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A SELF STUDY OF A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER NAVIGATING THEIR  
ROLE IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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A SELF STUDY OF A PHYSICAL EDUCATION TEACHER NAVIGATING THEIR ROLE  
IN A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITY

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## ABSTRACT

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Years of research has documented the socialization of inservice physical education teachers, while the socialization of physical education faculty members has only recently become a research focus. Self-study of teacher education practices is becoming increasingly popular when exploring the lived experiences of physical education faculty. In this study, we used self-study of teacher education practices to understand the experiences of Molly, a current physical education teacher. Molly's experiences differ from those of many other teacher educators as she was the only physical education teacher in her school. She had been using the self-study method to help her navigate her role in a professional learning community as the only specialist teacher. Data were collected through journaling, documents, and surveys. Qualitative data analyses resulted in the construction of three emerging themes: (1) unreciprocated expectations, (2) innovative socialization, and (3) schoolwide contribution. Molly's journey was marked by both successes and challenges, but at the end of the five months she felt that she had grown as an educator. Further, Molly's teaching experience and willingness to adapt and contribute where she could helped enhance her growth as a teacher. Results are discussed with reference to Kevin's socialization and directions for research are provided.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Physical education has been described as a marginalized subject area. Accordingly, the investigation of physical educator's socializing experiences has entertained scholarly inquiry for decades (Richards et al., 2014). Perhaps the theoretical lens most often used to frame these analyses is Occupational Socialization Theory (OST). This theory has been used to more fully identify and understand the various socialization processes whereby individuals become participating members of a "society of teachers" (Zeichner & Gore, 1990, p. 329). It suggests that individuals undergo a lengthy socialization process in order for assimilation into the teaching profession to occur. Generally, while not always linear, socialization is understood to occur across multiple phases or categories including: (a) acculturation; (b) professional socialization; and (c) organizational socialization.

### **Occupational Socialization Theory**

Occupational Socialization Theory (OST) is a dialectical perspective of socialization that examines "all kinds of socialization that initially influence persons to enter the field of physical education and later are responsible for their perceptions and actions as teacher educators and teachers (Lawson, 1986, p. 107). It is dialectical because it preserves teacher agency to push back, resist, or foster change in the prevailing school system. As teachers become organizationally socialized, they may strategically comply with or attempt to redefine the school culture (Curtner-Smith et al., 2008).

## **Acculturation**

Acculturation is defined as the period of time where recruits learn about the profession from teachers, coaches, and other significant individuals, before entering a teacher education program. This is the time where one decides to become a PE teacher (pretraining phase). During this time, individuals are socialized into teaching before their formal entrance into teacher education programs. This begins at birth and continues to the point when an individual decides to enter a teacher education program and is the most potent type of socialization experienced by PE teachers (Richards et al., 2014).

## **Professional Socialization**

Professional socialization refers to the time in which future teachers are enrolled in a teacher certification program at a college (training phase). PE recruits enter PETE programs having already begun to form their subjective theories of education that are used to evaluate new information relative to teaching PE. Some recruits will strategically comply with the mandates of PETE faculty in an effort to make it seem as if they are “buying into” program content, while their beliefs about teaching remain relatively unchanged, which is also referred to as studentship. Studentship is the process by which teacher trainees react to the demands of their training environment. These behaviors manifest in covert tactics such as cheating, taking shortcuts, psyching-out the instructor, and image projection (Richards et al., 2014).

While much has been written about the limited impact of professional socialization, it is important to note that not all teacher education is ineffective in influencing students’ subjective theories. It may be beneficial to promote instructional

approaches that are at least somewhat compatible with recruits' value orientations and subjective theories of teaching (ex. Sport education, Adventure education) (Richards et al., 2014).

### **Organizational Socialization**

Organizational socialization is the time where individuals assume the role of the teacher in K-12 schools (workplace phase). This is the process by which one is taught and learns the ropes of a particular organizational role. During this time, the socialization process is ongoing and continues to shape one's experience throughout the organizational career. Socialization is the process by which people selectively acquire the values and attitude, the interests, skills, and knowledge-in short, the culture-current in groups to which they are, or seek to become, a member. The individual teacher plays an active role in shaping their own socialization (Richards et al., 2014).

When making the transition into the school setting, new teachers are often faced with a significant amount of anxiety related to the need to take on a full complement of teaching duties. In most cases, many beginning teachers are expected to fulfill the same responsibilities of colleagues with 20 or more years of experience. Therefore, the transition into schools can result in reality shock. Reality shock refers to the collapse of missionary ideals that were formed during teacher training by the harsh and rude reality of everyday classroom life. When reality shock is high, teachers are more likely to leave the profession. Literature demonstrates that reality shock can be reduced through induction assistance and mentoring.

Reality shock can sometimes lead to the washout effect, which is the point of abandonment of the lessons learned during preservice teacher education. Washout is not

an all or nothing process, and certain elements of teacher education may be abandoned when transitioning into schools while others are supported and nurtured. It appears that when beginning teachers are supported to implement what they learned during teacher education, washout is less likely to occur (Richards et al., 2014).

Lastly, burnout is found in teachers that lacked proper equipment and proper facilities to teach properly. Burnout syndrome involved three main phases: emotional fatigue, depersonalization, and a sense of powerlessness to do routines. These three phases are associated with high levels of job stress and will eventually decrease the efficiency and job satisfaction in employees (Laureano et al., 2014).

### **Professional Learning Communities**

While research has explored physical education teacher socialization for decades, there has been little attention given to how teacher teams influence this process (Beddoes et al., 2021). This is surprising given the growing appeal for these structures in schools (DuFour et al., 2016). One practical framework gaining momentum specifically in the United States is Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). There are many definitions for a PLC, but a school-structured organizational PLC is defined as a group of teachers who meet regularly with a common set of teaching and learning goals, shared responsibilities for work to be undertaken, and collaborative development of pedagogical content knowledge as a result of the gatherings (Richmond & Manokore, 2010). One might also, define a PLC as a group of learners formed on the basis of a shared vision with the aims of helping one another to achieve the desired objectives (Sunaengsih, Komariah, Isrokatuen, Anggarani, & Silfiani, 2019).

Though PLCs are touted as beneficial (e.g., improved teaching practice, increased faculty efficacy, and enhanced student learning; Beddoes, et al., 2020) it is unclear how physical educators are utilizing these structures. There is preliminary evidence that PLCs can enhance physical education teacher's sense of purpose and mattering within a school community (Beddoes et al., 2021).

### **Self-Study of a Physical Education Teacher in a PLC**

To this point, self-study in physical education as a methodology has been primarily used in teacher education as a way to analyze and enhance teaching practice (Richards & Ressler, 2017). As explained by LaBoskey (2004) and quoted by Richards and Ressler (2017), self-study research is self-initiated and focused; it is improvement aimed; it is interactive; it includes multiple, mostly qualitative, methods; and it defines validity as a validation process based on trustworthiness: (p.817).

While improvement in pedagogy is one aim of an effective educator, a contemporary teacher is expected to do much more than “stand and deliver.” Navigating the sociopolitical environment of schools while simultaneously striving to assimilate into the school culture, interacting with parents, meeting the competing demands of administrators and overcoming barriers associated with marginalization, is a daunting task that extends well beyond the four walls of the gym. Indeed, one could define “teaching” as only one of many aspects of “being a teacher.” Yet, a comparative little is known about how physical educators navigate the sociopolitical environment of schools.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Context of the Study**

For this study, we drew upon self-study methodology with a specific focus on understanding how Molly was able to navigate the social milieu of a school. We chose to focus specifically on how Molly navigated her role as a member of a school-wide PLC. Because the school had recently implemented PLCs into the daily structure, Molly's interaction with faculty and administrators occurred routinely through the framework of PLCs as described by DuFour et al., 2006. PLCs were organized by grade level, and Molly was on the fourth grade PLC team. As a specialist, she was told to "just choose" a PLC team that she would like to join. They met every Thursday (once a week) and discussed what assessments their students would use and what their main focus would be for quarter, and where the students still needed to get to meet the quarterly goals. Weekly assessments were put into an inventory table to track the students' progress. Each week they would review the learning target and figure out new ways to reteach our objectives and how to expand upon them. Every team member set their own personal goals for the PLC and Molly's was to give out more reading materials within PE class to challenge students' comprehension.

Because self-study is improvement-oriented and draws primarily from the author's lived experiences, it has been described as "messy" (Richards & Ressler, 2017). As with other studies, we similarly tried to account for this by utilizing a critical friendship. Zack served as Molly's critical friend, while this self-study focused on Molly's perspectives of learning how to maximize her role in a school PLC.

## **Data Gathering**

Molly maintained a daily journal in which she considered her socialization into the faculty role with a focus on her teaching and interactions with students. She began writing in January 2021 and continued through May 2021. During this period, she averaged around 3-4 entries per week. In total, Molly made 33 entries, 14 pages, 4,146 words. Most entries were free written and responsive to Molly's reaction to her experiences. However, these entries were supplemented by responses to questions Zack sent Molly each week. These questions focused on Molly's reflection on specific issues associated with the visiting academic role and were catalysts for Molly and Zack's weekly critical friend discussions.

Beyond her journal, Molly took field notes during staff meetings, professional development, and equity team meetings. These notes included both a catalogue of events and Molly's reaction to those events in real time (Patton, 2015). They also collected a variety of artifacts that served to supplement and elaborate upon their understanding of events that transpired during the five months of the academic year.

## **The Role of the Researchers and Data Analysis**

Molly recognized her closeness to the topic of the research and the potential biases this caused (Patton, 2015). Her initial motivation for engaging in this study was to explore how her teaching experiences influenced her practice as a teacher educator in light of criticisms that made her feel like an imposter. Thus, she had a vested interest in the study. While they did not want to be dismissive of Molly's experience because closely investing in one's experiences and seeking improvement is a core characteristic of a self-study (LaBoskey, 2004), they were also aware of the need to keep Molly's biases

in check so as to promote trustworthiness (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001). The collaborative approach to the research design was instrumental as Zack provoked Molly to question assumptions about her teaching (Richards & Ressler, 2016).

They also sought to enhance the trustworthiness of their research design through a series of methodological decisions (LaBoskey, 2004; Patton, 2015). First, they researched triangulation by collecting data from a variety of different sources. Second, researcher triangulation was prompted as they involved multiple codes in the data analysis process. Third, they maintained an audit trail throughout the data analysis process in the form of memos and a researcher journal. This audit trail helped to maintain transparency by documenting the progress made toward the completion of the data analysis. Finally, they enlisted the help of a peer debriefer with whom they discussed the data analysis process and the themes.

Qualitative data was analyzed collectively by Molly and Zack using a multiphase approach grounded in a combination of deductive and inductive analysis (Patton, 2015). Part of the process was deductive as they used OST (Richards et al., 2014; Templin & Schempp, 1989) as a framework for guiding the study design and data analyses. The process was also inductive, as themes were allowed to emerge from the data, and they looked for instances in which data challenged or extended OST (Patton, 2015). Their approach embraced constant comparison as they continued to adjust the codebook at their weekly meetings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In the first phase, the two of them engaged in open and axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of excerpts from all the data sources. During open coding, they each read different excerpts, wrote research memos, and met to discuss emerging themes.

Following two weeks of open coding, they developed emerging themes into a codebook. This codebook was then tested through two weeks of axial coding. Through axial coding they met regularly to discuss the coding process and make adjustments that involved adding, removing, and combining categories. At the conclusion of axial coding, they made further adjustments to the codebook and developed an initial thematic structure that involved emerging themes and subthemes. Then they used the adjusted codebook to code all of the data across four weeks. During this time, Molly coded different excerpts from the dataset and met weekly with Zack to discuss them. Once all the data had been coded, they reviewed the codebook, made final modifications, and developed the final thematic structure.

## **RESULTS**

Molly's experiences were not linear, and while she experienced a variety of challenges along the way: navigating a pandemic, the death of George Floyd, and the Atlanta shootings. She particularly recognized that being a teacher educator is a continuous process. In her words, "I have learned a lot about myself this year as a teacher, but *I am still working on trying to find the ground beneath my feet*...I still have lots to learn." Data analyses resulted in the beginning of three emerging themes: (1) unreciprocated expectations, (2) innovative socialization, and (3) prioritization of content. Themes and subthemes are described below, and quotations are included to support assertions. All data is from Molly's journal.

### **Unreciprocated Expectations**

PE is a marginalized subject with inherent organizational barriers. One barrier is that as a PE teacher Molly felt that she had to do all that she can to imbed content from core classes into her class, but it is not reciprocated that core classes imbed PE content into their classes. Throughout the pandemic, Molly reflected that she felt like there were “low expectations” for her as a PE teacher relative to other faculty members during the pandemic (e.g., only met with classes once a week for ten minutes, students didn’t have to attend her class or do any work in my class- she was told that students had to automatically get an A in her class due to the strain of the pandemic). At the same time, she felt as though she did not have accountability since she did not have to contribute to Project Based Learning (PBL) like every other teacher did, as well as not having to enforce PE for online learners.

She found herself feeling as though PLCs were not helping her much as it seemed more like an extra task that nobody new how to involve her in. Molly was the only specialist in the school that was involved in a PLC since she was the only specialist who was full time.

### **Innovative Socialization**

Innovative socialization reflects an individual or context that is open to change and solicits new, up-to-date approaches to teaching PE (Richards et al., 2014). Through surveys that Molly sent out to her fellow colleagues, she was able to see what her colleagues perceived to be her strengths and how she best contributed to her school.

Molly saw students in a different light as a PE teacher. Many of her colleagues noticed this too as some mentioned, “She engages her students with educational and fun lessons. She shows her students empathy, and she is patient and loving (Survey #5).”,

“She sees all students and works with all grade levels, this helps her to gain strong relationships with students. She is a welcoming and kind person and students are always looking forward to PE class! (Survey #3).”, “The PE teacher gets to see kids in a different element. Perhaps a student who struggles in math is skilled in sports. This is helpful for all teacher to know so that they can build off of students’ strengths and interests. Also, if the PE teacher can make connections between class content and sports, this could increase and motivate brain connections (Survey #1).”.

Colleagues also mention how Molly is great at seeing how connections can be made between PE and reading skills, and she is a willing and ready collaborator who doesn’t shy away from a challenge (Survey #1). She has the ability to find ways in which PE can connect with classroom content through her flexibility and positive attitude (Survey #2). She also, comes willing to try new things each and everyday (Survey #4). Lastly, Molly is always willing to go the extra mile to support learners whenever she has the opportunity (Survey #7).

### **Schoolwide Contribution**

Molly noticed that she felt that her input was rarely relevant, which is why she refrained from giving her input during PLCs and other school meetings. Many of her colleagues mentioned that during meetings, she could voice her opinion more (Survey #7).

Even though speaking out seemed intimidating for Molly, other teachers stated that she has good ideas and classroom teachers tend to dominate during meetings because they feel a strong sense of responsibility to the standards, but that her point of view could help energize lessons (Survey #6). Molly noted in one of her journal entries after a PLC

meeting, “I felt kind of left out and not needed in our PLC since no one really cared when I tried to offer to assess the students within a PE setting instead of just a classroom style. Unfortunately, no one knows how to include a specialist withing a PLC (Entry #30).” Giving input was not an easy task for Molly because she was afraid of being dismissed or shot down.

There were also times during other staff meetings that Molly would shy away from sharing her thoughts and ideas due to her race. The school she taught at was an all-Latino school, so she felt that she might not respond correctly or fully understand what it is like to part of the Latino culture and their experiences. During an equity team meeting Molly’s group was discussing the recent events of the Atlanta spa shootings and how to address this issue with their students and their families. In a journal entry of Molly’s, she stated, “Now, since I am not Latino, I do not know how parental superiority works, since some of the students come from families where their parents are considered right no matter what, even when they may not be politically correct. In this case, I did not have much input because I do not know how to address Latino families properly without coming off wrong (Entry #29).” Finding a balance within the school was very difficult for Molly, and she never fully felt confident enough to jump in a share her thoughts.

## **DISCUSSION**

The purpose of this self-study was to understand Molly’s experiences as a specialist faculty member navigating her role in a PLC. Analysis of the data highlights the complexities associated with Molly’s experience creating and managing her identity

in the classroom, her struggles and successes in the school community, and her successes and struggles in a PLC. Her willingness to try new things and to work with classroom teachers presented both advantages and challenges.

Self-study of teacher education practices requires that scholars take a targeted interest in improving their own practice while also forging recommendation for the broader literature (LaBoskey, 2004). Through this investigation, Molly worked to interrogate her own practice in the hopes of improving her approach to teacher education. Although she recognizes that finding her role within a community is a lifelong process, through self-study Molly learned a great deal about her identity as a teacher educator and her approach to working with preservice teachers. Some of the lessons she learned represent reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) as she was able to make changes to her contribution with the goal of improving her overall school contribution. Other lessons learned were more long-term. Paramount among these is the increased confidence developed through an exploration of her identity as a contributor in a school setting.

Beyond the personal insights that Molly drew from self-study, they believe that their findings inform the literature of both OST and self-study of teacher education practices. In reference to OST, this investigation contributes to a limited but growing body of literature about the socialization of a PE teacher navigating their role in a PLC. As such, she needed to find ways to relate her understanding of PE to classroom instruction.

Related to the process of conducting self-study, they echo the sentiments of Richards and Ressler (2016) who describe it as messy-one that plays out over time in a dynamic environment. That messiness, however, was at least partially accounted for by

their critical friendship (Kitchen et al., 2008). Through their interactions, they developed a mutually informed understanding of Molly's experiences, augmented through critical dialogue (Petrarca & Bullock, 2014). Molly's experiences provide insight into the process of becoming a teacher educator. This study advances literature focused on identity development through self-study (e.g., Loughran & Russell, 2002). Molly's identity was shaped and reshaped throughout the year as she became aware of and struggled with issues that she faced within the PLC and trying to navigate her role as a participating member.

Perhaps the most important element of Molly's identity development involved struggles related to feeling like an imposter (Bullock & Christou, 2016; Foot et al., Murray and Male, 2005). Molly was self-conscious about her youth and lack of teaching experience, primarily when collaborating with other colleagues whom she viewed as more experienced. Some of her challenges may, therefore, be a characteristic of her lack of knowledge of subject matter being taught within the classroom.

While making connections to the realities of teaching was a challenge at times, Molly's strong background and willingness to adapt and try new things helped her connect with her PLC team and her overall navigation of her place within the school. At times, she struggled with imposter syndrome (Brookfield, 1994) in teaching others to do something that she was also new to. However, in line with previous examples in the literature, self-study enabled Molly to take a targeted approach to understanding and enhancing her contribution, which left her feeling more confident about how she compensated for lack of knowledge of classroom subject matter (Berry, 2008; Garbett, 2011).

While they would recommend self-study to teacher educators in any career stage, pre- or post-tenure, self-study seems particularly valuable for those making the transition to becoming an active member of a PLC. PE teachers are often under intense pressure to perform and collaborate with all teachers and incorporate classroom content within their lessons. Given the important role played by a critical friend such as Zack, mentoring relationships developed among beginning and experienced teacher could lead to self-study projects that also serve the purpose for PE teacher navigating their role in a PLC.

While most self-studies focus on the teaching role, faculty may consider applying OST to study and improve their performance across the school missions of teaching, service and the extent to which they balance time invested in those missions (Richards & Ressler, 2016). By conducting multiple and longitudinal self-studies over time, teachers could also begin to explore how their experiences and priorities change (Zeichner, 2007), and this relates to Fletcher's (2016) notion of developing principles of practice and provides insight into the development of teacher careers. Self-study of PE teachers navigating their role in a PLC could also be extended to classroom teachers navigating a PLC with a specialist teacher on their team.

**APPENDIX A**

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **Introduction**

Professional learning communities are becoming more prevalent in today's schools. In order to help teachers meet the needs of their students, we need to explore the following topics in more depth: What is a professional learning community?, What makes an effective professional learning community?, What processes are used to create and develop professional learning communities?, and Professional learning communities (PLCs) are the future of our schools. For over a decade, PLCs have been touted by practitioners as an effective structure for providing professional development to teachers by building upon the knowledge and skills of experienced teachers (Bausmith & Barry, 2011). The overall purpose of this paper is to introduce ways to create an effective PLC from multiple angles while revealing areas where they are lacking at the end.

### **What is a PLC?**

#### **Defining PLCs**

There are many definitions for a PLC, but ultimately a PLC is defined as a group of teachers who meet regularly with a common set of teaching and learning goals, shared responsibilities for work to be undertaken, and collaborative development of pedagogical content knowledge as a result of the gatherings (Richmond & Manokore, 2010). One might, also, define a PLC as a group of learners formed on the basis of a shared vision with the aims of helping each other to achieve the desired objectives (Sunaengsih, Komariah, Isrokatuen, Anggarani, & Silfiani, 2019). This group of people critically interrogate their practice in an ongoing reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, operating as a collective enterprise (Stoll). Another

words, a PLC consists of a group of connected and engaged professionals who are responsible for driving change and improvement within, between and across schools that will directly benefit learners (Alma Harris, 1997). A PLC mainly includes an improved teaching practice, increased faculty efficacy, and enhanced student learning; which is formed around three big ideas: a focus on learning, working together toward a collective purpose, and effectiveness is defined by results rather than intentions or effort (the process is [the] product) (Beddoes, Sazama, Prusak, Starck, & McMullen, 2020).

### **Principals' Role in PLCs**

Effective PLCs are often intended and designed as learning environments for voluntary participating teachers facilitated by school principals. Participation will then require a dedicated and intentional effort from its members to learn through reflective dialogues in which they are exchanging experiences (Schaap & Bruijn, 2017). PLCs often have as one of its purposes the development of the kinds of adult relationships that can support individual change in the classroom across a whole school. The principal plays a key role in nurturing these relationships, which ultimately affect the extent to which schools can be characterized as PLCs. A PLC is based on the trust that teachers and principals will act with the best interest of students in mind by researching best practices and pursuing data to bolster decision making (Cranston, 2011). As instructional leaders, principals are in a unique position to influence collaboration that takes place among teachers. In order to create a collaborative environment for teachers, principals should have deep knowledge, skill about PLCs and initiation to realize it. By creating collaborative learning communities or teams, teachers benefit from the insights of their colleagues, which offers a good source for their own professional capacity. By creating a PLC, principals create an

environment encouraging mutual cooperation, emotional support, personal growth, which cannot be accomplished alone (Balyer, Addin, Karatas, Kakan, Alci, & Bulent, 2015). Teaching students should not be an individual task, but a task that involves all teachers to ensure that students are receiving the most out of their education as possible. A PLC's legitimacy in the eyes of the school principal is grounded in the degree to which the PLC follows prescribed routines; thus, the structures of PLCs are inclined to be more alike than different within and across schools (Van Lare, Michelle, Brazer, & David, 2013). By having PLCs more alike across the school, it ensures that the learning opportunities that students are receiving is the same all across the school. It helps teachers know where students are going to be at before and after they have them in their classrooms. If teachers are all on the same page and know what to expect out of their students before they get them in their class, then they will be able to spend less time figuring what students have and haven't learned and spend more time teaching them what they need to learn.

### **Efficacy**

Efficacy is normally overlooked as a major part of PLCs. Self-efficacy refers to one's belief in one's own ability to successfully perform a specific task, and teacher efficacy refers to the beliefs of teachers with regard to their ability to influence student outcomes. One's efficacy is influenced by three factors: behavior, environmental events, and personal factors such as cognitive and biological events. Also, one uses these four major strategies for developing their self-efficacy: (1) mastery experience: the most direct and most powerful sources of information in the development of self-efficacy, (2) vicarious experience: more indirect, and occur when an individual observes someone else modeling a certain skill or behavior, (3) social and verbal persuasion: occurs when the individual is

given social encouragement and verbal praise, and (3) physical or emotional states: if the person is excited about the task, self-efficacy increases. Teachers who have high self-efficacy use different strategies than those with low self-efficacy, have a positive attitude toward the use of instructional innovations in the classroom, try out new ideas, are more likely to implement new programs and change their behavior to increase their classroom effectiveness and are open to using difficult techniques that involve taking risks and sharing control with students. These teachers who have high self-efficacy are more likely to implement new instructional methods, use developmental classroom practices, attend to the needs of lower achieving and special needs students, set high goals and high expectations, and exhibit persistence (Lakshmanan, Heath, Primutter, & Elder, 2011). Self-efficacy is key for teachers to have because it allows them the confidence to challenge themselves as well as the teachers around them.

### **What Makes an Effective PLC?**

#### **5 Characteristics**

An effective PLC consists of five characteristics: (1) shared values and vision, (2) collective responsibility, (3) reflective professional inquiry, (4) collaboration, and (5) group, as well as individual, learning is promoted (Philpott & Oates, 2016). These five characteristics are about the same for every school with PLCs. There are three more characteristics that are implemented into a PLC and goes without saying: (1) mutual trust, (2) respect, (3) support among staff members (Stoll). Shared values and vision are important because we want to make sure we all have the same end goal for our students. This leads to collective responsibility that basically states that everyone is doing their part, and no one is sitting back letting everyone else do the work. The purpose of

reflective professional inquiry is to make sure that we, as educators, take time to reflect on our lessons taught and think of what went well and what could have been better. Collaboration brings us back to collective responsibility because the goal of PLCs is to ensure that educators work together and use one another to lean on for advice and input on lessons. Lastly, group, as well as individual, learning is promoted; as educators, we need to never stop learning because the world is changing every day and we need to keep up with that change.

#### **4 Essential Questions**

PLCs should revolve around these four essential questions: (1) What do we want each student to learn?, (2) How will we know when each student has learned it?, (3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty learning?, and (4) How will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are proficient? (Beddoes, Prusak, & Hall, 2014). These four questions should drive a PLC. As educators, we should have an end goal of what we want our students to learn before we even teach a unit/lesson. We, then, need to come up with an assessment and determine at what point a student has learned what we wanted them to learn, and at what point they haven't learned what they need to learn. Then, we need to have alternative ways of teaching when a student is experiencing difficulty learning. When it comes to those who have learned, we have to have things prepared to challenge them further so that they keep on learning. These four questions are made to ensure that we keep students learning at all times and don't leave those who haven't learned behind, while keeping those who have learned moving ahead to challenge them beyond what they were expected to learn.

#### **Effectiveness**

Studies suggest that effective PLCs can enhance everything from teacher satisfaction to student performance (Woodland, 2016). PLCs are understood as effective learning environments when they have impact on the professional learning and morale of the staff- teachers, school leaders, and other adult workers and, most importantly, impact on student achievement (Schaap & Bruijn, 2017). The most commonly cited feature for a PLC to be successful is that teachers need a shared vision and values, which brings us back to the importance of the five characteristics of a PLC (Philpott & Oates, 2016). Strong PLCs are not only those in which new knowledge regarding content and pedagogy is acquired, but also those in which existing assumptions about teaching and learning are challenged and critiqued (Bausmith & Barry, 2011). These successful PLCs create environments where teachers can explore their strengths and weaknesses with colleagues; develop collaborative solutions to problems of practice; and implement new ideas collectively for the benefit of learners (Brodie, 2014). Having an environment where teachers can be vulnerable with their colleagues is important because it gives them a place where they can be completely open and honest about their struggles and successes within the classroom.

### **What Processes are used to Create & Develop PLCs?**

#### **Focusing on Learning Process**

It is said that student learning increases when teachers participate in PLCs (Abbott, Lee, & Rossiter, 2018). Evidence from different educational contexts suggests that developing PLCs significantly contributes to school reforms and development by providing a facilitative environment in which teachers work together to improve their teacher practices and enhance students' learning (Zhang & Pang, 2015). It is important that

teachers are continually improving their teacher practices to allow their students the opportunity to receive the best learning experiences possible. The use of PLCs as a means to improve teaching practice and student learning is a move that educators support and value; and the focus of a PLC should be on developing teachers' knowledge of practices around the issue of student learning (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

### **Learning PLCs**

Learning in a PLC is collaborative and interactive and progresses towards agreed-on goals of the community (Feldman, 2020). These goals help to ensure that all teachers are on the same page and end up at the same destination by the end of the lesson/unit. A central underlying assumption of PLCs is that teacher learning involves talking with colleagues about teaching and grappling with the issues embodied in everyday classroom life (Damjanovic, Victoria, Blank, & Jolyn, 2017). Some studies have pointed out that an online PLC can play an important role in teachers' learning and professional development. The use of an online PLC can provide professional development opportunities including courses, activities, and interactions with peers; thus, teachers can get together to share resources, solve problems, develop working strategies, and improve their performances (Zhang, Liu, & Wang, 2016).

### **Collaboration**

The basic premise of PLCs is that teachers can and should be working together to plan lessons, develop assessments, study curriculum, and otherwise improve student learning. Collaborative efforts encourage teachers to become active and conscious learners, based on the belief that public education must respond to and prepare students for a complex and rapidly evolving world (Servage). A key element in PLCs is the continuous

improvement of teachers, and in order for that to happen, the teachers engage in work that deviates practice, a challenge for teachers who have not experienced that level of collaboration (Wells & Feun, 2012). Within a PLC, everybody is working together, like pieces of a puzzle. We put the pieces together and that's why it works. We make decisions together. The focus is to educate our children and to help them become productive citizens (Hipp, Huffman, Pankake, & Olivier 2008).

### **Conclusions**

Major conclusions include that PLCs challenge teachers and students when it comes to learning. The ideal PLC is one where people continually expand their capacity to create the results, they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspirations is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together (Webb, Vulliamy, Sarja, Hämäläinen, & Poikonen, 2009). Future research needs to include more about how specialists play a role in PLCs. It is said that specialists might join their grade-level cadre or form their own group to focus on in-depth areas of inquiry that will help them meet students' needs that extend beyond general education (Stahl, 2015). If specialists join a grade-level group, how, then, are they incorporated into that group? How do general education teachers incorporate specialists into their group? Lastly, PLCs need to be taught starting at the college level to ensure that future teachers know what to expect when they start real live teaching. Many new educators have never heard of a PLC before, and, therefore, have no idea how to contribute to a PLC. If future teachers learn about PLCs and how they work before they enter into the teaching field, they will be able to jump right in when they start and not have to figure out how they work. The sooner PLCs are introduced, the better for all students.

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