievement, the focus is primarily on the operational aspects of leading and completing a project, with little attention to how the leader engages others in the process. The practicum requirement is an ideal opportunity to focus on the important role leadership plays in developing processes and structures that will facilitate the success of a given project. The reflective component of a practicum of this nature would lead into further examination of the role the administrator plays in developing a more inclusive, school-wide learning community in PQP II.

Beyond preliminary legislative requirements, school districts might also consider how they can extend the learning of individuals who are interested in moving into administrator roles and structure programs to facilitate succession planning and leadership development. Currently many districts in Ontario offer leadership courses that focus on developing a personal leadership philosophy and exploring the role of the leader within the school setting. District-based courses of this type could provide prospective school administrators with the opportunity to build on the ideas introduced in the PQP I and PQP II courses within the local context. It would allow districts to assist individuals in the development of their own capabilities with respect to facilitation skills, problem
solving, understanding system priorities, and the challenges of developing learning communities focused on student learning. This type of leadership course, set within the broader district context, could provide individuals with the opportunity to explore and engage in dialogue about some of the broader issues in education today, including the moral purpose of schools. Through an examination of the various challenges faced by principals, beyond the managerial ones, this type of exploration of leadership at the school level could complement the learning from the PQP courses and provide participants with an additional filter for thinking about who they are as a leader and perhaps a more realistic understanding of the complexity of the role of the principal.

In addition to preliminary qualification requirements and preservice supports for those aspiring to become principals, the findings of this study have implications for school districts as they consider the type of leadership support being provided to those in the role of administrators. One way districts could support new administrators is to continue to facilitate the exploration of who they are as principals and leaders within their schools, their own strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. Through a reflective stance, principals would be able to draw on the strengths they already possess and work to develop the areas that will also be required of them to facilitate the growth within their school. Career coaching or mentorship could provide ongoing support to individuals already in the role. Both types of approaches require that a climate of trust and open communication be established and that individuals feel safe to ask for support and help in this area. This type of leadership support could take the form of critical friends, collaborative study groups, or mentors to whom principals can turn in order to help clarify their thinking or solve challenging issues. Alternatively, leadership support may
take the form of peer cognitive coaching in which principals spend time observing each
other and providing objective feedback through a reflective process. Facilitating a
reflective stance and developing an inclusive environment across the administrative cadre
are two ways that school districts could assist principals in developing their leadership
capability and personal principles of operation.

Honouring the unique context of schools and the influence of context on
principals' perceptions and actions has significant implications for administrators and
school districts. First, it requires that school principals start with their own context, take
stock of their individual school's situation, and identify the unique strengths and
challenges they face. This reflective process provides a basis from which staff can make
decisions about how to move forward as they address apparent gaps. It also allows the
principal to be responsive to the local needs of the learning community rather than trying
to impose an external model into the setting. Freeing principals to work collaboratively
with staff to find unique solutions to the particular challenges they face provides
flexibility and creativity in thinking beyond stock responses to situations. By
acknowledging the unique context of schools and solutions, principals and districts can
move away from the one-size-fits-all mentality sometimes associated with the
development of PLCs.

Second, the power of the local context implies that school districts will need to
reconsider how professional development funds are allocated to support the development
of PLCs. Rather than spending significant funds on the implementation and training of an
external model, school boards should look to moving support closer to the school level, to
help individual schools develop strategies unique to their context and needs. Linked to
ongoing support of principals, this shift in the type of professional development could involve developing collaborative relationships among small groups of principals who share common needs or concerns. In addition, principals could have access to individuals who could help facilitate the development of their personal or collective capacity to address the unique challenges the school faces. These individuals may be curriculum experts or neutral facilitators who can provide the required input and support to address gaps in the capabilities of the individuals to address the needs of the students in their setting. Principals should feel empowered to act as the instructional facilitator in their school, accessing various resources available within the district to address challenges the staff have identified in moving forward.

A final implication these findings point to is the need for school districts to assign principals to the same school for a sustained period of time. Current practice in many Ontario school districts is to reassign principals to different schools after a period of 5 to 6 years. However, given the findings of this study, it may be more sensible to provide a longer period of time for principals to work with the school in order to engage deeply with the complex challenges each school faces. Recognizing that developing a PLC is a context-specific task, and that strategies applied in one context may not be effective in a different one, principals need time in a school to become familiar with the unique culture each site presents and the unique strengths and challenges therein. School districts would be wise to allow principals the time to become intimately familiar with the school and then sustained time to facilitate the necessary supports to see change occur. Forward momentum can easily be lost during a period of transition and readjustment with each change of administration. Allowing principals to facilitate improvement over an extended
appointment of up to 10 years could provide the necessary continuity and consistency to demonstrate significant change.

Implications for Theory

This study has confirmed recent developments in the literature regarding the role of the principal and the context of the setting in the development and facilitation of a professional learning community (e.g., Mitchell & Sackney, 2006; Stoll et al., 2006). The concept of guiding principles that emerged from this study provides a perspective to understand how principals operate as they navigate the multitude of decisions and choices to be made on a daily basis. The guiding principles are closely related to the unique context of individual schools in that they act as the filter used by the principal to make decisions and develop appropriate strategies that fit the unique needs of their setting.

Within the complex interrelatedness of the many characteristics of PLCs, guiding principles offer administrators an elegant mechanism for tackling the enormous challenges they face. Allowing for flexible, innovative, and sensitive solutions to emerge, the guiding principles assist principals in remaining focused on the difficult work required to significantly shift the culture, processes, and structures of their particular school. Theories of learning community development need to recognize and incorporate the role of the guiding principles and the unique contexts of schools in any descriptions intended to prepare administrators to build and harness capacity for learning community functions within their schools.

Implications for Further Research

One area worthy of further investigation is the use of guiding principles as an operational strategy across a broader sample of principals. While this study supports
other research emerging in the literature, it would be of interest to explore how widespread the use of some type of guiding principles is among administrators who have demonstrated significant shifts in school culture, processes, and structures. The limitations of this study, with only 3 participants, means that the findings may not be transferable to other contexts. Using a larger sample size across a variety of districts and contexts could provide further evidence of the role that guiding principles play in the work of nurturing professional learning communities. The findings of such studies could further strengthen the need for administrators to operate from a strong internal anchor by way of guiding principles, through which they filter the decisions and choices they face.

A second area of study that could be pursued involves the learning needs principals identify as they tackle the job of facilitating the development of a PLC. Given the complex and unique challenges facing administrators, further exploration of the type of support principals feel is required to assist their schools in making significant shifts would be beneficial. An exploration of the barriers perceived, as well as the skills and knowledge principals feel they lack, would be of benefit in two ways. First, the findings could inform the programs currently in place to qualify and prepare future administrators. Second, the data could assist school districts in the decision-making process regarding the allocation of professional development funds to support learning.

A third area of study could emerge from the second and explore various models of professional development for principals and the impact each has on the development of observable characteristics of PLCs. Building from the identified needs of principals, this subsequent research could investigate the implementation of various models of professional development such as cognitive coaching, peer mentoring, study groups, and
the subsequent impact on the PLC within participating principals’ schools. The findings of this type of study could also inform school districts with some of the structural choices they make when developing organizational plans and learning opportunities for administrators.

A final area of investigation could deal with the emotional toll on school administrators in light of the difficult challenges they face in bringing about a learning community within their school. This is a neglected area in the literature, and yet it is essential to investigate the responses that administrators typically make in such sensitive situations. Research is needed to discover the contextual and institutional realities that might cause them to avoid or deflect difficulties and those that enable them to face the challenges directly and to deal with them proactively. The learning community research literature has not yet moved in the direction of exploring the emotional contexts and responses of school administrators, which my study signals as a necessary next step.

Conclusion

This study began with a focus on the specific strategies that principals used to develop PLCs within their schools. What emerged from the results was that there are a multitude of strategies used by principals and that strategies are successful if they are developed and implemented within a specific context rather than being imported from elsewhere. The success of this development process hinged on the presence of a set of guiding principles that anchored and informed the strategies. The guiding principles of (a) protecting the purpose, (b) attending to relationships, (c) sharing the responsibility, and (d) valuing the journey, while common to each principal, were uniquely demonstrated based on individual styles and circumstances. This result shifted the
emphasis away from what the principals were doing to why they were making the choices they made in their daily work.

The flexibility of the guiding principles allowed each of the administrators to act in a way that was consistent with who they were as individuals, their personal leadership style, the strengths and capacity of the individuals with whom they were working, and the unique challenges facing them, but also allowed them to remain focused on their goals. The guiding principles kept the principals focused on what was important and allowed for innovative and flexible responses to the needs of the school. Acting as an anchor, the guiding principles allowed the principals to thoughtfully select strategies that would move the school forward as a professional learning community, adjusting and modifying the course as required but never losing sight of the end goal.
References


Appendix A

Checklist of Professional Learning Communities Characteristics
(Adapted from Eaker, DuFour & DuFour, *Getting started: Reculturing schools to become professional learning communities*, 2002)

Please use this checklist to identify the characteristics of a Professional Learning Community currently demonstrated by the school at this point and time. As these observable actions or behaviours describe the desired state, please indicate with a checkmark at what point on the continuum the school is in relationship to the behaviours.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of PLC</th>
<th>Observable actions or behaviours</th>
<th>Administrator:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration</strong></td>
<td>Teams working to identify collective goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teams developing strategies to achieve goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Teams using relevant data to monitor progress</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Vision &amp; Values</strong></td>
<td>Staff clearly articulating and promoting the attitudes, behaviours and commitments that will support their vision of the school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policies and daily practices (e.g., time on task, timetables, staffing assignments, student opportunities) are influenced and reflective of shared values</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Goal Statements</strong></td>
<td>Staff pursuing measurable goals as part of their work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff members identifying and pursuing challenging goals related to student learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Emphasis on Learning</strong></td>
<td>Staff working collaboratively to determine what students are expected to learn</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Student learning is assessed through collaboratively developed and determined assessments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff learning is focused on research-based best practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shared Leadership</strong></td>
<td>Administrator posing questions to challenge staff</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Administrator creating collaborative decision-making processes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff are being provided with the information, training, and parameters they need to make good decisions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action Oriented</strong></td>
<td>Training is provided for staff in action research</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff members valuing action research as an important component of their professional responsibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Staff are frequently discussing the implications of findings and the connection between student learning and instructional practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment</td>
<td>Measurable goals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment for learning</td>
<td>Norms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barriers</td>
<td>Physical plant organization</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural expectations</td>
<td>Planning time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear vision</td>
<td>Professional knowledge</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive coaching</td>
<td>Reflection</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent instructional practice</td>
<td>Staff learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data driven</td>
<td>Student learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>Teacher influence</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>Teacher practice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry</td>
<td>Teaching assignments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>Time</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Visibility in school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix C

Field Note Descriptive Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment for learning</th>
<th>Planning time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural expectations</td>
<td>Professional knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive coaching</td>
<td>Relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consistent instructional practice</td>
<td>Respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data driven</td>
<td>Routines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dialogue</td>
<td>Schedules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evidence of learning</td>
<td>Staff learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation</td>
<td>Student learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty</td>
<td>Student safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry</td>
<td>Teacher practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measurable goals</td>
<td>Teaching assignments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-tasking</td>
<td>Time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norms</td>
<td>Trust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical plant organization</td>
<td>Visibility in school</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>