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The Value of Professional Learning Communities as Perceived by Novice Secondary School Teachers

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THE VALUE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS PERCEIVED BY
NOVICE SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

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CAPSTONE

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived value that novice secondary school teachers have regarding the professional learning community process at Argo Community High School. The study uses qualitative methods in order to gather information about the novice teachers' perceptions.

During the study, novice teachers with three or less years of experience were invited and selected to partake in completing a survey and structured interviews that helped provide insight as to their perceptions on the effectiveness of professional learning communities in making novice teachers feel supported through collaborative efforts.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Professional learning communities, while not necessarily a new concept in education, are quickly becoming a method adopted by schools across the country who are looking to improve achievement due to their impressive results that are supported through decades of research.

“If there is anything that the research community agrees on, it is this: the right kind of continuous, structured teacher collaboration improves the quality of teaching and pays big, often immediate, dividends in student learning and professional morale in virtually any setting. Our experience with schools across the nations bears this out unequivocally.”
(Schmoker, 2004, pg. 48)

For the purpose of this study, the phrase professional learning community (or PLC) is defined as a group of educators who collaborate to identify student needs, evaluate data, identify solutions, and provide each other support and feedback. The objective of the professional learning community is to improve the quality of teaching and learning methods through the collaboration and implementation of a group of teachers with common goals. King (2002) describes a professional learning community as identifying a specific purpose for student learning, effective collaboration among staff, identification of strategies to address needed changes, and opportunities to improve upon school practices and policies. DuFour et al. (2011) suggests that professional learning communities have the ability to provide numerous positive effects for teachers and students.

Research by DuFour (2004) has implied that in order for professional learning communities to be effective they need to be supported not just by teachers and certified staff

members, but also by the leadership teams of the school. DuFour explains that this support comes in the forms of assistance with planning, providing necessary resources, and guidance in significant changes in curriculum or pedagogy.

Teachers early in their careers can feel overwhelmed and disillusioned during one of the most vulnerable times of their career. Research by Kim and Roth (2001) indicates that there is a significant gap that exists between what is taught in teacher education programs and the reality of working as a teacher. Often the information that new teachers are armed with is theoretical in nature with minimal practical application. New teachers are essentially thrown into a “sink or swim” situation which can add to the stress of early teaching years (Ingersoll & Smith 2003, p. 32). Many schools attempt to combat this problem by providing a new teacher induction program or teacher mentor program which provides general information about the school and assigns a veteran teacher to answer questions that the new teacher may have.

Williams (2003) suggests that new teacher induction programs focus on issues such as general policies and procedures which may provide little beneficial information to new teachers making a successful transition in their first few years. Access to professional learning communities provides a more comprehensive system of support not only because it allows the novice teacher to collaborate with a variety of teachers in differing stages of their career, but it also allows the novice teacher to have a meaningful participation in the professional learning community process. Lave & Wegner (1991) suggest that it is this participation that ultimately increases a novice teachers' confidence and competency in the classroom. Research has also supported that professional learning communities can be extremely effective in improving novice teacher efficacy, self-confidence, and effectiveness (Hipp et al., 2007).

Statement of the Problem

Argo Community High School is a single school high school district located in Summit, IL, on the southwest border of Chicago, IL. Argo Community High School has implemented professional learning communities for the past eight school years, however, during that time there has been no formal method for evaluating what sort of impact professional learning communities have within the school. The researcher chose to specifically survey novice teachers, or those with less than three full years of experience, in order to focus on identifying how beneficial professional learning communities are perceived to be by the most vulnerable group of teachers within the school. Identifying a way to support novice teachers is crucial to improving educational effectiveness within the United States. Many schools have implemented various types of new teacher support programs with a wide variation of success. Ingersoll (2012) has suggested that strong new teacher support programs can potentially reduce new teachers leaving the workforce, however, teacher retention has continued to be an issue despite the increased availability of new teacher support programs.

One system of support that schools often use to combat new teacher retention is a new teacher orientation or new teacher induction programs. These programs often have new teachers participate in a cohort group of fellow new teachers that provides them with an additional level of support to get them acclimated to their new school environment. Muhammad (2009) explains that these programs allow teachers to understand the culture, goals, and politics of the school as well as an idea of how their role fits into the larger picture. Typically, new teacher orientation/induction programs will have a component of mentoring where a novice teacher is paired-up with a veteran teacher in order to provide on-going support (Moir, 2009).

Research conducted by Moir (2009) has shown that one of the reasons new teacher support programs have had varied success is because they vary so greatly from school to school. Some schools' programs may be for a few days and may focus on getting to know the general rules and procedures of the school while others may last for years and really dive into providing support in critical areas such as classroom management, curriculum development, and other areas in which new teachers may struggle. While the more entailed programs have shown stronger success in teacher retention, they have also caused additional problems such as significantly higher costs compared to the scaled down versions (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003).

Due to some of the shortcomings of new teacher induction programs (also known as new teacher orientation programs), some research has suggested that implementing a professional learning community framework instead of, or in addition to, a new teacher induction program has proven to be very effective. Rigelman and Ruben (2012) found that novice teachers participating in effective professional learning communities valued feedback from their colleagues, had a higher level of self-confidence in their professional abilities, and stressed the importance of collaboration in their future professional development. One of the primary advantages of the professional learning community compared to a new teacher induction program is that a professional learning community is designed to be continuous whereas an induction program typically has a defined ending point.

Professional learning communities have the potential to provide an additional layer of support for new teachers. Professional learning communities are widely regarded as having the potential to be one of the most effective strategies at a school's disposal to increase academic achievement. While there are a variety of studies that support the potential effectiveness of professional learning communities (Dufour, 2004; Schmoker 2004; King, 2002; Marzano,

Waters, & McNulty, 2005), there is a gap in the data that looks specifically at how new teachers perceive the value of professional learning communities. As there is a significant amount of research (DuFour et. al., 2011, Hord, 1997) to support professional learning communities being a powerful tool to increase the effectiveness in all teachers, it is also important to understand whether or not new teachers perceive PLCs as a tool that increases their skills, confidence, and willingness to stay in the field of education.

Examining how new teachers perceive the effectiveness of professional learning communities is valuable due to the fact that research suggests that almost “40% of new teachers” change to a new profession within their first five years (Hope, 1999, p. 54). Ingersoll & Smith (2003) suggest that this high rate of ‘burn-out’ is due to lack of support from leadership, becoming overwhelmed with the demands of the job, and a lack of overall satisfaction with the career. Some general complaints reported by new teachers include lack of training in areas such as classroom management and instructional methodologies as well as insufficient support from their fellow teachers and administrative team (Goodwin, 2012). High stakes accountability programs such as No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act provide additional pressure on new teachers who are often left wondering if they made the right decision to go into education.

Since the benefits of professional learning communities are considered so significant to establishing effective teaching and learning in schools, it is important to gauge how effective novice teachers perceive professional learning communities to be. If these teachers feel that it is just another responsibility on their plate, rather than a tool to help them be more effective, it is unlikely they will put forth the necessary effort for the professional learning community to be effective.

In many schools today, new teachers will find that professional learning communities are either well established in their new school or that plans to begin implementing professional learning communities are on the horizon (DuFour et al., 2011). Identifying the perceptions of novice teachers as to the effectiveness of these professional learning communities will provide further insight to the wide body of research already conducted on professional learning communities in the larger context.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to obtain further evidence regarding the perceptions of novice secondary school teachers at Argo Community High School in relation to the effectiveness of professional learning communities. In using a qualitative research framework, the researcher aimed to identify both the positive and negative aspects of professional learning communities, as perceived by novice teachers, within the school and departments to help provide additional information on how professional learning communities can be improved and modified to fit the needs of novice teachers at Argo Community High School. The hope is that this information can be used in future research on the topic of professional learning communities as well as at Argo Community High School and in other school districts looking to improve their professional learning community models. It also intends to determine if professional learning communities provide novice teachers the support required to both make them effective and encourage them to remain in the field of education. As much research has been conducted on the effectiveness of professional learning communities, it is valuable to be able to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses as well as threats and opportunities that occur in professional learning communities at Argo Community High School. The information obtained from this study can help provide the basis for strengthening the professional learning community framework at Argo

Community High School and hopefully ensure it is successfully accomplishing intended goals. It is important to note that while much of the information obtained in this study will be applicable to larger districts, since the research collected for this research occurred in a single school, it will be necessary to control for additional factors when applying the results and recommendations to a larger district.

Research Question

The intended purpose of the study was to focus specifically on novice Argo Community High School teachers (in the case of this study those with less than three years of teaching experience) and how they perceive the effectiveness of professional learning communities. Teachers with three years or less experience were chosen as the threshold for participants in the study because research conducted by (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003 and Goodwin, 2012) suggests that these are the years that teachers are most likely to become unsatisfied with the field of education and leave the profession. In order to provide guidance for the study, the following research question was used: What are novice secondary school teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of professional learning communities at Argo Community High School?

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review intends to provide a summary of previous research conducted on the topic of professional learning communities. It begins by examining how professional learning communities have developed over time into what is now considered one of the most valuable tools in improving teacher efficacy (Schmoker, 2004). One of the common themes in the research was the shift from teaching all students through a systematic ‘one size fits all’ approach to the realization that students may need to be taught differently depending on the different variables unique to their situation.

These include variables such as working with students from different cultures, different socioeconomic situations, lack of motivation in the classroom, etc. Harris and Lowery (2002) discuss that these differences between what is taught in teacher preparation programs compared to what is experienced in real-life on the job experience can be overwhelming for new teachers. The National Research Council (2010) also found that teacher preparation programs are rarely evidenced based and monitored infrequently. Professional learning communities offer the ability for new teachers to not only learn from more experienced teachers who have familiarity with the same kinds of unique circumstances, but also to develop professionally in a supportive environment. Both of these factors can offer novice teachers the support needed to transition successfully through their first few years.

The literature review also looks at the structure of professional learning communities in schools and how research has shown that they have the ability to not only improve teaching and learning but also promote a more positive school culture and climate. DuFour and Eaker (2008)

suggest that professional learning communities have the ability to increase collaborative efforts in multiple stakeholders within a school. This collaboration ultimately yields increased positivity for a school's culture and climate.

Historical Context of Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities are not new concepts; they have been around in some form or another for decades. Dewey (1916) indicates that educational practices need to become more individualized in order to ensure that students' learning is appropriate to allow them to become productive citizens. Dewey (1933) explains the concept and potential benefits of collective problem solving among educators. Historically, many people involved in education shared the view that if a student's learning style did not fit the curriculum and educational style of the school, it was a problem with the student rather than a problem with the service delivery.

Prior to the implementation of collective problem-solving strategies, similar to those embraced by professional learning community frameworks of today, schools were organized and operated much like factories. DuFour et al (2011) describes the ineffectiveness that occurs when schools focus on standardization and uniformity rather than attending to the individual needs of students.

Throughout the 20th century, researchers challenged that this uniform teaching model was the best way to educate students. Research by Berman and McLaughlin (1978) suggests that in order for teachers to successfully engage in meaningful change they must have the ability to participate in the decision-making process and have access to impactful professional development opportunities. Research by Rosenholtz (1989) also emphasizes the problems with teachers working independently and the benefits of them working as a collective group in regards to developing skills.

One thing that has become more prevalent in recent years, is the rate at which schools looking to improve academically are adopting the philosophy and framework of professional learning communities. The concept of professional learning communities notably increased after research by Senge (1990) demonstrated the effectiveness of targeted groups working collaboratively in the corporate world. Similar to studies conducted by Senge (1990), research conducted by Little and McLaughlin (1993) helped coin the term ‘professional learning community’ once its application had become more common in academic settings.

A professional learning community, according to Little & McLaughlin, is characterized by a set of core principles which include the following: shared norms and beliefs, collegial relations, collaborative cultures, reflective practices, monitoring of effective practice, professional growth, and mutual support. The creation of core principals and structures for these types of collaborative methods are what formalized the beginning stages of professional learning communities as a common term for schools that were looking for effective school improvement.

Drucker (1992) contends that in any successful organization the single most important question that must be answered is the purpose for the change. Professional learning communities are designed to create a collective agreement on what that purpose is as well as help foster a collaborative method to help achieve that purpose.

Hord and Boyd (1995) describes the influx of professional learning communities as a response to necessary school reform. Researchers and educators recognized the benefits and results from collective problem solving and believed that the same principles that were effectively improving the corporate world could be used to improve teaching and learning.

The professional learning community framework was used by many schools nationwide looking for school improvement, however it was heavily utilized by school districts as a direct

response to increased accountability for school reform. One of the first major initiatives that placed accountability directly on the schools was the No Child Left Behind Act, commonly referred to as NCLB. This legislation placed specific accountability that was tied to both growth targets and federal funding and included stipulations on educator credentials and teacher professional development. This mandate created the realization that many schools did not have a sufficient system for professional development nor school improvement model necessary to impact measures such as standardized test scores which would now be used as a barometer to determine appropriate school growth.

If teachers are to embrace the idea of change and improvement they must also understand and support the overall purpose of the change. Often, one of the fundamental errors in creating systematic change in organizations is trying to improve the organization one member at a time. Research has demonstrated that large-scale goals are achieved at a much higher level when there is collective buy-in and participation from all members of an organization (Caruso & Wooley, 2008).

For example, many schools will allow reimbursement or advancements on the salary schedule for continuing education or send individual teachers to conferences and workshops. The theory is that by teachers improving themselves individually, eventually these teachers will create added value to the overall school. While this may hold true to some degree, Newman and Wehlage (1995) determined that collective professional development and collaborative planning processes were far more impactful on school achievement than individual teacher development opportunities.

Another major concept in the professional learning community framework that made the concept popular was the idea of having a variety of different impactful leaders rather than a

single leader in the process. Many schools, and organizations for that matter, try to identify a single person to motivate the change and make the important decisions. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (2003) identified the importance of collective leadership and successful professional learning communities. Similar to how trying to improve school change one teacher at a time can be less effective than improving teachers that work together in a group or school-wide; trying to place all of the responsibility on one leader can be less effective than creating many leaders that work together collaboratively. These leaders do not necessarily have to be school administrators. Teachers who have natural leadership traits or teachers who are looking for experience in a leadership capacity can step in to help collaborate with less experienced teachers. This system not only helps further the collaborative process within the school, but it also builds confidence for the teacher assuming the leadership role and the novice teacher who values the support. Research by Lambert (2002) and Angelle (2010) demonstrate the importance of shifting from leadership being a hierarchical system to that of a collective process.

Structure and Components of Professional Learning Communities

Professional learning communities were created as a result to provide a more collaborative structure in order to problem solve some of education's most daunting challenges which includes retaining high quality teachers (NCTAF, 2010). DuFour and Eaker (2008) describe professional learning communities as educators committed to working collaboratively on ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Various researchers and authors have slightly different philosophies or essential characteristics when it comes to the foundation of professional learning communities. Richard DuFour breaks his down into six essential characteristics as follows (DuFour et al.,

2010): (a) shared mission; (b) vision, values and goals; (c) collaborative teams focus on learning; (d) collective inquiry; (e) action orientation and experimentation; (f) commitment to continuous improvement; (g) results orientation. Huffman and Hipp (2003) use a modified version of Shirtley Hord's (1997) five basic essentials: (a) shared and supportive leadership; (b) shared values and vision; (c) shared values and vision; (d) collective learning and application; (e) shared personal practices; (f) supportive conditions, relationships and structures.

Both of the above models provide a framework to ensure that engaging in professional learning community work is focused and systematic. The models ensure that the professional learning community team members are all engaging in consistent practices that allow the school to move in a single direction. Different schools and organizations may use one of these commonly accepted frameworks or utilize a modified version that incorporates other elements. Both of the above sets of characteristics have a significant amount of overlap and emphasize the importance of collaboration and collective practices. For the purpose of this case study, DuFour's essential characteristics are more representative of the philosophies followed by the teachers involved. This is because Argo Community High School based their professional learning community framework off Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, IL, where Richard DuFour is a former Superintendent.

A crucial component that can often be overlooked in professional learning community work is that the objectives of the work being done are clearly articulated and agreed upon by the stakeholders within the professional learning community. While it is entirely possible that different professional learning communities are working on different aspects of school improvement, all stakeholders should have a larger collective objective that each individual component is working towards.

Shared Mission, Vision, Values and Goals

In order for professional learning communities to be effective, members of the professional learning community have to demonstrate genuinely shared mission, vision, values, and goals. DuFour and Eaker (2008) describe creating a shared mission by having the group determine what is the fundamental purpose of the group's existence? If the members of the professional learning community do not share the same view on their fundamental purpose, it is critical to continue discussions until the entire team agrees on their purpose.

It is important that professional learning communities go beyond creating a specific mission statement and also clarify the group's vision statement. Where the group's mission statement determines the group's purpose, the vision statement provides clarity on what specifically the group needs to do to support their mission. A shared vision is the primary factor that allows the professional learning community to go in a single direction and work towards a focused outcome.

DuFour et al. (2010) describes the next pillar, shared values, as the component that guides behaviors that need to occur in order to promote the collective vision. Aspects such as collaborative attitude and motivation are important components to successful professional learning community work.

The final Pillar in DuFour's framework is the goal of the professional learning community. This is a combination of how objectives will get completed and when they will be completed. It is important that professional learning community teams agree on priorities and timelines. Creating shared mission, vision, and values sets up a systematic approach to successfully work on goals as a collective unit and take advantage of the synergy created in a professional learning community.

Benefits of Professional Learning Communities

DuFour et al. (2011) supports the theory that professional learning communities, when implemented with fidelity, have the ability to provide numerous positive effects for both educators and students. Some of the positive effects Hord (1997) suggests are reducing professional isolation in teachers, a sense of collective responsibility in regards to student learning, improved likelihood of teacher preparedness and confidence, improved school climate, and a lower rate of student absenteeism. Research conducted by Fullan (2001) suggests that professional learning communities remove the physical and psychological stress caused by isolation and provide opportunities for personalized professional development. In addition to providing individualized professional development, professional learning communities have been shown to improve novice teachers' effectiveness in delivery of instruction as well as increased student comprehension (Wiley, 2001). These combinations of factors can increase confidence levels of newer teachers and make it much more likely for them to enjoy their careers and want to remain in the field.

While some of the core philosophies of professional learning communities can vary slightly between individual researchers, evidence is overwhelming regarding the positive impact professional learning communities can have in proactively transforming a school. Saunders, Goldenberg, and Gallimore (2009) determined that significant academic improvements were found when grade level teams had the opportunity to meet regularly, were provided with quality instructional leadership, and followed detailed procedures that targeted academic issues within the school and determined how to solve them.

Saunders, Goldenberg, and Gallimore's (2009) study also demonstrated that the collaborative nature of disseminating data improved the outcomes for student learning and

shifted the focus from teaching techniques to student learning. Many new teachers begin to formulate their beliefs and teaching style within the first few years of the profession. By helping properly shape their perceptions to focus more on students than themselves and providing them the opportunity to collaborate with other professionals that can act as mentors and supports, the likelihood that these novice teachers will remain in the field increases exponentially.

Problems with Professional Learning Communities

From a philosophical and theoretical perspective, professional learning communities are overwhelmingly positive as the research above suggests. However, there are many cases where professional learning communities are ineffective and even potentially harmful to the goals they set out to achieve. DuFour (2004) warned that “the term professional learning community has been used so ubiquitously that it is in danger of losing all meaning.” He goes on to explain that not every gathering of educators with the goal of collaborating in order to improve teaching and learning meets the criteria of a professional learning community. When the term ‘professional learning community’ is utilized in such collaborations and goals are not attained or realized, it leaves many questioning whether professional learning communities are just another educational initiative that will quickly be replaced by a new buzz word in the not too distant future.

According to DuFour (2004), professional learning communities must properly engage in the systematic framework (which includes the six essential characteristics outlined earlier) that make professional learning communities unique in order to fully capitalize on their benefits.

Districts can also struggle with determining when to build in time to allow teachers to engage in the professional learning community process. Most teachers already have full schedules and responsibilities that make it difficult for them to take on any more tasks. School boards and administrations are constantly under scrutiny to keep costs down, therefore paying

teachers for extra duty or to stay after school is not necessarily an option either. DuFour (2004) asserts that schools must often get creative to ensure they are providing the necessary time to implement the professional learning community framework with fidelity.

Another common pitfall of professional learning communities is a lack of clear direction when first starting a PLC or a lackluster follow through in continuously working on collective goals. DuFour et al., (2010) suggests that it is crucial that teams have a clear vision and mission prior to engaging in a professional learning community framework as well as effective leadership throughout the process. Failure to include these components creates the likely scenario that the professional learning community will create a huge demand of time with little results to show for it.

As mentioned previously, financial resources can often be hard to come by for school districts that are already functioning within tight budgets. Professional learning communities often require significant amounts of training and professional development in order to be implemented correctly. According to DuFour (2004), school administrators can be reluctant to invest significant amount of financial resources into professional learning community training when the teaching profession has such a significant turnover. It can get very expensive to constantly retrain teachers as they come in to replace previously trained teachers. When implemented correctly, however, professional learning communities can actually be used as a tool to help prevent teacher attrition and help retain highly qualified teachers.

Novice Teachers

Teachers just entering the field of education often start out optimistic and enthusiastic. They have chosen a highly altruistic and service-oriented field and are eager to begin helping shape young minds. This optimism can fade quickly, however, once the teacher begins facing

many of the hardships and realities of teaching in public schools. Norris and Barnett (1994) suggest that one of the factors can be attributed to the fact that many of the colleges and teacher preparation programs tend to design their programs based on a theoretical framework rather than a practical framework. It doesn't matter whether the teacher is planning on teaching in an urban environment or rural environment, if they will be in a highly diverse school, or if they will be working with low socioeconomic students, etc. The training programs are often a one size fits all approach and do not take into account the many differences and unique situations that teachers will face depending on the environment in which they work. Research by Ingersoll & May (2010) showed that there was a strong correlation between the type of professional development offered to teachers and their level of attrition.

Teachers who were offered consistent and ongoing professional development and opportunities to collaborate demonstrated significantly lower levels of attrition. Novice teachers are sometimes given the more difficult or less desirable classes due to their lack of seniority which can create an even stronger sense of job dissatisfaction. Keigher (2010) suggests that having to deal with situations such as this without the opportunity to receive support from fellow teachers could cause new teachers to continue to leave the field at a high rate.

Campbell (1996) indicates that there is a lack of research describing what kinds of experiences novice teachers go through during their first couple of years. Other studies, such as (Harris & Lowery, 2002), suggest that many new teachers discover that there is an enormous gap between the theoretical information they learn in teacher training programs and what actually happens in real-life. This discrepancy causes new teachers to go into survival mode and potentially abandon best teaching practices or leave the field all together.

The combination of getting assigned the most difficult students, being asked to teach classes in which they are underprepared, and a general lack of support from colleagues and supervisors cause novice teachers to regularly question whether they have chosen the right field. Research by Feiman-Nemser (2012) suggests that novice teachers, as well as veteran teachers, can substantially benefit from positive collegial collaborations where the focus is geared towards student achievement and school improvement. Professional learning communities are one solution to help provide that positive educational collaboration within schools.

Professional Learning Communities and Teacher Retention

Difficulty retaining quality teachers in the United States is a consistent barrier to providing competitive education to that of other industrialized nations. A report by Sucher et al., (2016) indicated that there has been a 35% reduction in teacher education programs between 2009-2014 and that nearly 8% of teachers are leaving the workforce every year before retirement age. An evaluation of various studies determined that the only statistically significant commonality that occurred in the vast majority of teachers leaving the profession was years of experience. Teachers with less than five years of experience were overwhelmingly more likely to leave the profession than those with more than five years of experience (Barnes et al., 2007).

Research conducted by Ingersoll and Smith in 2003 found that among the most common reasons for teacher attrition were lack of satisfaction with the working conditions in the school, poor administrative support, and disengagement in teaching as a career. Ingersoll and Smith (2003) also noted that the largest teacher attrition tended to occur in urban schools with higher percentages of poverty. Keigher (2010) noted that another major factor that causes teachers to

leave the profession at a high rate is the lack of support from colleagues and being scheduled to teach unfamiliar and difficult classes without the ability to collaborate with veteran teachers.

The level of control over school policies and procedures also appeared to be a significant factor in regards to teacher retention. Flynt and Morton (2009) demonstrated that teachers who felt they had little influence in decisions on policy became withdrawn from their roles as teachers while research completed by Liu (2007) showed that teachers who felt that their input was represented in new policies and procedures were far less likely to fall victim to attrition.

Opportunities for professional development was another factor that appears to be strongly linked to teacher retention. Ingersoll and May (2010) found that teachers that were provided with meaningful professional development opportunities were more likely to remain in the profession than teachers who lacked these resources. Professional learning communities, as a source of professional development, have also been linked by studies (Flynt & Morton, 2009; Liu, 2007) as providing the necessary support to novice teachers in the area of collaboration and mentoring to significantly improve teacher retention.

Professional Learning Communities Impact on School Climate and Culture

School climate and culture are as crucial to success in an educational organization as they are in any other organization. It is difficult for a business to be profitable or a military to be successful if their stakeholders do not have the same vision and commitment as the rest of the organization. Hattie (2009) indicates in his book *Visible Learning*, that one of the top three factors in student learning is collective teacher efficacy. This is important because this is not based just on Hattie's research, but rather a meta-analysis of over 800 research studies dealing with what matters in regards to student learning. Hattie could have simply used the term teacher efficacy in his literature, but his use of the term 'collective' has significant importance. If the

climate and culture of a school is a building full of individual educators who all have different expectations, goals, motivations and pedagogy, the school will function very differently than if the educators had some level of shared beliefs. Fullan (1992) argues that when a school makes the decision to implement professional learning communities it is crucial that they do not overlook or minimize the impact of school culture.

DuFour and Eaker (2008) suggest that while the perceptions and attitudes of individual teachers certainly help shape a school's culture, it is probably more true to say that a school's culture helps shape teachers' perceptions and attitudes about the school. Research conducted in 1998 by Dufour and Eaker further supports the notion changes in programs or procedures is often met with negative sentiment by clusters of teachers that may vary in size. Typically, this negativity is a reaction to having to learn something new, a fear of additional workload, or general lack of understanding of the new concepts. Hall and Hord (2001) emphasize that in order to implement this level of change within the school it is not enough to create a taskforce comprised of a portion of the teachers or administrators. It is necessary to get all stakeholders of the organization to embrace a shared vision and mission for teaching and learning.

Improving school culture is an ongoing process that requires mutual collaboration from teachers, administrators, and other key staff members. School staff that believe in a common goal and who see value in changing their current practices are much more likely to embrace employing new methods to help students than those who are simply complying with changes in order to satisfy the requests of the district office. Because of the belief that teachers are the driving force in creating positive change in the school environment, Peterson (2002) argues that positive school culture and climate is a key component in successful schools.

Schools that have created a positive school culture and climate are much more successful in collaborating both at a micro and a macro scale. Hoy, Tarter and Hoy (2006), argue that meaningful change does not happen in a single classroom but rather throughout the entire school or district. Teachers that collaborate with other groups of teachers and administrators and work towards shared beliefs and common perceptions tend to be more successful in implementing lasting improvements to a school district. Hipp et al., (2007) suggests that teachers and administrators that work in a collaborative culture and embrace a shared vision and encourage risk and experimentation improve the likelihood that student learning is occurring on an ongoing basis. It is important that collaboration go beyond just the opportunity for staff to have dedicated time to meet as teams and ‘go through the motions’ of collaborating. If staff are taking the time to meet but intentions are not focused and goals are not shared, the fidelity of the professional learning community will fail to be realized. Seashore et al. (2003) argues that collaboration must be a genuine driver in the actions of a professional learning community not merely a required task.

Summary

As the research has supported, professional learning communities are considered to be one of the most valuable tools at a school’s disposal to make meaningful change in academic gains, positive climate, and teacher confidence (Fullan (1992), Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore (2009), DuFour et al. (2011). The emphasis on collective problem-solving, organic professional development, and opportunity for meaningful instructional input creates a natural support system for novice teachers.

While many schools have historically implemented some level of new teacher induction or mentoring programs, these have typically not created the impact many schools had hoped for.

This is due to a variety of factors, some of which include lack of duration, lack of consistency, or a forced sense of mentorship. Professional learning communities have an advantage over new teacher induction programs in part because the support for new teachers occurs naturally and in a way that builds their confidence rather than just providing constructive feedback. Novice teachers have the opportunity to participate and take ownership in the creation of meaningful school change while simultaneously absorbing mentorship from veteran teachers who are members of the same professional learning community team.

Professional learning communities, like all systems, still have opportunity to be looked at through a closer lens in order to identify strengths and weaknesses. By interviewing various novice teachers at District 217, research will be able to be compiled and examined in order to determine what parts of the professional learning community framework could be improved to further provide novice teachers the support that is necessary for them to successfully transition through the first few years of their career. The objective will be to provide a summary of recommendations, based on teacher feedback, that can be utilized to help make continual improvements to the professional community framework at District 217.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to exam, through qualitative research methods, the perceived value of professional learning communities by novice teachers of Argo Community High School. In order to collect the necessary responses to analyze, surveys were sent to fifteen teachers from various departments that had three or less years of experience in the field of education. Additionally, five teachers agreed to participate in an interview in order to provide more detailed information regarding some of the trending themes coming out of the survey responses.

The information was then analyzed for themes and trends that would be useful in identifying potential strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities in order to improve the professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School.

Research Design

The research design chosen for this study was a qualitative methods case study design that focused on examining novice teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities. A case study design was chosen because the researcher did not have a hypothesis on the topic but rather wanted the data to tell the story of the particular phenomenon. Merriam (1998) recommends using a case-study methodology when the intent is to provide insight and interpretation to a particular situation rather than test a hypothesis. Merriam goes on to suggest that by focusing on a single entity (in this case teachers from Argo Community High School); the researcher is able to uncover significant factors regarding the case rather than just broader generalizations. Yin (2003) suggests that a case study design is also beneficial to focus on one specific group to determine phenomenon in real-life context. Using a case study methodology also afforded a deep and holistic view into a very specific group of novice teachers at a single high school. A qualitative design was utilized because, as Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest,

the point of this research is to get an understanding of the viewpoints of the individuals who are practicing it. While this may limit the applicability of the results to other schools, it will provide rich knowledge of how professional learning communities are perceived at Argo Community High School.

Due to only one school in a single school high school district being used in the study, a case study design was utilized in order to gather detailed information on one school rather than obtaining broader, but shallower, information from a variety of schools. Since a variety of influences can impact professional learning communities from school to school, the researcher chose to focus on a single school wherein the majority of outside variables impacting the results could be minimized to a certain degree. While the results of this study may certainly be applicable to larger school districts, the variables of working in a larger district must be considered when interpreting the results of this study. Patton (1990) suggests the use of a case study design when a particular issue is intended to become understood at a greater depth where information can be obtained from a few samples.

Study Participants

Participants were purposefully selected, in this case total population sampling was used to provide emerging themes regarding perceptions of professional learning communities. Purposive sampling, a style of non-probability sampling, is useful when the population of potential participants is small and the researcher aims to get a balanced diversity of participants (Creswell, 2015). The participants were selected in order to get a maximum number of participants in a relatively small participant pool. This provided the broadest representation of the school given the particular research topic. The goal of using purposive sampling in this instance is to select and focus on novice teachers, those with three or less years of experience in

teaching. Teachers were eligible to participate if they had a total of less the three years teaching experience and they were currently an active participant in a professional learning community.

Setting for the Study

Research for the study was conducted at Argo Community High School. Argo Community High School was founded in 1920 as a result of the increasing population fueled by employment at Corn Products Refining Co. The company built a multimillion-dollar plant in Summit, IL in 1910 that was named ‘Argo Corn Products.’ The products produced by the plant, such as cornstarch and other corn-based products, were branded under the name Argo Corn Products which played into how Argo Community High School was given its name. By the 1970s the facility employed over 4,000 people and was the largest corn milling plant in the world. While the plant is still in existence today, it is part of the multibillion-dollar conglomerate company known as Ingredion. Besides the corn processing plant, Summit and the surrounding communities are highly industrial. There are many processing and distribution companies located within the district boundaries.

Argo Community High School is an urban high school that has a highly diverse population. There are approximately 1800 students of which 1.8% are Asian, 15.4% are Black 36.6% are Caucasian, 43% Hispanic, and 3.1% are identified by two or more races. Argo Community High School’s low-income population is roughly 60%, its population of students with disabilities is 14.1%, and English Language Learners population is roughly 6%. Many of the parents of students at Argo Community High School speak English as their second language with Spanish, Arabic, and Polish being their primary languages.

Argo Community High School has been implementing the professional learning community framework for eight years at the time of this writing. The school has eight academic

departments which include: Career and Technical Education, Educational Support Services (Special Education), English, Humanities, Languages, Math, Physical Education, and Science. Each department leader organizes their department into various professional learning communities and are usually broken up by subject content area. For example, the science department is divided into multiple different professional learning communities that are broken up by the content area they teach (e.g., biology is comprised of co-taught, standard, honors, and advanced placement biology teachers). These teachers focus on initiatives that are unique to their specific subject area but impact the larger school goal of increasing academic achievement. Due to regular fluctuation of class sizes and other factors professional learning community teams may shift on an as needed basis and team members may also be involved on multiple teams. This can shift the number of individuals who participate on a team on a regular basis. See the table below for the various academic departments and examples of teams. ******(please note the table is not exhaustive of all teams that have occurred or are currently occurring at Argo Community High School)

Academic Departments and PLC Teams at Argo Community High School

Academic Departments	Examples of PLC Teams
1. Career and Technical Education	Industrial Arts Computer & Technology Culinary Arts
2. Educational Support Services	Life Skills Core 1 Program
3. English	English 1 English 2 English 3 English 4
4. Humanities	Music Art US History

	Psychology
5. Languages	Spanish 1 Spanish 2 French 1 ELL
6. Math	Algebra 1 Algebra 2 Geometry Computer Science
7. Physical Education	Health Team Sports Drivers Education
8. Science	Biology Chemistry Physics Earth Science

** (please note the table is not exhaustive of all PLC teams that have occurred or are currently occurring at Argo Community High School)

While the frequency of the professional learning community collaboration time can vary from department to department, most departments schedule their collaboration time to fifty minutes, three times per month. Student data and progress on initiatives are reviewed weekly and notes from the meeting are prepared for each department's supervisor, which are then reported to the school principal.

Data Collection

Survey

The survey that was provided listed eight questions that asked teachers about their perceptions of their respective professional learning communities. The survey was provided in an

unstructured format that utilized open-ended questions in order to get both specific and individualized feedback that could be compared to identify trends. According to Patton (2002), unstructured questioning allows for a deeper understanding of complex issues. The narrative responses were much more useful in comparing and contrasting trends that came out of the semi-structured interview than Likert-type ratings or other quantitative measures would be. The instrument that was used was developed by the researcher in order to strictly focus on obtaining information relevant to the research question for this study. Many other surveys regarding professional learning communities were already in existence, e.g., Bolam et al., (2005), however they had many questions that were not completely relevant to the research question for this study.

Interview

The interview used for the data collection was a semi-structured interview that was created by the researcher and developed from information ascertained during the literature review. According to Merriam (1998) and Yin (2014), semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to use a prepared script to initiate dialogue but also allows the ability to go off script to ask clarifying questions or to obtain additional valuable information when the opportunity presents itself. The questions were intended to obtain information regarding themes such as how professional learning communities impact teaching and learning, teacher support systems, climate and culture, and other areas that research suggests professional learning communities may play a part in. The interviews lasted around fifteen minutes on average and took place at Argo Community High School.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection for this study consisted of providing all novice teachers with three or less years of experience in education an anonymous survey via Survey Monkey with the hopes of getting at least fifteen teachers to complete the survey. Although twenty-five teachers were recruited to partake in the study, it was discovered that five teachers did not meet the criteria due to teaching experience in previous districts and five teachers did not respond to the invitation. The fifteen teachers who agreed to participate in the survey were sent the survey link, as well as instructions on how to complete the survey, via their work email address. The survey intended to capture perceptions of overall value of professional learning communities at Argo Community High School as well as how novice teachers believe professional learning communities support novice teachers.

After information was collected and analyzed from the surveys, a second phase of the data collection included interviewing five volunteer teachers to provide additional information on emerging themes and trends identified in the surveys. A letter was provided to all participants stating the voluntary nature of the study along with the assurance that all information from the survey results would be anonymous and confidential and that all information collected in the interview portion of the study would be anonymous. It also explains that all identifying information would be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

The researcher used themes developed from the previous research in order to generate questions for a semi-structured interview with the participants. Each participant was asked the same set of initial questions. However, participants were given the opportunity to expand or elaborate to the degree they felt necessary to convey their opinions. The researcher also asked

follow-up questions in order to more fully develop themes or to clarify responses provided by the interview participants.

The purpose of this study was to obtain and analyze the perceptions of novice high school teachers on their participation in professional learning communities. While the researcher felt that it was important to identify the particular school in which the study took place, there was no perceived benefit of listing the identity of the specific individuals that participated in the study. For this reason, there is no identifying information in the published results of the study.

Data Analysis

Once all of the surveys and interviews were completed and the data was sorted and organized, an inductive data analysis was utilized to search for common themes and patterns among all the interviews. Inductive data analysis is beneficial in the transformation of raw data into a summarization of categories and themes (Thomas, 2003). Creswell (2013) indicates that data analyzed through a case study design should provide a sense of the overall theme of the particular phenomenon. The data analysis would allow the researcher to find out what common themes, both positive and negative, emerged from the research in order to help determine what improvements could be implemented in the professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School.

Assumptions and Limitations

It is assumed that the results obtained from this study may help provide additional information to Argo Community High School as well as other secondary schools who also have novice teachers participating in professional learning communities. Due to the high number of novice teachers leaving the field of education because of feeling unprepared and unsupported,

information obtained from this study may help other schools identify certain areas in which their professional learning community models can support new teachers.

As this research was contained to a single school high school district, it's transferability may not be relevant to other high schools to the same degree. All of the teachers in this study went through similar new teacher orientations and for many of them this is the very first school they have ever worked in. Teachers' perceptions on professional learning communities are likely impacted by the particular culture and climate of the school whereas novice teachers in a different school or district may have different perceptions. Another limitation to this research is that the researcher is a current employee of the district and the responses provided by the interview subjects may or may not be different compared to if the questions were being asked by an unfamiliar researcher.

Due to the purposive sampling method used, this research may also have a higher than average chance of being subject to researcher bias. While the sampling strategy was used in order to provide a balanced sample of participants, it runs the additional risk of being more difficult to defend the results to represent a broader population. In order to mitigate this potential bias to the highest degree possible, the researcher recruited the largest number of possible subjects through total population sampling.

Ethical Considerations

The results of the survey were kept in a locked office or in an encrypted computer file. Confidentiality forms were signed by both the participants of the study as well as the researcher to help ensure that no responses would be used outside of the context of the study and that no identifying information would be used in the study results.

Chapter VI: Results

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to collect information through the use of survey and interview responses to help provide insight to the following question:

- What are novice secondary school teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of professional learning communities at Argo Community High School?

The responses from both the surveys and interviews were organized and analyzed to establish emerging themes and disparities as well as to identify potential weaknesses and opportunities in the school’s current professional learning community framework.

The data from this study were broken down into three different domains, twelve core themes, and forty-three categorical responses. For the purpose of this study, the term domain refers to a broader collection of similar core themes; core themes refers to the specific topics covered in the various interview and survey questions that fit into particular domains, and categorical responses are a breakdown of how individual subjects responded to particular interview and survey questions. In the later part of the data results discussion, direct quotes from both the interview and survey are used to help support and personalize a variety of core themes and categorical responses. See Table 1 below for an overview of domains and core themes.

Table 1

Summary of Domains and Core Themes

Domains	Core Themes (Correlating Question)
1. Professional Learning Communities Impact to Individual Novice Educators	Personal Experience (Survey Question #1) Meaningful Outcomes

	(Survey Question #2)
	Helpfulness in Transitioning into Teaching Career (Survey Question #3)
	Opportunities for Leadership (Survey Question #4)
	Effective Use of Time (Interview Question #2)
	Data Utilized for PLC Goals (Survey Question #4)
2. Transformational Impact of PLC's	Beneficial for Students (Survey Question #7)
	Changed Perception of Teaching as a Career (Survey Question #8)
	Changes Experienced in PLC Framework at ACHS (Interview Question #3)
3. Opportunities for Improvement	Recommended Improvements for Novice Teachers (Survey Question #5)
	Recommended Improvements for all PLC Stakeholders (Survey Question #6)
	Recommended Improvements for Overall PLC Process at ACHS (Interview Question #1)

Throughout chapter four, there are tables that summarize the information from each domain. The domains include: Professional Learning Communities Impact to Individual Novice

Educators, Transformational Impact of Professional Learning Communities, and Opportunities for Improvement. The tables use a cross-analysis of frequency recommended by Hill et al., (2005) in which the number of occurrences of similar responses are recorded. In this study there were 15 subjects participating in the survey questions and 5 subjects participating in the interview questions.

Professional Learning Communities Impact to Individual Novice Educators

The first domain, how professional learning communities have impacted individual novice teachers, is composed of four survey questions and two interview questions that attempt to look at a variety of factors relating to how professional learning community participation affects novice teachers at Argo Community High School. The questions relate to general experiences, perceived benefits, transitioning into the profession, leadership opportunities, time efficiency, and data utilization. The questions were designed in order to gather a general sense of whether or not novice teachers have felt that being part of a professional learning community team has been beneficial to them as they are transitioning into their chosen career field. See Table 2 for a summary of the information.

Table 2

Domain 1: How professional learning communities have impacted individual novice teachers.

Core Themes	Categorical Responses	Number of Respondents
1. Personal Experience (Survey Question #1)	Positive	5
	Neutral/Mixed	7
	Negative	3
2. Meaningful Outcomes (Survey Question #2)	Expressing Opinions	1
	Collaboration/Sharing Ideas	12
	Pacing/Planning	2
3. Helpfulness in Transitioning	Positive	10

Into Teaching Career (Survey Question #3)	Neutral/Mixed	2
	Negative	3
4. Opportunities for Leadership (Survey Question #4)	Yes	5
	Not Applicable	2
	No	8
5. Effective Use of Time (Interview Question #2)	Yes	2
	Mixed/Neutral	2
	No	1
6. Data Utilized for PLC Goals (Interview Question #4)	Behavior Logs	1
	Common Assessments	1
	None Used	2
	Progress Monitoring Software	1

Personal Experience (Survey Question #1)

The first core theme, Personal Experience, was generated through survey question 1; how has the experience of being involved in a professional learning community been for you?

Overall, for this question there was a high degree of variability among respondents' answers. All three of the categorical responses came out as variant due to the lack of consistency in answers.

The categorical responses were broken down into positive, neutral/mixed, or negative.

Five of the respondents reported generally positive answers such as:

Overall, I see the professional learning community as a positive experience. I believe that it gives teachers a chance to reflect on assessments and student progress while meeting with teachers gives our fellow colleagues new ideas to pursue in the classroom.

These responses suggest that some of the subjects believe the experience of participating in a professional learning community has been a relatively positive experience that provides them with support and allows them to collaborate on topics such as curriculum and common pacing.

Seven of the respondents reported mixed or neutral answers such as:

Being a part of a professional learning community has been a positive, but inconsistent experience. The interactions and sharing of ideas and strategies has been great for building relationships with colleagues, but meeting times and commitment to curriculum map pacing has been inconsistent.

I have had experience working in different capacities on professional learning community teams. While working in *some departments*, I did not feel as if I was an integral part of the professional learning community team. However, in my professional learning community meetings for my *current department* I feel as though I am part of a team and that our work together is beneficial.

Responses that fell into this category generally provided some positive aspects and some negative aspects. Some also believed that overall, their experiences in a professional learning community have not yielded enough value to consider it a completely beneficial experience. A common theme among respondents was the inconsistency experienced in working in professional learning communities. These inconsistencies were noted due to such factors as being in multiple professional learning communities across different departments, poor leadership, and lack of opportunity to regularly meet with team members.

Three of the respondents reported generally negative answers such as:

Being involved in a professional learning community has been frustrating. Often times the will of the group is to do the easiest activity or teaching possible even if it is not what

is best for kids or for learning. There is a lack of desire to change things and it leads to lazy teaching and bored kids.

These responses suggested that participants feel that being involved in a professional learning community has had a generally negative impact to their experience of being a novice teacher. Reasons such as relaxed expectations and lack of collaboration were noted.

Meaningful Outcomes (Survey Question #2)

The second core theme, Meaningful Outcomes, was generated through survey question #2: what has been the most meaningful outcome for you by being part of a professional learning community? For this question the subjects' responses fell in three different categories which included opportunities to express opinions, ability to collaborate and share ideas, and ability to work with team for curriculum pacing and planning purposes. Opportunities to express opinions came out as a rare categorical response only receiving one teacher response that fell into the category: Having a voice in the outcomes of our services and courses.

The ability to collaborate and share ideas was much more popular as twelve of the fifteen respondents provided answers that fell into this category. The ability to collaborate and share ideas was one of the few categorical responses identified in the study with which an overwhelming majority of teachers identified. Some examples of teacher responses that fell into this category are as follows:

The most meaningful outcome has been the opportunity to work with many different teachers. All teachers are unique and have different perspectives to bring to the table. I believe that the best teachers are able to take ideas from other teachers and make them their own.

In cooperative professional learning communities where teachers are focused on teaching the best way for kids, there have been many productive conversations about what alignment looks like and how students learn. These professional learning communities typically have productive conversations about student data and how to improve based on those insights.

Working in a professional learning community has provided a great venue through which to test ideas or talk through ideas about things that can be done in my classroom. My professional learning community groups have allowed me to receive quick feedback and ideas from other teachers in my content area.

The majority of teachers provided responses which suggest that the ability to collaborate with other teachers is a very valuable aspect of professional learning communities. Teachers' responses suggest that teaming with other teachers has allowed them to share ideas to strengthen their teaching practices as well as allow them to get valuable feedback from more veteran teachers.

The third category that emerged from survey question #2 was the ability to work with team members for curriculum pacing and planning purposes. Only two responses fell into this category. An example of one of these responses is as follows: My professional learning community team follows a common pacing schedule so being able to meet and make sure that everyone is on the same page has been the most successful part.

While common pacing is typically a strategy that is more part of a common planning period than a goal of a professional learning community, responses in this area suggest that teachers

appreciate the time to collaborate with their fellow teachers in order to ensure that their curriculum pacing is consistent across classes within the department.

Helpfulness in Transitioning into Teaching Career (Survey Question #3)

The third core theme, Helpfulness in Transitioning into Teaching Career uses survey question #3: do you feel that being part of a professional learning community has helped you transition into your teaching career? Please explain. For this question the subjects' answers fell into one of three potential categories which included Yes, Neutral/Mixed, or No. The overwhelming majority of the responses (10) were positive suggesting that most teachers felt that professional learning communities were effective in helping them acclimate to the expectations of the job. This was one of the few categories that showed a significant majority of teachers sharing a response. Some representative examples of positive (or yes responses) included the following:

Yes. It is important to get help from veteran teachers when you are a new teacher.

Veteran teachers know what concepts will cause students to struggle. Knowing this in advance can help new teachers avoid the potholes as best as possible and come up with ways to help these students.

I believe so because it gives me new ideas to pursue in my classroom. It helps for me to see not just ideas that can be used, but also I have the opportunity to see what teachers have also made mistakes on. If I can learn from their mistake, I could also help to make a better educational experience for my students.

I think that being part of a professional learning community has been very helpful in my transition; being part of a professional learning community has helped me receive resources from other teachers as well as discuss successes and setbacks in the classroom with others who can offer knowledge and reassurance.

Teacher responses indicated that being involved in a professional learning community has helped them transition into their teaching career more successfully. As supported by the research in chapter 2, teachers suggest that some of the benefits of being involved in a professional learning community are the opportunities to learn from veteran teachers, the ability to try new teaching strategies and receive constructive feedback, and a general increase in confidence in their own teaching skills.

The second category for survey question #3, which included neutral/mixed responses suggesting both positives and negatives to professional learning community teams assisting new teachers in transitioning into the field, only came up with two responses. Neutral and mixed responses to the question included the following:

Slightly. My position is a bit different from my professional learning community team, so I am not able to get too much support from them.

I feel it has helped me understand the importance of collaborating with people who work with specific students. I am not sure if it has helped me become a more effective staff member.

These teachers believe that while being involved in the professional learning community process has yielded some benefit, there are some concerns with the overall effectiveness of the professional learning community teams they are a part of.

The third category for survey question #3 included negative responses suggesting that these teachers did not feel being part of a professional learning community was at all beneficial in helping them transition as a new teacher. Three responses fell into this category. An example of a negative response is:

I do not. There is a significant lack of oversight for professional learning communities here and they're usually able to do whatever they want. When professional learning community teams are designed intentionally they have been more productive. However, when professional learning community members are simply left on a professional learning community team because that is what they have always taught the team becomes stagnant and unwilling to implement best practices for students.

Criticisms as to why these teachers feel being part of a professional learning community has not helped them transition into their career include reasons such as lack of effective leadership within their respective professional learning community team, lack of follow through regarding expectations of professional learning communities, lack of effective collaboration within teams, and teachers not being assigned to a team in order to engage in professional learning community activities.

Opportunities for Leadership (Survey Question #4)

The next core theme, Opportunities for Leadership, gathered responses from survey question #4. The question, 'Have you had the opportunity to take on a leadership role in your professional learning community? How has that experience been for you?' was broken up into three categorical responses which were Yes, Not Applicable, and No. This question had a high degree of variability. There were five subjects whose responses were yes indicating they have

experienced leadership opportunities within their professional learning community team. One representative response was:

I have. One instance of leading a professional learning community has been very positive. This professional learning community team works cooperatively, has productive discussions on data and curriculum, and shares work equally.

Responses suggest that teachers who have had an opportunity to take on a leadership role have found it beneficial. Some teachers have taken more minor leadership roles while others have taken on larger roles. Roles have varied from facilitating conversations to leading specific aspects of achieving professional learning community goals.

The second category include teachers that have not had the opportunity to take a leadership role in a professional learning community. This was the largest number of responses for Survey Question #4 with eight responses. Some examples of teachers who responded that they have not had the opportunity to take on a leadership role include the following:

I have not had the opportunity yet. I do believe in the future I would like to but at this time, I feel that it is better to learn from teachers with more experience.

I have not taken a leadership role, but have contributed many ideas and resources that have worked for my students. The professional learning community members' response to this has been welcoming and useful.

While Shirley Hord's (1997) research suggests that shared leadership is a basic essential element of successful professional learning communities, not all teachers' responses suggested that they have experienced their lack of opportunity as a negative aspect. Some teachers feel that even though they have not taken a direct leadership role, their ideas and contributions have been well-received and supported. Other teachers believe that they lack the experience necessary to feel comfortable stepping into a leadership role among veteran teachers.

The final category for survey question #4 included subjects who did not feel the question of leadership opportunities was applicable to their professional learning community. There were only two respondents whose responses fell into the Not Applicable category. One example of this was:

In the professional learning community team with another teacher, there are no real leaders. We are equal members and that has been great. I believe we respect each other and our individual work or contributions to the team without anyone feeling like they are "in charge" or a boss. I believe this has led to a healthy partnership in which all egos are set aside and we truly focus on the best for the students.

In this case the teacher reporting is part of a professional learning community of just two people. While the teacher's response to the question yielded generally positive experiences working with their team member, it is worth noting that professional learning communities are typically suggested to include more than two members in order to increase the ability to generate a larger collective inquiry.

Effective Use of Time (Interview Question 2)

The fifth core theme for domain one, Effective Use of Time, switches its data source from survey questions to interview questions. There were only five subjects who participated in the interview portion of the study. Interview Question #2: ‘Do you feel that the time allocated to the professional learning communities is the most effective use of your time, or are there other initiatives that you feel would be more beneficial to you as a professional educator?,’ was broken up into three categorical responses: Yes, Mixed/Neutral, and No. The quotes used are excerpts from the interview in order to capture a summary of the respondents’ viewpoints on the question. Examples from respondents who generally felt that professional learning communities are an effective use of their time expressed the following:

Professional learning communities are great if we had more time. I mean I love meeting with my professional learning community teams because we get a lot done. We share data, we share different ideas, we create different assessments. I mean we use the time wisely when we get it. (Teacher 2, Interview)

The teachers who responded favorably as to whether being involved in a professional learning community was an effective use of their time indicated that it was beneficial to collaborate with other staff to go over common data, brainstorm ideas, and create common assessments. They also indicated that it was beneficial for evaluating the consistency of their common pacing schedules.

Some respondents had mixed opinions or were neutral on whether they felt professional learning communities were an effective use of their time. One example of this is:

I do feel like the time is well spent but I feel like they could focus on things other than just curriculum mapping like possibly researching resources that are out there. Like programs in the past we've used such as the professional learning community wheel just

disappeared throughout the course of my time here at Argo. These are things that in previous schools that I worked at that they had these as programs and these were things that we would upload what we were doing once again we were using behavior logs and charts to use as a part of our professional learning community to kind of determine what was causing some of the issues with certain students. I do appreciate some of the things that we do in professional learning community obviously. We focus on data and reteach certain standards, but I feel like we're at that point where I would like to focus more on quality than quantity. (Teacher 1, Interview)

Some of the ideas that came out of these responses included using too narrow of a focus for the objectives of the professional learning community, such as focusing too much on topics like curriculum mapping. Other responses indicated that it was difficult to effectively use professional learning community time due to the inability to meet with other team members regularly. However, there were some positive aspects mentioned regarding having additional time to focus on curriculum.

Only one teacher felt that there were other initiatives that would be a better use of time instead of using the time allocated for professional learning communities. Below is an excerpt from that interview.

I think every week meeting is not necessary at least in in my case because I kind of need that time just to like produce my own material since I'm the only one you know working with certain classes. But I think it's also super important that I am meeting with other teachers in a similar content area that I can bounce ideas off of an learn from especially because they are more of a veteran teacher that I am.”(Teacher 4, Interview)

This was another example of how professional learning community time is not as effective when only a single teacher is involved. The inability to collaborate and work with veteran teachers negates the potential benefits that occur when new teachers are involved in the professional learning community process.

Data Used for PLC Goals (Interview Question #4)

The final core idea of the first domain was finding out what types of data novice teachers were using in their professional learning communities to help drive professional learning community goals. Interview Question #4: What data have you used to determine what professional learning community goals your team will implement? For this particular question there were four different ideas that were acknowledged among the five respondents. These categories included Behavior Logs, Common Assessments, Progress Monitoring Software, and None (No data used).

Data that we've been using lately, we've been using behavior logs to kind of determine the functions of behavior. Why are students acting the way they are acting, why are they performing poorly so these are some of the things that we've been implementing now and we're trying to refine it. We are a new program, but we are trying to refine that portion of the program which is essentially determining the functions of behavior and why students are acting the way they're acting and how we can obviously use that data to refine our teaching practices and increase student performance. (Teacher 1, Interview)

So in terms of like my PLC we all use the same assessments. We get together when we can to compare scores to see what did this kid struggle on here and then from there we added our curriculum map and make changes we need to focus more on this skill or that

skill. Not only that but we've been collaborating with other teams regarding the different skills that they've been teaching so that way we can kind of head towards that direction. We've been using that kind of data to determine different professional learning community goals and what we have in mind for the future. (Teacher 2, Interview)

No data. I have many issues with my professional learning community team members who don't look at any data. (Teacher 3, Interview)

I use progress monitoring software that basically figures out what level students are at and that really gives us an idea of where we're going with class and even the assignments that we create. It also gives a teacher a good idea of what they can expect for next year with the students that they are getting. We don't have similar assessments because they're two different classes. (Teacher 4, Interview)

I have used none. I teach by myself so there is no like cross class data or anything like that. I will look at what my kids have done on an assessment or even on a worksheet and then use that to determine should I use this moving forward, what do I need to change, what worked and what didn't. But it's not like a data set by any means there's nothing to compare to just my own personal experience and my students' experiences. You know if on a worksheet all the kids got an F on it obviously something was wrong with my teaching, the worksheet or something. There's something is not right there. So that kind of data I guess I use all the time but it's not like big time data. (Teacher 5, Interview)

The variability among respondents demonstrates the significant differences that occur from department to department and even from various teams within the same department. While there is nothing to suggest that all professional learning communities must use the exact same forms of data collection in monitoring their professional learning community goals, the high degree of variability does raise the question of whether there has been a consistent message on what the focus and objectives of professional learning communities at Argo Community High School should be.

Transformational Impact of Professional Learning Communities

The second domain area is focused on how the professional learning community process at Argo Community High School has transformed over time and the impact it has had on student achievement as well as novice teachers' thoughts on the field of education. The domain is broken down into three different core ideas and yielded eleven categorical responses through the use of two survey questions and one interview question. Table 3 provides a summary of the information in domain 2.

Table 3

Domain 2: Perceptions on the transformational impact of professional learning communities.

Core Themes	Categorical Responses	Number of Respondents
1. Beneficial for Students (Survey Question #7)	Yes	13
	Neutral/Mixed	1
	No	1
2. Changed Perception of Teaching as a Career (Survey Question #8)	Yes	7
	No	8
3. Changes Experienced in PLC Framework at Argo Community High School	More stakeholders involved	1
	More focus on curriculum	1
	More time to focus on students	1

(Interview Question #3)	It has become more scripted/less collaborative	1
	PLC's operate differently depending on department	1
	They have become slightly more structured	1

Beneficial for Students (Survey Question #7)

The first core theme is the identification of subjects' perceptions on whether professional learning communities are beneficial for the high school and students. This core theme was gathered through information from survey question #7: Do you think that Argo Community High School and its students will be better off due to the work done by professional learning communities? The respondents' answers fell into one of three categories: Yes, Mixed, or No. The overwhelming majority of respondents do believe that the work done by professional learning communities is beneficial for the high school and its students. Thirteen of the fifteen respondents reported generally positive feedback about the benefits of professional learning communities at Argo Community High School. This was one of the most supported answers of the study. Some representative 'Yes' categorical responses from the survey for question #7 are as follows:

Yes, I do. The collaborative nature of professional learning communities has allowed teachers with different experiences collectively determine what is best for their students. Conversations about what has worked, what hasn't worked based off of poor assessment, and what ways we can try to improve curriculum and instruction are all had amongst professional learning community members to meet the needs of each student at Argo.

I believe that the school and students are definitely better off due to the work of professional learning communities. Because teachers have the opportunity to work

together to improve the experience and outcome of all students, more students can be affected and considered as a whole. The ability to reflect on the instruction and outcomes of all students in a particular class might produce new ideas that wouldn't have surfaced through the reflection of only one person or reflection on a smaller group of students.

In general, respondents who fell within this category suggested that work in professional learning communities has provided an effective modality to collaborate with staff, evaluate teaching and learning practices, and ensure that students are receiving appropriate curriculum across all departmental courses.

There was one respondent who provided a mixed response suggesting that they believe the professional learning communities overall had some negative attributes as well as some positive ones regarding its impact on the school and students. This response on the survey was as follows:

Yes and no. If the standards are high, yes. If the curriculum is getting watered down because members of the professional learning community believe something is too hard for the students, then no.

There was also only one respondent that provided a negative comment suggesting that professional learning communities are not beneficial for Argo Community High School in its current practice. Rather than increasing student achievement and staff collaboration, it suggests that the professional learning community process runs the risk of stifling improvement within the school.

Not with the way they are currently implemented. Even when curriculum is created and reinvented, there is no feedback on the quality of that curriculum. This lack of oversight

means that essentially anything can be taught in the classroom. The current professional learning community model at Argo allows for stagnation.

Changed Perception of Teaching as a Career (Survey Question #8)

The second core theme from domain two examined whether being part of a professional learning community as a novice teacher has changed teacher views of working in the field of education. As mentioned previously in the study, teaching as a career has a relatively high rate of ‘burnout’ in the first few years and data has suggested that professional learning communities may be an effective tool to combat that statistic. Survey Question #8 asked: Have you had any experiences through your work in professional learning communities that have changed your thinking about working in education? Subjects’ responses fell into one of two categories, either Yes or No. For this particular questions, subjects’ answers were split down the middle. Overall, there were seven ‘Yes’ responses. Some examples of these are:

I really feel like it has given me time to reflect with fellow teachers. I have always been a reflective teacher, but having time built in the day gives me time to decompress and work through content with colleagues that can help to improve on my craft.

I think that working in content-based professional learning community can help teachers realize that similar content, learning goals, and practices can create equitable learning opportunities for all students if it is done with the option for differentiation and modification relative to student need. Professional learning communities can create the base for the curriculum, and then allow individual teachers or groups of teachers to update and modify the set curriculum as their students’ progress (or not) in order to create more student achievement and growth.

Teachers responded that their participation has increased their appreciation for the ability to collaborate with peers, work together to overcome challenging obstacles, and be able to evaluate teaching practices with more veteran teachers.

There were eight 'No' responses, however these were not necessarily negative or critical of the professional learning community process. The respondents' answers more likely suggested that being part of a professional learning community has not had a substantial impact on how they viewed the role of teaching. Some examples of these responses are: 'No. Like I've stated previously, the experiences I have had were positive and helpful.' And 'I cannot think of any specific examples.'

Changes Experienced in PLC Framework at Argo High School (Interview Question #3)

The third core theme from the second domain explores how novice teachers feel the professional learning community framework has changed at Argo Community High School since they began working at the school. This data switches sources from the survey to the interview and was gathered through interview question #3: How has the professional learning community process changed at Argo Community High School since you started working here? From the subjects' answers, six different categorical responses were noted.

The first categorical response was that there are more stakeholders involved now than there were in the past. During the interview, Teacher 1 indicated that previously there were some different kinds of protocols that were followed and there were less people involved in the process. Since then, Argo has shifted away from solely focusing on academic improvements and has involved mental health professionals (e.g., social workers, psychologists, etc.) as well as made a concerted effort to include parents.

Now in the professional learning community in my classroom we focus on the social-emotional facets of what our students are facing so we have more stakeholders involved. We involved the social workers for mental health and we involved counselors on the credit recovery side of things and we even involve parents. So I feel like there are more stakeholders involved now as compared my previous experiences when I first started.

(Teacher 1 Interview)

The second categorical response was that there has been a shift to focus more on the curriculum. Teacher 1 mentioned another thing that the team has been instructed to focus on is looking at how their curriculum is benefiting the students. Their team has shifted focus to embedding curricular strategies and content that keeps students engaged.

Another thing that we do is that we tend to focus on content that is related to the students' lives and this typically works in the long run. So these are things that we are researching during our professional learning community, what are some of the things that we can integrate into our curriculum that actually keep our students engaged. (Teacher 1 Interview)

The third categorical response for how the professional learning community framework has changed according to novice teachers is that it has provided more time to focus on working with students. Teacher 2 suggested that the extra time with the integration of some new schedules has allowed more time to focus on working with students in smaller concentrations. However, in Teacher 2's opinion, while this time has been extremely valuable it is still less time than they believe is optimal.

My first year here we did not have Argo Hour so we didn't have that built into professional learning community time the two days out of the week. My second year

that's when we started Argo Hour so we had those extra two days of professional learning community. It's given me time to work with my caseload more which is great. I think that's one of the major pros of having the extra professional learning community time with Argo Hour. I think we need more time still, especially because our numbers are going up. (Teacher 2 Interview)

The fourth categorical response was that the professional learning community process has become more scripted. Teacher 3 believes that professional learning communities used to allow time for teachers to meet regularly to discuss common issues and allow that to drive their goals. Now they believe the changes that have been implemented stifle their creativity and force them to focus on very specific content without the opportunity to deviate from that course.

It used to be much more flexible where we just kind of met on Wednesday mornings and talked about what we want to do and collaborate and come up with ideas. Now it is very much like this is a curriculum that was written this Summer and this is what we have to do in my new role in the new professional learning community team I'm on. It's very much telling us what to do and allows for very little collaboration. (Teacher 3 Interview)

The fifth categorical response was that professional learning communities run differently depending on what department you are in. Teacher 4 described that their participation in multiple different department professional learning community teams over the years has given them the impression that the professional learning community framework at Argo has not really changed, but depending on what department you are in, you are likely following different kinds of policies and procedures. They describe how in working with one department the agenda is set by the

leader of the professional learning community team and meetings basically stick to the agenda without allowing for much collaboration, whereas in other departments the process is much more flexible and it allows much more collaboration. Teachers 4 and 5 also support this idea by explaining how some departments appear to have stronger systems in place to ensure that their professional learning communities are successful.

So I think for me switching from different professional learning community teams has allowed me to see how it works in different areas of the building but I don't feel like overall there's been any changes in the professional learning community teams. (Teacher 4 Interview)

I think some departments do a better job than others with this. Like for example math, they know what their expectations are they have it finely tuned. They do professional learning communities great and have had some great results. Other departments maybe haven't had great results. (Teacher 5 Interview)

The sixth categorical response that generated from this question was that there is some evidence that professional learning communities have become a bit more structured over the past couple years, but still have room to improve. Teacher 5 suggests that when they started at Argo Community High School professional learning communities did not exist in a formalized structure. They acknowledge that the new administration has set up some parameters that have helped the process, but that the structure is still severely lacking for the most part.

When I first started there wasn't professional learning communities. I mean, I think we had professional learning community time with the previous principal but I didn't even

know what that was. I guess it was like just time to plan. Now there is a little bit more of a structure and we know that the current principal wants us to be doing these professional learning community things but there still is no real end goal or no clear structure. So, it has become more structured but still needs work. (Teacher 5 Interview)

Opportunities for Improvement

The third and final domain of the data focuses on opportunities for improvement with professional learning communities at Argo Community High School. This data was obtained through the use of two survey questions and one interview question. The responses yielded three core themes and thirteen categorical responses. The purpose of the questions was to try to identify what improvements could be made to specifically help novice teachers benefit from the professional learning community process, what improvements could be made to help all stakeholders of professional learning communities benefit, and what changes or information should be considered when looking to make improvements to the professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School. A summary of the information in domain 3 can be seen in table 3 below.

Table 3

Domain 3: Opportunities for Improvement.

Core Themes	Categorical Responses	Number of Respondents
1. Recommended Improvements for New Teachers (Survey Question #5)	Additional training and instruction on conducting PLC meetings	5
	Clear guidance on roles and responsibilities in PLC meetings and more unified and agreed upon structure for PLC meetings and objectives	6
	Additional time to meet as PLC team/	2

	reduced number of total PLC teams	
	Be provided more materials so teachers do not need to recreate materials that have already been created by previous teams	2
2. Recommended Improvements for all PLC Stakeholders (Survey Question #6)	More consistent structure and increased communication of expectations of PLC's	8
	A clearer explanation of what roles team members should play in PLC's	5
	Additional time to meet as a PLC	1
	No feedback provided	1
3. Recommended Improvements for Overall PLC Process at Argo Community High School (Interview Question #1)	Hiring a PLC Facilitator/Administrator	1
	Additional time to meet with PLC team	1
	Reduce number of PLC teams and be more strategic in assigning teams	2
	Increase collaboration and reflection in PLC teams rather than just working on tasks assigned by the team leader	1
	Better training on PLC framework and more clearly defined expectations for PLC team members.	2

Recommended Improvements for New Teachers (Survey Question #5)

The first core theme from domain three was opportunities to improve professional learning communities for new teachers. This information was generated from survey question #5: in what ways do you think the professional learning community process could be improved for new teachers? A variety a different suggestions emerged from the survey question and several of the suggestions began to form themes as there was multiple variations of the same idea presented by different subjects. The most common categorical response was providing additional training and instruction on conducting professional learning community meetings for new

teachers. This categorical response had five subjects provide an answer that showed support for the suggestion. One example of this was:

New teachers may need an introduction to the professional learning community team process. During orientation, new teacher should be given instruction on professional learning community teams and the importance of working together as professionals towards a common goal. Everyone on a professional learning community team should have responsibilities and feel part of the professional learning community team, no matter what the subject area.

Teacher responses indicated that new teachers coming into the field may not understand the objectives of professional learning communities. Having a universal training for all teachers, particularly new teachers, would help ensure all teachers involved in the professional learning community process were working under the same assumptions and procedures.

Similarly, having clear guidance on roles and responsibilities and a more unified and agreed upon structure for professional learning community meetings and objectives was another response that had multiple subjects supporting it. Some examples of survey responses included the following:

It seems like there is no real structure, system or approach for professional learning community at this school that gives continuity across the board. If one existed, it might make our work generated during professional learning community time more focused and streamlined across contents/grades/etc.

It would be helpful if they were more structured. Perhaps at the beginning of the year the professional learning community team decides to kind of map out how they want each professional learning community meeting to be ran.

Responses suggest that the lack of common structure in professional learning communities makes the process confusing and inefficient. Some suggestions indicate that utilizing trained facilitators, incorporating common agendas, and being provided specific objectives to focus on would be helpful for the process.

Two of the subjects responded that it would make professional learning communities more beneficial for new teachers by providing additional time to meet as a professional learning community team or reduce the number of total professional learning community teams.

Providing teachers with more time to PLC. We do not get enough time, especially teachers that have several preps.

I feel that it would benefit new teachers they had no more than two professional learning community teams to focus on.

Throughout the analysis of the data from the surveys and interviews, it has been a common theme that teachers are involved in several professional learning community teams with limited amounts of time. This has created such problems as a lack of consistency in meeting regularly with team members and even the creation of professional learning communities composed of one or two team members.

The last categorical response regarding how professional learning communities can be improved to help new teachers was to provide materials that can be used to help the professional learning community process that does not force teachers to spend unnecessary time recreating

materials that likely already exist. The teachers suggest that providing the materials will both help novice teachers' confidence in navigating the professional learning community process as well as provide them valuable time in order to acclimate to the professional learning community process.

I think it helps to have a curriculum that is in place for new teachers. It can be overwhelming in your first few years and having that in place helps to give you some clarity. As the years progress, you can work together to tweak the curriculum to meet the needs of your students. This also gives you more time to focus on score results to help your students right away.

Recommended Improvements for all PLC Stakeholders (Survey Question #6)

The second core theme from domain three changed the focus of looking at what improvements could be made for new teachers specifically to looking at what changes could be made to improve the professional learning community process for all stakeholders involved. This information was gathered from the results of survey question #6 which asked: in what ways do you think the professional learning community process could be improved for all stakeholders? Overall, there were several similar responses to this question as there was to survey question #5 that focused on novice teachers. Eight responses suggested that a more consistent structure and increased communications of expectations of professional learning communities would help. Some examples of this included:

Yes-there is a frustrating lack of communication from administration on what the goal of a professional learning community is. Are we supposed to have all formative and summative assessments aligned? Just summative? Should we be lockstep in day-to-day

activities? Who is looking at and giving feedback on unit guides and course overviews?

There needs to be a clear directive on what we're trying to get out of the professional learning community process.

Clear end goals for professional learning community groups to work towards would also be beneficial as to provide direction. However, micro-managed professional learning community would not be effective--but expectations, I think, would be welcomed. It would help with accountability across the board--not just for professional learning community teams or teachers, but for administration or leaders to help guide the school into a more progressive and achieving environment aligned with student growth.

The responses suggest there is a lack of clarity on the purpose and objectives of engaging in professional learning communities. Teachers are looking for specific directives as to what kinds of outcomes they are expected to achieve through their work in professional learning communities. As we have seen throughout the data, the lack of direction and leadership in some of the professional learning community teams has caused some teachers to utilize the professional learning community time as an extension of their plan period or to work on projects that are typically not aligned to the goals of professional learning communities.

Another popular categorical response which five subjects supported was a clearer explanation of team member roles within professional learning communities. There has been consistent support throughout the data analysis providing evidence that a significant number of individuals who are unfamiliar with their roles in the professional learning community process or that roles and responsibility expectations shift from department to department. Some representative responses from the survey included the following:

Professional learning community members should all have an equal voice. If a professional learning community includes both a DC and new teachers, the new teachers may not speak up as much if their view is different from the DC (personal experience).

Each teacher on a professional learning community team should have responsibilities and feel as though they are part of a team. This is something the team leader can organize for the professional learning community participants.

When teachers do not feel that they have an equal role within the team, or they are unfamiliar with what their role on the team is, it is unlikely that they will contribute as much as if they were confident in their role on the team. The responses suggest that leadership, whether through administration or professional learning community team leaders, needs to be more effective in establishing these expectations.

One of the respondents indicated that it would be beneficial to have additional time each day to participate in professional learning community teams: Giving us an hour before school starts (8:00-9:00 am) each day. The lack of time to properly engage in professional learning communities is another theme that has emerged in other parts of the data collection. This appears to also be correlated with the fact that many teachers are involved in several professional learning communities and are forced to decide which of their teams they are going to work with for that particular day (week). The lack of ability to work consistently with teams has been a common frustration noted by teachers throughout the data collection process.

Recommended Improvements for Overall PLC Framework at ACHS (Interview Question #1)

The final core theme of domain three was identifying ways that novice teachers feel the professional learning community process could be improved at Argo Community High School.

The data source for this question switches back to interview data. Interview question #1 asked: how do you believe the professional learning community process could be improved at Argo Community High School? As has been consistent throughout the process, the results yielded several different categorical responses with varying levels of support. Most of the responses have already been acknowledged in other parts of the study. Hiring a professional learning community administrator was one of the responses:

I've been a part of professional learning communities in the co-taught setting and self-contained setting I feel like the way that it could be improved is by hiring a professional learning community facilitator. I've noticed that in some settings teachers lack content knowledge so they were little timid and didn't really contribute too much to the conversation. If there was like a facilitator delegating tasks or assignments it would kind of offset that apprehension that most novice teachers face. (Teacher 1 Interview)

Another response brought up during the interview which has also seen previous support was to provide additional time to meet with professional learning community teams:

I think with our department because we are in so many different professional learning communities we need more time we don't have enough time to meet with every single professional learning community group. Sometimes I don't see someone in my professional learning community for like a month because they are in four different professional learning communities. I'm in four different professional learning communities so we need more time built in to work with one another and share data and ideas. (Teacher 2 Interview)

Reducing the number of professional learning community teams or being more selective in choosing teams was an idea that was brought up by two different participants:

There's other teachers that have four professional learning community groups that we just don't have the time to really meet that's a really conflicting schedule so creating some other sort of professional learning community time for us would be the best thing. I think that's been voiced a lot. Just finding the time to give us, especially in our department, because of how many different groups we have. I mean some of us are in science some of us are in math so it's kind of hard for us. (Teacher 2 Interview)

Sticking to one group and that's it instead of people going to different groups. For example, there's the teacher here who might be on the English 2 team but then also might want to work on Reading Enrichment team. Well then you're kind of spread thin. I think we should prioritize each teacher where their strengths are or where the bulk of their classes are where they're going to be the most effective and just focus on that. (Teacher 5 Interview)

Increased collaboration and reflection in professional learning communities rather than just working on tasks assigned by the professional learning community leader was another response by one participant:

I feel like a lot of what we do is our professional learning community is the leader telling us what we should teach and have a common pacing schedule and a common assessment schedule and then not a lot of collaboration not a self-reflection. I would prefer that we talk about what worked and how we can change things and how we make things better. And I think a lot of it also has to do with choosing the right personalities to be in specific professional learning community groups and choosing the right personality to be the professional learning community leader. Someone who's collaborative and listens and not just tells you what to do. (Teacher 3 Interview)

The final responses related to professional learning community improvement at Argo Community High School were related to better training on the professional learning community framework and more clearly defined expectations for professional learning community team members. These are suggestions that have come up multiple times during the data collection process.

I think if new teachers were given kind of a presentation or an introduction to like professional learning communities and what their expectations are as a part of the professional learning community team would be a good idea. Every school is different so coming into Argo, I wasn't really sure of what my role was with the professional learning community team that I was on. And I think that that also needs to be revisited with veteran teachers because there are some professional learning community teams where you feel like you're part of the team and you're participating and involved and then there's other teams that you know you're kind of just a passenger. (Teacher 4 Interview)

Another thing would be to have clear expectations. What does administration want from this? What is our goal? What should be working towards. We kind of have gotten that information a few years ago when the principal implemented the different phases. But even still it wasn't clear. What do you want, what are we doing? So that could definitely be improved. What is our goal what do you want us to create, what do you want to do, is there schedule for this? All those kind of things I think that's really important. (Teacher 5 Interview)

The improvements recommended by the teachers were all things that have come up multiple times throughout the data collection process. Themes emerged in the areas of providing

more clarity to the professional learning community process and structure, providing specific objectives, utilizing additional trainings prior to engaging in professional learning communities, providing more time to participate in professional learning communities, and reducing the overall number of professional learning communities so teachers are not spread so thin.

Summary

The data collected for this study through the use of teacher surveys and teacher interviews yielded information that can be divided up into three different domains. Each domain is then broken down into multiple core themes. The various responses for each core idea were noted and tallied and divided into categorical responses to help identify themes and trends within the data.

While the results of the data provided some excellent ideas to consider when looking at the value of professional learning communities for novice teachers, there was a high degree of variability for many of the questions due to the individual teachers' unique circumstances. After taking a closer look at the responses there are likely several factors that account for this which will be discussed in chapter five.

Many teachers reported being involved in several professional learning communities, some in multiple departments where expectations from department leaders varied considerably. A number of teachers identified being in at least one 'professional learning community' that consisted of them as a single teacher or paired with one other teacher. Teachers reported a general lack of clarity from leadership on what is expected from them as a member of a professional learning community as well as what are the expected outcomes from engaging in activities of professional learning communities.

Despite the many concerns about how professional learning communities are being utilized at Argo Community High School, the majority of teachers have indicated that professional learning communities have been highly beneficial to them as novice teachers. Themes such as the benefits of collaboration with colleagues, the ability to receive guidance from veteran teachers, and the benefits of collective problem solving were common throughout the data collection. Chapter five will explore these themes in more detail.

Chapter V: Conclusions and Discussion

Chapter Introduction

This chapter provides a summary of the findings, discussion of results and implications of the study. It will also provide information on possible connections for future research on professional learning communities. The purpose of this research study was to explore novice teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of professional learning communities. As chapter 2 discussed in greater detail, professional learning communities have a sizable amount of research suggesting that when implemented correctly they are a valuable tool for novice teachers. Hord (1997) suggests professional learning communities are capable of reducing professional isolation in teachers, providing a sense of collective responsibility in regards to student learning, are able to improve the likelihood of teacher preparedness and confidence, improve the school climate, and lower the rate of student absenteeism.

The study focused on a single school in a single district in order to attempt to reduce the number of variables that can come into play when assessing multiple school districts. The researcher sent out an invitation to participate in the survey portion of the study. Five of the subjects responded back that they were not eligible to participate (as they had more than three years of teaching experience which they earned prior to arriving at Argo Community High School) and five additional subjects never responded to the invitation to participate. Of the 15 subjects that agreed to participate, 100% of them submitted the anonymous survey via Survey Monkey. Of the 15 teachers that completed interviews, 10 teachers across a variety of departments were invited to participate in the interview portion of the study. Of the 10 teachers invited to participate, 5 were willing to complete the interview.

Discussion of Results

In reviewing the literature, the support on the effectiveness of professional learning communities when implemented correctly is significant. Some of the topics that regularly occurred within the research reviewed for this study were the ability for professional learning communities to solidify the positive impacts on school climate and culture; the importance of having a shared mission, vision, values and goals; and the impact of professional learning communities on novice teachers and teacher retention. It is important to note that in addition to the benefits that professional learning communities can provide, if not implemented correctly or consistently, many of those benefits can be eliminated or even potentially cause larger problems. The results from the data analysis from this study will be examined to see how the themes emerge compared to previous research on the topic.

School Climate and Culture

Professional learning communities have the ability to strengthen a school's climate and culture. However, in order for professional learning communities to successfully become rooted in a school's support structure, it is important that there is already some level of positive climate and culture in the school and that teachers are willing and eager to engage in collaborative and transformative activities. Barth (2006) strongly suggests that a "precondition" to create any improvements in a school is having a "collegial culture."

In the results of the study, there was a high level of variability among subjects' responses as well as some responses that suggested increased collaboration was essentially not possible in the current practices at Argo Community High School. In the surveys some teachers believed professional learning communities to be a consistently successful educational tool. These

teachers suggested that engaging in professional learning communities has been a positive experience that has allowed them to collaborate with their peers and improve their teaching practices in the classroom. The concept of being able to share ideas and co-create common assessments were themes that regularly occurred in the data.

DuFour et al. (2011) suggests that professional learning communities, when implemented with fidelity, have the ability to provide numerous positive effects for both educators and students. Responses from this study support that the collegial benefits of professional learning communities can range from opportunities to create common lessons and assessments, the opportunity to share previously utilized successful and unsuccessful teaching strategies, and opportunities for mentorship from more veteran teachers. Several responses in the survey help support this, including the following:

Working in a professional learning community has provided a great venue through which to test ideas or talk through ideas about things that can be done in my classroom. My professional learning community groups have allowed me to receive quick feedback and ideas from other teachers in my content area.

While there are many examples of how professional learning communities have helped increase collegial and collaborative efforts at Argo Community High School, there were some responses that suggested mixed results and inconsistencies. There were multiple comments in both the surveys and interviews that suggest some departments have had much less success in making all professional learning community team members embrace the collaborative nature. There were situations where some novice teachers were not made to feel as if they were an integral part of the team and other circumstances where team leaders simply took control of the process and eliminated the opportunity to organically collaborate and collectively problem solve.

These situations where teams are claiming to be engaging in professional learning community work are strikingly similar to what research from DuFour (2011) cautions to be careful of when implementing a professional learning community framework in a school. Not every group of teachers that gets together to collaborate is engaging in the professional learning community process as it is intended to be conducted. When teams claim to engage in professional learning communities and do not correctly implement all of the processes it can often lead to inability to effectively achieve goals. This lack of achievement can then be inappropriately used to claim that professional learning communities are ineffective.

Based on the results of both the survey data and interview data, one factor that was addressed on multiple occasions was that some departments tended to be stronger than others when it came to the professional learning community process. Some of this appears to be in relation to leadership at both the administrative and professional learning community leader levels. It was suggested on a few different occasions that expectations and objectives of professional learning communities were not clearly communicated from administration. DuFour et al., (2005) suggests that leadership is critical to ensure that the core objectives and principles of the professional learning community “become deeply embedded in the culture of the school.” McLaughlin and Talbert (2006) also strongly suggest that effective leadership is key in promoting or inhibiting the development of professional learning communities within a school.

Other responses in the survey and interview suggested that there is a complete lack of collaboration and that professional learning communities have turned into more of a scripted process of creating common lesson plans and assessments rather than an opportunity for collective innovation. There was evidence that in professional learning communities with

ineffective leadership, or lack of collaboration, that many of the goals that the team would be working on were already predetermined as opposed to being collectively decided. This process reduces the likelihood of ‘buy-in’ from team members that had no opportunity to help decide the team’s purpose. DuFour and Eaker (2008) indicate that if the members of the professional learning community do not share the same view on their fundamental purpose, it is critical to continue discussions until the entire team agrees on their purpose.

Many of the concerns related to a lack of collaboration and poor climates within the professional learning community framework tended to be isolated to specific professional learning community groups or specific departments. This is encouraging in that it suggests that it is not a schoolwide concern about climate and culture. However, this makes it more difficult to identify which specific clusters are not engaging in the core principles of collaborative teams’ focus on learning and collective inquiry in DuFour’s framework.

Another theme that emerged from the survey and interview responses in regards to professional learning communities impacting Argo Community High School’s culture and climate were the teachers that indicated that they worked in their professional learning communities independently or with one other teacher. Terms that are often used in conjunction with professional learning communities are collaboration, teaming, collective inquiry, shared, common, etc. The point of a professional learning community is to obtain multiple perspectives in order to problem-solve on various issues. While some of this may be possible with two people, it is definitely not appropriate with one person.

Participating in a professional learning community independently, or even with another teacher, is essentially an extension of a planning period. A teacher may be able to reflect upon their curriculum, make revisions, and even possibly do common planning with another teacher

but all benefits of the professional learning community process are essentially erased. DuFour et al. (2004) suggests that one of the primary benefits of the professional learning community model is the fact that moving a teacher from an isolated framework to a collaborative framework increases teacher morale, efficacy, and overall effectiveness.

The results of the study suggest that novice teachers' impressions of how professional learning communities impact the culture and climate of Argo Community High School are extremely variant. There are multiple examples of positive, neutral, and negative perceptions as well as ones that simply do not meet the threshold to be considered a professional learning community. These factors present opportunities for the school to target some weaknesses in the current model. The goal would be to get all departments in sync with the professional learning community expectations that have been proven effective.

Shared Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals

In addition to looking at the impacts related to the school's culture and climate, collaborative efforts are also critical when examining whether professional learning communities at Argo Community High School are embracing shared mission, vision, values, and goals. DuFour et al. (2010) confirms the importance of these elements as they are what set up the systematic processes in which professional learning communities operate. The results from the survey and interviews also suggest some mixed results in these areas depending on which teacher responses you look at.

Some subjects made comments suggesting that they see the benefits of working with colleagues that have the same objectives. These findings support research by Feiman-Nemser (2012) which suggests that novice teachers, as well as veteran teachers, can substantially benefit from positive collegial collaborations where the focus is geared towards student achievement and

school improvement. However, other teachers that participated in the study feel that there is a general lack of ‘shared’ components in their professional learning communities. One teacher mentioned in their interview that professional learning community meetings have shifted from feeling like a collaborative effort where ideas are discussed and agreed upon in order to create ‘shared’ elements for the professional learning community to a process where ideas are developed over the summer by the professional learning community leader and the group just moves forward with those initiatives even though the group did not spend any time to develop collective ‘buy-in.’

The feedback provided in relation to having shared mission, vision, values, and goals again demonstrates that there are likely systematic differences not only in various departments within Argo Community High School, but also differences among various professional learning communities within single departments. Saunders, Goldenberg, and Gallimore (2009) demonstrates that professional learning communities with high levels of collaboration tend to yield positive results. Similarly, the findings from this study suggested that in professional learning communities where collaboration is utilized to create these shared elements, teachers tend to report overall positive outcomes in their perceptions of the professional learning community. In instances where the time was not taken to create shared philosophies and goals, teachers tended to perceive professional learning communities as inefficient and burdensome. Research by DuFour et al. (2010) also found that a common theme among unsuccessful professional learning communities was a lack of ‘shared’ mission and vision.

Novice Teachers and Teacher Retention

It can be argued that nowhere are these positive and negative perceptions of professional learning communities more important than in the eyes of novice teachers. Novice teachers not

only rely on the benefits that professional learning communities provide to all educators such as the creation of common goals, collective inquiry, and innovative problem solving, but they also rely on it as a support network to help them increase their self-efficacy and confidence in their first few years of teaching. Wiley (2001) suggests professional learning communities have been shown to improve novice teachers' effectiveness in delivery of instruction

Overall, 87% or (13 out of 15) of the teachers surveyed believe that Argo Community High School and its students will be better off due to the work done by professional learning communities. These findings are consistent with research from Rigelman & Ruben (2012) which found that novice teachers participating in effective professional learning communities valued feedback from their colleagues, had higher levels of self-confidence in their professional abilities, and stressed the importance of collaboration in their future professional development. While that is generally an encouraging statement and supports much of the research suggesting professional learning communities can be a valuable tool, results from the survey and interviews also provided information on where Argo Community High School can improve professional learning communities to support new teachers.

There were multiple suggestions provided by the teachers surveyed for perceived benefits to the current professional learning community process at Argo Community High School. One of the suggestions supported by multiple respondents was having more robust training and instruction on conducting professional learning community meetings. Thessin & Starr (2011, pg. 54) concluded that, "Like students, adult learners engaging in problem-solving and teamwork for the first time need differentiated supports to ensure that they can work together effectively to meet their students learning needs." The data indicated that providing more information on what the district's objectives are for professional learning communities, what kinds of activities are

expected to be conducted during professional learning community time, and what the general structure of all professional learning communities within the school should be would be helpful.

Another common recommendation was having clear guidance on roles and responsibilities in professional learning community meetings. Much of the data from this study suggests a high variability among departments in how professional learning communities are led and what roles teachers are expected to perform. The lack of consistency makes it difficult for new teachers to understand what it is they are supposed to be doing during professional learning community meetings and also makes it challenging to be part of multiple professional learning communities in different departments. Some teachers also believe that the number of different professional learning community teams they are currently involved in is part of the problem. They report that trying to balance so many different groups with different styles and a general lack of consistency makes it difficult. Ideas that were proposed to help with this problem included being provided additional time to meet with professional learning community groups and/or reducing the total number of professional learning communities that any one teacher is expected to be a part of.

Some of the teachers surveyed believe that providing additional resources such as a curriculum or binder explaining how professional learning communities should be conducted and what kinds of goals they should be working on would be helpful. They indicated that coming in as a new teacher is difficult enough without having to try to create all this new material that likely already exists from professional learning communities that occurred before them. One teacher suggested that there is no need to “recreate the wheel” when it comes to participating in a professional learning community.

Incorrect or Inconsistent Implementation of Professional Learning Communities

The research outlining how professional learning communities can be a valuable tool to support novice teachers in their few years in the profession (Ingersoll & May 2010: Flynt & Morton, 2009: Liu, 2007) all operate under the assumption that professional learning communities are being conducted under specific conditions that make professional learning communities different than other collaborative efforts common in education. One of the most glaring examples that came up during the data collection is how often teachers commented that they ‘PLC’ by themselves. DuFour et al., (2010) explains the importance of having a ‘shared’ mission, vision, and goal when working in a professional learning community. Hord (1997) suggests professional learning communities have the potential to reduce professional isolation in teachers and create a sense of collective responsibility. Below are some quotes from subject teachers who participated in the research study:

I usually PLC by myself, except for on occasion I am able to PLC with another person. In my PLC time, I try to revise and create curriculum, but it is still very difficult by myself.

My PLC group has been very small, just me and one other teacher.

In a PLC team with another teacher, there are no real leaders. We are equal members and that has been great. I believe that we respect each other and our individual work or contributions to the team without anyone feeling like they are ‘in charge’ or a boss. I believe this has led to a healthy partnership in which all egos are set aside, and we truly focus on the best for the students.

It is difficult to obtain the benefits of a professional learning community, particularly as a novice teacher, when you are working in isolation or with just a single partner. In addition to the benefits of grouping novice teachers with more experienced teachers to share ideas with, one of

the fundamental benefits of professional learning communities is allowing a variety of minds to come together to work towards a focused goal.

Another common issue that came up from a variety of respondents was lack of time to properly engage in professional learning communities as well as teachers being involved in too many professional learning communities. In order for professional learning communities to be effective, educators must focus in on highly targeted goals as opposed to working on a variety of goals simultaneously. Often times goals created in professional learning communities are called SMART Goals. This acronym stands for: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely. When goals are too broad or unlikely to be accomplished within the scope of the professional learning community, they are reconfigured to match what the professional learning community is realistically going to be able to accomplish.

If teachers are involved in multiple professional learning communities and are not given a sufficient amount of time, it is very likely to create an environment where teachers will just ‘go through the motions’ rather than accomplish meaningful goals. DuFour (2004) asserts that schools must often get creative to ensure that they are providing the necessary time to implement the professional learning community framework with fidelity. Streamlining teachers to ensure that they were involved in only one, or at most two, professional learning community teams would help ensure that they are not spread too thin to achieve results.

Teachers also commented that the lack of clear structure and communication of expectations from administration caused a considerable amount of inconsistency in how certain departments conduct their professional learning communities, as well as discrepancies in how different professional learning communities within the same department operate. Some departments were praised as having a very systematic, yet collaborative structure for conducting

professional learning communities, whereas others lacked structure completely and teachers used professional learning community time as an extension of their planning period. One department was criticized as having their leader make all important decisions and simply delegate tasks to the other members rather than take the time for group reflection and collaboration. DuFour et al (2010) reiterates that it is crucial that professional learning communities have a clear vision and mission prior to engaging in a professional learning community framework as well as effective leadership throughout the process.

Future Research

Research supports that professional learning communities have the potential to be one of the most valuable tools at a school's disposal to make meaningful change in academic gains, positive climate, and teacher confidence (Fullan (1992), Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore (2009), DuFour et al. (2011)). While this study aimed at focusing in specifically on perceptions of novice teachers, the research from this study can be used as an additional data source for more generalized future research on the topic of professional learning communities. This could include using a schoolwide approach to get input from all educators within Argo Community High School or utilizing a multi-school sample in order to generate more broad-based applications. Another valuable option of continuing research in this area would be to shift from using qualitative data to quantitative data to obtain a different data set that would be much easier to poll a larger sample size.

There could also be significant value in doing a study that specifically focused on leadership (both administrative and team leaders) regarding the professional learning community process. Much of the criticism that occurred within the study could be directly correlated to

effective leadership. Issues ranged from ineffective structure to poor team leadership. Examining details related to leadership in the professional learning process at Argo Community High School could help provide additional information to improve the overall framework.

As the data collection for this study focused in on a single school, its implications are not as broad based as studies that look at many districts. However, one of the advantages this provides is a solid foundation to conduct follow up studies related to the topic. The research from this study, as well as any follow up studies at the school, would allow for a continuous improvement of the professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School as well as other schools with similar circumstances. While the information from this study could be helpful to a larger school district with multiple schools, it will be important to consider the various complexities that come into play when attempting to create systematic change in a large school district. This will likely require collecting additional data to account for these complexities.

Conclusion

Professional learning communities have the potential to transform schools and unlock a myriad of benefits for both the educators who are directly involved in them as well as the stakeholders who gain from the collective improvements. Previous research has also supported that they can be extremely effective in improving novice teacher efficacy, self-confidence, and effectiveness (Hipp et al., 2007).

While the benefits of professional learning communities are well documented when implemented correctly, the data from this study has supported the notion that they are also very complex systems that leave room for errors that can impact their overall effectiveness. The

general tone was that professional learning communities at Argo Community High School are beneficial, but there was a significant amount of information on things that are not working or that can be changed to improve the current model. Schools are often faced with having to balance a variety of agendas on a limited budget. While professional learning communities may not solve all problems on a school's radar, it does have the ability to create numerous aspects of positive change, including providing novice teachers the opportunity to increase their confidence, effectiveness, and willingness to remain in the field. It is also important to note that while both previous research and the results of this study suggest that professional learning communities have the potential to reduce teacher attrition, this would only apply to teachers who, after receiving the benefits of professional learning communities, still enjoy the profession. It is very unlikely that any type of support, including professional learning communities, has the ability to retain teachers who discover teaching was not a good fit for their personality.

The researcher has used the anecdotal responses provided through the surveys and interviews of this study to formulate recommendations that could be considered in improving the current policies and procedures that govern the professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School. These recommendations are likely just a starting point, as the study focused specifically on the perceptions of novice teachers. However, much of the data obtained from the result is applicable to schoolwide improvement. The following chapter will outline the various recommendations proposed in result of the data collected for this study.

Chapter VI: Executive Summary

The intended purpose of this study was to examine novice teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities at Argo Community High School. Argo has implemented the professional learning community framework for just under a decade with no formalized process of evaluating the perceived effectiveness of the framework.

Novice teachers were chosen to be studied due to the fact that there is previous research suggesting that professional learning communities offer unique benefits to teachers during the most vulnerable time of their career. Novice teachers were also more likely to approach the concept of professional learning communities with a more objective lens than veteran teachers who have lived through numerous changes in teaching regulations and philosophies with mixed results that may have created pre-existing biases.

Summary of Study and Results

In order to create a foundation for this study, a variety of previous research was reviewed in order to establish what has been learned about how the professional learning community framework impacts novice teachers. The information examined strongly supported that professional learning communities, when implemented correctly, are extremely valuable to novice teachers. The research also suggested that if not properly monitored, or implemented incorrectly, professional learning communities can be considerably less effective or even yield negative results.

The results from this study demonstrated support to both of these previous findings. The majority of participants in this study supported the idea that professional learning communities have improved their self-confidence, opportunities for collaboration, and teaching effectiveness. However, there were also several examples throughout the study of professional learning

communities being implemented incorrectly. Responses in these cases demonstrated lower confidence about the effectiveness and value of engaging in professional learning communities.

Recommendations

The following recommendations for improvement of the professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School will address some of the most significant issues that were identified from the study.

- I. Creation of a Professional Learning Community Oversight Committee
 - A. Form an interdisciplinary team to create uniform PLC policies and structures
 - B. Provide committee dedicated time to meet with departmental PLC teams to explain objectives and expectations (this can be accomplished by providing release periods to all PLC Oversight Committee members)
 - C. Provide professional development opportunities for committee members to create in-house PLC experts. Also continue to utilize outside contractual PLC experts to use as a resource to allow PLC Oversight Committee members opportunity to meaningfully engage in their own PLCs.
- II. Evaluate Time Allocation and Teacher Participation Related to PLCs
 - A. Ensure that teachers are not actively participating in more PLC teams than they can efficiently manage
 - B. Identify strategies to increase total time allocated to PLC meetings
 - C. Provide clear guidelines as to activities to be conducted during PLC time vs. planning period

- D. Ensure that teachers are placed into PLC groups that are large enough to engage in collective inquiry and action planning but small enough to generate regular participation.
- III. Provide Novice Teachers Dedicated Support in the PLC Process
- A. Embed a portion of PLC training in New Teacher Orientation to ensure that novice teachers are equipped to actively participate in PLCs immediately
 - B. Ensure that the New Teacher Mentoring program utilizes veteran mentor teachers that are familiar with PLCs and can act as a resource to novice teachers.

While this is by no means an exhaustive outline of steps that can be taken to improve the professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School, it is a good starting point as it addresses many of the thematic problems that came up during the data collection process. The proposed suggestions also provide a combination of immediate fixes as well as systematic changes which will allow for long term, continuous improvements.

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Appendix A

Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities at Argo Community High School

Please complete the following questions by providing a narrative response for each question.

Providing answers to these questions will assist in the identification of potential improvements that can be made to our current Professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School. This survey is completely optional and you can choose to not complete it or discontinue completing it at any time. All responses are completely confidential.

1. How has the experience of being involved in a professional learning community been for you?
2. What has been the most meaningful outcome for you by being part of a professional learning community?
3. Do you feel that being part of a professional learning community has helped you transition into your teaching career? Please explain.
4. Have you had the opportunity to take on a leadership role in your professional learning community? How has that experience been for you?
5. In what ways do you think the professional learning community process could be improved for new teachers?

6. In your experience how effective is the structure and organization of Professional learning communities at Argo Community High School?

7. Do you believe that Argo Community High School and its students will be better off due to the work done by Professional learning communities?

8. Have you had any experiences through your work in Professional learning communities that have changed your thinking about working in education?

Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. How do you believe the professional learning community process could be improved at Argo Community High School?
2. Do you feel that the time allocated to professional learning communities is the most effective use of your time, or are there other initiatives that you feel would be more beneficial to you as a professional educator?
3. How has the professional learning community process changed at Argo Community High School since you started working here?
4. What data have you used to determine what professional learning community goals your team will implement?
5. What other information do you think is important to consider when looking at the professional learning community framework at Argo Community High School?

Appendix C

**Governors State University
College of Education
Interdisciplinary Leadership**

Title of Research Study: THE VALUE OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS PERCEIVED BY NOVICE SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS

Principal Investigator: Brandon J. Cotter

Key Information:

The following is a short summary of this study to help you decide whether to participate or not. More detailed information is listed later on in this consent form.

- Your consent to participate in this study is being sought through a description of activities in this form. Participation in this study is voluntary and you can choose not to participate or withdraw at any time without any penalty.
- The purpose of this study is to help determine novice teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities at Argo Community High School.
- You will be asked to participate in an anonymous online survey. A select number of participants will also be invited to volunteer to participate in a 15-20 minute follow-up interview.
- We expect that your participation in this study will take approximately 30 minutes to complete the survey. If selected to participate in the interview it will take an additional 15-20 minutes.
- The risks of participating may include a hesitancy to answering questions. As participation is strictly voluntary, participants have the option of passing on any questions they chose not to answer. There are no direct benefits to individuals participating in this study.

Why am I being asked to participate in this research study?

We are asking you to participate in this research study because you fit the criteria of a teacher who is actively participating in professional learning communities who has three or less years of total teaching experience.

What should I know about participating in a research study?

- Someone will explain the research study to you.

- Whether or not you participate is up to you. You can choose not to participate.
- You can agree to participate and then later change your mind.
- Your decision will not be held against you or result in penalty.
- You can ask all of the questions that you want before you decide.

What happens if I agree to participate in the research study?

- After consenting to participate in the study you will be sent an online survey link that will allow you to complete and submit an anonymous survey. You may also be selected to participate in an additional face to face interview.
- The online survey should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. If asked to participate in the face-to-face interview it will take an additional 15-20 minutes.
- Participants will only interact with the principal investigator
- The research will take place at Argo Community High School during April and May of 2019.
- The research will take place in the form of an anonymous online survey and face-to-face interview
- The use of audio recording will be utilized during the interviews. If participants are uncomfortable being audio recorded, the interviewer will take written notes instead. The audio recordings will be locked in an office until they are able to be transcribed into a word document. Once the audio records are completely transcribed the audio recordings will be permanently deleted in order to protect the participants from being identified by the sound of their voice. The written transcriptions will then be kept secure in a locked office and will contain no identifying information.

Is there any way being in this study could be bad for me?

The risks of participating in this study are no greater than those someone would experience in day-to-day life. The only identified risk with the study is a potential breach of confidentiality. This will be addressed through the use of anonymous online surveys and omitting any identifying information from interviews from any part of the published findings. Names, departments, years of service and even gender identification will be omitted from the report as these are not integral variables necessary to complete the study. *You may also feel hesitant to answer specific questions, however due to the voluntary nature of the study you have the option of not answering any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.*

What happens if I do not want to be in this research?

Participation in research is voluntary. You can decide to participate or not to participate.

What happens if I say “Yes”, but I change my mind later?

You can leave the research study at any time and it will not be held against you.

What happens to the information collected for the research?

All anonymous surveys will be printed and locked in a file cabinet and kept in a locked office. All audio recordings will be transcribed into a word document and printed and also kept in the same locked file cabinet. Once audio files are transcribed into a word document they will be deleted in order to eliminate the possibility of an interviewee being identified by their voice. All relevant documents will be electronically deleted off of computers and paper copies shredded at the conclusion of the study. The only individual that will have access to the documentation during the analysis phase of the research will be the primary researcher.

Data Sharing

Results from this study (without any of your personal information) may be shared with other researchers to advance science and health. We will remove or code any personal information that could identify you before files are shared with other researchers to ensure that, to the best of our knowledge, no one will be able to identify you from the information we share. Despite these precautions, there is always the remote risk that there could be a breach of confidentiality, but we will do our best to avoid that risk.

Who can I talk to?

If you have questions, concerns, or complaints talk to the Principal Investigator, Dr. Marlon Cummings at [REDACTED].

This research has been reviewed and approved by an Institutional Review Board (“IRB”). You may contact the IRB Co-Chairs (Darrin Aase and Renee Theiss) at [REDACTED] if you have questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant. You may also contact the Director of Sponsored Programs and Research at [REDACTED].

Signature for Adult 18 or older

Signing here mean that you are agreeing (consenting) to participate in this research and that you are giving the researchers permission to use the information that they collect from your participation.

Signature of participant _____
Date

Printed name of participant

Signature of person obtaining consent _____
Date

Printed name of person obtaining consent

Appendix D

Email Inviting Participants to Participate in Interview

Dear Teachers,

Thank you for completing the online survey regarding your perceptions on professional learning communities. In order to collect more in-depth information regarding novice teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities you are being invited to volunteer to participate in a follow up interview. The interview will last roughly 20-minutes in length and can be scheduled at a location and during a time that is convenient for you. Your responses will be recorded via a digital tape recorder so that the interview can be transcribed and analyzed. All information will be completely confidential and no identifying information will be included in any part of the published report. Again, your participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any point. Please let me know if you would like to accept or decline my invitation to participate.

Thank you for your consideration,

Branon Cotter