A Qualitative Study of Pedagogical Consultants' and Teachers' Experiences and Perceptions of PLCs

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2020

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfillment

Of the requirements of the Degree of Master of Arts

In Educational Leadership

Abstract

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become increasingly prevalent as a strategy for engaging teachers in school planning and distributing leadership function within schools in Quebec. While many scholars have praised the potential of PLCs, their effectiveness in practice has been called into question. This qualitative study offers a close examination of PLCs by exploring the experiences that teachers and pedagogical consultants have had in PLCs, and by outlining how these experiences have shaped their perceptions of PLCs. This research, consequently, seeks to contribute to the literature on professional learning communities through an exploration of PLCs within a particular context – an English minority school board within the province of Quebec.

Data was collected through interviews with five participants, as well as from my reflective memos in order to address the research question: How has the attempt to implement PLCs in an English Language school board influenced the way their teachers and pedagogical consultants perceive PLCs? A constant comparison analysis of the participants' interviews revealed three major themes, including nine sub-categories.

The findings of the study suggest that even though the participants had generally negative experiences in their PLCs, they retained the belief that PLCs were a viable model to help improve student outcomes. Their experiences, furthermore, provided participants with a deepening understanding of PLCs including a recognition of where PLCs fail, and what needs to happen for PLCs to succeed. The study concludes with a series of questions that researchers or policy makers can use for future investigations of PLCs.

Résumé

Les communautés d'apprentissage professionnel (CAP) sont devenues de plus en plus répandues en tant que stratégie visant à engager les enseignants dans la planification scolaire et à répartir la fonction de leadership dans les écoles du Québec. Bien que de nombreux chercheurs aient loué le potentiel des CAP, leur efficacité dans la pratique a été remise en question. Cette étude qualitative offre un examen attentif des CAP en explorant les expériences que les enseignants et les consultants pédagogiques ont vécues dans les CAP et en décrivant comment ces expériences ont façonné leur perception des CAP. Cette recherche vise donc à contribuer à la littérature sur les milieux d'apprentissage professionnels par le biais d'une exploration des CAP dans un contexte particulier, une commission scolaire minoritaire anglaise de la province de Québec.

Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'entrevues avec cinq participants, ainsi que mes mémo afin de répondre à la question de la recherche: comment la tentative de mise en œuvre des CAP dans un conseil scolaire de langue anglaise a-t-elle influencé la façon dont leurs enseignants et consultants pédagogiques perçoivent les CAP? Une analyse comparative constante des entrevues des participants a révélé trois grands thèmes, dont neuf sous-catégories.

Les résultats de l'étude suggèrent que même si les participants avaient généralement des expériences négatives dans leurs CAP, ils ont conservé la conviction que les CAP étaient un modèle viable pour aider à améliorer les résultats des élèves. En outre, leurs expériences ont permis aux participants de mieux comprendre les CAP, y compris la reconnaissance de l'endroit où les CAP échouent et de ce qui doit se produire pour que les CAP réussissent. L'étude se termine par une série de questions que les chercheurs ou les décideurs peuvent utiliser pour de futures enquêtes sur les CAP.

Acknowledgements

I am thankful to all the people who have made this thesis possible. I would like to first extend my deepest appreciation to Dr. Blane Harvey for all his guidance and intellectual support throughout the process. His constant feedback allowed me to polish a study that at times seemed to have too many rough edges.

I would also like to thank my participants for dedicating their time and their experiences. Their keen observations of PLCs left me with the impression that education is full of dedicated professionals who are hungry for change.

Finally, I would like to thank my family: my daughter, Chloe Papadeas, for constantly reminding me of the joys of learning something new, and my wife, Kathy Panek, who picked up the slack so I could read and type. She is and always will be the best springboard for any of my ideas.

Dedication:

To my Family,

Kathy Panek and Chloe Papadeas

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction

The following chapter outlines the contextual background that has led to this study. It discusses how public concern over the quality of education has shifted the current educational landscape away from traditional organizational models towards the development of schools as learning organizations. The introduction also situates my experience in education, suggesting its impact on this study. It outlines how my experience as a teacher and as an administrator has impressed on me the perception that schools are often negative environments that are resistant to systemic change. This negative impression has led me to investigate professional learning communities (PLCs) and the associated efforts to transform schools into learning organizations.

Background to the Study: Canadian Schools within a Global Context

This study begins with two reports that outline public concern over the poor teaching environments that seem to perpetuate lagging student performance. The World Bank's *World development report: Learning to realize education's promise* (2018), paints a dire portrait of what it calls a learning crisis that particularly affects disadvantaged and disenfranchised groups of people. As the report highlights, learning outcomes remain poor, amplifying the inequality that these groups experience. The report goes on to suggest that struggling education systems face a deficit of effective teaching, learning-focused inputs and skilled management and governance. Key political players, furthermore, often fail to prioritize student learning because these objectives lack immediate political expediency.

Similarly, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report *PISA 2012 results: what makes schools successful? Resources, policies and practices. (Volume IV)* (2013), outlines how policies and resource allocation tend to be negatively related to issues of equity. In particular, the study highlights how schools systems that are highly stratified

through grade repetition and selective streaming programs tend to create unmotivated student bodies. Failing school systems, furthermore, do not always allocate resources judiciously, starkly contrasting high performing countries that allocate resources equitably across socio-economic lines.

Responding to these shortcomings, the OECD report (2013) argues that school systems can attain success by:

a) allocating educational resources equitably between advantaged and disadvantaged schools;

b) providing more curricular autonomy to schools;

c) providing more managerial authority to teachers through a culture of collaboration with administration;

d) engaging all stakeholders in education.

Along similar lines, the World Bank report suggests that countries can remedy their critical situations by making advances in pedagogy and in governance. The report states that countries can make these advancements by:

a) promoting well-designed student assessments that adequately highlight academic issues, while simultaneously providing tools that help educators monitor progress and make decisions;
b) aligning teaching practice with scientific evidence, ensuring research-based pedagogy;
c) mobilizing all stakeholders to overcome technical and political barriers that impede educational outcomes.

Within this global push for educational change, the Canadian education system is no laggard. It receives positive press for a system that is apparently equitable, and that performs

well in international assessments. The BBC (2019), for example, calls Canada an "education superpower," citing its success to an equitable and consistent system that successfully integrates its migrant populations. The Canadian School Board Association (CSBA, 2019) proudly boasts Canada's Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, highlighting how Canadian students continue to be leaders in math, science and reading. The Council of Ministers of Education Canada highlights how Canada is among the top four performing countries in the world on these PISA assessments (2019).

With such high educational outcomes, it is legitimate to question why school boards and policy makers might want to promote a restructuring of a school's organizational model through the development of professional learning communities (PLCs). The system is apparently not broken, so why try to fix it? Returning to the Canadian School Board Association, they warn that while Canadian schools are performing well, it is essential that schools continue to develop students as global leaders (CSBA, 2019), echoing the sentiment that to compete in a 21st century economy, countries need 21st century students who are productive and adaptive learners (Fiske, 1996; Lauglo, 1995; Coolahan, 2002; Watkins, 2005). The Globe and Mail similarly emphasizes that while Canada has had successful educational outcomes, there is also a growing decline in mathematics results (2019). A working paper from the Institute of Education (IOE) goes so far to discredit the Canadian PISA assessment results, claiming that these positive results are based on a high rate of student exclusion (especially those with special needs), pupil non-response, and a significant refusal by Canadian schools (particularly in Quebec) to even participate (Jerrim, 2019).

As these detractions of Canada's PISA results suggest, it is within the best interest of Canadian educational institutions to remain open to examining their learning outcomes and

teaching practices. The recommendations from the OECD and the World Bank Report, consequently, rings true even to Canadian ears. Both reports advise a transformation of schools from traditional bureaucratic models into learning organizations that prioritize a wide collaboration among all stakeholders, a dissemination of authority, a promotion of evidence-based practices and an increase in accountability. Both reports require the development and deployment of skilled management to facilitate such an extensive restructuring of school governance, of school organization and of teaching practice.

The professional learning community, consequently, emerged to meet many of these calls, promising to move teachers from their isolated practice, and to address the recurrent failures of educational reform. PLCs also promise to raise the level of teacher professionalism by articulating standards for the teaching profession that revolve around the development of a community of learners who participate in an ongoing cycle of evidence-based reflection and action. As Dufour & Eaker (1998) define, educators in PLCs "create an environment that fosters mutual cooperation, emotional support, and personal growth as they work together to achieve what they cannot accomplish alone (p. xii).

Reporting from an American context, Dufour & Eaker (1998), however, warn that "the history of American education in the second half of the twentieth century is marked by numerous attempts at reform and by increasing public concern" (p. xi) over the quality of education. Cook similarly adds that "the US spends more than USD 600 Billion annually on the nation's public education system while nearly the same sum is spent reforming that very system?" (Cook, 2019, p.1). This study particularizes itself within this context of educational structural reform by seeking to explore these attempts to implement professional learning communities within an English school board in the province of Quebec, and by questioning whether the experience of its

participants fits with the pattern of failure that Dufour, Eaker and Cook suggest, or whether their experiences point to new possibilities in improving educational outcomes.

Situating Myself in the Study

Having spent nearly two decades in the field of education, I have always been interested in exploring how interpersonal dynamics shape school culture. The close relationships I have formed with various colleagues have colored my professional experience as both rich and meaningful. At the same time, I have also experienced how this profession, characteristically marked by an ethos of care, can also house gossip, negativity, violence, and other forms of abuse. I have often had the impression that these negative characteristics emanated from schools that were too rigid and too hierarchical in their structure, producing environments that further marginalized and frustrated their stakeholders.

In 2016, I was promoted to the position of vice principal. In this new position, I was made privy to the strategic plans of my school board's pedagogical service department, plans that included as a priority the promotion and the development of professional learning communities (PLCs). I was hopeful that PLCs could help counter the negativity that I had encountered, especially since this organizational model promised to raise the standards of teacher professionalism through the transformation of schools into a community of learners who are constantly involved in an ongoing cycle of collaboration, reflection and action.

Unfortunately, I felt that the staff that I was working with did not wholeheartedly embrace PLCs. I experienced resistance that was often cynical, and, even at times, fierce. The literature suggests several possible reasons for this resistance, including:

1) Staff members who perceive PLCs as a form of pressure from the government (Vangrieken, 2017);

2) Teachers who fear the loss of classroom autonomy (Bryk et al., 1999);
3) As well as staffs that encounter other roadblocks including limited time, ineffective learning environments, ineffective policy, subject/departmental resistance, and prohibitive school sizes (Bryk et al., 1999; Parker et al., 2012).

Ultimately, this study arose out of a curiosity to explore whether the teachers in my school board shared these sentiments, or whether their experience revealed something unique to their particular context and experience. I wanted to hear (and maybe legitimize) the experience of my colleagues, and to explore the viability of PLCs as the social organizational model that could help transform our schools into more effective learning organizations.

What follows in this study is a systematic attempt to explore these experiences by focusing on how five participants within a school board in the province of Quebec experienced professional learning communities, and whether or not their experiences changed the way they perceive PLCs. Chapter 2 begins with a review of the literature that has offered a critical frame for my research on professional learning communities. Chapter 3 outlines my methodology through a close exploration of this study's design. Chapter 4 reviews the significant findings from this study by thematically categorizing what my participants shared with me. Finally, Chapter 5 presents my analysis of these findings, as well as suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature on PLCs in Educational Settings

Introduction

The literature covered in this review characterizes PLCs in education as communities of learners who are accountable to learning outcomes, and who are involved in an ongoing cycle of evidence-based reflection and action. Since this characterization places collaboration between individuals at the heart of the PLC process, this review is interested in exploring the roles that the various stakeholders take in PLCs, and how these stakeholders coalesce into a community of learners. Emphasizing this collaborative process, the review outlines how PLCs, as a model of social organization, herald their successes and failures on how well these relationships are nurtured and fostered. The review also notes the various tensions that arise in PLCs, especially considering the seemingly incongruous push between a demand for greater accountability and the promotion of trusting, collaborative environments.

The literature review demonstrates this by first outlining the literature that defines the essential characteristics of learning organizations in general and PLCs in particular. It then superimposes these characteristics onto the following questions:

- What roles do various participants take in PLCs?
- How do PLCs generate and define mission, visions, values and goals?
- What role does data management play in PLCs?
- What are the drivers and enablers of PLCs?

These questions form the basis of the thematic organization of the literature review. The schema that emerged, furthermore, offered the framework for the path of inquiry my research took, and for my analysis of the data.

Professional Learning Communities: Characteristics and Challenges

Breaking from an industrial leadership model that holds a heavy reliance on centralization, standardization, rigid hierarchical structures, and a rigid sense of time, PLCs are more in tune with our knowledge-based society, emphasizing the efficiency and the expediency of the private sector, while promoting the relationships and the shared values inherent in communities. The literature on PLCs reveals a growing consensus surrounding the essential characteristics of PLCs. Beginning with Dufour & Eaker's (1998) foundational text, PLCs are characterized as including:

a) a shared mission, vision and values;

b) an approach that depends upon collective inquiry;

c) the formation of collaborative teams;

d) an orientation inclined to action and experimentation;

e) a drive for continuous improvement; and

f) a drive that is results oriented.

PLCs, consequently, require constant collaboration that pivots around a desire to improve student outcomes. They represent a deprivitization of teaching practice that pulls teachers out of isolation towards a collective sense of responsibility (Bryk et al., 1999). Other salient features include the sharing of power between participants including the development of value-based, democratic and ethical principles (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). Ultimately, PLCs are an intellectually directed organizational structure that seeks to improve school climate, teaching practice and student learning (D'Ardenne et al., 2013; Eaker, et al., 2002; Epstein, 2018; Louis & Marks, 1998, Nelson, 2007; Vescio et al., 2006).

Even with these claims that PLCs improve school climate and student outcomes, Dufour (2015) highlights how the model has not been universally adopted, and has even been accused of being a recipe-driven fad. Responding to this, Dufour asserts that failed PLCs are only PLCs in name. Failed PLCs lack the essential characteristics for success, including the aforementioned development of collaborative teams that are involved in a critical culture that questions everything from why they desire certain student outcomes, to what should be their criteria for evaluation, and how effective is the use of common formative assessments and other data. Dufour (*ibid.*) concludes by reasserting that PLCs are not a "recipe" for success. Rather, they are conceptual frameworks that transform schools, but only after persistence and hard work.

Dufour's defense, ironically, merely reiterates the common characteristics of PLCs, presenting a de facto recipe for success that is rigid and formulaic. He neglects to address whether PLCs fail because the salient characteristics of PLCs are fundamentally flawed. Instead, he posits this failure on the participants' inability to adhere to the essential characteristics of PLCs. Dufour, furthermore, minimizes these failures, by stating that any anxiety surrounding PLCs is merely part of the process. He claims that people are naturally anxious at the early stages of any innovation, and that by the middle of an innovation, everything feels like a failure. This claim neutralizes any apprehensions against PLCs, especially at the initial and intermediary stages, by positing the blame on critics for lacking the requisite patience.

A closer look at the "recipe," furthermore, reveals several other problems. Louis & Marks (1998), for example, question how successful outcomes in a PLC are even measured. The data that PLCs assess often revolve around standardized tests, ignoring other indicators that are difficult to quantify such as critical thinking and the attempts, by students, to solve real world problems. Gray (2000), meanwhile, questions whether schools can ever fully become learning

organizations, claiming that these schools are an "ideal-type," rarely reflected in reality. Gray, however, acknowledges that the polar opposite, schools with little or no organizational learning, is also rare. Most schools lie somewhere along this spectrum, having a variable level of commitment to organizational learning.

The literature also asserts that PLCs often ignore the impact of biographies, social histories, identities and sociopolitical culture on their collaborative structure. Webb et al. (2009), for example, argue that different cultural contexts create fundamental differences in the implementation and success of PLCs. Wong (2010), meanwhile, criticizes the democratic structure of PLCs by claiming that the authoritarian style of PLCs conducted in China produce superior results. Wong's criticism, of course, reflects the cultural context he writes in, and brings to question whether a democratic model can work across cultural contexts. Consequently, as Day & Sachs (2004) assert, any continuous professional development needs to recognize these personal and cultural differences in order to produce effective results.

This marked ambivalence to PLCs, ultimately, suggests that there is a potential incongruity between the organizational structure of schools and the organizational structure of PLCs. PLCs borrow heavily from the idea of "learning organizations," a concept that was popularized by seminal theorist Peter Senge (Senge, 1990). Senge typifies learning organizations as organizations that collectively and continually pursue goals that are of interest to them (as cited in O'Neil, 1995). One of the problems that PLCs face, consequently, is the difficulty of overlaying a model that works in other sectors (i.e. business) onto educational institutions.

In order to facilitate the transfer of this model into a school setting, the literature suggests that schools need to provide an environment where teachers can continuously reflect, where coordinated efforts are possible, and where systemic attention can be placed not only on how

students learn, but on how teachers learn as well. Schools can only attain these significant changes in their organizational structure through effective school leadership that seeks to develop a collaborative environment that empowers teachers to make school-level decisions through meaningful participation (Day, 1999; Harris, 2011; Schleicher, 2015; Schlechty, 2009; Smylie, 2007; Woods, 2004).

Unfortunately, traditional models of hierarchical leadership still often typify school governance (OECD, 2008). This adherence to traditional models, however, does not necessarily indicate an overt resistance to more distributive/democratic forms of leadership. Rather, this resistance suggests that the educational landscape is far from homogenous. Hallinger (2003), for example, suggests that traditional leadership models might be more viable in situations where the development of shared leadership is impossible. At-risk schools might need a leader who uses a top-down managerial style to initiate the processes that affect the educational outcomes of a school. Meanwhile, other schools, while apparently stable, might not have made the requisite changes to what Kemmis (2014) calls their intersubjective spaces, including a significant re-organization of a school's resources and its use of space and time, as well as a careful navigation of its social relations.

In their study *The role of professional learning communities in international education*, Toole & Louis (2002) offer a succinct assessment of ten tensions that address why schools have not universally adopted PLCs. These tensions include:

1) How deep-seated cultural assumptions vary the successful adoption of PLCs between different countries;
2) whether PLCs match the educational priorities that are specific to a nation's ideological goals;

3) whether the requisite teacher professionalism in PLCs is possible in highly prescriptive education systems;
4) whether the best location for the development of PLCs is within the immediate school (due to physical and structural constraints);
5) whether differences in the way a country conceptualizes a "good colleague" affects a PLC;
6) whether a PLC is a genuine process;
7) whether students should have a role in defining teacher learning;
8) whether individuality is truly counterproductive;
9) whether control and power is equally shared between members; and
10) whether it is possible for PLCs to ever become the normative structure.

As these tensions suggests, PLCs need to be problematized, rather than zealously followed. PLCs should invite constant interrogation, even if that interrogation includes questioning the model's essential characteristics and viability.

Collaborative Culture: Breaking Isolation through Authentic Collaboration

Dufour & Eaker (1998) argue that the development of a collaborative school culture requires sufficient time, explicit purpose and facilitative structures. This collaboration, however, cannot occur without effective communication. Communication includes knowing what people are planning for, identifying what they are monitoring, questioning and confronting, allocating sufficient time to the endeavor, and celebrating successes. Dufour & Eaker (*ibid.*) also suggest that communication remain as simple as possible. This suggestion, however, seems counterintuitive, especially considering how the interpersonal dynamics inherent in the collaborative process, the goal of improving student outcomes, and a change process that often revolves around deep interpersonal conflict is anything but simple.

Teaching is traditionally characterized by its isolation (Eaker, 2002), and a shift in school culture requires that teachers move away from this isolation towards a collaborative culture. This collaboration, however, cannot succeed unless it permeates every aspect of school culture. Eaker suggests that schools can overcome this isolation through the creation of "effective, high-performing teams" (2002, p. 11). While this collaboration needs to be embedded frequently in routine practices, Eaker's proposals rely on a model of efficiency that seems to be characterized by *ad hoc* teams that are formed for the express purpose of increasing student outcomes. This argument burrows heavily from the private sector, potentially alienating both the teachers and their students by privileging efficiency, standardization and accountability. The proposal also aligns poorly with the characteristics of PLCs that relate to community development, neglecting how communities are formed around fluid dynamics that cannot always be characterized or driven by specific goals.

Smyth (2008), furthermore, explores the authenticity of PLCs, especially when PLCs ignore core issues of inequality and power. Smyth questions if it is possible to honor the voices of all the participants, and if it is possible to mitigate personal values and the fear of public exposure. Smyth finally outlines how conflict, when it emerges, usually surrounds differential time demands, competing obligations, loyalties and expectations, and differences in working methods. Smyth addresses these issues by arguing that critical collaborators need to see collaboration as an evolving process, where participants are open to differences, where they can acknowledge positionality, and where they regard the improvement of teaching and the development of a shared understanding of success as a crucial goal. Smyth's response, however, merely highlights the tension between professional obligations and personal differences. It does

not offer, how, in practice, collaborators can align the immediacy of professional goals with the deep complex process inherent in acknowledging positionality and issues of inequality.

Stiegelbauer (2008) offers that this tension between the individual and professional life and responsibilities is actually mitigated through the collaborative process. She claims that successful peer interactions are more likely to lead the individuals to find meaning. She further suggests that improvements that ignore individual desires are likely to fail. Toole & Louis (2002) similarly assert that educational leaders need to create a balance between the individual, the immediate group, and the needs of the larger culture. They add that healthy communities actually develop healthy and unique individual selves. Ross (2008) adds to this discussion by claiming that the iterative and the reflective nature of PLCs augments the authenticity of voices within a school through its focused engagement and through its exploration of its educational context.

Stakeholders: the Various Roles that Participants of PLCs Take

Since collaboration is one of the cornerstones of PLCs, the literature focuses heavily on defining and evaluating the roles that various stakeholders take in PLCs. This section of the literature review, consequently, seeks to explore these discussions by focusing on how the literature characterizes various stakeholders, what challenges these stakeholders face, and why the role these stakeholders take is essential for the successful implementation of any PLC.

Teachers

Beginning with teachers, the literature expounds how isolation often characterizes teaching practice. Teacher to teacher support remains relatively sparse. Schools, furthermore, have retained a cellular structure that further reinforces this isolation. Teachers are rarely consulted to address school-wide problems. Teachers also lack the accreditation and standards that many other professions possess (Nelson, 2008, Dufour & Eaker, 1998, Fullan 2001).

Fullan (2001), consequently, argues that the teaching profession needs a reculturing through the creation and nurturing of purposeful learning communities. Teacher collegiality is the starting point for implementing this change. Fullan suggests that personal contact often supersedes formal professional development, and that professional learning communities provide a framework for more purposeful interactions. Effective schools link norms and continuous professional development within this collaboration. Through collaboration, teachers develop the capacity to examine critically and to act on student-performance data. Finally, Fullan warns that it is possible to attain short-term gains in student outcomes without this reculturing, but that any sustained effort involves transforming the teacher community into one that adds to its ethos collaboration, accountability and professional development.

Fullan's proposals align closely with Dufour & Eaker (1998) who contend that the school improvement developed by PLCs must manifest inside individual classrooms. Teachers, furthermore, need to articulate a new standard of professionalism that emphasizes learning rather than teaching, that looks for active student engagement, that collaborates with colleagues to tackle school wide problems, that pursues lifelong learning, that is accountable and has high standards, and that has greater instructional autonomy and decision-making abilities within the school.

Teachers must also take on an expanded role in school leadership in order to enact the complex processes inherent in PLCs (Gordon, 2008). Teachers need to assume a range of roles including designing and administering data gathering tools and summaries, leading study groups, and writing and providing input on action plans. Teachers in more developed teams can also develop curriculum and instructional support, while providing workshops, demonstrations and peer coaching.

Principals

Various studies (Stiegelbauer, 2008; Gordon et al., 2008; Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Fullan, 2001; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Vangrieken et al. 2017) share similar characterizations of principals and their management of PLCs. Successful principals keep student learning in focus through efficient management, and by inclusive and facilitative leadership that helps develop collaborative cultures among the teaching staff. Principals assume a variety of leadership styles while reculturing schools, including using authority when necessary, expanding democratic leadership, building emotional bonds, and coaching. Principals simultaneously provide sanctions and support while they constantly move between the resumption and redistribution of authority. Principals, furthermore, align fragmented innovations by looking for program coherence, while providing additional resources such as materials, space and time.

As Schecter (2012) discusses, principals are often seen as the cornerstone of any successful PLC. Schecter outlines how the superintendents in his research all believe that principals have the greatest impact on any PLC. These superintendents cite success on how committed and faithful principals are to PLCs. Schecter goes on to argue that while teachers view cooperation with their colleagues as essential to a successful PLC, they also acknowledge leadership from their principals as the utmost important factor. In particular, the relationship between staff and principal help set the atmosphere of the PLC. Principals, meanwhile, feel that their main task was to generate enthusiasm for change, and to foster an inclusive and collaborative atmosphere.

Other Stakeholders

While the literature is not as exhaustive on the role that other stakeholders hold in PLCs, it is still important to explore their contributions. Fullan (2001) provides a brief overview of the

roles that students and district administrators play in the development of PLCs. Beginning with students, he claims that they can often provide better ideas for solutions. Involving them in the process is pedagogically sound, since this allows them to construct deeper meaning and learning. Superintendents, meanwhile have the responsibility to develop the management capabilities of administrators, to invest in teacher development that focuses on instruction, teaching and learning, and to monitor the district's progress. They also need to acquire help from external partnerships, while promoting a districtwide identity. As Stiegelbauer (2008) argues, school change needs constant and continued district and administrative support.

PLCs also include contributions from participants who are not immediately implicated in the school setting. Consultants represent an external resource for professional development. Their use ultimately depends on a school's readiness, and are ineffective in schools that are continually failing (Fullan, 2001). They are, as Erchul & Martens (2010) argue, change agents who purposefully attempt to alter beliefs, attitudes and behaviors of both the adults and adolescents of school settings. Erchul & Martens continue that this transformation occurs through the development of what they describe as a model of "cooperative relationships" rather than a model built on collaboration between equals. "Cooperative relationships" emphasize that there is a power imbalance between teachers and consultants, especially since consultants, in their role as 'experts', are naturally more influential.

This power imbalance, however, necessitates the development of respectful relationships between consultants and the consultees. Without spending the time to foster mutually respectful partnerships, the consultants face the risk of losing trust. Anderson-Butcher et al. (2010) expand on this by stating that consultants need to pay particular attention to the individual needs of stakeholders. Their technical assistance is essential to help build capacity, especially by focusing

on eliminating structural and systemic barriers while facilitating change. Preast & Burns (2018) add that consultants working within PLCs can help address shared goals, and help solve issues that are affecting academic results. They conclude by suggesting that consultants, who offer support by consulting with teachers about data and instructional change, can potentially influence systemic changes that are affecting student outcomes.

The literature also discusses the role of parents in PLCs. As Fullan (2001) argues, parents need to adapt to more contemporary organizational structures, rather than posing as an impediment to change. Dufour & Eaker (1998), meanwhile, assert that parents can help the development of PLCs by improving communication between home and schools, by developing their parenting skills, by assisting in student learning, by participating in the decision-making process, and by collaborating with the wider community.

Finally, universities help coordinate the actions of leadership teams that come from network schools. Universities are "critical friends" who are concerned with organizational issues, outcomes and the effects of the PLC on all participants. They support school teams in the change process, and provide expertise and feedback (Gordon, 2008; Nelson, 2008).

Mission, Visions, Values and Goals

Much of the discourse surrounding professional learning communities posits mission statements and the articulation of values as the pivot that school teams revolve around. Dufour & Eaker (1998) go to great lengths to provide an outline on how to produce a clear vision statement for school teams. They provide timelines as well as formulas to develop these mission and vision statements, right down to the use of post-its during team meetings. Ultimately, Dufour & Eaker argue that clear mission statements allow teams to articulate what are the expected student outcomes, and how to attain these outcomes, while clear vision statements provide a concrete

idea of attainable goals that energize and motivate people. Values and goals, meanwhile, provide the remaining foundation for successful PLCs, including such existential questions as why does the school exist, and what kind of school do these teams want to create.

Eaker (2002), similarly positing that school transformation relies on the mission, vision, values and goals of a school, adds that "changing the structure without altering the belief system will not produce fundamental changes" (p. 9). The mission has to focus explicitly on expected student outcomes, as well as how these teams measure and respond to these outcomes. Vision statements, meanwhile, are research-based, credible and provide the direction the team needs for school improvement. School values, furthermore, become shared and collaborative, moving people away from individual beliefs towards collective action. Finally, goals no longer represent an activity checklist, but instead reflect the constant interrogation of why these goals matter.

What Dufour & Eaker (Dufour and Eaker, 1998; Eaker, 2002) share is the belief that mission, vision, values and goals provide the glue that bonds people towards the collective endeavor of improving student outcomes. They recognize that challenging a traditionally individualistic and isolated profession with collective and collaborative structures requires a shift in the ethos of an organization. This shift hinges on keeping these teams motivated with collective goals that improve the learning culture of a school.

Data Management

Many of the leading proponents of PLCs advocate for the development of a model that emphasizes clarity of objectives and research driven approaches through the formation of data teams. They posit that the management of data is central to the PLC process, providing the structure and the occasion to facilitate team building and collaboration (Boudett et al., 2013; Eaker, et al., 2002; Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Through a close analysis of data, these teams can set

goals and develop instructional strategies that lead to greater student success (Allison et al., 2010; Ronka et al., 2008).

The primacy of data, however, does not come without its detractors. Fontaine (2016), for example, argues that data-driven decision-making reflects the prominence of accountability models. While data teams purport greater collaboration and democratic leadership, Fontaine contends that accountability processes actually promote policymakers, bureaucrats and test makers over professional educators. She outlines how the goal of data collection is to maximize economic growth and productivity, and is built on an accountability model that privileges standardized tests and a positivistic epistemological bias. She also counters the claim that data teams can help schools address student performance when there is no real evidentiary basis that supports this claim. Finally, she contends that the ability of approaches imported from the private sector (such as data teams in learning organizations) to improve the outcomes of vulnerable students is purely a presumption.

Just as critical of the data process, Smyth (2008) inveighs against such "evidence based" approaches to educational research. He claims that these "scientific" approaches stem from governmental pressure and represent a great threat to academic freedom. He contends that governments have promoted experimental design as the supposed scientific "gold standard" at the expense of other forms of educational research (especially action research). As Smyth concludes, "trying to steer educational improvement through evidence-based approaches around supposed scientific rigor, controlled experiments, and warehousing of knowledge through exclusive and restrictive clearinghouses is a complete sham" (*ibid.,* p. 73).

While Smyth's language is strong, it highlights the danger of strictly aligning PLCs with data teams. It questions whether these data teams have coopted the development of a dynamic

and fluid reculturing of schools in favour of a governmental accountability model. This parallels the previous discussion on authenticity within professional learning communities, questioning whether data is actually a medium that empowers teachers to increase student success, or whether data is an appraisal tool, meant to align school culture, including its mission, vision, values and goals, with market-oriented goals and models of efficiency.

Drivers and Enablers of PLC Effectiveness

This review has already outlined the various tensions that PLCs face – tensions that often manifest in the conflicts that arise from internal staff dynamics, or in the overt resistance to initiatives that originate outside the school. As the literature suggests, these tensions ultimately reflect a fear of disrupting the status quo, especially since this disruption can lead to a potential loss of classroom autonomy (Bryk et al., 1999; Parker et al., 2012; Vangrieken et al., 2017).

This final section of the review, however, is interested in exploring the various key factors that help counter these tensions. First, Vangrieken et al. (2017) assert that strong leadership is the best tool to counter this resistance to change. Strong leadership includes effective communication skills, a supportive culture, and the ability to foster open dialogue that embraces critical discussions. Ultimately, leaders can only promote this culture if they create a culture of respect. Huffman & Jacobson (2003), concur with this assessment, adding that PLCs need, as part of their core processes, a safe environment that embraces diverse ideas and beliefs, and that promotes a democratic ethical organizational structure. Zimmerman adds that shared decision-making, collaboration, professional development and a modelling of appropriate PLC behavior by the principal are research-based strategies that help overcome resistance. Bryk et al. (1999) also reinforce the need for strong leadership from principals, especially their ability to foster a nurturing environment, and to provide the necessary resources for successful PLCs.

Attard (2012), finally, suggest that PLCs have to respect individual autonomy by allowing individual teachers to make informed decisions, rather than forcing upon these teachers uniform solutions. Consensus, consequently, should not be the ultimate goal of a PLC. Rather, PLCs should provide a forum that allows an individual teacher the chance to escape the isolation that has often characterized teaching and learning.

Finally, the literature expounds on how PLCs need to nurture an environment of trust in order to succeed. Since PLCs are ultimately the promotion of a social organizational structure, they cannot function unless PLC members trust each other. Returning to Bryk et al (1999), they claim that social resources are key elements in school wide improvement such as PLCs. Without trust, the social resources become ineffective. Jappinen et al. (2016), concur, arguing that respect, equality and trust are essential for the development of dynamic relationships. Attard (2012) adds that trusting environments enable discussion, embrace alternative views, appreciate individuality, and tolerate uncertainty.

Conclusion

This review of the literature reveals that educational organizations develop capacity for professional learning communities by recognizing the need to foster and to promote collaborative structures. It also outlines how an acknowledgement of diversity (both in opinions and in identity), effective communication, and an expansion of democratic leadership facilitates the success of a PLC. The review suggests the need to accept conflict as part of the process, especially when schools attempt to create critical discourses and dialogue. Successfully navigating these conflicts are only possible once participants have developed trusting relationships.

A common view across the literature is that PLCs require a reculturing of schools into environments that eschew isolation and distribute power among its various participants. Principals need to exercise their authority, as well as the ability to divest this authority while promoting PLCs. They also need to provide the material resources, the space and the time to make this endeavor possible. Through efficient management, principals foster an inclusive environment that facilitates critical collaboration, and that keeps learning and student outcomes constantly in focus. Teachers, meanwhile, need to assume new leadership roles that take them out of their traditional isolation, in order to collaborate in purposeful interactions. They need to assume a new model of professionalism that focuses on student learning rather than traditional teaching. PLCs, furthermore, have to expand on this collaborative network to include students, schoolboards, consultants, universities and parents. The sign of a mature PLC is that of an organization that abandons insular introspection and reaches out to all stakeholders while it tries to address school-wide issues.

The literature also outlines the various problems that PLCs face. Schools are often traditional environments that fear disruption to the status quo. Inefficient leadership, poor policy, a lack of time and resource further inhibit the success of a PLC. Tension between the individual, the larger group and society are often issues that require mediation. PLC also face the challenge of navigating personal histories, positionality, culture, identity, competing obligations and loyalties and the fear of public exposure while attempting to give authentic voice to its participants. On top of this, the language of efficiency burrowed from the private sector, as well as the elevation of data teams and of accountability, seems counterintuitive to a model that proposes the expansion of authentic voices and of critical discourse through the reculturing of the social organization of schools.

This research seeks to contribute to the literature by further exploring these conclusions within a particular context – an English minority school board within the province of Quebec. The study, therefore, adds to the literature by soliciting the experiences of participants in PLCs within this specific context. While never reaching the broad scope that would allow it to make any causal claims, the study does highlight observations unique to these participants, and to their workplace. The particular attention that the study pays to its participants prioritizes a more focused and personalized interrogation of PLCs that differs from the broad perspectives and generalizations that so often characterizes the literature.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter discusses the methodology I used to conduct my study. I begin by recalling the purpose of my study, as well as the research question that I am investigating. I then explore the research design for this study, including a discussion of the participants and their selection process, how the data was collected and managed, as well as how it was analyzed. This chapter also discusses the ethical considerations that needed addressing. It ends with an overview of how the methodology the study used ensures the robustness and the credibility of the study.

Purpose

The purpose of my study was to interrogate further the conclusions drawn from the literature by investigating the implementation of PLCs in an English language school board in Quebec. In particular, I question how the implementation of PLCs within this English language school board has influenced how teachers and pedagogical consultants perceive PLCs. The study also seeks to contribute to the literature by exploring PLC participants' experiences within this specific context, providing an avenue for future research and exploration.

Research Question

My curiosity about whether teachers in my school board shared my perception of staff resistance to PLCs has led me to investigate the experience of the various stakeholders involved in English schools in Quebec. My desire to hear and to legitimize their experiences, as well as my interest in exploring the viability of PLCs, has led to the following research question: How has the attempt to implement PLCs in an English language school board influenced the way their teachers and pedagogical consultants perceive PLCs? I investigate this further through a series of sub-questions that frame the research within the literature. These sub-questions, furthermore,

help categorize the participants' experiences into specific themes that reinforce the findings of this research. These questions include:

- How do the participants envision the processes and the impact of PLCs?
- What role should / do teachers, administrators and pedagogical consultants play in PLCs?
- How has workplace culture affected the PLCs that these participants have experienced?
- What role does data play in PLCs?
- How has trust between various stakeholders been / not been developed in these PLCs?

These questions reflect a process of significant interaction with the literature and with my thesis advisor. These research questions, consequently, took final shape when, as Maxwell (2013) suggests, the purpose and context of the study attained clarity. They are also, as Butler-Kisber (2018, p. 21) describes, questions that are "broad enough" to remain open to new discoveries" while remaining "specific enough" to keep the study focused.

Research Design

Participants and Selection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured nature of my interviews allowed me to remain faithful to my research question, while permitting a flexibility that allowed the investigation of important issues that arose spontaneously.

My study includes five participants based on a criterion sampling that reflects Patton's (1999) purposeful sampling. The participants met specific criteria that includes:

- Teachers and pedagogical consultants of an English school board in Quebec.
- Participants who had participated at some point in their career in a PLC.

I chose an English language school board because I felt that the nuances inherent in a semi-structured interview required interviews in a language I am most comfortable with. The school board that I have chosen, furthermore, has prioritized the development and the deployment of PLCs as one of its essential professional practices. This of course, creates the possibility that the experiences of PLCs might be different in the French language sector, as well as in school boards that do not promote the practice. Exploring these possibility would require further investigation in a future study.

I chose to interview both teachers and consultants to gain a richer understanding of the participants' experiences. As the literature suggests, teachers represent the primary participant of any attempt to implement PLCs. The reculturing of schools that PLCs represent ultimately revolves around drawing teachers from the traditional isolation of the classroom and including them in processes that transforms a teaching community into one that has as its core ethos, collaboration, accountability and professional development (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan 2001). Pedagogical consultants, meanwhile, represent an external resource that is supposed to help guide this reculturing by providing guidance and external resources during this professional development (Fullan 2001). Consequently, I purposefully sampled pedagogical consultants and teachers because they represented the group of stakeholders who could best reflect on the complex social dynamics behind PLCs.

I also decided to recruit participants that work within my own school board. First, this proved to be convenient because these participants are also professional acquaintances who have shared work experiences. This has strengthened my methodology because the interviews have been conducted on a foundation of trust. As a manager within the school board, however, there were several ethical considerations that I had to take into account while interviewing the teachers

(this will be explored more fully later on in this chapter). The school board, recognizing this potential conflict, stipulated that I could not interview any teacher that worked in a school where I was also an administrator. I also had to request official permission from other school administrators to interview their respective teachers (see Appendix A). Once I received this permission, I presented another consent form to participants (see Appendix B). Both consent forms were written in a language that was relatively free of jargon, and that constantly reminded the participants of their rights throughout the research process. I ensured that they were aware of the nature and the purpose of the study. I outlined the procedures, and I reminded them of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. Once I received the participants' consent, I organized through e-mail the place and the time where these interviews would take place. The interviews only took place once I received signed consent.

The participants in the study included two pedagogical consultants, and three teachers, with one teacher formerly occupying the role of pedagogical consultant. The consultants serviced the entire school board. The teachers worked in various schools, representing both primary and secondary settings, as well as rural and urban settings. Their diversity of work experiences was beneficial, since I received data that richly describes individual experiences from diverse professional perspectives.

While the study could have included other relevant information about the participants, such as years of experience in education, gender, extent of exposure to PLCs, I opted to focus specifically on the participants' role in education to help the study clearly delineate between teachers and consultants and their experiences with PLCs. The study's focus on setting, meanwhile, reflects the vast geographic diversity of the school board that this study takes place

in. This study could not have ignored exploring the potential impact that these diverse settings might have had on the participants' experiences.

Table 1. Participant Profiles and Pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Role	Setting
Jane	Consultant	Entire School Board / Pedagogical Services
Nike	Consultant	Entire School Board / Pedagogical Services
Hadrian	Teacher	Secondary/Urban
Lord	Teacher	Secondary/Urban
Red	Teacher / Former Consultant	Primary Rural / Previously Entire School Board, Pedagogical Services

Data Collection

The two sources of data collection for this research are recorded interviews as well as my personal memos. I interviewed all participants twice. I began the first round of interviews in February, 2019. The second round of interviews took place in April and May, 2019. The participants chose the date and time of the interviews. The interviews took place at the participants' homes as well as at their school centers. I ensured privacy at both of these places. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes to complete. I gave no compensation for the interview.

Seeking to obtain meaningful data, I applied an adapted version of Seidman's (2013) three-part interview process. Unfortunately, time restraints and participant work schedules made it impossible to conduct three interviews during the timeframe allotted to my research. Instead, I opted for two interviews that still reflect Seidman's process, where each proceeding interview builds on the findings of the previous interview. The first interview established the context of the

participant's experiences through a reconstruction of these experiences. The second exchange sought deeper reflection from the participants.

I have included my questions in Appendix C. I kept the questions semi-structured and open-ended to allow my participants to respond freely. These open-ended questions generated responses that were more organic and authentic, but at the same time still respected the framework of the research questions. The questions are also both descriptive and interpretive (Maxwell, 2013), interested in detailing what actually transpired during these PLCS, as well as seeking to explore the meaning that the participants derived from these PLCs.

During the interviews, I employed what McMillan (2000) describes as prompting skills to ensure clarity, as well as the fluidity of the conversation. I took notes of key statements while conducting the interviews. These notes facilitated my prompting and led to rich and meaningful exchanges. During the interviews, I remained as engaging as possible, while trying to ensure that I was not imposing my opinion. I remained respectful of my participants' opinions and their concerns. Several of my participants expressed concern about sharing their opinions. I reminded them that participation was voluntary, and that they could end the interview at any point and for any reason. I believe I was able to maintain their trust because all my participants decided to continue the interviews. Furthermore, all the participants who expressed concern eventually expressed a sense of relief and enjoyment at the end of the interview process.

In addition to the interviews, I actively wrote memos that reflected on the PLCs that I personally participated in, as well as my interactions with the participants. Taking the form of an ongoing journal, my memos helped me recognize and limit the assumptions that I brought into the interviews. The memos, consequently, offered a tool for constant reflection and self-assessment. I would consult and write my memos before and after the interviews, and while I

was transcribing the data. As Maxwell (2013) argues, these memos helped me understand the topic, the research, and the conclusions that I reached. Since I am an administrator, and since I am not interviewing any administrators in this research, these memos also allowed me to include an administrative perspective that complement the opinions that the teachers and the pedagogical consultants offer.

Data Management and Analysis

After each round of interviews, I listened to the audio-recordings and proceeded to transcribe the recordings. While this process was long, requiring several revisions to ensure the accuracy of the transcription, it afforded me a closer look at the interviews. I was able to start reflecting on emergent patterns, a process that was influential in developing my data analysis. I wrote the transcriptions as if they were a script. I included stuttering, silence, and interjections such as ″ummm" in my transcription, in case these interjections as well as the non-verbal cues reveal another source of information that I could use in my analysis.

I opted to use a constant comparison analysis (CCA) to analyze the data (Butler-Kisber, 2018). This rigorous method unitizes the data, placing the units into emergent categories. It assigns codes to these categories to reinforce the inclusion of the data. These categories are then closely scrutinized, compared and contrasted with each other until larger conceptual themes emerge. The themes that ultimately emerge provide a rigorous and credible analysis of the data.

I began this process by, as mentioned previously, closely transcribing the data. Carefully transcribing the data allowed me to reflect on emergent patterns as I was transcribing. Once the transcriptions were complete, I began to superimpose categories heavily influenced by the general framework of the literature review onto the transcriptions. I color-coded the data to quickly and clearly identify these categories, while taking careful consideration of any data that

seemed to belong to multiply categories. I also took special note of any data that did not fit into the framework that the literature review provided. I jotted down brief observations next to the color-coded data to facilitate the discovery of emergent categories and themes.

Example 1: Sample of initial categorization

Nike: O.K. So a professional learning community as a ped consultant is where you have teachers not just teachers, teachers and principals working together and being engaged in and focused on student's learning. And together they work to help students learn at higher levels. And in order to be able to see if the team is successful they need to look at formative assessment.

Below is a list of the color-coding and the categories that I used:

1. How different participants conceptualize PLCs - Red
2. The role of different participants in PLCs
    1. Teachers - Green
    2. Principals - Purple
    3. Pedagogical Consultants - Light Blue
3. The culture of the PLCs/Workplace - Orange
4. The Role of Data in PLCs - Blue
5. Trust - Yellow

I then carefully reviewed these categories and the notes that I took to see if there were new categories that I could create that would more closely adhere to the data. I then re-categorized the data with new rules of inclusion, closely taking note of which perspectives and experiences my participants shared, and whether these experiences were unique to the individual or whether they reflected their experience through the lens of their respective professions. The table below illustrates an example of this re-categorization.

Table 2 Emergent Categories:

Category	Data	Shared Perspective	Unique Perspective
Workplace Goals	"it's purposeful with its expectations and the demands that are put on the teachers."	Shared by Pedagogical Consultants	

The following is a list of the new categories that emerged:

1) Time/Space Human Resources;
2) Stakeholders;
3) Data and its Use;
4) Pre-Existing Workplace Culture: School Culture;
5) Lack of Trust;
6) Workplace Goals;
7) Group Cohesion;
8) Pre-Existing Workplace Culture: Pedagogical Consultants;
9) Pedagogical Consultants: Offers of Service.

The data reveals that these categories often interweave with each other, demonstrating the complexity of the experiences that my participants shared with me.

I will fully explore the themes that this re-categorization helped generate in the discussion and the analysis section of this research.

Ethical Considerations

At the time of conducting this study, I was a vice-principal. Considering the hierarchical structure of Quebec schools, my participants were in a subordinate relationship with me. Furthermore, since questions related to trust arose in the study, this study had the potential to

place the teachers in a position of discomfort since they might have felt that an interview from an administrator was ultimately evaluative in nature. Pedagogical consultants, furthermore, might have felt that their access to the school I work at would be limited if they did not participate.

Working with teachers outside of my school center, however, placed limits on the authority that I had over them. I could not directly affect the employment status of teachers or of pedagogical consultants. The study requirements for ensuring participant confidentiality also prohibited me from sharing their opinions with their immediate supervisors. I did not have the power to limit the access pedagogical consultants have to my school center, especially since they are directly supervised by the pedagogical services department of the school board, who, as part of upper management, represent my superiors, and who ultimately decide how to orient their consultants.

As required, I received consent from both the school board and from McGill University's Research and Ethics Board. The school board stipulated that I seek consent from the principals before interviewing their teachers. The consent forms for both the participants and the principals clearly outline the intent of the study, as well as the rights of the participants, including the right to withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. This was also reinforced whenever meeting the participants. Ultimately, the study remained voluntary, protecting the rights of the participants throughout.

The apprehension that these risks might cause, furthermore, is acceptable because the study seeks to explore the issues of trust that might be causing this discomfort. It also explores how traditional school hierarchy impedes/enables the development of PLCs. The study, consequently, provides the opportunity to develop a more effective model for PLCs by understanding and finding productive ways to respond to any resistance that might be based on

feelings of mistrust, as well as the roadblocks that are created through the imposition of traditional models of school leadership.

Credibility

Credibility remains the cornerstone of any qualitative research. To ensure the credibility of this study, and in line with Butler-Kisber (2018), I have sought to accurately account for the participants' perceptions of their reality, to provide detail portrayals of these experiences and to offer a plausible analysis of the data. The interview questions, consequently, remain as value-neutral as possible to try to ensure the authenticity of participant responses. The participants, furthermore, have full access to transcription notes to ensure accuracy. This reduces any bias and assumptions that could affect the quality of the data and the authenticity of the study. As previously mentioned, I shared the interview transcripts with the participants, as well as my interpretation of their interview. This helps ensure the credibility/trustworthiness of the study in its attempt to include authentic participant voices throughout the process.

Furthermore, the triangulation of data from multiple sources increases the credibility of the study. As previously stated, the data includes both interviews and memos. The interviews represent a wide range of perspectives, from teachers and pedagogical consultants. As Maxwell states, this diverse range of data limits chance associations and systematic biases (2013). The memos, in particular, allow me to reflect and to scrutinize my biases and assumptions throughout the process. This includes a scrutiny of the literature, of my personal experience of PLCs, of my conduct during the interview process, and of my interaction with the data.

Example 2: Memo

General impressions interviews: Participants nervous at first, they then expressed a sense of relief. Do they need an outlet to talk? What silencing is occurring?

This short excerpt is an example of one of my reflective memos. Writing a memo like this allowed me to reflect on my initial impressions of the interview process. These also overtly exposed some of my biases. In this particular case, I would have reflected on why I believed that the participants needed an "outlet to talk." How did I know that there was any "silencing" going on? How much of this was my own impression of my work experience? These reflections, consequently, would help me focus more on what my participants were authentically saying, and less on the potential projection of my experiences and biases.

The study addresses confirmability by providing a clear "audit trail" (Shenton, 2004) that clearly outlines the inquiry process from the beginning of the process until final submission of this research. This "audit trail" not only includes a detailed description of my methodology (this section), but also includes an acknowledgement of various presumptions that might affect an authentic representation of the findings (my personal experiences as reflected in the introduction). As Maxwell (2013) suggests, these assumptions need examination and justification, especially since these assumptions can lead to unjustified conclusions that influence the results as well as the authenticity of the study.

The study, therefore, recognizes the possibility of various assumptive claims that might emerge from my personal experience of PLCs that seem to reveal cynicism and failure. I have sought to interrogate these assumptions through the extensive use of the aforementioned memos, by overtly exposing my methodology, and by drawing heavily on observations made through the literature (Toole & Louis, 2002; Smyth, 2008, Vangrieken, 2017; Parker et al., 2012).

The study also remains critical of the literature by constantly interrogating and investigating the claim by proponents of PLCS that professional learning communities represent an effective model for school improvement. It acknowledges and remains open to any findings

that might reveal positions that are contrary to these presumptions, and that might even bring the viability of PLCs into question. The study posits that this critical discourse can ultimately help strengthen this organizational model by highlighting its faults and its discrepancies.

Limitations

The following sections outlines the limitations that the participant sampling poses on this study. The sample size of this study remains small at five participants. Even though I attempted to counter the small sample size by selecting a group of participants from varied school settings and professions (rural/urban, teacher/pedagogical consultant), the small sample size limits any generalization that might be inferred from this study. This study, of course, is not interested in generalizing its findings. Rather, it is interested in particularizing the experience of its five participants, and then framing these experiences within the literature.

The participants, furthermore, all expressed a belief in the viability of professional learning communities. The study did not include any participants who were inclined to be suspicious of PLCs. This absence of strongly divergent viewpoints, however, was not due to any specific selection criteria. It might, instead, reflect that the participants work in a school board that strongly supports PLCs. It would have been interesting to purposefully include participants who see PLCs as a threat to their professional autonomy, and whether they champion isolation or envision other collaborative spaces besides the systematic approaches PLCs often take.

Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings

This chapter provides an analysis of the themes that emerged after the categorization of the interview data. As mentioned previously, the research question, as well as its sub-questions, provided a framework that facilitated the discovery of these themes. Specifically, the research question asked how attempts to implement PLCs in an English language school board has influenced the way their teachers and pedagogical consultants perceive PLCs. The following sub-questions supported this research question:

1) How do the participants envision the processes and the impact of PLCs?
2) What role do / should teachers, administrators and pedagogical consultants play in PLCs?
3) How has workplace culture affected the PLCs that these participants have experienced?
4) What role does data play in PLCs?
5) How has trust between various stakeholders been / not been developed in these PLCs?

Introduction

As discussed in chapter three (Table 1), the five participants in this study include both teachers and pedagogical consultants that worked for the same English school board in the province of Quebec. Quebec offers a distinct educational context where the school boards are divided on linguistic lines, offering a choice between Francophone and Anglophone schools. While the majority of the Francophone population can, by law, only attend the Francophone sector, the government does exempt certain sectors of the population from this restriction who can demonstrate a historical connection to the Anglophone educational sector (Légis Québec, 2020). This law has resulted in the creation of small, but dynamic educational institutions, that are interested in preserving the rights and the survival of the English community in Quebec.

These Anglophone school boards, in contrast to their Francophone counterparts, tend to occupy large territories of the province, with small student populations. This poses particular challenges, especially in resource allocation where the school boards have to distribute resources across a wide territory, often simultaneously servicing large urban schools and small rural communities.

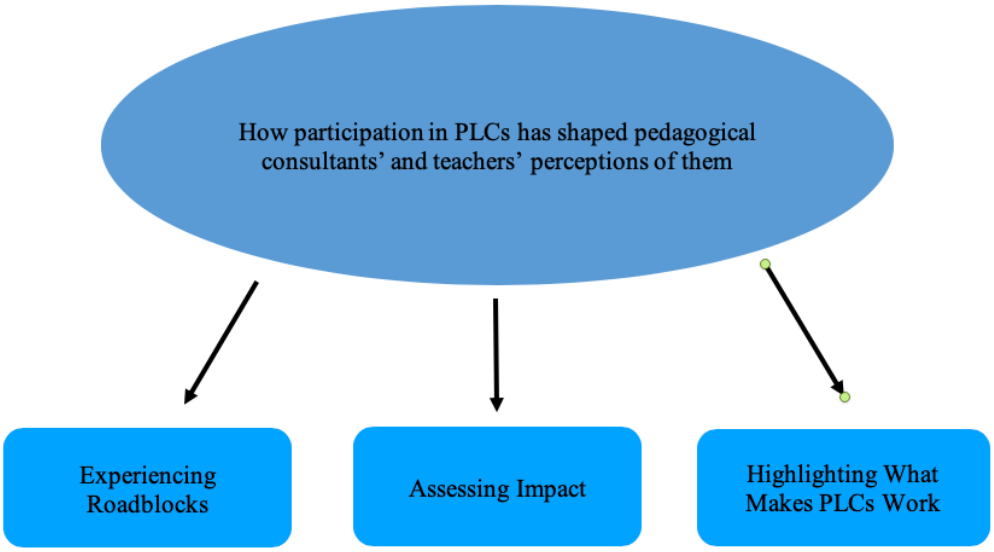
The participants of this study all worked in such a school board. The consultants are one of the key resources that this school board uses to provide training and pedagogical improvement throughout its sector. The consultants who participated in this study have provided services to the entire school board, supporting teachers and administrative teams by promoting effective teaching strategies and best practices. All the consultants, at one point in their career, had previous work experiences as teachers. The teachers of this study, meanwhile, worked in various schools that reflect the geographical diversity of the school board. One of the teachers worked in a rural elementary school. The two other teachers worked in separate urban high schools.

Even though each participant has had a unique experience with PLCs, they shared common perspectives that allowed me to elicit themes, irrespective of their place of work (rural/urban, primary/secondary) as well as their profession (pedagogical consultant/teacher). At the same time, the participants shared with me unique perspectives that their professional roles helped shape.

After rigorously implementing a constant comparison analysis (as discussed in Chapter 3), I was able to produce three conceptual themes that provided insight into my participants' experiences with PLCs. These themes include: 1) Experiencing Roadblocks; 2) Assessing Impact; 3) Highlighting what Makes PLCs Work. The first theme, "Experiencing Roadblocks," details the various obstacles that the participants faced in their respective PLCs. The second

theme, "Assessing Impact," outlines the impact that the participants believe a PLC can have on their workplace. The final theme, "Highlighting what Makes PLCs Work," explores the observations and the suggestions that the participants offer that might help overcome the challenges that PLCs face.

Figure 1: Emergent study themes



I arrived at the three themes by closely reading the transcripts. I followed this close reading with a rigorous process of categorization and re-categorization. I was then able to separate the data into nine categories. These nine categories formed the basis for the inclusion of data into my themes. I have included "Pre-Existing Workplace Culture" in two different themes to highlight the significant differences between school settings and the consultants' workplace at pedagogical services (see Table 3). While the teacher and consultants generally described the school settings as negative environments that limited the functionality of PLCs, the consultants offered their workplace as a model of a high-functioning, collaborative space.

Table 3: Themes, Categories and Inclusion Criteria

Theme	Categories	Inclusion Criteria
Experiencing Roadblocks	Time/Space & Human Resources	Material and organizational roadblocks that participants claim inhibit the success of PLCs
	Stakeholders	Participant definitions of stakeholder roles in PLCs, as well as the perceived failures within these roles
	Data and its Use	The relationship the participants have with managing data
	Pre-Existing Workplace Culture: School Culture	Participants' perceptions of their workplace culture, and how this impacts the establishment of PLCs
	Lack of Trust	Participant descriptions of the failure to develop trust in PLCs
Assessing Impact	Workplace Goals	Impacts of PLCs on the workplace. This closely aligns with what participants perceive as the goals of PLCs
Highlighting what Makes PLCs Work	Group Cohesion	Participants' insistence on the creation of strong group cohesion
	Pre-Existing Workplace Culture: Pedagogical Consultant	Pedagogical consultants' views on their workplace culture, and how this reflects a possible solution for establishing PLCs in schools
	Pedagogical Consultants: Offers of Service	Participants' perceptions of the pedagogical consultant role as a way to mitigate problems within PLCs

Theme 1: Experiencing Roadblocks

The first theme, "Experiencing Roadblocks," outlines the various obstacles that the participants faced while participating in PLCs. These obstacles include organizational barriers, as well as issues surrounding human resources. These obstacles also include how the participants delineated the various challenges that PLC members face while trying to reprise their roles. The theme ends with an exploration of the mistrust that seems to permeate the participants' school

settings, particularly focusing on the negative response to data management, and to the workplace culture. These "roadblocks" are respectively categorized as "Time/Space and Human Resources," "Stakeholders," "Data and its use," "Pre-existing Workplace Culture: Schools," and "Lack of Trust." Even though this discussion positions "Lack of Trust" as a separate category, this factor figures prominently throughout the discussion of all the categories. This, of course, reflects that this discussion does not seek a strict delineation of each category, but instead offers categories that often inform each other.

Time/Space and Human Resources

The organizational impediments to PLCs that the teachers and the consultants cited included various resource constraints. Beginning with issues of human resources, Jane highlighted how the rural schools of this school board often face a shortage of substitute teachers. While the urban schools within this school board were fortunate enough to have a greater pool of substitute teachers to draw from, the principals of the rural schools could not find replacements to release their teachers from their duties to attend the PLCs. As Jane suggested, there was no real way for the principals of these rural schools to remedy this situation.

As a teacher in an urban school, Lord never had to contend with limited substitution. Instead, her school had to navigate its own issues with human resources, which revolved around teacher retention and workplace stability. Lord described how high teacher turnover made it very difficult to run PLC sessions. Teachers would frequently leave the school because of burnout, maternity leaves, and several other factors, inhibiting the consistency that Lord felt a PLC needed to work. The replacement teachers, meanwhile, lacked the experience or the capacity to participate effectively in the complicated process. Furthermore, without these senior teachers, the PLC could not attain legitimacy with the rest of the staff. Lord's observation reflects the

conclusions that Bryk et al (1999) draw, that without a wider staff backing, PLCs cannot succeed. The instability in the workplace, consequently, inhibited the sense of continuity necessary to transform the PLC into something impactful and sustainable.

In addition to these issues surrounding human resources, Jane and Nike shared the limitations that finances and time often placed on PLCs. They described how the school board would initiate PLCs as a special project with specific budgetary parameters. Once the budget ended, however, schools failed to continue with the project because they did not have the finances to ensure the release of teachers from their regular duties. Without teacher release, it became increasingly difficult to find the time to meet. Since they could not meet on a regular basis, the PLCs eventually lost momentum, failing to enact any change. Even Jane's observation of rural schools having difficulty finding substitute teachers, discussed above, points to the constraints that time places on PLCs. Substitute teachers offer teachers a release from the strenuous pace of their regular teaching duties. Without this release, teachers have little space for time-consuming PLCs.

Conversely, Nike added that too many meetings also hampered PLC outcomes. She stated that teachers felt that PLCs that held too many meetings were "a waste of time and money" (Nike). Teachers would be upset at missing their regular duties, feeling that their frequent absenteeism hindered their effectiveness within their classroom. Nike, consequently, argued for PLCs that struck the balance between time spent at the PLC and time spent in the classroom.

Stakeholders

This section examines the roles that the participants posit onto principals and teachers, and suggests the failure to play these expected roles as one of the significant roadblocks to the

successful functioning of a PLC. While the pedagogical consultants can also be understood as stakeholders, I have placed the discussion of their roles into the third theme, "Finding Solutions."

Principals. Reflecting the literature, all the participants posited that the principals were integral to the success of PLCs, expecting the principals to keep student learning in focus, to foster a collaborative culture, and to provide sanctions and support when needed (Stiegelbauer, 2008; Gordon et al., 2008; Buttram & Farley-Ripple, 2016; Fullan, 2001; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Vangrieken et al. 2017). Nike, for example, added that the principal's role was not only to oversee PLCs, but to initiate the entire process as well. By prioritizing PLCs, principals would be prioritizing teaching and learning, keeping the PLC team accountable to school learning outcomes. In fact, she placed so much importance on the role that principals play that she asserted that school boards should force principals to run PLCs if they did not initiate them on their own.

This insistence on the centrality of the principal seems to originate from negative experiences where the study participants acutely felt the principals' absence, supporting Schecter's (2012) claim that the principal's direct involvement is of upmost importance to the PLC. As the participants' observations suggest, without the principal's engagement, their PLCs lacked enthusiasm and direction, failing to gain traction amongst the staff. Nike, for example, described one failed PLC where the teachers could not understand why the PLC was important, especially since they equated the principal's absence with disinterest in the PLC. She went on to describe how, without administrative accountability, teachers would often arrive late to the meetings and would fail to bring necessary material such as evidence of student learning. The meetings would also remain unfocused without clear learning targets. There was also no one to manage any conflict that arose within the group.

Recognizing this great pressure on the administrative team, some the participants of this study questioned whether the principals actually had the skills needed to manage PLCs. Jane and Nike, for example, experienced PLCs that struggled because the administrators lacked the expertise to run such a complicated process. As Nike described, "principals are expected to know everything, but they can't" (Nike). Considering her role as a pedagogical consultant, she recognized that principals might lack the requisite knowledge to understand PLCs fully and the pedagogical competence that goes with it.

Nike, furthermore, saw the role that principals play in PLCs as onerous. She sympathized with the principals, feeling that PLCs are just another task in an already heavy workload. She recognized how difficult it is for the principals to balance the diverse and multiple tasks of their occupation, often facing criticism and isolation:

> My gosh. Poor elementary principals are all alone in the school. They're doing everything. They have no help… I don't think it's because they hate it [PLCs]. I think they all agree on it. It's not that. They don't have time (Nike).

Red similarly reflected that principals might not have the requisite pedagogical knowledge to run a PLC. She, however, did share one successful PLC where the principal seemed to know "the questions to ask and to anchor the conversation, to allow the teachers to make more informed decisions" (Red). Here the principal successfully assumed a role as the instructional leader, directing the group through targeted questions, ultimately empowering the teachers to teach judiciously.

Hadrian, meanwhile, offered a position that greatly differed from the other participants. Unlike the other participants, Hadrian felt that PLCs function better without administrative involvement. Looking at the administrative body as an obstruction to the numerous programs he wanted to run, he felt that the people in position of authority do not know how to manage

change. Countering the suggestion by the rest of the participants that principals are somehow the main catalyst behind successful PLCs, he asserted that whenever administration tries to impose its authority on the process, the purpose of the PLC was lost. As he stated,

> If it's admin and its position of authority, you're going to lose your purpose and your why. But if the leaders that understand trust and collaboration and they understand the why of the building and the needs of the community, then surely the professional learning community has to represent the needs of the community, so that's their why.

For Hadrian, principals often seem out of touch with the needs of the school community. They are part of a removed, politicized bureaucracy that could not build the requisite relationships for successful PLCs.

This concern over the principal's capacity to run PLCs reflects how the participants of the study conceptualized PLCs as an extremely complex process. The participants all described PLCs as an iterative model, similar to Kolb's model of experiential learning (as cited in Mcgill & Beaty, 2001). Red, for example, described PLCs as a constant "back and forth" from the classroom to the PLC participants. Red saw the constant feedback in PLCs as foundational, where one idea led to the collaborative development of a greater idea:

> So if you contributed to an idea they had actually a quality, a scale of contribution, a wording that went with it and if you built on somebody else's, so…they had that wording. What we did was meshed the two and then we went back out and tried it (Red).

The participants, furthermore, insisted that the complexity of this collaborative task needs clearly established rules, as well as a code of conduct for the PLC. Red described the establishment of this code of conduct as part of the collaborative process, where the participants negotiate and establish the rules and procedures from the onset. She further posited that these procedures and expectations need to be "alive and revisited," evolving with the needs of the group. Nike concurred with Red's insistence, asserting that successful PLCs have clearly established norms that teachers generate.

The participants of the study, consequently, expected the principals to have the skill to run what they perceived as a dynamic organizational model. Not only did the participants expect their principals to have the requisite pedagogical knowledge to identify pedagogical issues and offer potential solutions, they also expected them to coordinate a complex system of collaboration between diverse groups of people, constantly mediating between participants, while promoting a school-wide vision, constant reflection and action, accountability and a rigorous interaction with classroom data.

Teachers. Of course, the participants also felt that teachers are an integral part of this process. Similar to their assessment of the principals, the participants felt that the teachers lack either the capacity or the interest to participate in a PLC. Red, for example, reflecting on both failed and successful PLCs that she participated in, expressed that teachers need a "willingness" to "explore something…that has to be innate that has to be budding" (Red). Red, consequently, believed that teacher capacity correlated to an intrinsic desire for growth, a similar belief held by proponents of growth mindsets (Dweck, 2016; Heggert, 2015). The PLCs helped satiate this desire by providing the opportunity to explore and to share their work experience with others. Unfortunately, Red felt that many teachers do not see a value to PLCs unless it has an immediate impact on the classroom. Considering that immediacy was anathema to the long and complicated processes inherent in PLCs, she mostly encountered teachers who saw little value in the process.

Jane, meanwhile, was even more critical of teachers and their roles in PLCs. To begin, she felt that most teachers in the school board do not even have an understanding of what a PLC is. Many of the teachers, in her experience, do not actively look for quality feedback or strategies to help their practice. She expressed with great dismay this resistance to change that the teachers often express:

> They don't want PD [professional development], they don't want to be part of any initiatives, they just want to keep doing what they're doing, what they've been doing for years (Jane).

Nike shared a similar perspective to Jane, adding that teachers avoid PLCs because of the constant pedagogical scrutiny implied in the model. She insisted that teachers are often afraid of judgement:

> Teachers think that they're being observed that they're being evaluated, that they're not doing their job properly. They forget that their core mission is to care for the student's learning (Nike).

Sharing similar observations to the literature (Bryke et al., 1999; Jappinen, 2016; Attard, 2012), Nike believed that this fear arrested the development of a teacher's "core mission" to educate their students effectively. The PLCs she attended did not develop the requisite trust between PLC members that could help overcome this fear.

Of all the participants of the study, Lord was the only one who believed that teachers had the skill and mindset to participate in PLCs, establishing a link between seniority and expertise. As a veteran teacher, she argued that teacher experience was a significant factor in running successful PLCs. She felt that it was the senior teachers' role to lead younger teachers, showing them what works, and which practices are more effective. Lord, however, having only worked within one school and in one PLC, remained fiercely loyal towards her fellow staff. Her loyalty often colored her discussion throughout the interview process. She generally avoided any potential criticism, and only once expressed a misgiving that some of her senior staff might have performed poorly at the PLC.

Red, Jane and Nike's more critical appraisal of teachers in PLCs, however, reflected their wider and more diverse experience within the school board. As school board pedagogical consultants (both current and past), they would have experienced a greater number and diversity

of PLCs than Lord. Their assessment of PLCs, consequently, came from a vantage point where they could discriminate between one school's PLC with another. As employees who service the entire school board community, they would have been less likely to develop an allegiance to a teaching staff that was associated to a particular school.

Interestingly, the fiercest criticism that teachers in PLCs faced came from another teacher. Hadrian expressed how PLCs offer a great opportunity to explore pedagogy through process and outcome. As a teacher, Hadrian claimed he welcomed criticism, and saw it as part of the learning model. He noted, however, that this willingness to be criticized requires an openness to peers, to self-evaluation, and to peer-evaluation. As he stated:

> I am an individual and I have to personally grow, but I came to teaching to collaborate, to work with other people. And that means open up yourself, to criticism, and uh…again to continuous improvement. It improves you as a teacher and at the end of the day the students are there to learn and to grow themselves so we have to grow, and we have to grow quicker than them, because if you look at the pace of the world and what's happening, you talk about instinct, you gotta go along with it because it's fast paced (Hadrian).

Consequently, for Hadrian, PLCs represent the opportunity to break what the literature considers a culture of isolation (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001; Nelson, 2008), as well as an opportunity to keep pace with 21st century learning and globalization. Hadrian, however, described the teachers in Quebec and in his school board as suspicious and unwilling. This perceived unwillingness by the teachers to collaborate and to face criticism contributed to the great frustration Hadrian expressed throughout the interview. Where PLCs could have been a site of collaboration and growth, they instead became emblematic of what Hadrian saw as a systemic failure within the educational system of this province.

Data and its Use

Several of the participants shared similar opinions with the literature that an effective management of the data representing student performance and outcomes played a pivotal role in their PLCs (Boudett et al., 2013; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker, et al., 2002). Lord, for example, claimed that student data allows schools to scaffold the education of individual students and that data is integral to helping schools evaluate programs and to integrating students into these programs. Jane concurred by arguing that student evidence is ultimately what drives PLCs. She went on to warn, however, that PLCs "should be data driven because… as long as you have reliable data…that's the way you can remove personalities and egos from the conversation." She then added, "it's really the data should speak for itself, but it needs to be reliable" (Jane).

Several participants, furthermore, argued that formative assessments were a more useful source of data than an overreliance on summative assessments. Nike, for example, asserted,

> formative is more preventative than summative. Formative informs your teaching and your student's learning before you [administer] the test that will go on the report card. So you have time to change and to address and to make sure that the kids that got it can perhaps do something else that can enrich their learning, and the kids that still are not getting it, they're going to have a bit more time to work it out" (Nike).

Elaborating on formative assessments as a source of data, Nike went on to argue that this data could come from several sources, and not just from conventional testing.

Jane shared this view, claiming that data could even include testimonials and anecdotes. In fact, Jane felt that qualitative data is generally more enriching allowing teachers to more accurately reflect on their students. She described qualitative data as "looking at kids in a totally different way," allowing schools to address not only academic needs, but also social and emotional issues that students are facing.

Similarly, Hadrian advocated for qualitative data, stating,

> I believe in data, but I also believe in instinct, management awareness, leadership awareness. Data sometimes is written just to [….] prove objectives. So for me data's gotta be proportionally measured towards the outcome of the project. But there's something you can't measure. You can't measure emotions (Hadrian).

Hadrian, however, expressed deep mistrust of data that tried to quantify student difficulties and outcomes. He felt that quantitative data is political in nature, to be avoided when possible so that we could separate schools from political involvement. He expressed a belief that he was championing students by staying "true" to his values and objectives by attempting to depoliticize data. Quantitative data, he felt, is often wrong, part of a "failed 80s" business model that presented numbers as "sound bytes" meant to justify these strategies. He argued that "we don't share good working practices. We do it in a very aesthetic way by the numbers" (Hadrian). Hadrian, consequently, shared a similar detraction of data with researchers such as Fontaine (2016) and Smyth (2008). He questioned the authenticity of "evidence-based" practices, and asked whether this accounting simply promoted policymakers, bureaucrats and test-makers over professional educators.

Describing similar experience in PLCs that reflect Hadrian's perspective, Red highlighted how teachers often feel that this type of quantitative data analysis is an audit on teacher performance. While expressing that teachers needed to separate this fear of judgement from data management, she understood that the evidence-based practices found in PLCs imply a tracking of results. This tracking, she felt, made teachers feel that the process was ultimately some sort of audit on teaching, especially when budgetary parameters and evidence tracking framed the discourses of the meetings. This sent a negative message to the teachers, who were already suspicious of initiatives from external organizations such as the school board.

Further reflecting on this, Red added, "I'm not sure if the label 'the board' causes mistrust initially [….] but relationships take time to build and grow and trust comes with those

relationships" (Red). Red, consequently, recognized how difficult it is for a school board employee to provide the requisite time to develop a trusting relationship that would enable the exploration of such sensitive topics as student results and teacher performance. Without the development of trust, the teachers could not separate their fear of judgement from the management of data. Instead of providing a tool to help direct the professional learning community, data, in this instance, proved to be a roadblock that broke down the collaborative process.

School Culture

Out of all the teachers, Lord was the only one who described her work environment as relatively positive - a place where everybody collaborated and was professional. She then added that her school had easy access to their administration through an "open door policy" (Lord). She ended this part of the discussion by highlighting that in her school, nobody was forced to do anything since all professional development, including PLCs, was voluntary.

Pedagogical development on a voluntary basis, however, might suggest why the PLCs in Lord's school failed to gain any traction. While the teachers often met to provide emotional support to each other, they rarely collaborated on educational outcomes. Instead, Lord's colleagues saw PLCs as an imposition on their work life that did not reflect the needs of the classroom. Without administrative expectations, these PLCs could not gain traction. As the literature posits, successful PLCs require administrative mandates (Schecter, 2012; Stiegelbauer, 2008; Gordon et al., 2008; Buttram & Farley-Ripple; 2016; Fullan, 2001; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Vangrieken et al.; 2017). The more laissez-faire attitude that Lord had assigned to her workplace might have helped her staff avoid acrimony, but at the cost of missing the opportunity to develop collaboration that focused on student outcomes.

Red, on the other hand, provided a drastically different depiction of school culture. She detailed the frenetic energy of her school, describing it as a "day to day scrambling" (Red). She added that her school's "priorities are backwards," where teachers did not have the time to confer with each other, let alone run a PLC. As she lamented, "we have no PLC going on, no professional development, we can't plan forward because we're just right now" (Red). Reflecting deeply on the situation at her school, Red added

> It's so obvious to me it's been so obvious to me, but it wasn't obvious until today that we have no idea what we are doing. So how is the culture right now? It's a coping culture, I would say, it's a struggling culture (Red)

My interview with Red seemed to trigger a despondent reflection on the state of professional development within her building, where there was little room for professional development because her school was dealing with the immediate management of the student body. Within an environment that was, apparently, always in a reactive state, there was little time for the sustained effort required to establish the long, complicated processes implicit in PLCs.

Hadrian, meanwhile, depicted a workplace scenario that was even more despondent than Red's. Unlike the clear missions and vision statements that the literature suggests helps direct the purpose and the functioning of PLCs (Dufour & Eaker, 1998), Hadrian felt that whatever vision his workplace had was purely aesthetic, with no real impact on teaching and learning. Reminiscing on his previous experiences in international schools, he expressed a longing for the collegiality that could not exist within the isolationist culture of his workplace. He wanted an alternative work culture that would "take the ego out of the equation" (Hadrian), and that would define a purpose and common set of values. Instead, he admonished what he felt was professional stasis:

> Well it's the same bullshit every day isn't it. Well nothing changed. Nothing's moved forward, nothing moved backwards, it's just gone sideways (Hadrian).

The pedagogical consultants similarly felt the negative impact of this isolationist culture that the literature expounds as a common feature of teaching environments (Nelson, 2008; Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2001). Jane, for example, described the general animosity she felt from teachers whenever there were attempts to collaborate. These teachers often expressed that PLCs were not what their schools needed. Jane added that it was difficult to prioritize PLCs in an environment that often neglected professional development. Reflecting on her previous teaching career in other provinces, she was amazed at the absence of professional development in Quebec:

> So in my previous province what we had to do at the beginning of the year we had to put down on paper our professional ummm improvement plan. And we had to say what umm our goal was for the year, how we were going to meet that goal, what kinds of things different PD we were going to do. It could be observing another teacher teaching, reading, going to workshops, going to a conference, and at the end of the year…umm….in a meeting with the administration we had to review it and I found that a really good process because it really made you stop and think and plan and just having a goal and setting it down on paper was more likely to happen. Then when I came to Quebec ummm I was I was amazed at how little PD was going on. I've been here for 18 years and for most of my teaching there was little PD going on (Jane)

This transition from the rich processes inherent in her previous province to the paucity of pedagogical activity within her teaching experience in Quebec proved to be Jane's biggest professional frustration. She felt fortunate that her employment as pedagogical consultant provided her the opportunity for deep pedagogical conversations and development.

Nike agreed with Jane's claims, adding that within the current climate of the schools within the school board, PLCs actually had a negative impact on school culture. She described how teachers who were not involved in PLCs, expressed animosity towards those who were. These PLCs, consequently, were unable to attain the critical mass of staff support that Bryk et al. (1999) suggest as essential component to overcoming resistance. Participation within the PLCs Nike attended, instead, posed a threat to many members of staff. She mused that "PLCs are

supposed to promote a community of leaners, but now it's starting to separate people" (Nike). Instead, within schools that lacked a collaborative school culture, any attempts to impose collaboration as a disruption to the status quo, ended up reinforcing separation and animosity.

Trust

The inability to build trusting relationships often permeated the participants' discussions of the various roadblocks that their PLCs faced. Sharing the literature's sentiment (Bryk et al., 1999; Jappinen et al., 2016), the participants felt that the failure of stakeholders to reprise their roles successfully, the suspicion that surrounded the analysis of student data, and the failure of stakeholders to escape the isolation of their school culture, often revolved around an inability to build trusting bonds. As Lord described, trust is the shared experience between peers working with the same students and towards the same goals:

> They're in the same situation so they know each other and they can help each other out and they like each other. Everyone was very honest and open. There was no reason not too (Lord).

Shared experiences, consequently, were the glue that bonded people together in a community that actively sought support from each other. Through these shared experiences, members of this community found what Lord described as an audience that was sympathetic to individual concerns.

Red, concurring with Lord's sentiment, argued that a PLC could not run without taking the adequate time to develop trusting relationships. Reflecting on a previous failed session, she argued that running PLCs is similar to running classrooms:

> It's what we do with the kids right. They're not ready to learn. Build a relationship. You know it takes time. It will come, then they're ready to learn from me because they have a trust. But somewhere we skipped some steps there because we only had a year. We had to report (Red).

As an organizational model, the PLC that Red experienced needed an adequate amount of time to allow the stakeholders to develop trusting relationships. Instead, she expressed how an accounting process with rigid deadlines depersonalized this PLC, failing to take the time to develop the requisite bonds and relationships between participants.

Nike shared Red's assessment, adding that participants should never rush a PLC. Like Red, she felt a PLC needs time to develop trust:

> You need to take the time to build good relationships. You need time to listen to your staff. Not necessarily agree with them but listen to them. You need to, well if you're saying that, you need to show your principals, administrators you need to show themselves as learners too. They need to show that they're vulnerable also that they can make mistakes and that they can learn from it even though it's hard on ego (Nike).

Her observation, however, revealed that time was not the only factor for a successful PLC. Participants in PLCs need the courage to express vulnerability. The administrators, as pedagogical leaders, need to be willing to express weakness. Teachers also need to be willing to expose their vulnerabilities by inviting outsiders into their classroom. This point was particularly relevant to Nike, since as a school board employee, she felt that having access to the classroom is a symbolic barrier that consultants need to overcome.

Hadrian, however, felt that there are too many systemic issues within Quebec's education system to allow the development of these trusting relationships. He stated that "we work as an island mentality, an isolation mentality it brings that kind of insular approach an isolated approach, and a divisive approach" (Hadrian). He further characterized the educational system as a "failed system" that was "toxic," and "cancerous" where teachers are suspicious of change and different outcomes. This is very different from the type of trusting collegiality he dreamt of where "teachers have to show the courage and open the doors - their classrooms to the outside world" (Hadrian).

Summary: Experiencing Roadblocks

The participants of the study conveyed generally negative experiences with PLCs that closely reflect the obstacles that the literature elicits. "Time / Space and Human Resources," for example, suggest a failure to reorganize the workplace. As the literature posits, this reorganization is essential for the successful operation of any PLC (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Kemmis, 2014). Apparent issues, including a lack of staff stability, the challenge of finding substitution for rural schools inhibited the functioning of their PLCs, as well as financial and temporal restraints (whether too little or too much allotted time) negatively affected the outcomes of these PLCs.

Surprisingly, the participants posited the brunt of these negative experiences onto the inability of various stakeholders to fulfill their respective roles in PLCS, rather than on structural or financial limitations. While their critique is similar to the literature's disquisition (Bryk et al., 1999; OECD, 2008; Parker et al., 2012; Vangrieken et al., 2017), the strong emphasis that the participants placed on teachers and principals suggest a clear understanding that PLCs are only as strong as the people who are collaborating. The participants, consequently, felt that principals needed to remain central to the process, providing direction and accountability. Unfortunately, the principals in their PLCs often lacked an understanding of the pedagogy as well as the capacity to lead such complex group dynamics. The participants also felt that the teachers, while obviously integral to these PLCs, often lacked the desire, the capacity and the experience to participate effectively in PLCs. They expressed that these teachers were not open to critical discourses.

While the participants presented data management as an essential component to the development of professional learning communities, the participants' interest in pursuing

qualitative data suggests that issues of trust were not addressed before conducting these PLCs. Several of the participants overtly expressed the concern that quantitative data is either a political tool, or a way to audit the teachers. This fear, again, reflects the literature (Fontaine, 2016; Smyth, 2008), highlighting school cultures that are apparently isolationist and static. From the participants' perspectives, these school cultures have failed to develop trusting relationships that can help overcome the safe refuge of the status quo.

Theme 2: Assessing Impact

The second theme highlights the impact that the participants felt PLCs could have on the workplace. While emphasizing that the participants retained a positive outlook on PLCs, most of this section focuses on the divergent opinions surrounding the potential outcomes of PLCs within educational settings.

Workplace Goals

Even with the roadblocks that the participants faced, they retained a belief that PLCs, as an organizational model, could provide substantial pedagogical benefits to the schools within this school board. The participants, however, diverged on the scope and the impact of these benefits. While some of the participants felt that PLCs are a valid endeavor when they reflect immediate classroom/school setting concerns by incrementally changing their work environment, others often advocated for PLCs as a transformative processes that could potentially change teaching practice while engaging stakeholders in a broader educational "mission."

Lord asserted the possibility of using PLCs as a political tool that could influence decisions made at the school board or administrative level. Specifically, she believed that PLCs should affect class composition and address issues that apparently arose from an overly heterogeneous grouping of students and the inclusion of students with severe social

maladjustments. Much of the commentary that Lord provided reflected how much of a challenge these groupings have been on the teaching practices of her school:

> I remember what it's like to be a teacher having certain kids and certain classes that you just know you want to get through to and you're having this block and you need help and you're asking for help and it doesn't seem to be they don't seem to be getting the help that they're asking for (Lord).

Within these difficult circumstances, Lord did not want a PLC that offered teaching strategies or differentiated instruction. She felt that the needs of the students were beyond the pedagogical development that a PLC might offer. Instead, Lord hoped that the PLCs she was involved with would lobby for structural change in these classes and/or in the organizational model of the school.

Hadrian, meanwhile, offered that PLCs could have a broader impact on school culture than what Lord suggested. He felt that a successful PLC could "impact the status quo" (Hadrian), potentially transforming the teaching practices of the school setting. He warned, however, that outcomes needed to remain flexible, especially since various stakeholders have different expectations from PLCs. As he observed, "sometimes I just feel that their objectives are not my objectives" (Hadrian). The "their" that Hadrian referenced included what he perceived as an out-of-touch bureaucracy as well as theorists who have no stake in his school. He felt that only stakeholders within the immediate school could define preferred educational outcomes as well as the manner used to achieve these outcomes.

Nike, in her role as pedagogical consultant, was more preoccupied with teaching practice and the expectations a school has for student learning. She stated that PLCs "have influence on the learning of their students," adding that PLCs require clear learning targets where students and teachers "know what you want them to learn, so you're able to tell that support person what she

should be working on" (Nike). Nike believed that teachers could attain these learning goals by focusing on teaching practice.

Apart from improving pedagogy, Nike also referenced the development of a broader school "mission" through the PLC process. In a particularly impassioned discourse, she pleaded that PLCs help develop a school's purpose:

> it answers to the why are we here. Why are we doing this? That's our mission. It brings us back to our mission. As educators why do we teach, why are we here (Nike)?

Nike's plea was existential in scope, reflecting her constant discouragement at the poor teaching practices she had experienced throughout her involvement in the school board. Her hope, ultimately, was for a broader change in teacher practice throughout the school board, where educators prioritize teaching and learning as the core mission of their schools.

As a former pedagogical consultant who returned to the classroom as a teacher, Red was able to maintain a unifying position between the desire to transform pedagogical practice that the consultants espoused, and the teachers' desire to address the immediate issues of the classroom. Like the consultants, she stated PLCs should be "purposeful, with its expectations and the demands that are put on the teachers" (Red). She felt that teaching practice needs to evolve and develop further, bemoaning the current state of educational priorities, where teachers are more concerned with "bulletin boards, end of year activities, Christmas concert fundraisers, than PLCs." At the same time, she concurred with Lord and Hadrian, arguing that PLCs work only when they have a direct impact on the classroom.

Red was fortunate enough to have experienced a PLC that seemed to bridge these two perspectives. While working on the "talk" competency in the English Language Arts curriculum, she described how these teachers were not only sharing a theoretical endeavor, they also emerged from this PLC with a better understanding of this competency that allowed them to

implement concrete strategies onto the classroom. She claimed that the teachers returned to these sessions excited that their work in the PLC helped develop their approach to teaching a particularly difficult and ill-defined competency.

Summary: Assessing Impact

The participants of the study retained their belief that PLCs could positively affect educational outcomes. There was, however, tension between how various participants perceived the impact of PLCs. Some participants wanted to address immediate classroom concerns as well as structural issues. Others argued for a broader pedagogical transformation that would help redefine a school's core educational mission. This tension suggests that the day-to-day reality of these schools is far from the ideal situation that would make PLCs possible. They might represent at-risk schools that, as Hallinger (2003) suggests, may require a more traditional model of leadership that can initiate the necessary structural changes before wider collaboration is even possible.

Interestingly, Red, reflecting on her former role as a consultant and on her current role as a teacher, was able to offer a unifying vision, positing that pedagogical transformation could have an immediate impact on the classroom. She expressed a similar belief to the literature (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker, et al., 2002) that a shift in a school's ethos towards a more collaborative and purposeful structure could help address the more immediate, "practical" classroom concerns.

Theme 3: Highlighting what Makes PLCs Work

This theme highlights suggestions that the participants made to help PLCs overcome their challenges. In particular, this theme illustrates how the participants reflected on group cohesion as one of the cornerstones of successful PLCs. The theme then discusses how the pedagogical

consultants offered their workplace as a model for collegiality that counters the negative culture that the participants described in the schools. The theme ends with the support that the participants believe pedagogical consultants could offer as one of the ways to counteract the challenges that their PLCs faced.

Group Cohesion

As the literature suggests (Fullan, 2001; Dufour & Eaker, 1998), the participants argued that involvement in PLCs should include a diverse group of stakeholders. Beginning with Nike, she felt that the group should include teachers, pedagogical consultants and principals working together to enhance student learning. Jane concurred with the caveat that participants need to be "pedagogically minded" (Jane). Red, however, countered Jane's assessment by arguing that even non-teaching employees, "possibly including support staff" (Red), could join a PLC. Their inclusion depends on the objective of the PLC.

Hadrian, meanwhile, wanted to include students, parents and alumni in his PLCs. He felt that it was urgent to "involve students in the process because at the end of the day, the learning that we shape for them is the outcome" (Hadrian). He continued that alumni involvement is also a sign of a healthy school community, as well as a vibrant PLC, representing individuals who are willing to share their experience as both outsiders and former students. Hadrian also wanted parental involvement, as long as the parents help the process by addressing the common needs of the school, rather than their individual children's' interests.

Hadrian, however, argued that there should be limitations placed on who should be involved in PLCs. He felt that a common goal has to unify participants, leaving little room for dissent or opposition. As mentioned in the previous themes, Hadrian was also skeptical of the

involvement of certain outside organizations, especially those he deemed as too bureaucratic or too far removed from the classroom. He posited:

> Why have another island make a decision when the best people able to make a decision is in the building itself. So I think we gotta cut a lot of the middle people out, cut the bureaucracy out, the red tape (Hadrian).

For Hadrian, the stakeholders in a PLC need to have an intimate relationship with his students and his learning objectives. While parents and alumni, as outsiders, still have obvious claims of proximity to the student body, bureaucrats and other governmental organizations are a prohibitive force, limiting the scope of his ambitions and the outcomes he wanted to develop through his programs.

The participants, furthermore, argued that the cohesiveness of the group depends on more than just a group of stakeholders who share common interests and goals. Group cohesiveness ultimately depends upon keeping the process voluntary. As Red stated, in an "ideal" (Red) world, a group of teachers would initiate a PLC. This desire to pursue a shared objective would propel the teachers to seek collaboration without any compulsion. As willing participants, Red felt they would have the energy and the excitement to make the PLC succeed.

The pedagogical consultants Jane and Nike concurred with Red's assessment that PLCs need to remain voluntary. Jane asserted that school board mandated PLCs are difficult to initiate, especially after having experienced resistance by the teachers to anything that comes from outside their immediate school. Nike, meanwhile, reflecting on how voluntary PLCs naturally seem to lead to better group cohesion, asserted, "the people that hate each other are not there. There's a clan of people that are friends. They're present. The rest of the group is not" (Nike). As Nike went on to suggest, group cohesion in these PLCs is highly dependent on interpersonal histories in a school. Mandated sessions, especially by organizations outside of the immediate

school setting who are unaware of these histories, could potentially force a dysfunctional grouping of people.

Of all the participants, Hadrian was the only one who expressed uncertainty on whether or not voluntary PLCs could work. Hadrian felt despondent that schools in Quebec have an "isolationist" (Hadrian) environment, relying heavily on individual levels of "creativity" (Hadrian) to initiate PLCs. While this works well for teachers who take initiative, he claimed that this acts as a disincentive to teachers who are afraid of change. As he asserted, "it is very easy to sit back choose not to do it, choose not to trust, choose not to collaborate" (Hadrian).

Reflecting, however, on his experience teaching in his place of origin, he concluded that mandatory PLCs are just as ineffective. While he felt that teachers from his place of origin had a greater ownership of professional development, he felt that outside organizations dominate PLCs, promoting political agendas, rather than the needs of the students and of the school. This negative experience suggests why Hadrian was so critical of data (discussed in Theme 1), feeling, like Fontaine (2016) and Smyth (2008), that PLCs could easily become accountability models that serve to promote the interest of policymakers and bureaucrats.

In the end, Hadrian preferred his experience in other international schools, and other countries, where PLCs seemed to be more ingrained in the school culture. While PLCs were never mandated at these schools, they somehow permeated the teacher ethos. They avoided the feeling of disenfranchisement inherent in mandated processes, while celebrating a culture that seemed to collaborate naturally and voluntarily.

Culture at the Pedagogical Services Department

While the participants presented school culture as a significant roadblock to the development of PLCs, the pedagogical consultants offered their work environment at the school

board's Pedagogical Services Department as a positive alternative that enabled the development of complex organizational models such as professional learning communities. This section explores how the consultants characterize their workplace, and how this characterization reflects a viable model for the development of professional learning communities.

Jane praised her experience at the Pedagogical Services Department, claiming that her work as consultant has culminated into ongoing and enriching professional development. Jane described how she worked closely with other consultants, sharing diverse viewpoints through critical discourse. She asserted, "I am learning so much from them and the conversation is so enriching for me and I hope for them as well" (Jane). As this assertion implies, reciprocity characterizes Jane's involvement in her workplace, where she hoped she could become an equal contributor to the group.

Jane also characterized her workplace as highly professional and collaborative. She described the Pedagogical Services Department as an organization that prioritizes emotional and mental health, while setting goals for both collective and individual professional development. Staff meetings, for example, did not only impart information. The pedagogical consultants, instead, were asked to weigh in on different planning tasks and orientations. In particular, Jane lauded the varied perspectives and orientations that various participants at her department brought to the meetings:

> It is very stimulating conversation like I said the PLC that I am part of with other ped. consultants some of them subject consultants some of them special needs consultants it's interesting conversation I mean everybody whether you're assistive tech consultants or deal with ABAV [anti-bullying anti-violence plan] or the new sexuality course. These are all very different perspectives people are bringing to the meeting (Jane).

Jane ended by arguing that the group of pedagogical consultants were very collegial and supportive, volunteers who have decided to work with each other, rather than employees compelled into meetings.

Nike shared a similar appraisal of her workplace. She described how her workplace had facilitated the separation of ego from work objectives, crediting this separation to an environment that allowed her to share openly and readily her failings with other consultants:

> I find it's a good learning environment. Ummm….how could I say……I hang out with the people that are keen and that make me learn. And I know that I'm a highly reflexive person and when I…things go wrong I tell my colleagues I messed up. I did this wrong. I should have did this. So yeah. Is it perfect? No. Are there cliques? Yes. But for professional conversation I find it's O.K. (Nike).

Nike did not feel that her workplace was perfect. Like the schools she visited, there were staff histories that influenced group dynamics. Unlike the schools, however, Nike and her colleagues were able to overcome these dynamics to pursue broad work objectives. At the same time, Nike also asserted, that the pursuit of these common objectives did not stymie the consultants' individuality. Instead, she elicited how the consultants retained a high degree of autonomy to pursue these common objectives in a manner that reflected everyone's diverse personalities and education.

Pedagogical Consultants: Offers of Service

Study participants felt that the pedagogical consultants, through the services they offer schools, could provide possible avenues to address the problems identified within PLCs. They shared Anderson-Butcher et al. (2010) and Preast & Burns's (2018) assessment that consultants need to address the individual needs of stakeholders. Consultants also need to address the shared goals of PLCs, especially by consulting teachers on data management and instructional change.

The participants in the study, consequently, asserted that consultants provide a level of pedagogical expertise that is essential for a PLC to work.

Beginning with the teachers, Red argued that consultants have sufficient time to support the partnerships inherent in PLCs. She claimed that the consultants could provide the pedagogical information and the literature to help build capacity. Once the consultants help build this capacity, Red asserted that they need to step back and remove themselves from the PLC. Their use, consequently, was not to constantly coordinate the group, but to promote teacher and administrative independence by building capacity through the dissemination of knowledge.

Hadrian, meanwhile, offered a more selective argument that pedagogical consultants are only useful if the teachers are able to handpick which consultants they could work with. He felt that by being able to select the consultants, teachers would be able to choose an individual who believes in their projects. Furthermore, Hadrian felt that there would have to be a pre-existing relationship with this individual. Without this pre-existing relationship, it would be impossible to build a partnership between the school staff and an individual from outside the immediate organization.

The consultants themselves perceived their role in a similar vein. Jane, for example, argued that their expertise with the curriculum gave them value within PLCs. Through their expertise, they could save PLCs time by helping generate data, and by producing research. They could also provide support to the administration, helping them find the direction that they want to take. She felt that consultants are highly motivated, skilled employees that are useful to the schools and the school board because they share the broad vision of the school board, all the while being able to offer advice on the more immediate experiences in the schools. As she describes,

> consultants are a good bunch of people. They see the bigger picture. They understand that people need to put effort into improving the system and honing their abilities. And that's even for themselves, they hold themselves to the same standard of improvement (Jane).

This last point highlights that Jane also understood the pedagogical consultants as a model for the increased professionalization of teaching. She believed that a consultant's role is not only to help coordinate meetings and to provide resources, they also present a work ethic that sets an example for teachers to follow.

Our other pedagogical consultant, Nike, asserted that success in a consultants' role is incumbent on the collaboration and the trust they could develop with administration as well as with the teachers. Once consultants attain trust, they could actually attend the teacher's classroom to offer a more critical assessment that could be taken back to the PLC. As she argued, "I think that in order to help someone it takes a lot of time, but when I did take the time to build that relationship and it was mainly by naming and giving positive feedback to the teacher. Naming what she is doing well. Well that just reinforces what she is already doing well" (Nike).

Nike, however, highlighted how difficult it is for consultants to attain this trusting relationship with teachers, noting in particular that teachers are rarely open to critical discourses beyond positive feedback. She also cited how particularly challenging it was for her to remain silent when faced with teachers that she knew were performing poorly, questioning the effectiveness of her role when she could not share what she felt could be the beginnings of an honest discourse. With these limitations, she was left with the impression that consultants, as perennial outsiders, could not have an impact on the mission, vision and values of the school.

Nike felt similarly limited in her relationship with the administrators. She observed that the administrators often were not open to the critical discourses needed to alleviate problems that arose in PLCs. Consequently, without open and frank conversations, Nike argued that the

consultants could not successfully assume their critical role in PLCs, helping both the teachers and the principals identify and overcome the roadblocks that they faced.

Summary: Highlighting what Makes PLCs Work

Even though their experiences were often negative, the participants were able to offer a range of solutions to help make PLCs more effective. All participants stressed the significance of positive group cohesion in the establishment of a successful PLC. They argued that cohesion depends upon bringing people together who share common educational objectives. The participants insisted that PLCs have to remain voluntary to ensure collaboration and civility. Dissent, instead, emerges from mandatory PLCs that force together incongruous opinions and that neglect personal histories within the workplace.

The participants of this study felt that the consultants could help make PLCs more viable. They argued that the consultants have the requisite knowledge to help build expertise in the stakeholders involved in PLCs. The third theme ends, however, with the caveat that it was difficult for the pedagogical consultants to attain the requisite trust of the various stakeholders in PLCs, limiting the service that they could potentially provide.

The third theme also explored how a positive workplace culture could ensure the successful operation of a PLC. Specifically, this section focused on how the pedagogical consultants perceived their work environment as an "ideal" setting, approximating the requisite conditions that the literature posits onto PLCs (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker et al., 2002; Fullan, 2001). Unlike the school settings that the participants of this study described, the Pedagogical Services Department seemed to demonstrate a work environment that fostered the type of trust and collaboration essential for successful PLCs, as well being as a supportive setting that invited

critical discourses and fostered collegiality. Within this setting, the consultants felt they could pursue common goals while retaining their individual approaches and interests.

This apparent disparity between the Pedagogical Services Department and the schools intimates that the two environments offer drastically different work conditions. While this study cannot make any assumptions of the work environment at the Pedagogical Services Department beyond the descriptions provided by the pedagogical consultants, the preoccupation of participating teachers on the day-to-day management of their classrooms and their school underscores the complexity of navigating an environment where parents, students, various employees, bureaucrats, and school board employees converge.

Chapter Five: Review of Study, Significant Findings and Recommendations

This chapter details the conclusions that I have made from the study. Along with these conclusions, I have included a review of the study as well as recommendations for future research.

Review of Study: Objectives and Approach

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have become increasingly prevalent as a strategy for engaging teachers in school planning and distributing leadership function within schools in Quebec. This study has sought to better understand this model of school improvement by detailing teachers' and pedagogical consultants' experiences and perceptions of PLCs. Through interviews with five participants (both teachers and pedagogical consultants) who work in a Quebec English language school board, the study was able to highlight both the challenges and the opportunities of implementing PLCs within school settings. These challenges and opportunities are reflected through a detailed discussion that revolves around three emergent themes. These themes include: 1) Experiencing Roadblocks; 2) Assessing Impact; 3) Highlighting what Makes PLCs Work.

The rest of this chapter highlights any significant findings before turning to a list of questions that suggest recommendations for future research.

Significant Findings

As the first theme "Experiencing Roadblocks" reveals, the participants have had generally negative experiences in their PLCs. To begin, the participants listed several limitations in material/financial resources as well as in human resources that have hampered their PLCs. These limitations include:

1) The challenge for rural schools to find substitute teachers to release teachers from their duties, so that these teachers can attend PLC sessions;
2) The challenge for PLCs to maintain continuity in school environments marked by high employee turnover;
3) How finances can limit the operation of a PLC, especially once school board / governmental funding runs out;
4) The challenge of allotting adequate time to a PLC.

Material/financial limitations, as well as the limitations in human resources, however, played a secondary role to other factors that seemed to curtail these PLCs. Instead, the inability of various stakeholders to fulfill their respective roles had a more direct and impactful role on a school's ability to implement a successful PLC. Beginning with the principals, participants echoed sentiments within the literature suggesting that the principal's role is integral to the PLC process by not only providing necessary resources, but also by fostering a supportive culture, open dialogue, and critical discourse (Bryk et al., 1999; Schecter, 2012; Vangrieken, 2017). The participants, furthermore, expected principals to keep the PLCs accountable, while mediating any potential conflicts. Unfortunately, the study highlighted an administrative absence and/or disinterest in the PLC process. This disinterest made it difficult for the PLCs to compete with the numerous and recurrent daily tasks that dominate a school's workday.

The administrators referenced in this study, furthermore, might have lacked the ability to navigate the complex processes inherent in PLCs. Sharing the OECD's sentiment (2008), a PLC's success is incumbent on principals moving beyond their managerial task, embracing, instead, a role as transformational leaders. Like Schlecher suggests (2015), principals are the main driver of change, constantly pushing to improve teacher practice, as well as the school

culture. This suggests why one of the participants (Nike), sympathized with the principals, recognizing that the task of managing PLCs in particular (and schools in general) is onerous. Not only are principals expected to maintain their regular managerial duties, they are also required to possess an in-depth understanding of pedagogy, while mediating the complex biographies, social histories, identities and socio-political cultures that make up a staff (Stiegelbauer, 2008; Webb et al., 2009).

Teacher involvement is another area of concern, highlighting the negative impact that teacher disinterest can have on a PLC. This closely parallels Bryk et al.'s (1999) assessment that PLCs need to attain backing from a critical mass of the staff to attain success. As the participants in this study elicited, however, the teachers often shied away from the transformation PLCs promised, preferring a more "practical" form of pedagogical support that would immediately affect their practice in the classroom. These teachers wanted PLCs that offered training, rather than what Dufour & Eaker (1998) describe as an almost existential investigation of their schools practices, values and goals. They were unwilling to disrupt the status quo, preferring the safety of isolated work instead of the potential public exposure that collaboration offers (Bryk et al., 1999; Smyth, 2008).

The emphasis PLCs place on accountability, furthermore, exacerbated this discomfort. As the participants of the study noted, several of the teachers they collaborated with felt that the management of data (especially quantitative) represents a mechanism that was a veiled bureaucratic audit of teaching practice, as well an aesthetic tool that promotes political agendas. This partially suggests why several of the participants emphasized the collection of qualitative data as a richer source of information, arguing that quantitative data could never detail the rich observations teachers make of their students every day (Louis & Marks, 1998). At the core of

this suspicion of quantitative data was the inability of school board employees and administrators to build trusting relationships with their teachers. Management apparently took an insufficient amount of time to develop nurturing environments that would enable discussions, embrace alternative views, appreciate individuality, and tolerate uncertainty (Attard, 2012; Jappinen et al., 2016). Similarly, management spent little time exploring the impact that biographies, social histories, identities and sociopolitical culture could have on their PLCs (Webb et al., 2009).

Surprisingly, despite the generally negative experiences that the participants have had in their PLCs, the theme "Assessing Impact" revealed that the participants retained a positive belief in the viability of the model. Furthermore, through these experiences, the participants seemed to develop a deepening understanding of PLCs, including why they are failing (discussed above), where they succeed, and what stakeholders can possibly do to address recurrent failings. This suggests that critically engaging participants of PLCs can be both a tool of assessment, as well as a source of solutions.

The last theme, "Highlighting What Makes PLCs Work," ultimately illustrates how participants can be a source of solutions to the problems PLCs face. Embedded within the participants' criticisms, and even within their divergent opinions, are numerous suggestions for the successful management of PLCs. Take, for example, how the participants expressed the belief that the collaborative process needs to stay voluntary for it to work. The participants noted that when stakeholders chose to collaborate, they were able to overcome the type of staff resistance that Parker et al. (2012) discuss, by sharing a desire to work together towards a common goal. Hadrian's interview, however, offered a stark contrast to this perspective. Detailing his vast teaching experience outside of the province in "international" schools, he lauded organizations where collaboration seemed to permeate the entire school culture. Unlike

the schools where participation in PLCs remained on a voluntary basis, Hadrian described schools where the work environment aligned closely with the literature (Dufour & Eaker, 1998; Eaker et al., 2002; Fullan, 2001). According to Hadrian, these schools were able to transform the ethos and processes of the entire workplace, offering an expansive scope beyond the involvement of select individuals. The spirit of collaboration seemed to imbue entire staffs without the apparent presence of any coercive force.

These apparently diametric perspectives between Hadrian and the other participants, however, do not suggest that the other participants rejected a broader participatory base. Instead, their insistence on voluntary reflects their ability to recognize that their schools could not reach the critical mass of support from their staff to initiate such drastic changes, especially without first addressing the complexity of developing a trusting collaborative environment where parents, students, various employees, bureaucrats, and school board employees can converge. It is therefore possible that their suggestion that PLCs remain a voluntary process not only highlights their continued support of a model that they value, but also reflects an acknowledgement that intermediary steps are needed before developing a school wide PLC.

Furthermore, the discussion surrounding the consultants' workplace suggests that it was possible and desirable to have a wider participatory base within this school board. The consultants presented their workplace as a viable collaborative model, where the employees were open to share diverse viewpoints and critical discourses. The consultants went on to describe how in their workplace, they were able to retain a high degree of autonomy (a feature that Attard, 2012, claims PLCs have to respect), and how they worked together with their peers on common objectives, all the while being held in check by a degree of accountability that did not seem intrusive or burdensome. The pedagogical consultants' work-culture, consequently, was made up

of the effective and high-performing teams that Eaker (Eaker & Dufour, 2002) celebrates. Conversely, the schools in this study seemed to be workplace settings that either could not reach the critical mass of support from their staffs to initiate such drastic changes or could not address the complexity of establishing a collaborative environment

Perhaps because the consultants herald from such a high-functioning environment, the participants of this study positioned the consultants as one of the potential resources that can help transform schools into critically collaborative spaces. In this regards, the role pedagogical consultants play in PLCs closely aligns with the literature. Similar to Erchul & Martens' (2010) description, the consultants are potential change agents, who, through their expertise, can become a key component in the attempt to alter beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. They provide what Anderson-Butcher et al. (2010) describe as the technical assistance to help build capacity, and to overcome the structural and systemic barriers to PLCs.

Recommendations for Future Research

The recommendations that follow reflects the limitations of this study. As previously stated, by particularizing the participants' experiences, this study avoids any generalizable claims or causal relationships. Instead, the study recognizes that the observations that I have detailed can only lead to a series of emergent questions and reflections that could provide a potential springboard for future research on PLCs.

To begin, several participants described school environments that preferred isolation to collaboration. This led me to question what were the real and perceived threats that teachers face when conducting PLCs? Why do some stakeholders embrace the collaborative process, while others view collaboration with mistrust? Exploring these questions in future research can potentially help proponents of PLCs identify critical roadblocks to the development of the

collaborative process. Researching these questions, furthermore, might also help legitimize the perceived threats that teachers face, while providing an avenue to explore the potential benefits / deficits of working in isolation.

The study participants also emphasized that they put greater value and trust in qualitative data as an input in PLCs. This emphasis appears to have been a reaction to the mistrust that surrounds quantitative data. While there is ample literature discussing quantitative data and its role in education in general and PLCs in particular, there is a paucity of research on the use of qualitative data. This provides a great opportunity to explore the role that qualitative data can play in PLCs, and how groups can actually collaborate around this type of data to make decisions. Consequently, this leads me to question whether qualitative data can be used to provide a more diverse assessment of students, potentially transcending traditional interrogations of academic progress for an approach that might instead help investigate the needs of more vulnerable/marginalized students.

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Appendix A

REB File # 227-1018

Learning to Navigate Professional Learning Communities

Dear Principal,

I am a Vice-Principal at Laurentian Regional High School, working for the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board. I am also a Graduate Student at McGill University (Faculty of Integrated Studies in Education). As part of my Master's Thesis, I am currently researching how the relationship between teacher, administrator and pedagogical consultant affects the development of professional learning communities. I hope this work will help us better understand how schools can successful support PLCs.

Through this study, I intend to investigate what understanding teachers have of PLCs, what goals they have for joining a PLC, the professional relationships that PLCs build, and the challenges that teachers face during their engagement in PLCs. An important aspect of this study is to seek teacher feedback and insight on the impact of PLCs on educators.

I hope to conduct this study with interested teachers at your school center. This is an interview-based research project and therefore I will be conducting interviews with your teachers. I will need approximately an hour of their time to initiate a discussion surrounding their understanding of PLCs. I will then meet them for another hour at a later date to discuss their observations on PLCs as the year progresses. The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. I will share these transcriptions with your teachers for accuracy.

The participation of your teachers in this study is voluntary. They can withdraw at any time, and for any reason.

I will make every effort to ensure that teacher confidentiality and privacy is protected. Their name, personal, and institutional information will be kept confidential. I will not disclose their real name in the thesis or in any other report, and I will ensure that their identity will not be associated with the interview transcripts. I will store any identifiable information in a safe place separate from the interview data. I will be the only person who will have access to this information.

I will be more than happy to share my findings with you. My results will be submitted for review for my Master's thesis. I will also be presenting the findings to the pedagogical services department of the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board.

Thank you for considering my request. I appreciate your cooperation in this research project. If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Please contact via email Peter Papadeas at peter.papadeas@mail.mcgill.ca

Sincerely,

Peter Papadeas

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, and want to speak with someone not on the research team, please contact the Associate Director, Research Ethics at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

You can also contact my acting supervisor, Dr. Blane Harvey at the following e-mail address: blane.harvey@mail.mcgill.ca

Please sign below if you have read the above information and consent to having me interview teachers at your school center. A copy of this consent form will be given to you and I will keep a copy.

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B

REB File # 227-1018

Learning to Navigate Professional Learning Communities

Dear Participant,

I am a Vice-Principal at Laurentian Regional High School, working for the Sir Wilfrid Laurier School Board. I am also a Graduate Student at McGill University (Faculty of Integrated Studies in Education). As part of my Master's Thesis, I am currently researching how the relationship between teacher, administrator and pedagogical consultant affects the development of a professional learning community. I hope this work will help us better understand how PLCs can be successfully supported.

Through this study, I intend to investigate your understanding of PLCs, your goals for joining a PLC, the professional relationships built through PLCs, and the challenges you are facing during your engagement in PLCs. I hope that this work will help educators to have a better understanding of how PLCs work. An important aspect of this study is to seek your feedback and insights on the impact of PLCs on educators.

I hope to conduct this study wherever you feel that we can accommodate you best. This is an interview-based research project and therefore I will be conducting interviews with you. I will need approximately an hour of your time to initiate a discussion surrounding your understanding of PLCs. I will then meet for another hour at a later date to discuss your observations on PLCs as the year progressed. The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. The transcriptions will be shared with you for accuracy.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary which means that you can withdraw at any time, and for any reason. Upon withdrawal, all data you provided will be destroyed, unless you indicate otherwise. Data cannot be withdrawn once identifies are removed. Data will be de-identified after 1 year. All data will be destroyed after 7 years.

Every effort will be made to ensure your confidentiality and privacy is protected. Your name, personal, and institutional information will be kept confidential. Your real name will not be disclosed in the thesis or in any other report. I will need your permission to record your interview via audiotape for accuracy. Interview tapes will be erased after careful transcription, and your identity will not be associated with the interview transcripts. Any identifiable information will be stored in a safe place separate from the interview data and I will only have access to this information.

I will be more than happy to share my findings with you. My results will be submitted for review for my Master's thesis. I will also be presenting the findings to the pedagogical services department of the Sir Wilfred Laurier School Board. If I decide to use data from this study in future related studies, I will need your permission.

Thank you for considering my request. I appreciate your cooperation in this research project. If you have any questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Please contact via email Peter Papadeas at peter.papadeas@mail.mcgill.ca

Sincerely,

Peter Papadeas

If you have any ethical concerns or complaints about your participation in this study, and want to speak with someone not on the research team, please contact the Associate Director, Research Ethics at 514-398-6831 or lynda.mcneil@mcgill.ca.

You can also contact my acting supervisor, Dr. Blane Harvey at the following e-mail address: blane.harvey@mail.mcgill.ca

Please indicate by circling yes or no if you consent to the following:

I agree to have the interviews audio-recorded: Yes / No

I agree to allow the researcher to use the data provided for future related studies: Yes / No

Please sign below if you have read the above information and consent to participate in this study. Agreeing to participate in this study does not wave any of your rights or release the researchers from their responsibilities. A copy of this consent form will be given to you and I will keep a copy.

I have read the above information and I understand all of the above conditions. I freely give consent and voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

Name (please print) _____

Signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C

Questions for Interview 1

How PLCs are conceptualized:

1) What do you understand a PLC to be?
2) What role should data take in a PLC?
3) How should PLCs be initiated?
4) Who do you believe should participate in PLCs? Why?
5) Have you ever participated in a PLC? Please describe the experience.
6) How would you describe the learning culture of your work setting?
7) Please describe your workplace's value and vision.
8) How does your workplace approach difficulties surrounding student learning?
9) Describe the centrality of professional development in your work experience.

Questions for Interview 2

1) Since our last interview, has your perception of professional learning communities changed? Why or why not?
2) How much time was allotted to this PLC? Where did the PLC take place? Was the amount of time and setting sufficient?
3) What other supports do you feel the PLC needed?
4) How were the interactions and participations organized in the professional learning communities you took part in?
5) What role should administrators, teachers and pedagogical consultants play in PLCs?
6) How would you describe the collegiality in your workplace PLC?
7) Was it possible to develop trust between all participants? Why or why not?