

## **Connecting for Greater Purpose: An Examination of a District Professional Learning Community**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses an innovative professional development model based on a *personal service* approach of teacher collaboration in lieu of the more traditional expert-driven *in-service* paradigm. It presents a research-based Professional Learning Community (PLC) model in a large urban Ontario (Canada) school board that focused on transformational teaching strategies as a means of professional development to enhance teacher practice and improve student learning. The two key themes of the grounded theory qualitative analysis are also discussed. They include: (1) contextually-relevant PLCs, and (2) teacher leadership embedded in relationships. Last, the paper provides a framework for provincial, district, and school-level administrators to support the underlying values of teachers' professional capacities as collaborative lead learners.

The current policy context in Ontario, Canada, is reflective of a prescribed curriculum based on student expectations and the results of large-scale standardized provincial assessments. It may never have been so imperative, thus, to reconfigure teacher professional development that enables teachers to successfully negotiate their skills, characteristics, and attitudes in light of the aforementioned policies that threaten to dislocate the binary of authentic teaching and learning practices. In Ontario, teachers are expected to deliver the provincial curriculum legislated by the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME). Further, students' results on provincial standardized tests administered in grades three, six, and nine are subject to public comparison and commonly used as data in school and district improvement plans thereby contributing to another layer of public and transparent accountability for teachers. At the peril of engendering an overly narrow approach to teaching and learning, it may be prudent for teacher professional development initiatives to stimulate teacher engagement by consolidating their knowledge in a critical and collaborative recognition of their capacities in light of the institutional, academic, and socio-cultural conditions that exist in schools and the climate of accountability.

Effective professional development affords teachers the opportunity to engage in critical inquiry and collegiality (Feinman-Nemser, 2003). Professional development that is not entrenched in fragmented policy initiatives

and unidirectional information sharing have an especially intriguing appeal to teachers who are responsible to prepare their students for 21<sup>st</sup> Century learning realities, many of which remain presently intangible. Teachers are commissioned to address the complex and interrelated objectives of founding their pedagogical practice based on thoughtful instructional decisions that in turn accommodate the range of student diversity (Fullan, Hill, & Creivola, 2006). Traditional educational professional development based on an in-service approach to delivery information in a top-down manner from administrators to teachers seems to be justified largely from a structural perspective more reminiscent of an industrial age of education.

An interesting kind of alternate experience, as discussed in this paper, rests in providing opportunities for teachers to engage in professional development in matters that are most relevant and compelling to their professional circumstance relative to their career stage. Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) provide a basis for teachers to form a learning group. In this view, improvement to practice and professional growth is negotiated through shared learning and collective inquiry (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Teachers exercise their expertise and experience in a professional forum. As members of a deliberate and thoughtful PLC, teachers assume professional roles that affect change and ultimately improve student learning. The process is a far cry from traditional professional development in-services that resign teachers to passive recipients of information; instead, PLCs entrust teachers with the heightened responsibility to contribute towards their professional development given an educational environment characteristic of standardized practices and evidence-based learning (Lieberman & Miller, 2004).

### **Purpose of the Paper**

This paper discusses an innovative professional development model based on a *personal service* approach of teacher collaboration in lieu of the more traditional expert-driven *in-service* paradigm. It presents a research-based Professional Learning Community (PLC) model in a large urban Ontario (Canada) school board, consisting of 5 teacher participants, which focused on transformational teaching strategies as a means of professional development to enhance teacher practice and improve student learning. The two key themes of the grounded theory qualitative analysis are also discussed. They include: (1) contextually-relevant PLCs, and (2) teacher leadership embedded in relationships. Last, the paper provides a framework for provincial, district, and school-level administrators to support the underlying values of teachers' professional capacities as collaborative lead learners.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework that established the context of this study included a review of the pertinent literature on PLCs, transformational teaching strategies, and concepts related to teacher leadership.

### *Professional Learning Communities*

As the 21<sup>st</sup> century evolves, public school teachers are challenged to prepare students to meet the realities of the global society and knowledge economy. To meet these challenges there is a need for high quality, effective teachers who are adaptive in their pedagogy and practice to facilitate student learning. To be optimally effective, teachers may benefit from professional development sessions that are different from the more traditional in-service models driven by senior board administrators in their effort to communicate relevant policy and procedural information to classroom teachers. We propose, instead, professional development that is fundamental to the individual needs and interests of teachers themselves. As a framework, PLCs seem especially applicable.

A PLC involves shared learning that “builds knowledge about the hard questions regarding teaching and learning” (Garmston & Wellman, 2009, p. 14). According to the literature, its components include collaborative group learning with a focus on student learning and achievement (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). DuFour and Eaker (1998) explain that “the engine of improvement, growth and renewal in a PLC is the collective inquiry of educators” (p. 25). The research endorses the benefits of transitioning from isolated practice towards collaborative professional development and constructive dialogue about issues that are important to teachers themselves. Kise (2006) criticizes that “classrooms currently isolate teachers, so they may not be aware of alternatives to their current teaching methods, and further collaboration provides concrete benefits and results” (p. 57). Quite significantly, for teachers the critical inquiry inherent in PLCs rest on the premise of improving student learning by improving teaching practice (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

In terms of their structural elements, Garmston and Wellman (2009) suggest that PLCs include the twin goals of developing organizational capacities and developing professional capabilities. With these goals in place, Reeves (2009) emphasizes the development of internal capacities of the members of the group as a key characteristic. For DuFour and Eaker (1998), a PLC acts as a bridge that helps to close the gap between research and practice. Similarly, Wenger (as cited in Lieberman and Miller (2004)) writes that as people participate in groups around their work, it “shapes not only what [they] do, but also who [they] are, and how [they] interpret what [they] do” (p. 20). Common to all the approaches of PLC and consistent in the literature is the importance of constructive, authentic collaborative practice to improve student learning. Garmston and Wellman (2009) determined that “developing a teacher’s capability for talking together professionally is not a panacea, but it represents one of the single most significant investments that teachers can make for student learning” (p. 45).

A PLC focused on instructional collaboration, according to the literature, is essential to improving student learning and academic achievement. Kise (2006) states:

For teachers to understand where, how and why classroom practices need to be changed, they need instructional collaboration. Teams of teachers engage in deep discussions about teaching and learning, serving as resources for each other in developing the tools necessary to meet the needs of all learners. Together they unearth assumptions about

teaching and learning, and gain from each other's natural strengths, share strategies and ideas and learn more about what is possible in the classroom. (p. 55)

The literature also factors teacher expertise as a critical component of effective PLCs. Vescio et al. (2008) explain that as experts, teachers can be "clear and consistent while focusing on ensuring that students do indeed learn" (p. 80). The fundamental shift from teaching to learning has profound implications for reflective dialogue. In a PLC, the "dialogue leads to extensive and continuing conversations among teachers about curriculum, instruction and student learning" (Vescio et al., p. 81). It is assumed that knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived circumstances of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with those who share similar experiences (Martin-Kniep, 2008).

DuFour and Eaker (1998) further explain that "a focus on learning rather than a focus on teaching, represents a fundamental shift in teacher-student relationships and causes significant changes in a school" (p. 197). Instead of just examining what and how to teach students, teachers are asked to also examine why teachers teach students the things they do. In a recent review of the impact of a PLC on teaching practice and student learning, Vescio, Ross and Adams (2008) commented that "most reform agendas require teachers to rethink their own practices to construct new classroom roles and expectations about student learning outcomes, and to teach in ways they have never taught before" (p. 80). As Vescio et al. cite, "those communities that did engage in structured, sustained, and supported instructional discussions that investigated the relationships between instructional practices and student work produced significant gains in student learning" (p. 81). It is important to note, however, that in the communities where teachers worked together but did not engage in structured work that was highly focused around student learning, similar gains were not evident. Participation in learning communities impacts teaching practice as teachers become more student centered (Vescio et al.). In addition, teaching culture is improved because the learning communities increase collaboration with a focus on student learning. In those instances when teachers participate in a learning community, the empirical longitudinal evidence suggests that students benefit by improved achievement scores (Vescio et al.).

### **Transformational Teaching Strategies in the Context of PLCs**

Transformational teaching strategies are research-based and proven to meet the needs of diverse student learners. They are transformational because they lead to a change in teacher practice (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). For PLCs, "it is important to create collective forums where teachers can share their methodologies, share data, troubleshoot confusing strategies, analyze and discuss findings and raise new questions for further inquiry" (Martin-Kniep, 2004, p. 56). Learning to use research-proven strategies increases teacher capacities and repertoire, leading to the development of an informed praxis. Marzano et al. (2001) advocate for critical inquiry around "practical perspectives that exemplify instructional strategies that have been extracted from the research base of effective instruction" (p. 3). Teachers can use these strategies to interrogate and

reflect upon their own practice to maximize the possibility of enhancing student achievement.

Martin-Kniep (2004) also suggests that the “expertise of teachers has been minimally documented and therefore is not accessible to those who need it the most, their fellow teachers” (p. 84). Building a shared knowledge base in a PLC is a means for teachers to share their expertise. Martin-Kniep explains that “each member brings some expertise to the group, no one person is good at everything, and to cultivate the specific talents every teacher brings helps maximize the effects of the collective” (p. 11). Commitment to developing these talents in a PLC is one of the intended characteristics. Little (2007) cited the benefits of professional collaboration focused on student learning to conclude that students achieve at higher levels and teachers develop a higher quality of solutions to problems.

In comparison, Garmston and Wellman (2009) explain that “a deep transition is not in the knowledge base, but in the way teachers apply their knowledge within their new identities” (p. 6). Teachers need to have the knowledge base of instructional teaching strategies; however the application of this knowledge develops over time and experience. In her recent research, Martin-Kniep (2008) identifies the PLC “to be a means of increasing teachers’ expertise, which is the most direct path to improved learning for students” (p. 10).

Fullan (cited in DuFour, Eaker, and Dufour, 2005) explains that “PLCs dig deep into learning because teachers are engaged in disciplined inquiry and continuous improvement in order to ‘raise the bar’, and ‘close the gap’ of student learning and achievement” (p. 209). The PLC is a venue where the focus for such critical discussions can take place. DuFour et al. (2005) state that “the problem is not that teachers do not know enough; it is often that this knowledge is not acted on, refined or applied into their daily practice” (p. 149). Schmoker (cited in DuFour et al.) distinguishes that:

Teachers do not learn best from outside experts or by attending conferences or implementing programs installed by outsiders. Teachers learn best from other teachers, in settings where they literally teach each other the art of teaching. For this to happen, collaboration has to occur in a radically different way. (p. 142)

### **Teacher Leadership in the Context of PLCs**

Lieberman and Miller (2004) argue that “teachers should become leaders in curriculum, instruction, school redesign, and professional development and that the real power to improve achievement lay with teachers, who need to be entrusted with new responsibility and accountability for change” (p. 8). PLCs assist in developing teacher leadership capacities that are necessary to support student learning and achievement and build capacity for change. Specifically, teacher leaders facilitate and act in roles that affect change. Teachers develop skills to focus on teaching and learning that leads to student success (Lieberman & Miller). Lambert (2005) explains that “high leadership capacity schools are characterized by having increased knowledge of the work of teaching and learning, and ultimately a capacity for developing capacity in others” (p. 315). Developing such capacity is a characteristic of teacher-leaders.

According to the literature, effective leaders are flexible and sustaining in their practice. Garmston and Wellman (2009) explain that “teachers with an expanded repertoire of teaching skills have the most flexibility of movement thus the most options for their students” (p. 23). Teacher leaders model sustainable learning practices by availing themselves to research and technology to continually expand their knowledge base (Garmston & Wellman). Teacher leaders experiment with new strategies to better support student learning. Darling-Hammond and Richardson (2009) argue that “active learning opportunities allow teachers to transform their teaching and not simply layer new strategies on top of the old” (p. 48).

Consider too Lieberman and Miller’s (2004) endorsement of teacher-leaders who “inquire into their own practice [to] become more articulate about learning and teaching” (p. 90). Teacher leaders assume responsibility for educational success beyond their own classrooms by providing peer support, modeling good practice, and coordinating curriculum and instruction (Lieberman & Miller). Such endeavours lead to setting examples for others to follow in schools.

Lambert (2005) indicates that a “good leader is a good teacher who uses his/her knowledge and skills with colleagues” (p. 39). The literature highlights the importance of teacher leadership to improve and sustain teaching and learning in schools. Teacher leaders, according to the literature, are agents of educational renewal and change. A PLC with teacher leaders focusing on transformational teaching practices enhances the educational experience for both teachers and students.

## **Methodology**

The experiences and perceptions of teachers who participated in a PLC from across one school board in Ontario, Canada were examined.

### *Participants*

The study consisted of 5 teachers from across one school board who were selected to attend three PLC full-day meeting sessions. Participant selection was determined by gender, age, years of experience, and district school board representation. The participants ranged from 3 to 12 years of teaching experience and represented different schools across each district. There were 3 female participants and 2 male participants. Three of the participants were above 30 years of age, with at least 7 years experience, and 2 participants were less than 30 years of age and had at least 3 years teaching experience (See Table 1). Each of the participants was a practicing elementary school teacher. The sample of teacher-participants represented each region of the respective school board. The respective school board services more than 29,000 students at 40 elementary and eight secondary schools. This area includes suburban, urban, and rural schools.

The participants were formally identified as leadership candidates by the senior school board administration on the basis of their involvement in various leadership initiatives within their schools and/or districts. All of the participants have either completed or are currently enrolled in the school board’s leadership modules for practicing teachers identified as prospective formal school leaders (in terms of assuming formal positions of additional responsibility).

*Table 1: Participant Profiles*

Participants	Years Teaching Full-Time	Divisions Taught	Current Position	Age
Participant A	7	I	I	30 years
Participant B	7	F	F	30 years
Participant C	12	SERT, P, J, I	SERT	36 years
Participant D	3	I	I	26 years
Participant E	5	P, J	P	28 years

P-Primary, J-Junior, I-Intermediate, SERT-Special Education Resource Teacher, F- French

Participant A coaches numerous sports teams, is the numeracy lead teacher in the school, has served as the student public speaking competition chairperson, is a special education team member, and is enrolled in a Master of Education program. Participant B also coaches various sports teams, and is a key member of the divisional professional development committee at the school. Participant C is a Special Education Resource Teacher providing programming to students of various exceptionalities from K-Grade 8. Participant C also has a Master of Education degree and is the principal designate in the school. Participant D leads the school instrumental band and choir. Participant D is a core member of the school improvement team. Participant E is the program team leader in the school, and serves in various pivotal roles related to literacy education.

### *Data*

Participants' reflection logs constituted the data for this study. Participants were asked to record their reflections in writing at timed and strategic intervals throughout the 3-day PLC sessions. Their responses to the various professional development interventions provided a comprehensive account of how the participants perceived their involvement in the PLC in terms of meeting their professional development needs. Participants engaged in timed critical reflections during the PLC to encourage both independent and shared responses. Each reflection was prompted to encourage independent participant responses as well as shared perspectives amongst the larger group. Participants were provided with opportunities to freely express their observations, impressions, and concerns regarding transformational teaching strategies best suited for 21<sup>st</sup> Century teachers and students.

### *Professional Learning Community Model*

The PLC model conceptualized for this study deviated significantly from traditional professional development paradigms reflective of an in-service approach. Instead, it borrowed from the tenets of professional collaboration at the core of the PLC literature to deliver professional development based on transformational teaching principles in a personal service approach. The process of collaborative group learning that is fostered in a PLC is a means for a community of teachers who are fundamentally committed to the same mandate to

identify their individual needs and subsequently determine the course of action of their professional development as they collectively refine their thinking and hone their skills towards developing sustaining transformational teaching strategies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Given this unique conceptualization, professional development was driven by the needs and interests of the teacher-participants themselves, and not externally imposed by the agendas of senior administrators. By concentrating on the transformational teaching practices that were most relevant to them, each participant engaged in critical inquiry and learning to further their practice in order to improve student learning.

The interventions for each day of the PLC model sessions consisted of interactive and engaging activities that were directly related to the essential questions and needs of the participants. The sessions focused on new learning that was relevant to participants' professional growth through reflection and inquiry. The first PLC session was titled: Turning Experience into Expertise: Collaborative Inquiry as Professional Development. During this day, teachers reflected upon a question that they deemed critical to their professional development. The second PLC day focused on "Educating for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Learning by Sharing," including a discussion of transformational teaching strategies that were most pertinent to their individual classrooms and schools. The final PLC meeting date was titled: "Think Big, but Act Small." During this session participants interrogated what they declared to be a dilemma in their practice as it related to meeting the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century learner.

### *Data Analysis*

The qualitative methodology used in this study derived from the principles of grounded theory as an approach to identify codes and themes emerging from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). According to Creswell (2008), "grounded theory enables the researcher to generate a broad theory about the experience of a central phenomenon 'grounded' in the data (p. 431).

After each PLC meeting session, data were collected and analyzed. Initial coding sessions identified preliminary codes to assist in determining the sequence of events for the subsequent PLC meeting dates. Creswell (2008) describes this emerging theory design as an image of a "zigzag [to] help understand this procedure" (p. 442). The open coding process identified discrete concepts (basic units of analysis). The key phrases that emerged in the participants' own words were used in the line-by-line examination of each participant's responses (Chesler, 1987). The list of key words and phrases was converted into narrative explanations. The codes were subsequently clustered into code phrases after each PLC session. Clusters were assigned labels to represent concepts (Eaves, 2001). As Creswell suggests, "the process of slowly developing categories of information is a constant comparative procedure" (p. 443). Various relationships between categories were examined. Using the constant comparison technique, categories were developed and tested against the collected data. The technique provided the opportunity to examine the categories in juxtaposition to the additional data from the subsequent PLC sessions. As a result, categories were modified and revamped throughout the data collection to reflect the emerging analysis. The researchers cross-checked the data to triangulate the results to increase the study's validity and reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Results

Two core themes were grounded in the data of participants' reflections. They were identified as: (1) Contextually relevant professional learning communities and (2) Teacher leadership embedded in relationships. Significant excerpts deemed typical of participants' reflections are cited in this section to substantiate the core themes.

### *Contextually Relevant Professional Learning Communities*

Grounded in the voices of each participant was the distinction that the effectiveness of the PLC model under discussion was the result of its contextual relevance. Participants described that their involvement in the PLC allowed for "diverse viewpoints to enrich group discussions and nurture our understanding" (Participant D). The data attested to the success of this PLC model to account for participants' previous experiences, honour their current capacities, and support what they believed to be priorities in their current practice. Each teacher identified his/her needs given their career stage of professional development. As one participant explained, "The PLC provides an opportunity to maintain a high quality [of] teaching and learning for all students through discussions with other teachers" (Participant C). Another participant stated, "It is truly a great opportunity to listen to other teachers and hear their concerns and strategies that support student learning" (Participant E). These statements, and others like them, support the fact that the PLC was a contextually relevant professional development opportunity that enabled participants to distinguish their professional growth as it related to their individual practice.

Furthermore, participants were provided with opportunities to reflect on what they believed were the skills and strategies necessary for effective teaching to improve student learning. Participants observed that "in this fast paced changing world, if we strive to educate 21<sup>st</sup> century learners, we need to be 21<sup>st</sup> century educators" (Participant A). In order for this to occur, one teacher identified the benefit that the "knowledge and expertise that is possessed by each member of the team was able to be shared" (Participant B). This specific PLC "encouraged discussion about where students need to improve and what new strategies can be effectively implemented" (Participant C). A different participant stated: "PLCs should uncover the 'pressing' issues in education and look for ways to overcome problems teachers face in their practice" (Participant A). The discussions that ensued throughout the PLC assisted teachers in "troubleshooting" issues; however, as one participant criticized, the "troubleshooting is easier said than done when left alone in practice" (Participant B). Another participant defended this observation by stating that "this is due to the fact that not all teachers are on the same page with their training and knowledge of transformational teaching strategies" (Participant D). Nevertheless, many of the participants expressed that "networking with colleagues to seek assistance and direction allowed for critical thinking, creativity, and problem solving skills" (Participant A) that were most significant to their practice (Participant A).

Not only did this PLC model account for participants' professional experiences, it also furthered their reflective capacities as professional teachers

that consecutively contributed to the critical inquiry. A PLC consisting of teacher-participants allowed for, as indicated by this participant's description, "teachers to have an opportunity to reflect on their own thinking, philosophy, and attitude to teaching and learning" (Participant E). Each member was able to "share knowledge and information" (Participant B) as well as "share the success and challenges relating to teaching and learning" (Participant D) in the profession. Participant A stated that when his needs are specifically supported, he is "competent in meeting students' needs and is adaptive in his willingness to learn and continue to build a bank of effective strategies." This comment was underscored when a participant explained that "collaborating ideas, sharing insights, and resources are all discussed and developed in PLC to meet student needs" (Participant C). Particularly interesting was Participant D's observation when a teacher mentioned that "it is great to have all the experience of the group to support my own learning needs." A common observation that surfaced from the participants' responses was: "When each member shares specific expertise and their specific talents with other members of the group, it helped to enhance instruction in practice" (Participant E). Through reflection and collaboration participants supported the inquiry and discussions relevant to the group.

The aforementioned critical inquiry resulted, quite interestingly, in a sense of urgency that seemed to drive some of the professional development needs of the PLC participants. This result may be less surprising given the provincial policy context in Ontario. One participant mentioned that "there needs to be more of a push for educators, as learners, to take a different more interactive teaching and learning approach" (Participant A). Others wrote that the "pressure of collecting data and providing evidence forces teachers to withdraw from effective and research proven methods" (Participant B). Teachers reported that "due to time constraints, effective teaching strategies may be neglected in order to cover all the expectations" (Participant C). Many participants argued that "there is so much focus on grades and assessment and not on the learning" (Participant B), thereby creating a sense of urgency in the teaching profession. Consistent in the thematic findings is that "student learning is not progressing as quickly as it needs to in meeting the expectations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century world" (Participant A), and that this issue needs to be addressed. Participants in the PLC felt a profound sense of urgency in their current teaching practice with respect to teaching and meeting the needs of students of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Improvements to specific matters of instruction and teaching were also expressed in participants' observations. One teacher mentioned that "we have shared so much and have all come away from this experience with more knowledge, tools, and strategies to share with our students and colleagues" (Participant E). Participants, as classroom teachers, had a chance to "understand and support one another with instructional concerns," (Participant D), which in turn supports students. The opportunity allowed members to have a chance to "hear about effective strategies being used by teachers of the PLC" (Participant E) and simultaneously provided "more resources and motivation to make new materials" (Participant B) to support students. Participant A commented that, "more than just the curriculum needs to be taught in order for students to acquire the necessary skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." This PLC model fostered improvements to their individual teaching practice because the professional development was

determined by the needs of the members in the group. Much like authentic student engagement the classroom, the learning and teaching in this PLC model emanated directly from the specific needs of each individual.

Quite intriguingly, the analysis of the data demonstrated how closely matched teachers' thoughts were about improving their learning to facilitate higher quality teaching for students. Participant C commented that the PLC "built courage to expand my repertoire of teaching strategies and I have learned not to rely on default teaching." For another teacher, it was "reassuring to share common dilemmas and struggles with colleagues from different divisions and schools that have similar concerns regarding teaching and learning" (Participant B). One participant emphasized, "That as I continued to reflect on my practice, I was able to offer suggestions for change to other PLC members" (Participant A). An important finding common to all participants is that the PLC members could "share what we have learned about student work from our individual schools and how teaching and learning can be best supported regardless of where we teach" (Participant A). The teachers were "gaining new perspectives and insights in their own learning which further encouraged more dialogue with the group." (Participant C). To improve teaching, a participant indicated that "a teacher must be thinking about improving their [*sic*] own learning needs to support their [*sic*] teaching" (Participant A). The participants believed that the relationship between teaching and learning should be closely aligned in order for growth in one area to affect growth in the other.

### *Teacher Leadership Embedded in Relationships*

A second theme emerging in the data is described as teacher leadership embedded in relationships. Although one participant suggested that it can be quite daunting for some teachers to participate in a PLC model like the one being presented, others noted how building relationships assists in developing what Participant E identified as "leaders sharing ideas and empowering others through networking and modeling, which essentially will improve student learning." Participants consistently commented on their "common vision of how all students need to and can learn" (Participant C). Participants unanimously believed that "quality teaching is a direct result of the teaching and learning relationship in the classroom" (Participant A). One teacher explained that with "effective communication and collaboration in a PLC, teachers are more open to accept new ideas and practices that can assist to meet student needs" (Participant B). A different participant stated, on behalf of the others, that effective teachers need to act like "leaders to provide guidance to others" (Participant D). In order for teachers to be viewed as leaders, she believed that "leadership models need to encourage teacher participation and the sharing of teacher talent and strengths" (Participant C). Another participant supported this by saying that participation in the "PLC was important for networking, collaborating, and directing his own PD with the help of others to move forward and support student learning" (Participant B). He continued to suggest that like successful leaders, teacher leaders need to have "a positive attitude towards teaching and learning rooted in a willingness to seek knowledge and relevant research" (Participant B). Another member of the group explained that "taking risks, accepting failure and reflecting on practice is part of being a teacher leader" (Participant D). Most important,

members of the group identified “teacher leaders as people that take part in transforming learners; they engage, encourage and support those around them” (Participant C). Participants unequivocally shared the understanding that teachers as leaders must be current in their understanding of student learning.

Membership in the PLC, thus, affirmed teacher participants’ leadership capacities in an open and trusting professional environment. As one participant stated, she was able to “openly express relevant concerns about teaching strategies and discuss her understanding of how to use research proven strategies that actually work in the classroom” (Participant B). Another participant stated that in the PLC, “I was able to discuss how I planned to move forward, and take risks because I felt that I am not left alone in my struggles in the classroom” (Participant E). Yet a different participant said that he was “willing to learn and change practice as research develops in education and use suggested new strategies in teaching and learning [as long as he was] given time to develop this understanding” (Participant A). Given the trusting professional relationship established in the PLC, participants felt drawn into the critical and collaborative inquiry, and through this comprehensive growth model they exercised dimensions of leadership by contributing to developmental and sustainable conversations focused upon student learning. A teacher reflected that her ability to “ask good questions” regarding teaching and learning affirmed that she could “achieve more consistency in meeting student learning needs and progressing towards higher levels of achievement” (Participant D). Each member in the PLC took the lead in “focusing on specific needs relating to student learning” (Participant C). One teacher concluded that the exercise of his leadership capacities brought to light this PLC model as opportune for “promoting change for better learning” (Participant A). As one participant emphasized, “in this PLC, communication and collaboration encouraged consistency and continuity among member’s understanding in the group” (Participant E). Participants agreed that “professional growth does not just come in the form of taking an AQ course” (Participant B). The same participant explained that she believed professional learning and teacher leadership is synonymous with “teachers taking the time to reflect on the world they live in and what is in store for their future and the future of their students” (Participant B).

Participants in the PLC confirmed that “coming together as a group was the most important thing for your profession and career to support your personal growth” (Participant D). The PLC model “encourages and facilitates collaboration among teachers” (Participant C) and “knowledge learned in the PLC is shared, and not simply filed away like usual professional development in-services” (Participant B). One member of the group believed that networking in a PLC helps “gain confidence that someone will most likely be able to help” (Participant D) when they encounter challenges to their practice. Similarly, and typical of other participants, one individual distinguished that their leadership with beginning teachers might be conducive to learning from this PLC model: “Mentoring in the PLC allows for consistency with new initiatives and skills presented in professional development opportunities” (Participant A). Participants reported that in the PLC “common problems were expressed with [colleagues who] are able to relate to how it feels to be in the classroom and it is great to get good ideas and think of new strategies together” (Participant A). One

participant's observation captured the sentiment of the rest in terms of defining a successful PLC as including members that are willing to exercise their leadership by "coming together to support each other with the intent of supporting student learning" (Participant E). The concepts of teacher leadership that emerged as results were founded upon the genuine communication and collaboration among all participants.

## **Discussion**

Two key themes emerged from the participants' experiences and were grounded in the data. They were identified as (1) contextually relevant PLCs and (2) teacher leadership embedded in relationships. The results attested to teachers' appreciation of transformational strategies relevant to their needs and to their leadership capacities as a result of their participation in this PLC model. The PLC addressed the participants' needs and situated teachers' knowledge in a collaborative and reflective environment. The PLC allowed teachers to exercise their leadership capacities and affirm their professional influence to support student learning.

The participants' perceptions are a testament to the significance of what Fullan (2008) describes as "steeped in learning through reflective action" (p. 89). Indicative of the research literature, there is a substantial need for teachers to engage in collaborative and critical inquiry with their peers to benefit their own practice. Fundamental to the PLC model under discussion was the provision of time allocated to participants to ask and subsequently probe questions and issues that were pressing to their practice. Participants articulated the questions that were most relevant to their current teaching practice, professional development, and students' needs. Having the expertise of others in the group to consider the questions and issues as well as the strategic resolutions led to the improvement of the participants' teaching practice and professional development. According to Martin-Kniep (2008), collaborative and critical inquiry is about "extracting the inherent wisdom of grounded and well-reasoned practice. It is about teasing out the profound from the insignificant and about harvesting those rare moments in which one word, one action at the right time and place and with the right individuals, can become strategies for tackling specific problems" (p. 77). Each member supported his or her own learning and assumed leadership roles in contributing to the collective questions and discussion of the group. The immediate professional needs of the group were presented and addressed through this collaboration.

Imperative to this model was the fact that the content of the PLC was defined by the expressed needs and capacities of the participants. In doing so, the research context of the PLC conceded that knowledge is socially constructed through the expertise evident in the support of the peers in the group (Martin-Kniep, 2008). Each participant examined his or her teaching practice and pursued questions that were essential to making improvements. Fullan (2008) states: "In fact there is no trick; you can achieve consistency and innovation only through deep and consistent learning in context" (p. 86). Learning in context was enhanced through the conversations, dialogue, and support of all of the members in the group.

Having the time to engage in such a professional development opportunity allowed the participants to meta-cognitively reflect upon the notion of “self” as a teacher and leader. The results of this study indicate that developing as a teacher and leader exist interdependently. As the participants understood more about themselves as teachers, they experienced an affirmation of their teacher leadership capacities. In the discussions regarding the needs for teaching and learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the teachers developed insight into skills that are necessary for effective teaching that permeate across subject areas. In gaining these insights, the members developed confidence that they had the skill set necessary to be effective teachers and successful leaders. Fullan (2008) explains that teachers have the “complex and challenging task of transforming classroom instruction into a precision-based process” (p. 28). Through the conversations in the PLC, the participants felt sustained in their personal growth process and in their understanding of the skills required to be a teacher and leader that is capable of supporting every student. Fullan, Hill, and Creivola (2008) advocates that “the focus must be on improving classroom instruction and adopting processes that will create a more precise, validated, data-driven expert activity that can respond to the learning needs of individual students” (p. 81). It was pertinent that the teachers led in investigating instructional strategies and examining questions that emerged in their teaching practice in an attempt to develop a deeper understanding of their teaching and learning that, in turn, further engages students in their learning.

The reflections garnered from participation in the PLC were indicative of participants’ versatility in terms of their level of interaction in the critical discussions and their cohesive thinking concerning the educational dilemmas presented by their colleagues. All participants, regardless of where they were situated on their professional continuum, identified challenges and issues related to their growth and willingly analyzed the challenges of others. These discussions and insights gave participants a chance to approach the professional development opportunity with a meta-cognitive lens. They concentrated on their basic assumptions related to teaching and learning and in the process further broadened the analysis of the collective group discussion by leading in the explanations of their own perspectives. Participants were challenged by difficult circumstances, and as their participation in the PLC grew, they imagined new possibilities in what we described as having been inherent in their connectivity within the trusting community of teachers.

The PLC allowed for relationships to become sustainable professional development for participants. Developing relationships in the PLC was important and deliberate in order for participants to be comfortable to exchange their thoughts and learning with others. Participants in the PLC worked collaboratively to challenge and discuss concepts and strategies that they believed were foundational in teaching and learning within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The participants pondered their educational paradigms about transformational teaching strategies and led in the group discussions that were reflective of sustained engagement and input (Hargreaves & Fink, 2004). The PLC supported student learning by structuring the professional needs of the teachers as central to the collaborative and critical inquiry. The participants exercised their leadership capacities by networking with their colleagues and contributing to what were intrinsically

valuable conversations. As the results indicate, the PLC model established a conducive professional development environment that accounted for participants' needs, honoured their capacities as leaders, and ultimately supported student learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## Limitations

The PLC sessions were limited to three days across one academic year. A subsequent study might provide for several more sessions interspersed throughout the academic year. In turn, the research project would yield a longitudinal data set.

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