

**PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS CONCERNING THE PROCESS AND DYNAMICS  
OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF  
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

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By  
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## ABSTRACT

If the reforms in public education are to be sustained, it is commonly believed that they must be founded in new conceptions of schooling. Recently, to improve school effectiveness and raise students' success, educational researchers are devoting increasing attention to research related to transforming our schools into professional learning communities. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of principals concerning the process and dynamics of the implementation of professional learning communities.

Qualitative method was used in this study. The perceptions of the principals were explored through six research questions. The research questions addressed the following areas: process and dynamics of the implementation process, challenges to the collaboration and issues of sustainability in professional learning communities. Six principals, four females and two males, from two school divisions were selected and data were collected using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Participants' responses were analyzed according to the research questions and recurring themes.

The findings of this study revealed that the process and dynamics of implementing professional learning communities, included pre-implementation (self-education), the implementation process itself (training internal stakeholders), teaching the PLC concept to external stakeholders, and facilitating collaboration amongst all stakeholders. Participants emphasized that collaboration was a critical component for the positive development and effectiveness of the professional learning communities.

Further analysis of the data indicated that time, funding, diverse interests, preconceived mindsets of stakeholders, constant staff changes, workload, fear of being ridiculed or judged, and evaluation/data collection methods were the major challenges in the implementation process. Regarding sustainability, respondents advocated that it was essential to focus on school vision, create a collaborative culture, provide administrative support to all stakeholders, and retain key people who are self-motivated.

In the final analysis, this study determined that the implementation of professional learning communities is a question of will. A group of staff members who are determined to work collaboratively will be able to implement and sustain professional learning communities, regardless of some foreseeable problems.

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Bertrand Russell, once defined the Good Life as one “inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” What Russell said about a Good Life may equally apply to a good teacher. A good teacher, besides having other qualities, should have genuine care for students. A teacher’s love for students must also be supplemented by knowledge and insight in his/her areas of expertise. Dr. Patrick Renihan, I strongly believe, is such a teacher. He meant so much to me that any note of acknowledgement will limit his contribution to my emotional and intellectual growth. His encouragement, his understanding, and most of all, his patience, are greatly appreciated. I am truly grateful for his mentorship and dedication.

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Most importantly, I would like to express my deepest appreciation to my parents, who always encouraged and supported my educational pursuits, no matter the cost and personal sacrifice. I would also like to thank my relatives and friends for their prayers and support.

## DEDICATION

To My Parents, Md. Fozlur Rahman and Most. Jebun Nesa –

It's a Blessing to Have Parents like You.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Educational researchers are devoting increasing attention to research related to transforming our schools into professional learning communities. According to Hord (2003), much is written on the benefits and attributes of learning communities; however, the study and understanding of their implementation is in its infancy. In this regard, Mitchell and Sackney (2001) stated that there is no particular recipe to be followed in successfully developing schools as learning communities. However, there are several attributes and behaviors which foster the growth of community.

Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002) identified that some key components of successful, effective learning communities include: future-oriented, shared decision-making, focus on learning, data driven, ongoing assessment, reflective and utilize effective teaching strategies. Dufour and Eaker (1998) described mission and vision as the foundation of the school as a learning community. They said "...vision instills an organization with a sense of direction" (p. 62). Adding to this Eaker and Huffman (2002) said, a professional learning community's goal statements must be linked directly to the vision. Once goals are set, then action plans for the learning community can be developed. Developing a learning community requires employing methods that encourage the joint efforts of teachers, administrators, staff, students, parents, and other members of the community. One of the essential activities of professional learning communities is professional collaboration. According to Speck (1996), there are six key elements of a collaborative process. These are: 1) developing collegiality, 2) treating teachers as professionals, 3) shared leadership/ decision-making, 4) involving parents and

community, 5) Dialogue and reflecting, and 6) planning and evaluating (p. 106). Based on these elements of the collaborative process a common vision develops. Ultimately, a common vision leads to the establishment of a professional learning community.

Even though a learning community is characterized by shared power and leadership, principals play a critical role in whether or not a learning community will develop, and once established, whether or not it will continue (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Adding to this, Newman and Wehlage (1995) described that the principal with a vision is the leading factor in encouraging, supporting and implementing the characteristics required for implementing a professional learning community. On this issue, Teschke (1996) noted as follows:

Good schools are collegial communities of learners and leaders, and research clearly shows that good schools have strong, professionally focused principals who articulate a vision and are proactive in the pursuit of their vision.... [A]n effective principal models the values and behaviors that provide the necessary stability and direction for his or her school. (p. 1)

In this quotation, Teschke implied the importance of principals' roles in the implementation of a professional learning community.

What principals think regarding specific strategies or practices for the implementation of professional learning communities requires further investigation. Leonard and Leonard (2001) also expressed the need for research on principals' perceptions in implementing and maintaining professional learning communities. The motivation for this research emerged from my academic research interests as well as a professional need to more clearly understand the principals' perceptions concerning the implementation of professional learning communities.

### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of principals concerning the process and dynamics of the implementation of professional learning communities. The investigation attempted to discover what principals believe is important and specific strategies or practices that they believe are effective in the implementation process.

### Research Questions

The following research questions were developed to guide the focus of the study:

1. What are principals' perceptions of the process and dynamics by which professional learning communities are implemented?
2. What is the relationship between shared vision and successful implementation of professional learning communities?
3. What role did collaboration play in the implementation of professional learning communities?
4. What structures and process were used to enhance collaboration within the school?
5. What were the challenges or barriers in implementing professional learning communities?
6. What helps to sustain professional learning communities?

### Significance of the Study

The importance of this area of study has been emphasized by several authorities. Leading educational researchers (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Roberts & Pruitt, 2003) saw a professional learning community model as the key to success for students and school effectiveness. Newman and Wehlage (1995) stated that

principals play key roles in implementing the conditions that allow schools to become professional learning communities.

The principal, in the implementation of a professional learning community, must embrace a vision of what a brighter future might look like. Regarding the importance of vision, Harvey (2004) noted that Helen Keller was once asked by a reporter, “Is there anything worse than being blind?” “Oh yes,” she replied, “Having sight, but no vision!” (p. 1). The vision cannot be solely the vision of the principal. One of the important responsibilities of the principal is to initiate the necessary dialogue in order to adorn the beliefs, values and ideals of the various stakeholders (Sergiovanni, 1987). A shared vision should be developed and articulated through the collaborative process in order to implement a professional learning community (Dufour & Eaker, 1998).

This study had implications for both principals and school divisions interested in pursuing the implementation of professional learning communities in their schools. The findings of this study could contribute knowledge to principals interested in transforming their schools into professional learning communities. The information from this study would be also valuable to school divisions as they reflect on their commitment to teacher professional growth and teacher collaboration.

#### Delimitations

The following constituted the main delimitations of this research:

1. The research was delimited to principals’ perceptions concerning the implementation of a learning community.
2. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews.
3. The time-line for data collection was from April 20, 2006 to May 30, 2006.

4. The study was based upon the perceptions of six principals selected from two school divisions where professional learning communities were implemented.

#### Limitations

The study was restricted by the following limitations:

1. The researcher's past experiences in other school settings and philosophical biases might affect how the data were collected, analyzed and consequently, how the conclusions were drawn.
2. Data were collected from a sample in which most participants had similar exposure to information and training about professional learning communities. Consequently, the findings might not relate to a variety of contexts.
3. Principals might be biased while answering the interview questions.
4. Collaboration can be misconstrued as synonymous with PLCs.

#### Assumptions

The research was conducted with an awareness of the following assumptions:

1. Selected principals were visionary and wanted to transform their schools into learning communities.
2. The participants engaged in this study were knowledgeable about professional learning community and its characteristics.
3. Principals had the ability to influence the professional practices of the staff within a school.
4. The principals selected for this research were responded truthfully and without deception.

5. The participants engaged in this research represented a diversity of school cultures within the same school division, all with unique needs and contexts.
6. A collaborative environment was necessary for the implementation of professional learning communities.
7. Principals were able to accurately recall and describe their vision for the school and its relation to professional learning communities.

#### The Researcher

Ever since the dawn of civilization, human beings have been craving for becoming something special to their liking. This strong desire can be termed as the goal of life. Born and raised in Bangladesh, a country laden with a vast array of culture and people, I developed an aim to succeed in life in the same orthodox way. Within a child, achieving this phenomenon is influenced by numerous factors. In my case, it was my uncle. As he was a teacher by profession, I was lucky to see his works regularly. This developed in me an inherent attraction towards the teaching profession.

After finishing high school, Rajshahi Cadet College in Bangladesh, I received admission in the Middle East Technical University in the Department of Foreign Language Education, Ankara, Turkey. Upon graduation, I started working in a collage as an English teacher in Bangladesh, which has improved my teaching capability, as well as ability to communicate with people, solve problems and to work as a team member. While teaching, I realized that for a country like Bangladesh, education is the key to attain success. But the education system in Bangladesh is on the verge of collapse as it holds to the old traditional system. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to implement educational strategies in a country such as Bangladesh where the unequal distribution of



wealth causes limited access to education. The task of educating gets even harder when the people of the country suffer from hunger and health issues. It could be said that in this situation, Bangladesh needs a social reform along with educational change. To broaden my knowledge and experience regarding this social reform and educational change I came to Canada to pursue my Masters of Education degree in Education Administration.

For me educational administration is vital in order to understand the purposes of education in all societies. Here, the intension is to increase my knowledge on basic principles of school administration and educational organization planning. Moreover, I am keen on analyzing the nature and function of units of education at local, intermediate, and state levels via exploring the substantive elements such as leadership, change process, strategic and operational planning, and current issues in education. My ultimate plan is to do a comparative research on education systems of Canada and Bangladesh. By doing this, I hope that I will be able to find out the ways and strategies of how to do the social reform and educational change in Bangladesh.

#### Definitions of Key Terms

A number of terms used repeatedly in this research are defined in this section.

*Principal.* Principal refers to the staff member of a school who serve as the administrative head, with whom major responsibilities are delegated for the coordination and direction and direction of the activities of the school (Casavant, 1999).

*Perception.* According to *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, (2002), perception is “the process whereby sensory stimulation is translated into organized or meaningful experience” (p. 279). For the purpose of this study, the word

perception refers to the thoughts, understanding, and awareness an individual has regarding outcomes resulting from certain actions.

*Process.* According to Wikipedia Encyclopedia, (2006), process is a naturally occurring or designed sequence of changes or properties/attributes of a system/object.

*Vision.* An organization's vision articulates a view of a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization. It describes a condition that is better than what currently exists within the organization (Sullivan, 2003).

*Implementation.* Implementation is the process of putting idea, programs, structures, or activities into practice that are new to the people affected by change (Fullan, 2001).

*Professional learning communities.* A learning community is defined as a group of people that focus its energies on improving the capacity for learning for all. Stakeholders, within the community, confront the problems or barriers facing them, identify the components of a better future and seek ways to obtain that very future. They continually evaluate and develop their skills in order to attain their goals (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000).

*Collaborative process.* The term collaborative process is defined by DuFour (2003) as the systematic process in which educators work together to analyze and impact professional practice in order to improve their individual and collective results. Leonard (2002) stated that professional collaboration is evidenced when teachers and administrators work together, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for the purpose of achieving educational and organizational goals.

*Dynamics.* According to Wikipedia Encyclopedia, (2006), the social, intellectual, or moral forces that produce activity and change in a given sphere are called dynamics.

### Overview of the Study

In Chapter One, the topic of the study was introduced. This included a rationale for the research, an outline of the purpose of the study, the research questions that guided the research, the significance of the study and the related delimitations, limitations, and definitions of the key terms associated with this research. A brief history of the researcher was also included in this chapter.

In Chapter Two, a review of the current literature on characteristics of effective schools, roles of the principals, importance of principals' vision, purpose of the professional learning communities, process and dynamics of the implementation of a professional learning community through a collaborative process, challenges to collaboration and issues of sustainability in the implementation process was presented. In Chapter Three, an outline of the methodology employed in the development of the data collection instruments was introduced; it also included the collection and analysis of the data, and the ethical considerations associated with the research.

Data analysis and the research findings are presented in the Chapter Four. A summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for theory, practice, and further research are the focus of Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this research was to examine principals' perceptions concerning the process and dynamics of the implementation of professional learning communities. In this chapter, literature on the process and dynamics of the implementation of a professional learning community is examined. The review of the literature begins with a discussion of the characteristics of effective schools, and an overview of the multiple roles that principals play in effective schools. Further to this, the literature review focuses on the importance of the principals' vision, and how they develop a shared vision and a collaborative environment in the schools. The next section of the literature review discusses how a professional learning community can be implemented through a collaborative process, as suggested by Speck (1999). The last section deals with the challenges to collaboration and issues of sustainability in the implementation process. The conceptual framework of this literature review is introduced through a diagram in the summary.

#### Effective Schools

Even though the role of the school is continually expanding, its primary function remains as a center for learning with an emphasis on academic work (Renihan & Sackney, 1999). Murphy, Weil, Hallinger, and Mitman (1985) found that "in the great majority of studies, the definition of effectiveness is high student academic achievement (particularly) in reading and mathematics" (p. 362). In this regard, Rosenholtz (1989) described an effective school environment as a place which embraces change in order to become a learning enriched school that not only motivates students, but teachers as well.

Rosenholtz's research classified schools into two categories, "stuck schools" and "moving schools" on the basis of their orientation and capability to change (as cited in Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994, p. 90). The process of school improvement and change becomes a matter of capitalizing upon the opportunities to move a school toward the fulfillment of the characteristics of a "moving" school as opposed to that of a "stuck" school.

Noting that school effectiveness is a "multivariate phenomenon" and that "professional interdependence is essential", Renihan and Renihan (1984, p. 1), summarized the following eight attributes of effective school: leadership, conscious attention to climate, academic focus, high expectations, sense of mission, positive motivational strategies, and feedback on academic performance. To this list Renihan and Renihan (1989) later added another element which is parental involvement. As indicated in Table 1.1, similar characteristics were found in school effectiveness research by Renihan and Sackney (1999) as well as Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore (1995).

The following is a discussion of these effective school indicators as represented in the educational literature.

#### *Sense of Mission/Vision*

Having a sense of mission/vision is one of the most important characteristics of effective schools. According to Barth and Pansegrau (1994), "schools with a mission tend to be schools that are improving, schools that are more exciting and better than schools without mission" (p.2). They also noted, "If you know where you'd like to go, it's more likely that you will get there" (pp. 2-3). Vision, shared by

Table 1.1

*Two perspectives on the elements of effective schools*

Key Qualities and Catalytic Conditions for School Effectiveness (Renihan & Sackney, 1999)	Factors for Effective Schools (Sammons, Hillman & Mortimore, 1995)
School vision and purpose	Shared vision and goals
Leadership	Shared leadership
Academic emphasis	Concentration on teaching and learning purposeful
Instructional expectations teaching	
Parental involvement	Learning organization
Professional community	Home – school partnership
Student involvement	Pupil rights and responsibilities
Feedback	High expectations Monitoring progress
Positive climate	Positive reinforcement
Physical environment	Learning environment

Source: Hopkins, D., Ainscow, M., & West, M. (1994). *School improvement in an era of change*. London: Cassell Villiers House.

members of an organization, helps people to set goals to advance the organization and is an important key for motivation and empowerment (Nauheimer, 2003). While emphasizing the role of vision, Nanus (1992) wrote:

Vision plays an important role... throughout the organization's entire life cycle.... Sooner or later the time will come when an organization needs redirection or perhaps a complete transformation, and then the first step should always be a new vision, a wake-up call to everyone involved with the organization that fundamental change is needed and is on the way. (p. 9)

Vision, then, is seen as a critical element throughout an organization's entire life cycle.

#### *Academic Emphasis*

Renihan and Sackney (1999) described the importance of academic emphasis on school effectiveness. They stated, "Good schools place a sustained focus on academic skills, and the importance placed upon this is reflected in the amount of school time and professional energy devoted to it" (p. 8). According to Gamoran and Porter (1996) teachers have a great deal of autonomy when it comes to dealing with what is taught in their classrooms. In this way, "schools are 'loosely coupled,' meaning that decisions in one part of the school do not reverberate in clearly patterned ways elsewhere in the school" (p. 19).

#### *Instructional Expectations*

According to Marzano (2003), "high expectations and pressure to achieve refer to establishing challenging goals for students." (p. 35). As with all indicators of school effectiveness, the philosophy of setting high expectations for success of all students must start with the leadership of the school. What the principals say and do has an impact on the expectations of everyone in the building. Edmonds (1979) mentioned that teachers in higher achieving schools provided more evidence of student monitoring process, student

effort, happier children, and an atmosphere conducive to learning. (p.18). In agreement with this, Renihan and Sackney (1999) stated, “school effectiveness research has pointed to a strong positive relationship between student achievement and the expectations which teachers hold for them” (p. 10).

### *Parental Involvement*

The rationale for this factor has its roots in findings that student achievement is significantly related to the extent to which parents are actively involved in, and support, their children’s learning (Hawley, 1988). Within the school community, parent involvement is crucial to any increased effectiveness of the school. In this regard, Renihan and Sackney (1999), stated, “There is a significant body of research which points to the fact that enhanced parental involvement is closely related to significant gains in several measures of school and classroom success” (p.11).

Renihan and Renihan (1994) found that parental involvement is related to decreased absenteeism, improved achievement and improved perceptions of school and classroom climate. In recent years, it was found that there are multiple benefits of meaningful parental and community involvement in a learning community. To support this, Darch, Miao, and Shippen (2004) pointed out that parental involvement not only increased student grade scores and motivation to complete homework, but it resulted in a more positive student attitude to school, and increased student attendance. A recent MetLife survey of teachers indicated that over 80% of teachers believed that many motivational, behavioral and academic problems of students can be resolved with family support (Tam & Heng, 2005). This survey suggested that parental involvement in effective schools is crucial.



### *Professional Community*

The teachers and other professionals at the school are among some of the most important stakeholders. Kirby and Colbert (1994), in their study of thirty schools, also underlined the importance of process and content to empowerment. They noted that by providing the teachers with the right professional development, the principal enables the staff to become leaders and generally also show a high degree of authenticity. Such principals are more genuine, and they assume responsibility for their actions of their staff. To support this, Kirby and Colbert further stated, “Their teachers are not treated as a means to their own advancement, but as professionals capable of advancing the vision they share for the school” (p. 135).

### *Student Involvement*

The students in the school can also influence school effectiveness through greater participation. If teachers can control their professional lives and students control their learning, then both would ultimately be responsible for their outcomes (Stone, 1995). In this regard, McDermott (1994), noted that teachers must work as partners with our students, exploring what they want to learn. Teachers must create resource opportunities through creative problem solving and be student advocates at every opportunity.

### *Effective Feedback*

Consistent and continuous feedback on academic performance is another important characteristic of effective schools. Levine and Stark, noted “continual monitoring of individual pupil and classroom progress is a logical means of determining whether the school’s goals are being realized and can serve to stimulate and direct staff

energy and attention” (as cited in Purkey & Smith, 1985, p. 445). To support this, Marzano (2003), stated, “high expectations and pressure to achieve refer to establishing challenging goals for students. Monitoring refers to feedback, which is tracking the extent to which goals are met” (p. 35). Sharing academic goals can make administrators, teachers and students strive for these goals together and gain a powerful and coalescing effect. It was also suggested by Schmoker (1999), that “Goals themselves lead not only to success but also to the effectiveness and cohesion of a team” (p. 24).

### *Positive Climate/Culture*

Conscious attention to climate or culture is very important for effective schools. How people interact with each other on a daily basis sets the tone for the people in the school building. The school must promote a climate conducive to working and learning. Renihan and Sackney’s (1999) model reflected this notion. They wrote

In effective schools, specific attention is given to the creation and maintenance of a climate which is conducive to learning. This includes the establishment of a safe, caring and attractive environment in which students can enjoy school and the relationships they experience within it. (p. 9)

The climate of the school needs to be safe, positive, respectful, and supportive to result in a sense of pride and ownership among students and staff. It is important for the school to be safe and orderly. In this regard, Marzano (2003), stated, “If teachers and students do not feel safe, they will not have the necessary psychological energy for teaching and learning” (p. 53).

### *Physical Environment*

Although Renihan and Sackney (1999) recognized that physical environment is not directly related to all activities of the school, it does affect them. These authors pointed out that, “Most importantly, the appropriateness of the classrooms, and related

space and environment, for the program offered is important” (p. 15). It implies that physical settings also play an important role for the effectiveness of schools.

### *Positive Motivational Strategies*

Motivation is necessary to sustain continuous improvement within a school. Studies at both the school and the classroom levels of analysis have repeatedly indicated that in successful schools there is a greater conscious reliance on praise rather than blame (Austine, 1979; Berliner, 1979; Brophy, 1982; Rosenshine, 1979). Positive motivational strategies increase people’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth. These also serve as proactive strategies which deter negative attitudes such as apathy and defiance. In their motivational strategies principals play an important role by empowering staff and community. Leaders do not do things alone, thus the principal can do much more through the empowerment of teachers, staff, students, parents, and the rest of the community (Short & Greer 1997). Gardner (1990), in discussing the importance for leaders to motivate their followers, stated:

Leaders must understand the needs of the people they work with – their needs at the most basic level for income, jobs, housing and health care their need for a measure of security; their need for confidence in the stability of the system of which they are a part, including the capacity of the system to solve the problems that threaten it (crime, inflation, social disintegration, economic collapse and the like); their need for a sense of community, of identity and belonging, of mutual trust, of loyalty to one another; their need for recognition, for the respect of others, for reassurance that they as individuals are needed; their need for new challenges and a conviction that their competences are being well used. (p.185)

By this quotation Gardner implied that principals as school leaders play an important role to motivate their fellow staff, and to do this they should know and understand their staff’s basic needs.

### *Strong Leadership*

Leadership, the most important characteristic of effective schools was missing in the preceding discussion. Noticeably, with every characteristic previously discussed, there was frequent reference to the importance of the leadership role of the principal. As Foster (1988) asserted:

...the correlation between school effectiveness and the role of the principal cannot be underestimated. Without the leadership, support, and philosophical acceptance of the hierarchal concept by the principal, school effectiveness is not likely. In terms of school effectiveness theory, the principal is indeed a key participant. (p. 45)

The leader's role requires the principal to select and practice effective leadership styles and focus on school improvement. Empowering staff and students, building trust, monitoring and assessing progress, and providing assistance are critical elements of the leader role (Speck, 1999). The effective school leader must have a clear vision. As Renihan and Renihan (1989) noted, a school needs "visible, assertive leadership with a clear personal vision of where the school is going, and an image of the school as it should be" (p. 21). The principal's actions and decisions are guided by a vision of education (Conley, 1993). To support this, Speck (1999), also said that the vision may reside in the principal as an individual, but more frequently it is created jointly with the staff; in all cases this vision is clearly and repeatedly articulated within the school learning community.

The work of Eaker, DuFour and DuFour (2002) provided an important link between the effective schools correlates and the qualities that contribute professional learning communities. Eaker et al. believed that in order to improve schools, educators

need not change the structure of the system rather alter the foundational belief system of the school. Principals play an important role to alter this foundational belief system.

### Role of the Principals

The principalship continues to change, but this position continues to be critical for making a difference in a school's success. In reviewing various studies, Speck (1999), observed that it can be seen that the principal's role includes resource finder, facilitator, shared-decision maker, innovative thinker, and student advocate. This variety of roles is dynamic and fluid with the melding of educational, management, leadership, and the balance of the inner person skills, providing overall leadership for building a school into a learning community for all students.

#### *Principal as Educator*

As an educator, the principal must be a continual learner who researches, studies programs and innovations, interacts and talks with others about educational issues, and models life-long learning with clear focus on improving student and staff success (Speck, 1999). Bennis and Nanus (1985) found that successful leaders are perpetual learners. These writers found that leaders learned how to learn in an organizational context. According to Fullan (1988), it is the principal modelling learning and professionalism in the role of educator that affects the professional culture. In a learning community, adults and students alike learn, and each member energizes and contributes to the learning of the others (Barth 1990). Principals of learning communities are often referred to as "head learners", "models of life-long learning", and "instructional leaders" (Hord, 2004; Speck, 1999). Barth (as cited in Sergiovanni, 2000b) argued "the more crucial role of the principal is as head learner, engaging in the most important enterprise of the schoolhouse

– experiencing, displaying, modeling, and celebrating what is hoped and expected that teachers and pupils will do” (p. 274).

Sergiovanni (1995) reinforced the importance of reflective practice for the principalship:

Reflective practice requires that principals have a healthy respect for, be well informed about, and use the best available theory and research and accumulated practice wisdom. All these sources of information help increase understanding and inform practice. (p. 36)

This emphasizes the importance of the principal serving as a role model for learning, there by creating reflective practices in the school. In this regard, Senge (as cited in O’Neil, 1995) stated that principals with the greatest impact tend to see their job as creating an environment where teachers can continually learn, discuss, and develop new ideas and teaching strategies. Conducting and promoting collaborative environment is one of main tasks of principals. The ongoing personal and professional development of principals is necessary to keeping them informed in responses to change. To support this, Flemming (2004), asserted that a principal must be in a continuous search for new information to improve learning and student achievement. Part of the principal’s learner role is to provide training and support to the teachers and community.

According to Sagor (1992), the principal, with the help of the rest of the learning community, can assess the status of the school through the use of collaborative research. This includes formulating the problem, collecting and analyzing the data, reporting the results, planning for action that will improve learning within the school and involve members of the learning community in the process. Speck (1999), also stated that the principal as educator, must understand the characteristics and needs of students through

careful investigation with the rest of the community, to better align curriculum, instruction, and assessment with the students' needs.

### *Principal as Manager*

The principal's role as manager is key in organizing, functioning, and execution of numerous process and tasks that permit a school to accomplish its goals as a learning community. As the school's head manager, the principal develops systems to manage the school effectively and efficiently (Speck, 1999). Smith and Piele (1996), summarized the importance of the management aspect of the principalship in the following way:

School leaders must first of all be skillful managers. ... Whatever else a district may want from its leaders, managerial skill is essential; without it, no school leader will last long. (p. 15)

Thus the principal's managerial role is essential to the running of a school. In a recent study of Ontario principals, Castle, Mitchell, and Gupta (2002), discovered that management tasks held predominance for principals, and that large parts of their days were devoted to managing, coordinating, and overseeing what occurs in the school. Robbins and Alvy (2003), stated that good leadership goes hand in hand with good management. Sergiovanni (1991) provided a perspective on the relationship between the management and leadership roles of the principalship:

Distinctions between management and leadership are useful for theorists and help to clarify and sort various activities and behaviors of principals. For practical purposes, however, both emphases should be considered as necessary and important aspects of a principal's administrative style. The choice is not whether a principal is leader or manager but whether the two emphases are in balance and, indeed, whether they complement each other. (p. 16)

In a later study Sergiovanni (2000a), described leadership and management as important aspects in the principal's administrative style. In fact, they complement each other. In addition to this, Sergiovanni further stated that managing is one of the nine

essential tasks that principals perform as school leaders. He suggested, “Ensuring the necessary day to day support (planning, organizing, agenda setting, mobilizing resources, providing procedures, record keeping, and so on) that keeps the school running effectively and efficiently” is a primary role of the principal (Sergiovanni, p. 89).

Morrissey and Cowan (2004) identified main functions of the principal’s management role in a professional learning community as ensuring time and support for staff collaboration, and the provision of information and data to teachers to use in their reflective practice. One of the key management functions of the principal is providing the necessary resources for collaborative practice. A number of researchers agreed that providing time for collaboration is one of the most essential resources (Hord, 2004; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Rallis & Golding, 2000; Speck, 1999). In this regard, King (2002), observed that the principal must “provide regular opportunities for educators to work together on issues of teaching and learning” (p. 63). Speck (1999) suggested that the following five management functions of the principal as critical: 1) preparing and planning, 2) organizing, 3) establishing recurring systems, 4) directing and carrying out policies and procedures, and 5) evaluating and improving existing systems (p. 69).

An affective school can achieve its goals through effective management by the principal. The principal’s managerial role must include effective planning, providing resources, scheduling and monitoring, maintaining facilities, handling student problems, budgeting and bookkeeping, and keeping a safe school environment.

### *Principal as Leader*

The leadership role of the principal is crucial because it involves putting the beliefs of the principal as educator into action to achieve student and school success. As a



leader, a principal appraises the present, anticipates the future, and collaborates with the school's stakeholders to develop a school vision that will yield a learning experience for all members of the learning community (Speck, 1999). The principal as leader helps construct and nurture an effective learning environment where stakeholders can hold and seek a vision, reflect and inquire, build collective capabilities and understand systems to improve learning for all students. "Encouraging learning is the primary task of leadership, and perhaps the only way that a leader can genuinely influence or inspire others" (Senge, Kliener, Roberts, Ross, & Smith, 1994, p. 65).

The change in the role of the principal can be simply described as a change from top-down leadership to a perspective of leadership from the centre. Conzemius and O'Neil (2001), found that successful principals developed broad based leadership that focused on shared responsibility for student learning. Evans (as cited in Uchiyama & Wolf, 2002) suggested that "leadership begins at one's center: authentic leaders build their practice outward from their core commitments, rather from a management text" (p. 80). The principal in the role of leader decides the learning community's capacity for change and supports the change procedure through planning and implementing change inside the school. A learning community, with the principal, can foster the capacity for change by taking note of the comments of Senge et al. (1994), "If there is one single thing a learning organization does well, it is helping people embrace change"(p. 11). Schmoker (1996) offered insight into the importance of the principal's leadership in school improvement and the need for monitoring progress:

Schools improve when purpose and effort unite. One key is leadership that recognizes its most vital function: to keep everyone's eyes on the prize of improved student learning. The crush of competing agendas and distractions does not make that focus easy. (p. 103)

In professional learning communities, leadership is not limited to administrative ranks. To support this idea, Roberts and Pruitt (2003), said, “Principals contribute to the long-term maintenance of the learning community by building teacher leadership throughout the staff and nurturing shared leadership” (p. 187). King (2002) also described the significant time that today’s leaders devote to developing the instructional leadership capacity of other members of the learning community (p. 62).

Roberts and Pruitt (2003) recommended several methods by which leadership among the members of a learning community can be developed and sustained. Some of these strategies are:

- Induct new teachers into the concepts and practices of shared leadership;
- Rotate leadership opportunities among members to give many individuals to experience their leadership capacity;
- Recognize and celebrate the efforts of individuals in their leadership roles;
- Access the skills and talents of learning community members for school-wide staff development;
- Provide leadership training opportunities to all staff;
- Make sure leaders develop expertise in data collection and analysis; and,
- Expose leaders to educational research and pedagogical knowledge. (pp. 186 - 187)

It is important for principals, as leaders, to have a clear vision of schooling. Vision separates the principals who are school leaders from those who are merely managers.

### Importance of Vision

Whereas mission establishes an organization's purpose, vision instills an organization with a sense of direction. Vision presents a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization – a future that is better and more desirable in significant ways than existing conditions. It offers a 'target that beckons' (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Rozycki (2004) called vision statements "happy talk" which he said constitutes "sweet slogans that enervate clear definition of goals, that obscure inquiry into their achievability" (p. 94). In this regard, DuFour and Eaker (1998) also stated, "An effective vision statement articulates a vivid picture of the organization's future that is so compelling that a school's members will be motivated to work together to make it a reality" (p. 62). Kotter (1996) contended that effective visions are:

- Imaginable – they convey a picture of what the future will look like.
- Desirable – they appeal to the long-term interests of stakeholders.
- Feasible – they comprise realistic, attainable goals.
- Focused – they are clear enough to provide guidance in decision making.
- Flexible – they are general enough to allow for individual initiative and changing responses in light of changing conditions.
- Communicable – they are easy to communicate and explain. (p. 81)

Discussions of the vital role of vision appear in almost every book on educational and organizational excellence (Fullan, 1988). According to Blanchard (1996) "when people talk about effectiveness they are basically talking about vision and direction. Effectiveness has to do with focussing the organization's energy in a particular direction" (p. 82). Belasco and Stayer (1993) stated that vision is the criteria against which all

behaviour within an organization is measured. They also said: “Vision focuses. Vision inspires. Without a vision, the people perish” (p. 90). This emphasizes the importance of vision. Barker (1991) stated the view that the vision of organizations has been found to have a profound impact on their activities and their success.

Sergiovanni (1995) saw the vision as the ability to create and communicate a view of a desired state of affairs that induces commitment among those working in the organization. Vision is the essence of what the school communicates in a holistic way through words, actions, and written material about what the school stands for and hopes for the future. “There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile, and achievable vision of the future, widely shared” (Nanus, 1992, p. 3).

Barth and Pansegrau (1994) believed that a vision should be “written in pencil” and should be adjusted over time, but they also said, “You need to couple moral outrage with a vision,” (p. 9) so that people strive toward its actualization. In this regard, Peel and McGary (1997) stated that a vision in a school system only has power for those who can see it. They postulated that a vision cannot be created in isolation and must be continuously communicated by the leaders of the organization. To support this they also stated, “The vision must become part of the belief system of individuals and play itself out in their behaviour” (Peel & McGary, 1997, p. 698). A school must have a clear vision of where it is going in order to succeed as an effective educational institution. Barth (1994) suggested:

the inclusion of the ‘craft knowledge’ that the staff brings with them is integral in the formation of a vision for the school. The information related to parental involvement, social order, and equal dignity can come from a perspective that only a teacher can bring. Everyone has a dream of what the school they are in can

become. Why not harness those ideas and bring them into a concentrated form that can be used to give the organization clear direction. (p. 3)

Renihan and Sackney (1999) described the importance of a school vision and purpose in creating the building blocks upon which to build an effective school. Starratt (1995) emphasized the importance of institutionalizing the vision. He further stated that no matter how inspiring it sounds on paper, the dream will wither unless it takes concrete form in policies, programs, and procedures. At some point, curriculum, staffing, evaluation, and budget must feel the imprint of the vision, or it will gradually lose credibility. Leadership needs vision. Effective leaders must be visionary leaders, if they want to turn their schools into professional learning communities.

#### Visionary Leadership

Schuller indicated that “the world of tomorrow belongs to the person who has a vision today” (as cited in Batten, 1998, p. 53). Leadership requires vision. It is a force that provides meaning and purpose to the work of an organization. Effective educational leaders are visionary leaders, and vision is the basis of their work. They begin with a personal vision to forge a shared vision with their coworkers. Their communication of the vision is such that it empowers people to act. According to Westley and Mintzberg (1989) visionary leadership is dynamic and involves a three stage process:

1. an image of the desired future for the organization (vision) is
2. communicated (shared) which serves to
3. empower those followers so that they can enact the vision. (p. 18)

Effective educational leaders have a clear picture of what they want to accomplish; they have the “ability to visualize one’s goals” (Mazzarella & Grundy, 1989, p. 21). Their vision of their school provides purpose, meaning, and significance to the work of the school and enables them to motivate and empower the staff to contribute to

the realization of the vision. Furthermore, educational leaders can transmit that vision to others so that they become motivated to work toward the realization of the vision.

In a discussion of visionary leadership, Sashkin (1995) also identified three characteristics of visionary leadership. One consisted of creating an ideal vision of the organization and its culture; second was defining an organizational philosophy that succinctly states the vision and developing programs and policies that put the philosophy into practice within the organization's unique culture and context. The third was the leader's personal practices on a one-to-one basis in order to create and support the vision. Harris (2002) supported the idea of visionary leadership for instructional improvement by noting, "The articulation, development and implementation of 'vision' is particularly important in capacity-building for improvement" (p. 73).

Mitchell and Sackney (2000), noted, to lead is to vision; to vision is to lead. The school community is made up of people "who take an active, reflective, learning-oriented and growth-promoting approach toward the mysteries, problems and perplexities of teaching and learning" (p. 9). There is a glue which holds people together. This glue is effective leadership with a shared vision and understandings of teaching and learning ideologies. According to Heifetz and Linsky (2002), effective leadership is made up of: building a shared vision, improving communication, and developing a collaborative decision-making process. This implies that effective leaders should be a critical element of the building of a shared vision by communicating and listening to the ideas of others.

#### Principals' Role in Communicating the Vision

The school vision can be realized only by being understood by all the stakeholders of the school community. Effective principals are good communicators and

listeners. In this regard, Mazzarella and Grundy (1989) noted that “effective school leaders in particular, are good at communicating” and have the aptitude and skills “they need to interact well with others; they know how to communicate” (p. 18). The communicating and listening skills of principals are an important characteristic of leaders who facilitate school improvement. This is the basis for their ability to articulate a vision, develop a shared vision, express their belief that schools are for the students’ learning, and demonstrate that they value the human resources of their peers and subordinates. Albrecht (1994) pointed to the power of leaders who articulate a vision and enrol others in that vision. He noted that a leader must not only have a vision, but it must be valid and compelling.

In organizations, the conventional wisdom is that leaders should have visions and then work to shape the organizations they manage in accordance with their visions. “Leaders, in other words, work to make their visions realities, and this depends on how well they can sell their visions to others” (Sergiovanni, 1994, p. 82). Vision-building for the principal, then, is very much an interactive process and depends heavily on two-way communication skills, empathy, and exposure to a variety of ideas and stimuli (Fullan, 1988). Sergiovanni (1995) described vision as the ability to create and communicate a view of a desired state of affairs that induces commitment among those working in the organization. Kouzes and Posner (1995) found in their leadership study that successful leaders define a common purpose and then effectively communicate a vision so that others come to share the vision as their own. A vision that is not clearly articulated and shared is one that is likely to be lost. Barth (1990) made comments on the importance of communicating the vision:

Teachers and principals who convey their craft knowledge and their visions to other adults derive enormous personal satisfaction and recognition. Vision unlocked is energy unlocked. (p. 151)

Sergiovanni (1996) stated that the ultimate purpose of school leadership is to make the school into a moral community. The words of Mahatma Gandhi “my life is its own message” (as cited in Ulrich, 1996, p. 215) are very relevant. Leaders of the future will be known less for what they say and more for what they do (Ulrich). A principal can effectively communicate his or her vision by being an exemplar of morality, and not only that, but a morality that promotes the tenets of the vision for the school.

The principal needs not only be resolute but also has to cultivate a spirit of forgiveness; without this spirit, precious energy may be expended on settling personal scores rather than on the general good of the school. Batten (1998) said that forgiveness “is a requisite for happiness and peace of mind, for a liberated and energizing approach to life” (p. 37). Since the principal interacts with everybody in the school, there are bound to be some clashes at one or the other time. The spirit of forgiveness therefore becomes the energizing force that propels the school’s vision forward.

Covey (1998) described communication as “the most important skill in life” (p. 237). A principal must be able to communicate his or her vision effectively to the active community of stakeholders otherwise it may be difficult to elicit the cooperation of others. As Gardner (1990) observed “unhappy is a people that runs out of words to describe what is happening to them. Leaders must find the words” (p.18). He further stated that to attract people to his/her vision, a principal must not only find the words, but must be able to communicate them in a polite and respectful manner to teachers, parents and students. A principal who fails to effectively communicate with all stakeholders may



find that he or she has no support from the community whose children are under his or her care.

Morse (1998) advised that a leader who cannot tolerate criticism fails to meet wholeness that incorporates diversity. A principal of a school must embrace diversity and the difficult ideas, values, and norms it encompasses. With effective communicative qualities, the principal will be able to harness the goodwill of staff, students and parents for the continual building of a healthy school community.

Gardner (1990) suggested that “Nothing can substitute for a live leader (not necessarily the top leader) listening attentively and responding informally. There is more to face-to-face communication than the verbal component” (p. 27). Some principals prefer to communicate through talk even when other forms may provide better outcomes. This is a very important point to note because there is a substantial literature that suggests that regular written communication is also an essential component of a public relations program. This may be so, but it should not be seen as a substitute for eyeball-to-eyeball contact! Principals believe that successful communication is characterized by openness, honesty, high visibility, and the ability and capacity to listen (Bredeson, 1987).

At the school level, Ripley (1994) discussed the principal’s role in implementing vision in a school. Ripley said that principal is the “high priest” of the school and the one who most influences the values and beliefs that make the school unique. The principal’s vision, then, is part of the “curriculum” (p. 16) that determines the culture of the school. “A good principal’s ‘curriculum’ allows unity without conformity, symmetry without sameness, and diversity without divisiveness” (p. 18). From this discussion, it is clear that

the staff of effective schools should personify a sense of passion for a course of action that will move the school toward the fulfillment of its mission and vision.

Rideout, McKay and Morton (2004) conducted a study on effective school visioning process. Their conclusions were that visioning strategy appears to be controlled by in-school professional educators, specifically principals, and that principals view visioning as an event and not an ongoing process.

### Shared Vision and Collaboration

The principals must have a personal vision as a leader of the school. Having a personal vision is not enough until it is shared and accepted by all groups involved in a school. Principals need to encourage others to develop a shared vision for the school. The process of developing a shared vision promotes the collaborative relationship among the staff, students, parents and community, which ultimately leads to the implementation of a professional learning community.

#### *Shared Vision*

A number of researchers and educators did a lot of work on shared vision. According to DuFour and Eaker (1998), "A vision will have little impact until it is widely shared and accepted and until it connects with the personal visions of those within the school" (p. 65). To illustrate this, Sergiovanni (1990) also stated that "School leaders have not only a vision but also the skills to communicate that vision to others, to develop a shared vision, a "shared covenant" (p. 216). He further stated that the "development, transmission, and implementation" (p. 216) of a vision is the focus of educational leaders. Leaders invite and encourage others to participate in determining and developing a shared vision. The process of developing a shared vision promotes collegial and collaborative

relationships. How do educational leaders develop collegial relationships to form a shared vision? Sergiovanni (1990) described this aspect of leadership as "bonding"; leader and followers have a shared set of values and commitment "that bond them together in a common cause" (p. 23) in order to meet a common goal. The shared vision becomes a "shared covenant that bonds together leader and follower in a moral commitment" (p. 24).

Senge (1990) described, "A shared vision, especially one that is intrinsic, uplifts people's aspirations. Work becomes part of pursuing a larger purpose," (p. 207). He also described vision as unearthing shared pictures of the future that foster genuine commitment and enrollment rather than compliance. Senge distinguished 'enrolment' from 'compliance' by defining the former as internal motivation and the later as external and related to rules and procedures. A shared vision changes people's relationship with the organization, moving it from "theirs" to "ours" (Senge, 1990).

Leithwood, Jantzi and Steinbach (1999) focused on the setting of direction by leadership through building a shared vision, developing consensus about goals, and creating high performance expectations. It was assumed that a vision or mission statement would have no impact unless there were commitments to it by those affected by it. Leithwood et al. concentrated on how such commitment could be created. They found that leaders who helped the organization to identify and articulate a vision may not have been attributed with charisma by colleagues, but they helped to identify new opportunities for the organization. Leithwood et al. listed eight research-based, identifiable leadership behaviors associated with vision building. They are: 1) helping colleagues find uniting purpose, 2) engaging staff in vision development, 3) providing the framework of vision that included others' views, 4) helping colleagues see the result of

working together to change practices, 5) tying vision to practical implications for program and instruction, 6) making the link between external initiatives for school change and vision, 7) assisting in building understanding of larger implications of the vision, and 8) communicating the vision to stakeholders and the community at every opportunity (p. 31-32). By following these important leadership behaviors effective school principals can build a shared vision.

Leiberman (1995) identified schools where a shared vision was created through a “bottom-up” (p. 7) authentic process. This process built support, over time, engaging staff in discussion, supporting a vision, and then acting on that vision and inventing ways to make it a reality.

Zmuda, Kuklis and Kline (2004) highlighted the importance of a shared vision, and further identified the concept of “collective autonomy” (p. 61). This was defined as a staff that agrees to collaborate to pursue shared goals. “To move from individual autonomy to collective autonomy, stakeholders must engage in collegial conversations about the school, its purpose, its beliefs, and its problems” (p. 61). If a clear and practical vision can be shared by all the members of a school, the following benefits will be gained by the participants:

- Getting motivation and energy from their work - By communicating, people in the school can understand the vision and connect their daily tasks with it. They gain enthusiasm and think their work is meaningful.
- Creating a proactive orientation – A shared vision to change the ways of thinking of people, focus more on the future.

- Giving direction to people within the organization – The more the educators know their school vision, the better they understand their own ongoing roles within the school. They will automatically change their direction to keep up with the school’s vision.
- Establishing specific standards of excellence – A shared vision makes people strive for the same ideal and norms of excellence to avoid wasting time and energy.
- Creating a clear agenda for action – A shared vision provides a time table for the current reality of the school and what will be done in the future (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p. 83).

To sum up, a shared vision creates a collaborative environment in the school by bonding the staff, students, parents and community. A collaborative environment is quite significant for the development of a professional learning community. Collaborative efforts of different stakeholders create a sense of belonging, which promote student performance, teacher efficacy and overall responsibilities.

### *Collaboration*

Cook and Friend (as cited in Gable & Manning, 1997) described collaboration as:

... the direct interaction between at least two equal parties who voluntarily engage in shared decision-making as they work toward a common goal .... Teacher collaboration is predicted on voluntary participation, mutual respect, and parity among participants, a shared sense of responsibility and accountability, and an equitable distribution of available resources. (p. 2)

One of the reasons that collaboration is of great importance as a component of staff development for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century was argued by Fullan and Hargraves (1992), “in fully functioning collaborative schools, many (indeed all) teachers are leaders” (p. 51).

This supports the idea of building school leaders and produces other results that may enhance the educational organization. “Collaboration among teachers fosters a sense of shared responsibility for educating heterogeneous groups of students. Further, teachers who collaborate with their colleagues are able to establish more rewarding and long-lasting social and professional relationships than those who labour in isolation” (Idal-Maepas, Lloyd & Lilly, as cited in Gable & Manning, 1999, p. 1). “If teachers have opportunity for collaborative inquiry and learning, the vast wisdom of practice developed by excellent teachers will be shared across the profession” (Darling-Hammond, 1996, p. 9).

Lieberman (1988) illustrated the need for collaboration in stating that “Working in collaborative situations exposes teachers to new ideas, to working on problems collectively, and to learning from the very people who understand the complexity of their work best ... their own colleagues” (p. 43). Collaboration is a significant process used in the development of a learning community. A collectively shared vision is derived through the collaborative efforts of stakeholders (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1997). The process of developing a vision must encourage and welcome input from all stakeholders. It should reflect everyone’s hopes, dreams and ideals for their learning community. A vision cannot be merely a consensus of opinion (Eaker et al., 2002). It must be arrived at so that all stakeholders see the possibilities for their learning community and understand their role in its fulfillment.

Leonard and Leonard (2001) linked the study of collaboration to the work of Little (1982) who recognized collaboration as a critical practice in effective schools. During the past decade, ideas from Senge (1990) have influenced schools to embrace

team learning rather than learning in isolation as a strategy for improving school effectiveness. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) provided further proof of the benefits of collaborative cultures in schools such as increased teacher efficacy, teacher job satisfaction, and student performance. The idea of teachers learning more effectively in the presence of others was supported by subsequent studies (Donahoe, 1993; Fullan & Hargreaves, 1993; Hord, 1997). When teachers came together, they learned from one another (Dufour, 2001) and encouraged each other to learn. When teachers collaborated, they experienced a more productive and satisfying work environment (Fullan & Hargreaves) and a strong feeling of efficacy was reported by teachers who participated in professional learning communities (Hord). Furthermore, a higher level of trust and morale was experienced when teachers work together in teams (Barth, 1990). As teacher satisfaction with collaborative learning increases, teachers become more effective and students learn more (Boyer, 1995).

#### Role of the Professional learning communities

Professional learning communities are referred to as communities of practice and can be characterized by staff members that work collaboratively, reflectively, and from an inquiry-based perspective to improve teaching practice and student achievement (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). In this regard, Sparks (2002) mentioned that a learning community's purpose is to "create sustained professional learning and collaboration in schools for the benefit of all students" (p. 62).

Much clearer understanding of the professional learning community concept can be gained through a closer examination of some of the terms within that label. "Learning", for example, highlights one of the most important components of the concept. Learning is

maintained as an active and ongoing process of all staff members in the professional learning communities. Speck (1999) emphasized the learning focus of professional learning communities when she stated, “Developing schools where every aspect of the community nourishes learning and helping everyone who comes in contact with the school to contribute to that learning community are important concepts” (p. 8). The learning component of the professional learning communities is also emphasized in her definition:

A school learning community is one that promotes and values learning as an ongoing, active collaborative process with dynamic dialogue by teachers, students, staff, principal, parents, and school community to improve the quality of learning and life within the school. (p. 8)

The word ‘community’ itself provides the nature or purpose of professional learning communities. In general, the term community entails a group of people working together collaboratively to accomplish shared goals. To define community, Sergiovanni (1994) said that, “communities are collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bound to a shared set of ideas and ideals” (p. 48).

Sergiovanni (1994) described schools as communities, which he distinguished as different from organizations. He further explained, in communities the connection among stakeholders is based on commitments rather than contracts. Communities are defined by their centers of values, sentiments, and beliefs that provide the needed conditions for creating a sense of ‘we’. Where as organizations are organized into a system of hierarchies, roles, and expectations, communities rely more on norms, purposes, values, collegiality, socialization and natural interdependence. Mitchell and Sackney (2000) assented with Sergiovanni’s differentiation between learning communities and learning organizations. They stated that in a learning organization the focus is on organizational



growth, productivity, efficiency, and effectiveness, by contrast, in a learning community the ends of importance are the growth and development of the people.

To sum up, professional learning communities are having mainly two roles: first, to improve students' learning and second, to provide the opportunities for professionals to work together.

#### Implementing a Professional Learning Community through Collaborative Process

Dufour and Eaker (1998) identified mission and vision as the foundation of the school as a learning community. They said "...vision instills an organization with a sense of direction" (p. 62). "An effective vision statement articulates a vivid picture of the organization's future that is so compelling that a school's members will be motivated to work together to make it a reality" (p. 62). Visions come with actions. Perez (1999), saw the development of a vision as the first step toward higher performance and improvement. If the vision is "stated clearly, displayed prominently, and communicated frequently" (p. 17) then it shows the direction of the learning community. Frase and Hetzel (1990) also asserted that once the vision has been articulated clearly and communicated to all of the stakeholders, the next phase in the development of an effective and progressive learning community is just beginning.

According to Eaker and Huffman (2002), a professional learning community's goal statements must be linked directly to the vision. Adding to this, Hopkins (2001) mentioned that reaching consensus on what goals to strive for involves a great deal of collaborative planning. Development planning is not an easy task for learning communities. The long-term benefits to the learning community do not exist in the plan itself, but in the *process* of collective planning where differences are resolved and a basis

for action is created (p. 102). Once goals are set, then action plans for the professional learning community can be developed.

Some key components of successful, effective learning communities include: future-oriented, shared decision making, focus on learning, data driven, ongoing assessment, reflective and utilize effective teaching strategies (Eaker et al., 2002). One of the essential activities of professional learning communities is professional collaboration. Professional learning organizations require teachers and principals working collaboratively and in teams to seek learning, and act on their learning collaboration is widely embraced as an idea; however, in practice, teachers and administrators continue to operate in isolation (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1991). That is why a professional learning community requires a diversified leadership style.

Saskatchewan Learning (2003) termed this as an adaptive leadership style that reflected and embraced a shared decision making model, in a sense, a leader of leaders. Fullan and Hargreaves (1993) and Lambert (1998) agreed that the process of developing a professional learning community begins with understanding the existing culture of a school. A principal should be aware of a school's culture before attempting to change it. The complexities of a school's culture and its micro politics must be understood by the principal in order to get things done (Achinstein, 2002).

Developing a learning community requires employing methods that encourage the joint efforts of teachers, administrators, staff, students, parents, and other members of the community. A learning community cannot function in isolation, the norm for many schools. Collaboration within a learning community means people working together,

breaking down the walls of isolation built by solitary efforts of individuals inside and outside the school (Speck, 1999).

McDonald (1996) emphasized the difficulty of transforming the organizational context of learning from direct instruction in isolated classrooms to the community of learners. It is the exception, not the rule, for a school to have a culture of collaborative sharing about students, curriculum, instructional and assessment practices or other critical educational issues. School must discard the common practices that isolate elements of the learning community into discrete cells (McDonald, 1996). A principal endeavoring to create a community of learners must provide support, motivation, and encouragement as key parts of the collaborative process. According to Speck (1996), there are six key elements of a collaborative process. These are: 1) developing collegiality, 2) treating teachers as professionals, 3) shared leadership/ decision making, 4) involving parents and community, 5) Dialogue and reflecting, and 6) planning and evaluating (p. 106).

### *Developing Collegiality*

The relationships among the principal, teachers, and other members in schools build collegiality. Barth (1990) pointed out that collegiality should not be confused with congeniality. 'Congeniality' refers to the friendliness people manifest in social settings such as chitchat about a weekend trip, a ballgame, or a new recipe. In contrast, collegiality entails high levels of collaboration among members of a group, such as schools principal, teachers, and staff members. It is characterized by mutual respect, shared work values, cooperation, and specific conversations about teaching and learning (Sergiovanni, 1995). Little's research (as cited in Barth, 1990) found that norms of collegiality were developed when principals clearly:

- Communicated their expectations for teacher collaboration.
- Provided a model for collegiality by working firsthand with teachers in improving the school
- Rewarded expressions of collegiality among teachers by providing recognition, release time, money, and other support resources.
- Protected teachers who were willing to go against expected norms of privatism and isolation by engaging in collegial behaviors. (p. 33)

Barth (1990) discussed the importance of collegiality for a school to become a community of learners. He noted:

I think that the problem of how to change things from “I” to “we,” of how to bring a good measure of collegiality and relatedness to adults who work in schools, is one that belongs on the national agenda of school improvement – at the top. It belongs at the top because the relationships among adults in schools are the basis, the precondition, the sine qua non that allow, energize, and sustain all other attempts at school improvement. Unless adults talk with another, very little will change. (p. 32)

Barth’s comment emphasized the importance of collaborative relationship among the stakeholders of the professional learning community. So it is the relationship and quality of discussions about learning and the learners that are essential if a school is to become a professional learning community. The principal must constantly assess through leadership opportunities the development of a collaborative school culture (Speck, 1999). Strong leadership by principals seems to be important because of their broad responsibilities for overseeing the atmosphere of their schools, making and coordinating initiatives, and generating a democratic framework and process that strongly binds the organization (Joyce, Wolf, & Calhoun, 1993). Deal and Peterson (1990), also suggested that within the process of collegial culture-building, a principal and staff can transform a school population from a collection of ‘I’s’ to a learning community of ‘We’s’. Culture building is an important leadership quality of a principal, and as a cultural norm, is essential for the establishment of a professional learning community.

### *Treating Teachers as Professionals*

As professional educators, teachers and principal work together to improve the school's teaching and learning practices. A principal, being the leader of the professional learning community, must base all actions on the premise that all teachers are professionals and treat them as such. Keeping this professional attitude and creating a collegial culture are essential in the collaborative process for establishing trust, respect, and reflection within the professional learning community (Speck, 1999). In this regard, Dufour (2003), suggested that when a principal has moral purpose, his or her next mission is to inform and explain professional learning to the entire teaching staff. If teachers do not see the benefits of collaborative work, they will not participate completely. Most teachers desire to meet together, discuss practice, plan new strategies, and dissect past performances; but the desire to collaborate is not matched with the practice of collaboration (Leonard & Leonard, 2001). In this case, principal should play an important role in treating the teachers as professionals and invite them to work collaboratively.

Quality relationships are the heart of a professional learning community and it can only fully emerge in an environment of trust (Lambert, 1998; Levey & Levey, 1995; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). In the same tone, Lambert, spoke of the importance of "authentic relationships fostered by personal conversations, frequent dialogue, shared work, and shared responsibilities" (p. 79). If staff members interact and work with one another, they come to understand and respect each others' experiences, values, and aspirations. Mitchell and Sackney, established this as effective climate –valuing the contributions of colleagues, and inviting them to be participants – as significant in

acknowledging an individual's opinions, ideas, and contributions. Fullan (1992) also challenged principals to support and promote this interactive professionalism and believed it to be essential in helping teachers understand, gain insight into and improve their own teaching.

Rosenholtz and Kyle (1984) described the following as classic elements of professionalism that demonstrate the centrality of the collaborative ethic for a learning community:

- Professionals share technical knowledge that is developed through professional training.
- Professionals determine what and how work is to be done, and goals to be attained.
- Professionals supervise, review and evaluate their own colleagues with a view toward quality control. (p. 15)

Teacher professionalism is essential for the development of a working, collegial professional learning community, and it is the principal's responsibility to foster and provide opportunities for teachers to understand and practice professionalism.

#### *Shared Leadership/ Decision Making*

Within effective school learning communities, the principal empowers teachers and staff members to lead and share in decision making to develop curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Speck, 1999). Leadership in a professional learning community does not rest with the principal alone. Moller (2004), found in her Southwest Educational Development Laboratory's Creating Communities of Continuous Inquiry and Improvement project (CCCII) that principals of schools that functioned as learning communities saw it "as their responsibility to build the capacity of teachers to take on these [leadership] roles" (p. 145).

Sergiovanni (1994) described the principal's role in developing shared leadership in learning communities as bringing out the best in others, devoting themselves to serving the school's purposes, exercising their power to work with others. Sergiovanni defended the position that leadership in a learning community is situational, not positional, and that the establishment of this orientation is a critical element in the creation of a learning community. Murphy (1994), identified sharing leadership as having two main components:

- Delegating authentic leadership opportunities to others;
- Employing collaborative decision-making processes in the school (pp. 25-26).

Sharing leadership has been found to contribute to greater teacher participation, commitment, and efficacy. Short and Rinehard (as cited in Short & Greer, 2002) described how teacher involvement in shared leadership activities produced the following empowering dimensions:

- It heightened teachers' involvement in decision-making;
- It provided increased opportunities for teachers' professional growth;
- It heightened teachers' status; and,
- It increased teachers' self-efficacy, autonomy, and ability to influence the work of school (pp. 150-153).

Moller (2004) found that schools, characterized as having a high level of readiness for shared leadership were exemplified by the following qualities:

- They had emerging teacher leadership that was based on expertise, and involved a large base of individuals;
- They had an established, but fluid (changing as needed) structure for shared decision-making, and a history of shared decision-making in the school;
- They had principals who had well established and trusting relationships with staffs that viewed shared leadership as a tool in working towards the shared purpose of the school; and,
- They had principals who fostered supportive conditions for shared leadership by exhibiting the qualities of being listener, having an understanding of

teaching and learning, and consistently following through on decisions made in the school. (p. 142)

Principals should take the initiatives for pursuing these qualities for shared leadership or decision making in schools.

Hord (2004) suggested that the principal's role in the implementation of a professional learning community model represents more than a list of tasks or activities. It is essential to understand that teacher perceptions of a principal's actions and behaviors are a determining factor of whether or not those practices will be effective.

Professional learning communities exist when an administrator's actions are positively perceived and reciprocated by the teachers on staff. The principal's role is a critical one, orchestrating a delicate interaction between support and pressure, encouraging teachers to take on new roles while themselves letting go of old paradigms regarding the role of the school administrator. ... The weight of responsibility for improvement and renewal is shared equally with the faculty, and engages the voices of all professional staff. (p. 56)

### *Involving Parents and Community*

Fullan (1997) noted the importance of community when observing that the research is abundantly clear: nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and families/community working together in partnership.... These forms of [parent] involvement do not happen by accident or even by invitation. They happen by explicit strategic intervention ( pp. 42-43). This implies that principals must invite parents and others in the community to become active partners in the learning process at school, at home, and in the community. In this regard, Glickman (1993) gave some insights into the importance of parental and community involvement:

A school, with its charter, has involved parents and community members in decision-making. It has developed a covenant of learning principles and, through critical study, it has sampled additional parental and community responses to proposed actions. Those parents and community members who get involved typically become strong advocates of change and help school personnel inform



the larger community. People involved in the process tend to reason more than those who are not involved about benefits for all children. (p. 105)

Parents, a child's first and primary teachers, can reinforce the work of the school learning community. Recent research has pointed to the fact that improved parental involvement is closely related to significant gains in several measures of school and classroom success. Renihan and Renihan (1994) noted that studies had found that parental involvement is related to decreased absenteeism, improved achievement and improved perceptions of school and classroom climate. In recent years, it has been found that there are multiple benefits to meaningful parental and community involvement in the learning community. Darch, Miao, and Shippen (2004) found that parental involvement not only increased student grade scores and motivation to complete homework, but it resulted in a more positive student attitude to school, and increased student attendance. A recent MetLife survey of teachers indicated that over 80% of teachers believed that many motivational, behavioral and academic problems of students can be resolved with family support (Tam & Heng, 2005).

The entire community can benefit from education. With the involvement of the community, the school learning community can gain from rich resources of expertise, experience, application, and opportunities for community service. Principals and teachers must understand the significance of community involvement and decide how to connect the school learning community with the larger community surrounding the school (Speck, 1999). In summing up, a learning community cannot exist in isolation; it should be linked with the outside world to meet the demands of the twenty-first century.

*Planning, Reflecting, and Evaluating*

Speck (1999) noted that teachers and principals should collaboratively plan, reflect, and evaluate the practice and progress the learning community is making with regard to learning for students and themselves. Lieberman (1995) emphasized the importance of reflective practice in a learning community:

Transforming schools into learning organizations, in which people work together to solve problems collectively, is more than a question of inserting a new curriculum or a new program. It also involves thinking through how the content and processes of learning can be redefined in ways that engage students and teachers in the active pursuit of learning goals; it involves a joining of experimental learning and content knowledge. Teaching as telling, the model that has dominated pedagogy and the consequent organization of schooling to date, is being called into question as professional learning for teachers increasingly connects to this reconsidered view of schools. (p.592)

According to Resnick (1987) and Schon (1991), learning and organizational theorists have found that people learn best through active involvement and through thinking about, and becoming articulate about, what they have learned and then reflecting on practice. Lieberman (1995) saw this as an expanded view of professional learning, both personal and professional, both individual and collective, both inquiry-based and technical. Speck (1999) further stated that evaluating processes such as reviewing programs, materials, and use of budgets should also reflect the participation of all members of the school learning community: teachers, students, parents and the community. Darling-Hammond (1995) reinforced the necessity for principals to rethink practices:

To fulfill these new roles and expectations for leadership, however, administrators need to understand what the conceptions of teaching and learning that motivate the nation's reform agenda look like in classrooms and how these visions of practice relate to teachers' opportunity to learn. (p. 603)

Communication implies dialogue and, as Daloz, Keen, Keen, and Parks (1999) observed, “the practice of dialogue is central to meaning-making, ... dialogue is the central dynamic of human development” (p. 109). Dialogue facilitates the sharing of information. As Morse (1998) pointed out “the purpose ... of dialogue is to move discussion from what ‘I’ think to what ‘we’ think (p. 232). Dialogue helps in building a school community where cooperation is easier to achieve.

For the establishment of the learning community, principals need to understand the conception of the nation’s reform agenda. Moreover principals need to nurture all these processes by providing time and encouraging these reflective practices.

#### *Common Vision*

Effective leaders, in the collaborative process, motivate and encourage all the stakeholders to establish a common vision. In this regard, Speck (1999) stated that

Finally, the school learning community must establish a common vision based on the other elements of the collaborative process: fostering collegiality, shared leadership and decision making, teacher professionalism, planning, reflecting, and evaluating and parental and community involvement. (p. 117)

Speck’s comment implied that establishing a common vision is the final step of the implementation of a learning community. He further stated that the common vision develops as members in the schoolhouse work together, formulating it from their varied beliefs about education and points of view.

#### Challenges to Collaboration

Leonard and Leonard (1999) mentioned that the majority of teachers considered ‘collaboration-by-design’, i.e. that which is undertaken in formal structures such as school committees, to have minimal effect in terms of promoting innovation and program improvement. Furthermore, in an examination of the collaborative process in the

implementation of team teaching and committees at an elementary school, Leonard (1997, 1999b) revealed a number of barriers or challenges to collaboration. These barriers or challenges, centered on issues of teacher efficacy, time constraints, fragmented vision, competitiveness, and conflict avoidance. Other studies of collaboration addressed similar findings (Louis & Kruse, 1995; DiPardo, 1997; Knop et al., 1997; Kruse & Louis, 1997; Welch, 1998). Moreover, burnout, not sharing the workload, insufficient budget allocations, and limited resources (Knop et al. 1997), feeling threatened and reluctant to open up one's classrooms (Allen & Calhoun, 1998), and lack of support from administration (Lehr, 1999) all constitute potential barriers to collaboration.

Fear of being ridiculed or judged is another barrier in collaboration. In this aspect, Anderson (1999) said that teachers may fear they will be judged as incompetent if they ask for help or they may have a feeling of inefficacy. In the same vein, Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) commented that some teachers choose to avoid collaboration because they are insecure and they fear their incompetence will be unmasked. They further explained, in some cases, teachers may not want to share ideas with other teachers because they do not want others to steal their ideas or they may believe every teacher should have to earn their own stripes as a professional.

According to Boyer (1995), the structures of schools and school systems worked against collaboration among teachers. Hierarchical control, directive leadership, and unilateral decision-making were part of what Mitchell (1994) referred to as 'organizational learning disabilities'. Mitchell observed that when new programs were imposed on teachers by the superior administrators; teachers did not take part willingly to implement those programs. Multiple demands were placed on schools without support

structures, political commitment, or attention to evaluation and feedback. The response of school systems was to appliqué changes onto schools rather than intertwining new ways of doing things into the cultural fabric of the school (Donahoe, 1993). In this regard, Dufour (1997) also mentioned that the response to public demand for school development was met by quick fix solutions, recycled ideas, or faddism where new solutions are set up without the connection to earlier training.

Lack of trust is one of the worst de-motivating factors to collaboration. Donahoe (1993) observed that sometimes in schools, collaborative efforts are avoided because there is a lack of trust among stakeholders or there is staff discord. Some teachers may fear individual differences may lead to conflict when they meet together; therefore, they choose to avoid clash by keeping distance from other staff. In this regard, Achinstein (2001) said that when psychological safety is threatened, diversity is not encouraged, and collaborative efforts are not productive. Leonard and Leonard (2001), in a study of 96 Western Canadian schools, concluded there was a need for teachers to build trusting collegial relationships and to develop proficiencies in conflict resolution.

Constant staff changes might act as a barrier to collaboration. In this issue, Donahoe (1993) explained that sometimes over dependence on principals or other staff members, structures and habits might cause the disruption in the collaborative efforts towards the implementation of professional learning communities. Similarly, Copland (2003) mentioned that transition or turnover of key leaders, both principals and teachers, creates a challenge to sustainability for schools engaged in implementing professional learning communities.

For meaningful collaboration to occur, Marzano (2003) suggested that schools must stop pretending that merely presenting teachers with state standards or district curriculum guides will guarantee that all students have access to a common curriculum. Even school districts that devote tremendous time and energy to designing the intended curriculum often pay little attention to the implemented curriculum and even less to the attained curriculum.

Lack of clear expectations or lack of shared leadership might be the barrier to collaboration. In this regard, Leonard and Leonard (2001) mentioned that principals must have clear expectations for staff to collaborate because collaboration was unlikely to occur otherwise. If teachers were left to their own resources, or if they were simply invited to collaborate without principal's support, they seldom chose to work together. In fact, Dufour (2001) stated that collaboration by invitation never works. Lambert (1998) also stated that some principals feared loss of power; therefore, they did not empower teachers to take leadership roles that would have made a school less dependent on the leadership of the principal, on the other hand, some principals stood in the way of improvement because they did not demonstrate leadership.

Many researchers agreed that managing time for collaborative effort is a challenge in the implementation of professional learning communities (Hord, 1997; Leonard & Leonard, 2001; Mitchell, 1995). To elaborate this, Abdul-Haqq (1996) explained that meeting after school is made difficult by extra curricular activities and the weight of teachers' personal and professional responsibilities. Teachers who sacrificed personal time experienced burnout and felt guilty about taking time away from their class during the day when collaborative opportunities were presented. North American schools

face a condition Donahoe (1993) referred to as ‘the crowding of time’. While teachers in Asian schools were scheduled to teach for only 60% of the school day, teachers in North America faced a lack of flexibility in scheduling because they taught most of the school day with very little time to collaborate, plan, or reflect on their practice (Stevenson, 1992).

For generations, teachers have worked in a state of professional individualism with many formative underlying beliefs and attitudes that have developed over the years within the profession’s culture (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1993). In the same tone, DuFour (2004) stated that few educators publicly assert that working in isolation is the best strategy for improving schools. They give reasons why it is impossible for them to work together: “We just can’t find the time.” “Not everyone on the staff has endorsed the idea.” “We need more training in collaboration” (p. 8). But the number of schools that have created truly collaborative cultures proves that such barriers are not insurmountable. As Roland Barth (1991) wrote,

Are teachers and administrators willing to accept the fact that they are part of the problem? ... God didn’t create self-contained classrooms, 50-minute periods, and subjects taught in isolation. We did – because we find working alone safer than and preferable to working together. (pp. 126-127)

In the final analysis, building the collaborative culture of a professional learning community is a question of will. A group of staff members who are determined to work together will definitely find a way.

#### Issues of Sustainability

To define sustainability, Copland (2003) stated that, “Becoming sustainable meant schools needed to find ways to embed their reform work, and especially their inquiry process, into the culture of the school” (p. 393). How do principles guide schools’

efforts to sustain the professional learning community model until it becomes deeply embedded in the culture of the school? To answer this question, DuFour (2004) suggested focusing on three main ideas:

- *Ensure that students learn.* Schools that are truly committed to the concept of learning for each student will stop subjecting struggling students to a haphazard education lottery.
- *Establish a culture of collaboration.* Schools should provide time and encourage all stakeholders to work collaboratively.
- *Keep focusing on Result.* Of course, this focus on continual improvement and results requires educators to change traditional practices and revise prevalent assumptions. Educators must begin to embrace data as a useful indicator of progress. (pp. 9-10)

In order to implement and sustain professional learning communities, keeping the vision of the school at the forefront is an effective practice. In this regard, Roberts and Pruitt (2003) described a number of practices that leaders engage in to contribute in sustaining the vision. They demonstrated a personal commitment to the school's shared vision through consistent acts of shared leadership. They provided opportunities for learning community members to share and reflect upon their vision related to teaching and learning activities. They afforded members of the professional learning community opportunities to make plans to translate the vision into practice. They consistently talked about school's vision and goals in different venues with all stakeholders. Principals ensured that existing programs and practices are in alignment with the implicit direction of the vision statement. These principals publicly acknowledged the activities of learning community members who develop and carry out the vision. These individuals regularly reviewed the vision with staff and revised as necessary. DuFour (1999) also regarded the "identification, promotion, and protection of shared vision and values as one of the principal's most important responsibilities" (p. 14).



Morrissey and Cowan (2004) described key functions of the principal's management role in a professional learning community as providing time and support for staff for collaboration, and the provision of information and data to teachers to use in their practice. One of the primary management functions of the professional learning community principal is ensuring that the necessary resources are available for collaborative practice to be initiated and sustained among the staff. Hord, 2004; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Rallis and Goldring, 2000; and Speck, 1999, agreed that providing time for collaboration is one of the most crucial resources. Rallis and Goldring asserted that principals must find innovative ways to redesign schedules and traditional structures for regular collaborative time among groups of teachers that is focused on student learning. Rallis and Goldring also suggested that principals ensure that technology is readily available for teachers as a tool to increase communication.

One of the most critical functions that principals play in developing and sustaining the leadership capacity of the learning community is to create conditions for regular and on-going professional learning. Regarding building leadership capacity, Copland (2003) said that creating new structures to support changes at school can provide a means for building leadership capacity, but the ability to keep key people in those structures is equally important.

To sustain professional learning communities, principals must "provide regular opportunities for educators to work together on issues of teaching and learning" (King, 2002, p. 63). This contention is corroborated by Uchiyama and Wolf (2002) who asserted "principals must ... create an environment in which teachers collaborate, exchange ideas, and develop tight collegial connections – and in which principals share governance with

their staff members” (p. 81). Valeriel (2005) conducted a study in four schools to examine educational change and its sustainability. This study explored that schools and districts can bring about student achievement and sustain that achievement if they are willing to examine their practices and embrace change. Valeriel mainly focused on teacher leadership, principal leadership and district leadership style. The result of his study also shows that strong teacher leadership was apparent in each of the four successful sample schools, principals at these schools were more likely to create time for teachers to collaborate and to provide them with structured support, and district leaders in these schools provided more services than their counterparts in unsuccessful schools did.

To implement and sustain professional learning communities, DuFour (2001) suggested that passion is critical in this process for two reasons. First of all, the process is inherently messy. It never runs flawlessly and we never get it right the first time. The difficult times are inevitable and can be overcome only through the tenacity and persistence that are byproducts of passion. The second reason why passion is so critical is that most educators enter their profession because they hope to make a difference in the lives of kids. They tell an ongoing story with specific examples of how the collective efforts of the staff are helping students overcome obstacles and achieve their dreams. When people feel successful, when they feel that they are making a difference, when they feel a sense of connectedness, they will put forth the effort essential to sustaining the improvement process through tough times. Therefore, leaders must appeal to passion if they expect people to persist. He further mentioned that what the PLC model offers is a process, not a program. This model offers a process for addressing the very difficult and

challenging task of implementing and sustaining initiatives that help all kids achieve at higher levels and help all teachers become the very best teachers they can be.

The challenge for principals in successfully implementing and sustaining a professional learning community is to address the cultural change that all stakeholders must work together in a collaborative way, while at the same time supporting and directing structural changes. Regarding this, Fullan (2001) described that successful principal aims first at addressing cultural change within the school, having structural change occur secondarily, as members of the collaborative culture discover that traditional structures no longer meet their needs, and inhibit the sustainability and growth of the emerging culture of collaboration. To support this, Schlechty (as cited in Cosner & Peterson, 2003) also stated “structural change that is not accompanied by cultural change will eventually be overwhelmed by the culture, for it is in the culture that any organization finds meaning and stability” (p. 12).

Hargreaves (as cited in Marge, 2006) stated that the invitation to make a change can frighten or thrill us, bore us or challenge us. In education, where reform has been a persistent part of the landscape but has only rarely resulted in change that endures, educators often tend to adopt the attitude that “this too will pass” (p. 7). His research on high-performing schools gives credibility to his view that positive, lasting change is possible. Here is a capsule list of his seven characteristics:

- *Depth.* To sustain education reforms, we must focus on learning that matters and that results in measurable achievement.
- *Endurance.* To make change last over time requires that reforms not be linked to one person’s bright ideas. If you want continuity, you must distribute leadership to many.
- *Breadth.* If many people have brought into your new practices, the practices will not collapse when you leave.

- *Justice.* As part of a system, every school must consider its effects on every other school. Partnership and collective accountability can drive schools to work together.
- *Diversity.* Putting faith in one single program as a way to close the achievement gap will yield only a short-term fix. He recommended relying on diverse talents, programs, and expertise.
- *Resourcefulness.* The supply of energy is not bottomless. Hargreaves noted, we need to attract the next generation to school leadership.
- *Conservation.* Good changes occur when leaders take time to understand the past. (p. 7)

In conclusion, to sustain professional learning communities, keeping the shared vision of the school at the forefront is very crucial. In professional learning communities, instead of traditional teaching, students' learning should be given priority. In order to sustain this model, a culture of collaboration should be established and leadership should be distributed. Educators need to focus on results and data driven decision-making for continuous improvement. Professional learning community model is not a fad like any other programs. It is a complex, and continuous process. This process does not offer a quick-fix solution. Therefore, principals must appeal to passion if they expect people to persist.

### Summary

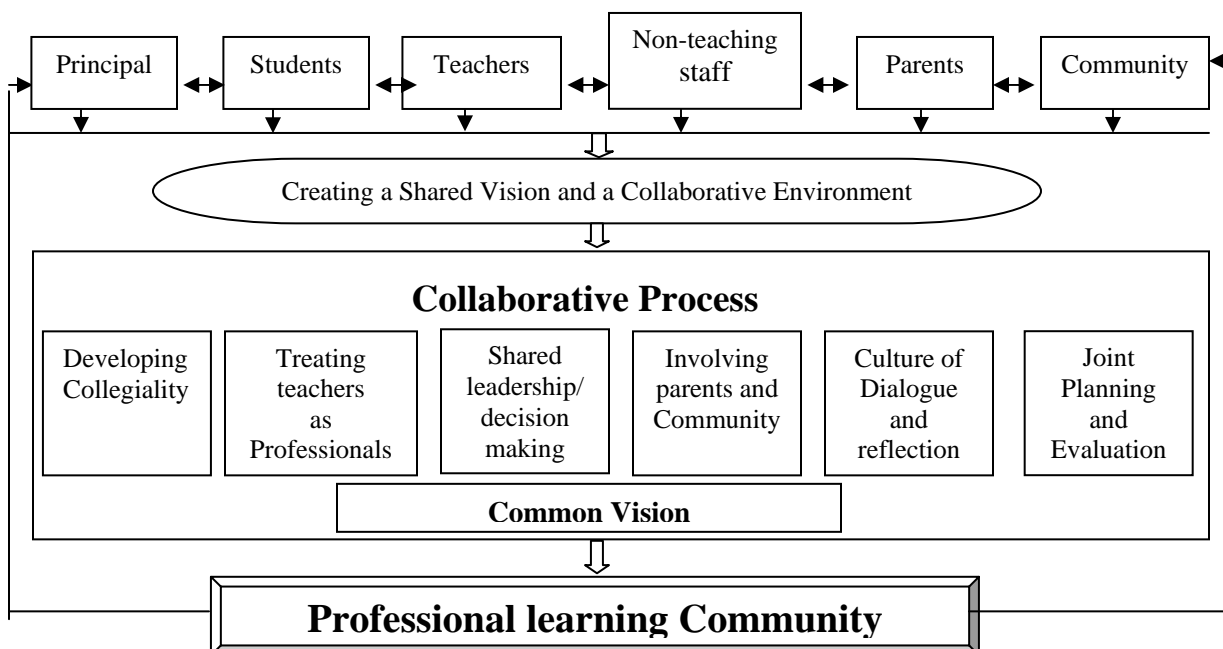
In the synthesis of this literature review, it emerged that a professional learning community is the end result of a continuous process of a systematic building of collegiality and a community of learners in an atmosphere of ongoing learning cycle (as it is described in figure 1). Principals play the most important role in this process. In this regard, Speck (1999) noted that

Today, the principal is not the only educational manager, leader, and educator in the school. The creation of a learning community requires the principal to reexamine, redefine, and expand the multiple roles as principals. (p. 16)

This quotation implies the importance of principals' role in the development of a professional learning community. She further stated that the variety of roles that principals play is dynamic and fluid with the melding of educational, management, leadership, and the balance of the inner person skills, providing overall leadership for building a school into a learning community for all students.

Principals who help staff develop and articulate a shared vision; encourage shared values, beliefs, and attributes related to teaching and learning; and then work together toward school improvement are operating on a different approach to power and authority. This shift from a control oriented leadership function, to a facilitative function, is a necessary ingredient in the development of a professional learning community. In the process of building an effective and progressive learning community, principals need to establish a strong foundation. Developing a mission and vision, goals, and action plans is not an individual task. The responsibility for this development is a collective one, shared by the stakeholders who have a keen interest in the well-being of the learning community (Fullan & Hargreaves, 1997). The role of the principals therefore is one of activating and motivating stakeholders to create a collegial environment as key part of the collaborative process.

It is essential for the principals to provide support, motivate and encourage the stakeholders to develop a common vision based on the other elements of the collaborative process: developing collegiality, treating teachers as professionals, sharing leadership/decision making, involving parents and community in a culture of dialogue



*Figure 2.1. Conceptual Framework*

and reflection, and engaging in joint planning and evaluation. Ultimately, a common vision leads to the establishment of a professional learning community.

This is a continuous process, so to sustain it, principals along with the members of the learning community need to revisit the process through continuous dialogue, reflection, planning and evaluation to adapt any necessary changes. It is also important to remember that with hard work and commitment it is possible to overcome some of the barriers or challenges of the professional learning communities.

## CHAPTER THREE

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of principals concerning the implementation of professional learning communities at the school level. In this chapter, the research design, selection of participants, the instrument, validity of the instrument, pilot-testing, the method of data analysis, presentation of the data and ethical considerations are presented.

#### Research Design

Research can be classified into two categories of study depending on the nature of the data collected. Quantitative research and qualitative research are terms often used to describe these two distinct research approaches. A qualitative research method was employed in this study. Marvasti (2004) defined qualitative research as a form of study that “provides detailed description and analysis of the quality, or the substance, of the human experience” (p. 7). In this regard, Cresswell (1998) advised the “use of the qualitative study because of the need to present a detailed view of [a] topic” (p. 17).

Some characteristics of a qualitative research include: research is conducted in a natural setting with the researcher as the key data collection instrument, the data collected is descriptive as opposed to numerical, focus is placed on the process rather than the product, the perspectives of the participants are considered essential and the data are analyzed inductively (Tuckman, 1994). In this study, the researcher collected the data by semi-structured interviews in the offices of the participating principals, the collected data were descriptive and latter on these data were analyzed through the inductive process.

## Data Collection

### *Selection of Participants*

According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (2003), the sample size in qualitative studies is typically small. They further stated, “In purposeful sampling the goal is to select cases that are likely to be ‘information rich’ with respect to the purposes of the study” (p. 165). Consistent with this, this researcher selected six principals, four females and two males, from two school divisions. The selection of specific principals was made using a reputational approach. Recommendations from university professors and the insight of senior administration in the school divisions were used to select six experienced principals. They were principals whose schools had implemented professional learning communities and whom the researcher believed would be ready to share their perceptions and experiences in implementing professional learning communities.

The first contact with the participants inviting their participation in the study was by e-mail and telephone. Attached to the e-mail was the letter of transmittal explaining the purpose of the study, how the findings would be put to use and the ethical considerations involved. When the consent was received, personal interviews were scheduled for times and locations mutually agreeable to both the researcher and the participant. At the first meeting, the nature, purpose and significance of the study were further outlined. The researcher presented to each participant a consent form outlining the intent of the study, the structure of the interview and their rights as participants. Participants were assured that confidentiality and anonymity would be observed.



### *The Instrument*

The semi-structured interview was used as instrument in this research. An interview is a purposeful conversation, usually between two people but sometimes involving more (Morgan, 1988), that is directed by one in order to get information from the other. In the hands of the qualitative researcher, the interview takes on a shape of its own (Burgess, 1984; Fontana & Frey, 1994). Bogdan and Biklen (2003), further stated, “The goal of understanding how the person you are interviewing thinks is at the center of the interview.” (p. 98). To describe the importance of interviewing, Borg and Gall (1983) noted,

the interview situation usually permits much greater depth than other methods of collecting research data ... the skilled interviewer, through the careful motivation of the subject and maintenance of rapport can obtain information that the subject would probably not reveal under any other circumstances. (p. 436)

Bogdan and Biklen also advocated this semi-structured open-ended interview process for a number of reasons. They stated,

The first is that it lets the subject in on the study. It is a personal and inviting approach. In addition, it sets the interview up in such a way that it establishes the subject as the one who knows and the researcher as the one who has come to learn. Third, it tells the interviewee that you respect his or her ideas and opinions. You do not just want them to tell their story but instead are encouraging them to share their own ideas and observations. (p. 99)

The good fit between all these aspects of qualitative interview and the purpose of the study was the main reason behind choosing this qualitative semi-structured interview as the instrument for this research. In this regard, Gall, Borg, and Gall (2003) described the adaptability of the semi-structured interview that allows for the open-ended exploration of a topic, and an opportunity to probe deeper into identified themes. Seidman (1998) also supported this instrument by stating that this format will fit well

with the purpose of these interviews, which is to understand people's perceptions of their experience and the meaning they make of that experience.

Based on the six main research questions the researcher developed 14 interview questions for the participants (see Appendix B). They were developed according to the major areas of process and dynamics of implementation, challenges and issues of professional learning communities.

All interviews took place in the offices of the participating principals so as to provide the natural environment for the interviewee. Each interview lasted between 50 to 90 minutes and recorded on audiotape. Seidman recommended 90 minutes for an interview, because "rather than seeming too long, it's long enough to make [respondents] feel they are being taken seriously" (p. 14).

According to Glesne and Peshkin (1992), in qualitative research the "researcher becomes the main instrument as he or she observes, asks questions, and interacts with research participants" (p. 6). Keeping this in mind, the researcher did not necessarily follow the order in which interview questions were arranged on paper. Each interviewee was given a chance to ask or add anything he or she felt relevant to this research. All interviews were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed.

Copies of the interview transcripts were sent to the principals for checking. Principals had the opportunity to add, modify, or delete any parts of their transcripts before the data were analyzed and used in this research. Principals approved the use of their transcripts data by signing a Transcript/Data Release Form. This Transcript/Data release Form was included in Appendix A. This process of checking provided an

opportunity for selected principals to recall new facts or include new perceptions that might aid in the researcher's interpretation.

#### *Validity of the Instrument*

According to Gall, Borg, and Gall (1996), content validity is based on the extent to which a measurement tool reflects the specific intended domain of content. In the design of the instrument for this research, the researcher designed the questions relevant to the principals' perceptions associated with elements of visioning, building relationships with staff members, and establishing a collaborative culture as they relate to the implementation of a professional learning community. Some of the questions were regarding the challenges to collaboration and issues of sustainability in the implementation process.

Face validity was determined in two ways. First, by discussing them with the researcher's advisor. Second, by piloting the instrument with two principals.

*Pilot-Testing the Questionnaire.* Gall, Borg, and Gall (2003) advised "You should carry out a thorough pilot test of the questionnaire before using it in your study. The pilot test should include a sample of individuals from the population from which you plan to draw your respondents" (p. 230). In this regard, Cone & Foster (1999) also stated, "pilot work is important because what you plan to do may look good on paper but not work very well when you actually try it out with real subjects" (p. 201). Consistent with this advice, after designing the interview questions for this research, the researcher piloted the interview questions with two principals in the month of November and December, 2005. As a result of the pilot the following changes were made:

- Based on their feedback about the clarity and wording of the questions, modifications were made to ensure brevity.
- The questions were also re-examined by a faculty member in the Educational Administration Department, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan.

### Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of principals concerning the implementation of professional learning communities at the school level. To that end, a process of interpretative analysis was used. Gall, Borg, and Gall (2003) defined interpretative analysis as a process used in studying qualitative data to identify constructs, themes, and patterns that can be used to describe and explain the phenomenon being studied.

The data collected from the interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to provide a clear understanding of the underlying themes using reflective analysis from a hermeneutical perspective. Gall, Borg, and Gull (2003) described the hermeneutical researcher as one who carefully examines and then re-examines all the data that have been collected.

Seidman (1998) suggested that analysis begin with the reduction of words, sentences, and paragraph to what is most important. Seidman emphasized that:

Reduction the data be done inductively rather than deductively. That is, the researcher cannot address the material with a set of hypotheses to test or with a theory developed in another context to wish he or she wishes to match the data .... The researcher must come to the transcripts with an open attitude, seeking what emerges as important and of interest to the text. (pp. 99-100)

Seidman (1998) recommended that after the data is reduced it should be organized into categories. Seidman further expressed the notion that the researcher then searches for relating threads or patterns among the excerpts within those categories, and for associations between the various categories that might be called themes. As this process continues, certain features of the incident should become significant to the researcher.

#### Presentation of the Data

Miles and Huberman (1994) stated that interview results are grouped according to the emergent themes. Consistent with this, the data from the interviews were presented thematically according to each research question in turn.

#### Ethical Considerations

Ethical guidelines as outlined by the University of Saskatchewan's Ethics Review Board Committee were followed. The researcher took all the necessary safety measures to protect the anonymity of participants. The researcher attempted to maintain anonymity through the use of pseudonyms for participants and the schools that were studied. Data collection was initiated only after the Application for Approval of Research Protocol was approved by the Ethics Review Board (see Appendix A). Before approaching any potential participants, permission was sought from their administrative superiors. After the approval of their senior administration, participants were informed of the nature and purpose of the study. It was also made clear that participation was voluntary, and participants had the right to decline or terminate their participation in the study at anytime. Interview participants were given transcripts of the interviews and given the opportunity to make any changes before the data was finally used in the study.

The researcher acknowledged the elements of subjectivity in the literature. To emphasize this notion, Stake (1995) stated, “subjectivity is not seen as a failing needing to be eliminated but as an essential element of understanding” (p. 45). In this regard, Kvale (1996) also pointed out that interviewing is neither an objective nor subjective method – its essence is intersubjective interaction” (p. 66).

In fact, there were no known risks in participating in this research. Interview audiotapes and transcripts will be stored in a secured place in the College of Education, Department of Educational Administration. These documents will be kept for a period of five years and then destroyed.

### Summary

This chapter has described the research methodology chosen for this study. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were used as the method of data collection. The purpose of these interviews was to gather useful data about principals’ perceptions concerning the implementation of professional learning communities in their schools. Research design, procedure for participant selection, validity of the instrument, description of data analysis, and presentation of the data are provided in this chapter. Ethical implications were also considered in this chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The findings from the interview data related to the research questions outlined in Chapter One are presented in this chapter. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of principals concerning the process and dynamics of the implementation of professional learning communities. Interviews were held with six principals from two systems who had been involved in the implementation of professional learning communities in their schools. Principals were asked to describe and reflect on their experiences of the process and dynamics in the implementation of professional learning communities.

The data were collected through semi-structured interviews throughout April, 2006. The interviews were tape recorded and transcribed. Each participant was provided with the opportunity to review the transcripts and make any changes they considered necessary. The data from the approved transcripts were examined using the interpretational approach outlined in Chapter Three. From this analysis, several themes emerged. In presenting these themes, direct quotes from the participants are used. Participants are distinguished by the pseudonyms Angela, David, Martina, Amanda, James, and Christina. Very little has been added to the descriptions of the principals and their work contexts purposefully to help protect anonymity.

The presentation of the data begins with an examination of the principals' understanding the role of professional learning communities. It then continues with recurring themes about the implementation process, the relationship between shared vision and professional learning communities, the role of collaboration in the

implementation of professional learning communities, mechanisms for enhancing collaboration, tensions and barriers in the implementation process, and issues of sustainability.

The first part of this chapter presents a description of the two school systems and the participants. The next part consists of an analysis of the research findings and the final section of this chapter consists of a summary of the research findings.

### The Participants

Principals were principals representing two systems. There were four female principals and two male principals. Angela was the principal of a Kindergarten to Grade 12 School. She had been the principal of this school for four years; she had been the acting principal in this school for one and half years before that. David was the principal of a Kindergarten to Grade 8 School. He had been the principal for 22 years, but this was his second year as principal in this school. Martina was the principal of a Kindergarten to Grade 8 School. This was her first year as principal in this school but she had been a principal for seven years. Amanda had been a principal for three years; she had also served two years as Vice Principal at this school. James was the principal of a K-8 school. He was in this school as principal for four years. Christina was the principal of a K-8 school. This was her third year as principal in this school but she had been a principal for previous seven years.

### Role of Professional Learning Communities

All participants demonstrated a very high level of knowledge and understanding about professional learning communities. At the very beginning of the interviews, when participants were asked about the role of professional learning communities, respondents



mentioned mainly two roles: first, to improve students' learning and second, to provide the opportunities for professionals to work together. Regarding student learning, Martina stated, "I think there is only one role, and it is to help kids in their learning." Amanda demonstrated the same belief by stating that "the professional learning community, I feel, is basically a philosophy or a framework with the entire community working together to increase student learning". David's comment carried the same message as he stated, "The role of professional learning communities is to generate responsive teaching and learning in a school."

Regarding the opportunity to work together, Angela stated, "I think the role of professional learning communities within a school and a school community is to bring people together so that they can learn from each other and they can collaborate." In a similar vein, James articulated that, "The primary purpose is to provide teachers, and even sometimes our support staff, an opportunity to get together and discuss different things of a professional nature that are of interest to them." Christina explained, "So the role of professional learning community to me is learning about your professional practice together, whatever that might be."

From the above responses, it can be summarized that the purpose of the professional learning communities is to improve students' success, enhance collaboration among staff, and provide the opportunity to all stakeholders to learn more about professional practices.

### Implementation of Professional Learning Communities

Regarding the process and dynamics of the implementation of professional learning communities, principals in this study expressed their experiences from different

perspectives, relating to how professional learning communities were initiated at the system level and at the school level, the essential steps in the process, teaching the PLC concept to stakeholders, and facilitating collaboration amongst all stakeholders.

### *Initiation*

Most of the principals said that the concepts or practices of professional learning communities had been in their school for a long time, but were just not formally called professional learning communities. David said, "...there have been pockets of this concept (professional learning community) going on for a long time and someone finally labeled it." Martina expressed the same idea by stating, "The whole idea of a professional learning community has been around for a while, but it hasn't been taken as a priority in our system until this year." Amanda also stated,

The professional learning community model was part of the school right from the day that it opened, and we were fortunate enough to set the culture of the school, because we were a new school in 2001. So there was not any patterns, there were not any traditions to break. We could decide – make decisions – as a community with the input of parents and students and staff, and we could work together and set that philosophy right from the beginning.

The direct words of participants as recorded show that they affirm their existing practices, however all of them said that the implementation of professional learning communities was first initiated by the School Division, as the direct quotations below portray:

The idea of professional learning communities was initiated in our system; it started at the top with our director, and two assistant directors. They had gone to see Richard Dufour in Vancouver and then in Victoria, and they really liked the idea of teachers collaborating more and learning from each other and having the data and the results of student learning and that we would learn from that and try to better those results. And anyway, after they had gone to a couple of these conferences, they came back and they basically asked the principals group if anyone was interested in being on a community to look at starting a professional learning community. (Angela)

It was probably initiated by our director. Then at principals' meeting, we started dividing up into groups of interests of the principals, and each group did their research on different topics, from facilities to literacy to math to aboriginal education – all those kinds of things. So it started from there and it has been growing pretty strongly and being promoted quite a bit. (David)

The school system this past year, since the fall of 2005, brought the whole model into the school system, so every school was required to explain the model to their staff, set some goals and then decide how they wanted to use a form of the model to work towards the specific goal. (Amanda)

These comments indicate that the initiation of the implementation of professional learning communities was perceived to be top down. School divisions mainly took the initial initiative for implementation.

#### *Essential Steps in the Implementation Process*

Regarding the implementation process, participating principals mentioned that they followed some essential steps. The majority of the principals referred to processes such as planning, their own learning, and visioning as essential initiatives.

*Learning before leading.* The participating principals of this study felt that understanding the concept of professional learning communities and how implementation might be accomplished before attempting to start the implementation process was an essential first step. In this regard, Angela mentioned that when the School Division first initiated professional learning communities they involved people that had done background research on professional learning communities. She stated that,

Most of the people that they (School Division) asked, because lots of principals that did volunteer were principals that were already involved in the admin program at the university. So they asked them if they would like to be involved because they were already taking classes on professional learning communities and knew a lot of the background and research on it already.

When asked for suggestions for other principals who were interested in implementing professional learning communities in their school, Angela advised, "...do

some reading first of all so you understand what a professional learning community is, what it can look like ...". James said, "Well first of all you need to be as knowledgeable as you can about what PLC's are." Christina also stated,

Read everything you can. [Like being a principal] there are lots of great writers out there about learning communities. Some old ones – some of Sergiovanni's books. I just love some of his books they are about 12 years old. Read Business magazines like Ink and Harvard Business Review...they are full of information on building learning communities.

Besides reading about professional learning communities, Martina suggested that principals who are implementing professional learning communities for the first time should visit other schools where professional learning communities are already implemented or being implemented.

All these comments show that taking courses from universities, attending conferences, reading professional journals, and visiting other schools and having dialogue with other administrators or teachers are essential steps in learning about professional learning communities. Principals in this study responded that, after gathering the information about professional learning communities, most of the principals together with other principals and directors of the school divisions did strategic planning and developed vision for the implementation process of professional learning communities.

*Strategic planning and developing the vision.* For the respondents, strategic planning and creating the vision for implementing professional learning communities is like pouring a foundation for a building. In this regard, Amanda said, "It is important to have a strategic plan and direction. So you need to have it on paper ...what are we trying to do, and how are we going to get there?" Angela recalled that, "I was on the planning team right from the very beginning stages of the implementation process. So we sat

down as a group and we brainstormed how we were going to use Richard Dufour's plan ...” She further commented, “You need to know where you’re going or what your vision is before you implement it.” James also pointed out the importance of strategic planning and developing the vision for the implementation process by stating that,

It is important to provide folks with a picture of where we would like to go or we need to go. So in my mind, what’s important is building the foundation, the stepping stones for us to get to where we need to go.

Martina also emphasized strategic planning and creating the vision for implementing professional learning communities. She shared her own experience about how she developed a vision statement for the school:

We are almost at the stage to finish working on vision statements for the school, and about how important that is to know where we are going. So we’ve talked about what we believed. How we started – we talked about what we believed in. I had the staff do that, and we have worked on that several different times. In addition, I had the Parent Council work on that and invited any parents who wanted to be part of that to come to the Parent Council meetings, and we have had some students’ participation as well. In short, all stakeholders took part and now we are at the point, to actually come up with a vision statement.

These direct quotations from the participating principals demonstrate the significance of strategic planning and developing vision for the implementation process of professional learning communities. From the responses, it has emerged that principals together with other principals and directors did the strategic planning of the implementation process. The analysis of the above responses also revealed that the process of developing the vision involved lots of discussions, collaboration, and involvement of all stakeholders.

### *Teaching the Concept*

Participating principals in this study acknowledged that once the creation of vision and strategic plan was done, the next important step towards the implementation of

professional learning communities was explaining the concept of professional learning communities to other staff. This involved obtaining buy-in and engaging others.

*Obtaining buy-in from teachers and other staff.* Principals began the implementation process by taking information about professional learning communities back to their schools, and then opening up a dialogue with their staff about how and why the school should consider implementing a professional learning community model. In some cases, principals, along with the directors, initiated dialogue to explain the concept of professional learning communities to other staff. On this point, Angela said,

We actually had the director, and the two assistant-directors, go to each school and explain individually to all staff what we had in mind, and then they could ask questions of our directors or the assistant-directors, and one of us was always there too, as part of the team at the school level. Then we just explained the process to them.

Amanda indicated that she “was required to explain the model to the staff” and was given an information package regarding the professional learning communities. In her own words,

Our system gave us a package to use; gave every school a package that they could use at staff meetings to inform the staff of what a professional learning community is, they gave some assessment tools to assess where we are on the professional learning community model, are we just beginning, are we in the middle, are we there? So the system has developed this package for every school to use.

Christina said that she first explained the main concept of professional learning communities to other staff and then also welcomed their input. That is why she commented, “Actually every time I go into a building, I talk about what I believe a learning community is and try to get input from other people and what they think a learning community is.” In her reflection, she also mentioned, “I thought, I can go give a

two hour workshop with the teachers.” In this respect, Martina saw her role as a catalyst, and a provider of resources. She stated,

I have photocopied a lot of articles from journals and put them in mailboxes and encouraged the whole staff, not just teachers but the whole staff, to read them. Then we have had a chance to talk about them.

In this perspective, James’s experience was bit different. He said that he went to explain his other staff what PLC’s are and examples of PLC’s in different schools. Then people at his school made the connection that they were already doing that. They just had not called it a PLC. He put lot of emphasis on explaining the concept of professional learning communities to other staff, though it was not a difficult task for him.

When they were asked about teachers’ buy in, most of the principals observed that there was not much to worry about. For example, Amanda said, “There was not anyone that needed to buy-in. The only ones that maybe were not as informed would be some of the support staff.” Similarly, Angela stated that, “We didn’t really have a lot of concern about buy-in. It was one of those loose-tight decisions that we decided that this had to be a tight decision.” In this regard, both David and James noted that if the decision came from the division then there was no need to buy in, teachers normally commit, but if it is initiated from somewhere else then people tend to be a bit resistant. At this point, to maximize buy in, David and James used different strategies:

The strategies are to point out that there is an area of weakness, that there are other people that are interested in that topic. That you can discuss and share ideas and visit each other and provide opportunities to do that. So I guess, making it easier for them to meet and talk, by thinning out some of the responsibilities and expectations around other initiatives that are going on in our division; and try to stay focused on a few rather than many. (David)

In my mind, what’s important is building the foundation, the stepping stones for us to get to where we need to go. Moreover, I see my role as the principal to do

that. Because I see, sort of where the system is going, and where education's going, from a different perspective than the classroom teacher does. Actually, part of my role is preparing the teachers for those changes that are coming. Without necessarily hanging a term on it. (James)

These comments also imply that principals used lots of discussions and explanations as strategies to achieve buy in. They also enabled the teachers to be ready to accept any changes that may come. They noted that once everybody knew about professional learning communities, 'buy in' did not seem to be as issue. A related strategy was to involve others in the implementation process.

*Engaging others.* Involving others in the school in the learning process before attempting to begin implementation of professional learning communities emerged as an important theme for the principals. Some of the typical comments representing this theme follow.

One of the things that I have really worked with is figuring out ways that we involve community in proactive ways and make sure that everybody has a say in what is going on. The students, the parents, the community are working together. So we've been working hard this year to figure out ways to work well together. (Martina)

The roles of the principal are overwhelming. It can just overwhelm you. I mean, you sometimes feel like you are treading water and your nose is just above the water surface. So get a team together. Engage people. Do not try to do it all yourself, because you cannot. (Amanda)

You need to find pockets of interest where people are at different stages in their careers or at different levels of professionalism, or desire to have a professional learning community. Sometimes you can slide them or hook them in there without them even knowing it. (David)

Christina also emphasized the point of engaging other staff when she said, "The professional learning community incorporates all of the individuals that are part of the school setting." All these participants indicated that involving all stakeholders in the



process of implementing professional learning communities is very important. From the principals' comments, it was noted that recognizing differences, finding the pockets of interests, using proactive ways to involve all stakeholders were seemed to be some of the effective strategies to engage all staff members in the implementation process.

### *Facilitating Collaboration*

Once principals had gathered all stakeholders in the implementation process, the subsequent step was to engage them in collaboration to determine how a professional learning community could be implemented in their schools. The principals in this study explained how they shared the leadership and involved all stakeholders in decision making for the development of how PLC teams could be formed, what they would work on, and how they would interact with each other.

*Shared leadership/decision making.* Empowerment emerged as a theme in the data. All six principals mentioned that their decision-making processes were collaborative and they practiced a shared leadership model in their schools. Specific strategies principals used to practice shared leadership are presented below:

I tried to implement the shared leadership at staff meetings, where I have asked a staff member to share. I tap certain people, or I extended an invitation for people to share in a certain area of expertise that they have in regards to instruction, a key strategy, a type of assessment, whether it's use of portfolios in assessment, to share it with the wider staff. And especially to tap, and maybe to tap those people who would never put their hand up to offer to do that. (Amanda)

I think it's vital that we work together as a team, so we talk about this at the beginning of the year, all the jobs that need to be done, and who wants to change different jobs, and do the leadership for that job, and everybody does that. Everybody takes on the leadership in different jobs and in different areas. (Martina)

In the school when we meet, like if K – 5 teachers meet, there would be all the teachers, and there would be no real leader, each one of them would have a role. Like there would not be any team leader. They would change each time, or I'd say okay, I'll chair this meeting but next time you chair it, so they felt very comfortable in sharing that role. It is very much shared. (Angela)

These responses show that principals deliberately used a variety of strategies to involve all stakeholders, and took initiative to take a leadership role. They were gratified that in their schools, leadership was distributed. For example, Amanda commented, "I feel really good that leadership has been distributed in implementing these professional learning communities." David mentioned that if there is only one leader in the school then people will not feel safe to try any new things, but if the leadership is distributed then "people will show initiative, and not wait for an administrative authority." To emphasize distributed leadership, Angela also commented,

I do not think without shared leadership you could have a professional learning community. I think if you tried to implement a professional learning community and felt that you could do it as the principal or as the director, all on your own, and have all the say, you would not have a professional learning community, you'd have a dictatorship.

This comment signifies the importance of shared leadership in the implementation of professional learning communities. James also said that he took all the necessary steps to involve all of the staff in leadership roles.

Most of the principals viewed that shared decision-making is also crucial in the implementation of professional learning communities. In their statements, they clearly stated the importance of shared decision-making and how they used this in their schools:

I'm a firm believer, even in the classroom and working with students, that if we're empowered and we have input as to how the school runs, along with input from the students, and input from the parent council – so and so much – we just feel better about it and feel more committed to it. (James)

So, everything that we do, it is not always a consensus, but in our school, it is usually a majority. But the majority is almost like a consensus. There might be one or two out of 30 that do not want it. But there's always an open floor and you always get to say how you feel. So, it isn't like they don't get to say well I don't like this. Because they are very vocal. They're very – in our school they feel very comfortable disagreeing with everyone. Therefore, that's good. (Angela)

Its shared decision-making, we don't vote. We come to a consensus. So we basically work on a model of consensus of collaboration dialogue. And bottom line is can you live with this decision, and if you can live with this – give it a try. If it doesn't work, let's change it.(Amanda)

These responses strongly suggest the fact that most principals used consensus, not authority, to make decisions. Only David mentioned about balance in decision-making. He made it clear that most of their major decisions are being made in staff meetings. Some decisions are open to everyone, but some are not. He characterized this as a 'balancing act'. He further stated that in decision-making, it is not possible to please everybody, and that is why he preferred a balance in decision-making.

When there are different stakeholders, there will be many different opinions. Therefore, to get a consensus is difficult. It is almost impossible to please everybody. All six principals in this study responded that building trust and collegial relations is very important during the implementation of professional learning communities.

*Building trust and collegial relations.* Respondents had numerous points to make about the issues of trust and collegiality. About this, Angela said, "I think teacher collegiality is important. But while collegiality is important, I think trust is an even more important thing." Similarly, Amanda mentioned that, "They have to trust each other to collaborate. You need to try to help them understand that by working together, it makes their job easier." Christina also stated the same idea with a brief explanation,

I was thinking about bringing an opportunity for teachers to build some collegial relationships, and to talk about their professional practice. We had to do a lot of

initial work on building trust because sometimes you'd have a teacher that'd been teaching 12 years, and you would have another teacher who was teaching two years. It turned out to be an amazing experience. I think if you give the teachers the opportunity to discuss professional practice and build the structure for that, I think that's a huge part of an administrator's job. And not to be fearful that the teachers will just sit there and complain. You can put the structure into it, but the teachers have to have input into what they need to talk about and when that professional dialogue, or professional learning community is built around our staff learning curriculum, it keeps the conversation professional, and the people value the opportunity to have that time to spend with colleagues talking about professional practice.

When asked to advise other principals who might implement a professional learning community model in the future, David recommended, "Try to encourage professional talk, in informal settings." He further said that principals should create informal infrastructure to continue these types of circles or conversations. In this respect, Martina depicted a comprehensive picture in her response,

We have grade-alike meetings sometimes we have staff meetings. Therefore, they meet together, the K – 3's get together and talk about how things are going, issues, strategies, that sort of thing. The 3 – 5's get together and the 6 – 8's get together to talk about those kind of grade-alike issues. Again, the vice principal and I visit the classrooms as much as possible and encourage teachers to watch other teachers teach at times. We have two resource teachers, so they do some team teaching with the teachers. We have a teacher-librarian who team-teaches. We have a teacher that tries to get to all the classrooms. With 17 classrooms that difficult to do, but she does the best she can, and so, its a lot of – I get to see what they're doing just by casually being in the classroom at different times, and encourage them to do things with each other.

She also mentioned about two resource teachers, who assist other teachers to work collaboratively. James echoed the same theme when he reported,

The collegiality is important. In addition, not only collegiality, but also making sure that you have the right people on staff to help with the different pieces that you're doing. If not, at least have access to people like consultants, or folks from central office who are able to support.

Participating principals felt that building the trust and collegial relationship is one of the most important steps in the implementation of professional learning communities.

From the above responses, it can be summarized that principals used grade-alike meetings, staff meetings, involving all staff in professional dialogue, encouraging teachers to visit other teachers' teaching, team teaching, and providing support from external consultants as effective strategies to develop and foster collegial relationships among staff. On the point of involvement and developing relationships, principals also indicated that involving parents is another major step in implementing professional learning communities.

*Involving parents.* Parents as children's first and primary teachers, can strengthen the work of the school learning community. In this study, all six principals noted that parents should be involved in implementing professional learning communities. They also explained how they invited parents and others in the community to become active partners in the learning process at school, at home, and in the community. Some of the important comments regarding this issue are stated below:

I think that you need to keep strong communication with them. You need to inform them what is going on. They need to know what is good or bad before they can help you fix it or celebrate it, and just keep inviting them in, inviting them in, or even making those phone calls to them and saying, you know your son is doing very well, or whatever. And they need those positive communications. (Angela)

We send a newsletter out every two weeks, so a lot of that information goes in the newsletter. Meeting people in the hallways who are here to pick up their kids and encouraging them, but we – as a whole staff for one staff meeting we went out and did home visits. And we're going to do that again. And hopefully we'll do that 3 or 4 times in a year next year. It was really a scary thing for some teachers, especially to go out and visit homes and they're worried about how they would be seen. I prefer – it was really awesome, and a lot of the parents really appreciated the fact that we were going out to their homes to visit, not just expecting them to come. (Martina)

We have the parent council, parent-teacher interviews; we are working on having survey that goes home, but mostly its person-to-person interviews. Moreover, inviting them to meetings, to gatherings, to asking people, commenting on things they are doing, asking for people's opinions. (Christina)

These responses indicated that principals realized the importance of involving parents in the implementation process. They reported that they used surveys, newsletters, report cards, notes, parent-teacher interviews and telephone calls to communicate with parents regularly. They also reported that they were having parent council and some other parents groups to organize different projects to improve students' facilities, and participate in discussions to assess and develop curriculum for the students.

James also acknowledged that generally he encourages parents to become more involved, though he raised an important point that, "In parent council parents help organize events, help fundraising, do field trips, raise money for this or that but they don't see their role as sort of a governance one." He pointed out another crucial issue: that parents tend to get more involved when their children are younger, as in grade 1 or 2. They get involved until their children are promoted in the senior grades. To alter this situation, he further suggested that, "What we have to do is to think more in terms of succession planning and encouraging." By succession planning, this principal meant that school administrators need to find out ways to get these parents involved whole through their children's schooling years.

Like involving parents, succession planning, encouraging others, principals engage in varieties of tasks in the implementation of professional learning communities. The principal's role in any implementation initiative is critical to its success or failure. In describing their role in implementing professional learning communities, participating principals were asked to describe how they are involved in the implementation process.

The participants in this study unanimously recognized the essential role they played in implementing a professional learning community.

*Principals' own involvement.* Angela said that she was involved in the implementation process right from the beginning. She was a member of the planning committee. In her response, she mentioned, "I have always been at the very forefront of the whole initiation and the planning part and in keeping it going. I was the driving force." She further informed that she took part to set some goals and strategies for the system. Her comments indicated that she acted as driving force, initiator, and strategic planner in the implementation of professional learning community in her school.

In response to the personal involvement issue, David reflected that in the implementation process he was an active participant. He was involved in promoting it in the system. Therefore, he modeled it and promoted it in his school. He also commented that, "My own involvement, I guess helping the group to identify where their areas of interest are. And of course, in any institution or any organization, they are going to get people together." His response suggests that in the implementation of professional learning community in his school, his involvement involved leading, participating, modeling, promoting and helping others.

Martina stated, "One of the things that I really promote is decision making. It makes sure we are using consensus, we do not vote, and that was a huge part of my initiation." In addition, she commented that she encouraged all stakeholders to work as a team and share leadership. To promote parents' participation and involvement she also initiated family home visits.

Amanda and Christina detailed their involvement in the staff development committees. In this regard, Amanda stated that, “I have been very much involved with the staff development committee.” She also mentioned that she organized different meetings, supervised different projects and did formal or informal instructional supervision regularly. Christina took different initiatives to foster collegial relationships among the staff. In her response, she mentioned, “I organized workshops with the teachers and brought an opportunity for teachers to build some collegial relationships, and to talk about their professional practice.”

James stated, “From an administrative perspective I think my involvement was more of facilitating, and supporting the communities in their development, sometimes it’s leading, encouraging people to move in right direction.”

These responses indicate that principals were actively involved, and participated in the implementation of professional learning communities. Their roles involved processes of initiating, modeling, leading, participating, facilitating, and encouraging. They saw themselves as vision builders. By sharing their personal vision with all stakeholders, they formed a shared vision, which fostered the successful implementation of professional learning communities in their schools.

In summary, principals mentioned that they had been practicing various features of professional learning communities in their school for a long time; however, it recently became a high priority for the School Divisions. The themes that emerged from the data suggested that learning before leading, strategic planning and creating the vision, teaching the concept to others and engaging all stakeholders were the essential strategies in the implementation of professional learning communities. From the principals’



responses, it also emerged that to foster collaboration, involving all stakeholders, developing collegial relationships, empowering all stakeholders to share decision-making, and practicing shared leadership were the most important factors. Furthermore, principals in this study acknowledged that in the implementation process they were actively involved. Their roles included resource finder, facilitator, shared-decision maker, innovative thinker, student advocate, and vision builder. The data analysis also revealed that this variety of roles was dynamic and fluid with the melding of educational, management, and leadership, providing overall leadership for implementing professional learning communities.

#### Relationship between Shared Vision and Professional Learning Communities

Participating principals were asked how a shared vision helps in the implementation of professional learning communities. They were also asked to describe a situation giving an example of shared vision. Most of the principals suggested that shared vision was important and it increased people's motivation. Amanda stated that shared vision is so important that it keeps "everybody on the same page." In this regard, David commented, "Shared vision of course, is the whole concept of whether – if you don't share the basic goal of wanting to improve student learning, then you're probably in the wrong business." To emphasize the importance of shared vision, James said, "The shared vision is extremely important, ... without the shared vision you're not going to get the commitment, and without the commitment you're going to be struggling." Angela described her perspective this way:

We need to learn from each other. So that – if we all have that shared vision of that's where we're going, and we are going to build on each others' expertise, then I think that people would be able to buy into that – they need to know where

they're going and how they're going to get there, and if they don't have that shared vision then why would you even go.

This comment emphasized the importance of a clear sense of purpose. From these responses, it can be inferred that shared vision was seen as a catalyst for uplifting people's aspirations, creating high performance expectations, promoting collegial and collaborative relationships among stakeholders, fostering genuine commitment, and giving direction to people within the organization.

All six principals shared their stories giving an example of shared vision. Through these stories, principals described how they formed and practiced shared vision in their schools. These stories revealed a variety of strategies. Amanda and David's stories are related to their schools' internal dynamics. They stated that,

We really felt strongly that math was an area that we really wanted to improve on. Therefore, we had to start to ask ourselves, how we can be better in the area of math. How can we be better teachers? How can we help our students be better student learners in that area? Therefore, we decided to have a look, closely, at the CAT scores for the last 3 years in grade 4 and grade 8. There was an indication that three areas were areas that we needed to do some work on and look at as an entire staff and those three areas were measurement, geometry and problem solving. So we took all the data, the bar graphs. We shared it with our staff, we shared it with our parents, and then what we proceeded to do was to make – decide on a plan of how we were going to focus on those 3 areas, and they would not be left until just the end of the year, to teach. Because often, those three areas may be taught quickly at the end of the year. And that could be one reason why our students do not do as well on those 3 areas. So we had a plan, shared vision. (Amanda)

Our initiative around math and numeracy is our initiative this year. Therefore, we have had professional development around that and numeracy. We've had people meeting in groups – in grade-like groups – to talk about numeracy and that particular strand in the math curriculum. We did a pretest with all our students from Kindergarten to grade 8. We talked about those results - this was in the fall – over the course of the next few months that we were looking to enhance our numeracy instruction. Then we did post-tests in May. So the shared vision was that we wanted to improve numeracy, and everyone has bought into it – at least to this point. (David)

Both of the above principals mentioned the example of their students' weaknesses in Mathematics. To improve in Math, they first formed committees, then they discussed in detail, the reasons and the remedies for the weaknesses. After that, they tested their hypothetical remedies to overcome students' problems in Math, and they found that students did well in their tests. Through this process, they became 'assessment literate', which helped them to be experts at interpreting achievement data on student performance, and to develop action plans to alter instruction, and other factors in order to improve students' learning.

Martina's story provided an example of a school-wide quality of climate initiative:

We are really working hard on what our shared vision is. However, I can give you a story from the last school – the school I was in last year. We really worked hard there on what we called building moral intelligence. And what happened was before I got into that school, they had done a lot of anti-bullying, and the kids knew about bullying and could talk about it, but they didn't understand how to really be different or why it was good to be different. Therefore, we started working on together as a whole school staff, that building moral intelligence, talking about values, and how important they are, and helping kids understanding values and what they look like. Helping parents be an important part of that and one of the ways we did that was I bought the same book for all staff, the caretakers, the secretaries, everybody got the same book, we read it over the summer, and we started the year by having a day retreat at Waters. We went there and had some time to talk about if this book was important for us to use to start with these kids, and everybody agreed with that, and then we met throughout the year, about how best to do that. So without that shared vision, it wouldn't have happened. (Martina)

In this story, she illustrated how she took the initiative to form a shared vision to build moral intelligence and establish anti-bullying policies. This story also revealed that in order to develop shared vision, it was essential to engage all stakeholders, delegate

specific duties to all staff, and use consensus in decision-making. She further mentioned that without that shared vision, anti-bullying policies would not have been established.

James and Christina cited the examples of external forces that schools must contend with, and how they can be turned to their advantage.

One example would be the progress reports. The system was piloting an electronic version of our report cards. So I explained this to the staff, and said, here's an opportunity for us at the school to: a) become more informed about technology; b) for you to learn how technologies are going to enhance what you can do in the classroom; and c) also have some direct input into what the progress reports look like. Therefore, there were three opportunities and three reasons that I think we should become involved in this pilot. Then we had a discussion at the staff meeting, and they said yeah, let us do it. Some said right away, some said I am busy, well only if. You have that whole range, but for the most part, they all said yeah; let us give it a shot. Therefore, we spent quite a bit of time at our staff meetings and other meetings, lunch meetings and whatever meetings were required with folks coming out from downtown to help us. So, I think that's sort of format (shared vision) I would use regardless of what the topic of the PLC is. (James)

I had a volunteer English Second Language teacher teaching the parents with no English on Wednesday every week. But that person was getting increasingly busy and could not continue doing that, so the parent council approached the community association who actually hired a teacher to come and teach the parents. It was the preliminary work that went into this from September to November. Parent council also brought different outside speakers to build the understanding of the stakeholders of how the community was changing. These international students and parents brought their own culture and traditions in this school; they shared their culture, traditions and ideas with other. This could be really an opportunity for the staff that are already living here to learn about the world. Therefore, it has helped in building that professional learning community, whereas everyone could share. (Christina)

James observed that when the initiative of piloting an electronic version of report cards was taken in his school, he worked hard to achieve buy-in from staff. He explained the benefits of electronic versions of report cards to the staff. He further discussed it with other staff at their staff meetings, and asked for their input. Finally, they came to a consensus and decided to try it. He also acknowledged that he used this format to develop

shared vision for other aspects of professional learning communities. Christina's story briefly described a small picture of a diverse community, where all international students and parents shared their own culture, traditions and ideas with all other stakeholders. Both stories show that schools need outside forces to get the job done, and the work of the school is to figure out how to make its relationship with these external forces a dynamic one in order to develop a shared vision.

Angela referred to a shared vision as an up-front 'guide' for a point of reference.

She stated:

Even for us when we had that shared vision we were up and down and okay, is this where we go? Like where do we start with some of the test results, do we start in ELA – and then in math from K – 9, or do we start with grade 10, 11 and 12? These are the questions that as a planning team you have to figure it out through discussion with the stakeholders. So I think for us it is that we have to have that shared vision actually a visual of it up on the wall, and this is where we are going; and people needed to see that. Like all of the staff needed to see where we were going. Then if something changes or revamps, we have to explain why it has changed, and then we have to ask them for their input. (Angela)

She explained that shared vision shows everybody the direction. She further elaborated that shared vision is not permanent, it may change from time to time but to change it, all stakeholders need to add their input.

To conclude, these stories indicated that principals, together with the other stakeholders, identified the problems first, then at staff meetings, lunch meetings, and many other meetings, they discussed and shared their opinions to set the strategies to approach the goals. These stories also demonstrate the sense of urgency and priority derived to collaboration among stakeholders, in order for initiatives to be successful.

### The Role of Collaboration in the Implementation of PLCs

Principals in this study were asked how they experienced the role of collaboration in the implementation of professional learning communities. In response to this question, Angela said, “I don’t think that you can have a professional learning community without collaboration, and within the collaboration, you have to collaborate to build trust, you know, one comes out of the other.” In the same vein, Martina stated, “Well I think without it you will not get it. If you don’t learn how to collaborate and work together, then you are not going to have a professional learning community.”

To emphasize the role of collaboration in the implementation of professional learning communities, James commented,

It is huge. It is huge. I mean if people are working together, and getting along together, they are more likely to move as a collective group. Take into new areas and challenges. Again, they can rely on the strengths of other people within that group, when they come up against and issue or a problem or something they are not sure about, or it would be – I think it would be much more difficult if you happened to have a staff, where collegiality was not as strong. Well it is like a team.

David also realized that building trust was very important to foster collaboration among stakeholders. In order to build trust among all staff he kept “...working on little relationship builders at staff meetings, almost weekly.” He further commented that without collaborative environment, “It would probably cease the effect of expanding some of those PLC concepts.”

In this aspect, Christina commented that, “When people work together they establish learning community norms.” Later while elaborating her comment, she mentioned that in her school everybody shared his/her expertise with others to work collaboratively to implement the professional learning community norms. Amanda also

realized the importance of collaboration, noting that, “my job was to make sure that I was asking all those experts to share and collaborate.”

These responses indicated that the role of collaboration in the implementation of professional learning communities was perceived to be paramount. Building trust, sharing expertise, and establishing learning community norms were the key factors in the process.

#### *Mechanisms for Enhancing Collaboration*

Principals were also asked how they fostered collaboration among stakeholders. In this section, there will be a discussion on the different mechanisms for fostering collaboration among students, among teachers, between students and teachers, between teachers and EAs, and between staff and parents.

*Among Students.* Most of the principals recognized the importance of collaboration among students. Among them Amanda emphasized the most, as she commented, “I think the way society is today, we need to help our students become better at communicating, and offering their opinions in a very respectful way.” All of them provided the examples of how students were collaborating in their schools. Like David, 3, and 4 stated that they were having SLC (Student Leadership Core) in their schools. David said, “In our middle years program we have our student leader core. That is likely our most direct way to be collaborative around the kinds of things they want to do.” Martina said, “We have a student leader core, and any of the kids in grade 6, 7 and 8 can be a part of that student lead core.” Amanda also acknowledged that in her school students did lots of collaborative work through SLC. They provided the information that students are not voted as a popularity kind of thing, but anybody who wants join in SLC can join and participate to the meetings and suggest activities. While talking about students’

collaboration, Angela, Christina, and James mentioned about ‘Care partners’. Their comments are stated below:

We have care partners in our school, where like the grade 5’s will be paired up with the grade 1’s and they will do an activity once a month or twice a month with their care partner. (Angela)

Our school holds collaboration class among students. Well we have our middle year’s initiative; I will give you a couple of examples of that. Right now, we are examining how we can get input from students. I think probably we’ll do a series of entries with students, and see how they feel about this year, because we’ve done some gender specific math and lifestyles teaching, where all our grade 8s from the Actel and regular students have come together and at the beginning the students did not like it, but now what its done is literally built collegiality among our students because having an Actel student at school at middle years level, and regular stream there were some students that had the marks to be in the Actel stream. So you have a school where you really build a link in between so their doing lots of activities together but then they have their different academics. (Christina)

We have care partners. We recognize students for accomplishments, ... so again, that’s just fostered because of the staff and the things that the staff are prepared to do and see its important. Moreover, it rubs off on the students. (James)

Some of the principals stated that students do lots of collaborative work in extra-curricular activities. Some other principals also mentioned that students’ council, students’ forum, group work, field trips, voyagers club, etc. are the means to involve students and offer them the opportunities to work collaboratively.

*Among Teachers.* Respondents were asked how they fostered collaboration among teachers. All six principals said that they tried to foster collaboration among teachers through staff meetings, PD days, grade-alike meetings, social gatherings, and different sorts of informal interactions. Some of the comments are below:

We do that in a formal sense through staff meetings, and grade-like meetings every week or every other week. We have different committees and a lot of subgroups that also meet on a regular basis. (David)



Grade-alike meetings, staff meetings, its huge. We did a lot of working together in small groups when we were working on our vision statement. We would all work together in small groups and talk about what we believed and what we valued here, we also did things like put forth what's not working, what do we need to add, what do we need to change? (Martina)

We have our staff meetings is one place where we can build collaboration and build kind of a team. We have a professional development committee that looks after having the teachers go to different conferences together as teams more than just one on one. So our professional development committee looks at fun things for the teachers to do so we plan a lot of the social activities within the teaching group. So that kind of helps build collaboration. We have staff lunches. (Angela)

These responses showed that the process is given priority, in the establishment of formal structures and process. Principals encouraged teachers to participate and contribute in staff meetings or grade-alike meetings, PD days, and other informal meetings to enhance collaboration and develop collegiality.

*Between Teachers and Students.* As the focus of professional learning communities is improving students' learning, enhancing the collaboration between teachers and students is very important. In this point, principals were asked how they foster collaboration between teachers and students. While answering this, David mentioned that "having children feel valued and having their opinions being respected" are the main mechanisms of involving students for collaboration. Angela described her experience this way:

I think that comes as just sort of your whole school improvement plan. For us in our school, its really fostered on almost like a family, and that we care about you enough that you just don't talk to them about academics. Their personal life gets into it. You know, anything that comes up, we're willing to listen. We're willing to spend I think, hugely again, extra-curricular activities – if your spending time after school with kids, or at noon hours, or before school, they'll see that as collaborating with them.

She further noted that they had an SRC (Student Representative Council) in their school, which fostered collaborative relationship between staff and students. She also mentioned that, “We’re also looking at “the 4<sup>th</sup> R” a grade 9 initiative that’s come out that also builds collaboration between students and teachers.”

James explained, “I don’t see anything special or magical there, just the amount of activities that teachers are prepared to plan for students, and the opportunities for them to be involved.” He shared his experience of tsunami, at which time both students and teachers worked together to raise money for the tsunami victims. He thought that in his school, teachers are willing to take on these activities that pull students together in helping the larger community.

Amanda emphasized communication. In her response, she said, “If our teachers can assess their learning and give feedback to the kids on how they can become better learners, I think that’s key.”

These responses indicated that principals recognized the importance of collaboration between students and teachers. They viewed that improving teacher-student communication, valuing students’ opinions, involving them emotionally, and encouraging them to participate are the ways to enhance collaboration between students and teachers.

*Between Teachers and EAs.* The relationship between teachers and EAs is very important. It can be a serious area for concern. Martina realized the importance of collaboration between teachers and EAs but she confessed that they have not achieved it fully, but are working on it. In her response, she stated,

Basically when I first got here they saw themselves as separate entities, in a lot of ways, but I think it’s vital that we don’t see ourselves that way that we see each

other everything working in the best interests of the child. So we are really working on that, and I think its improving. We're not totally where I'd like to see us yet.

To enhance collaboration between teachers and EAs, Amanda said, "There should a little bit of time before school, and a little bit of time after school for them to collaborate." She further mentioned that EAs should be treated as professionals and they should be participated in staff meetings with teachers. Angela also echoed the same concern in her response, "We look after the EA's in our school, and we treat them the same as the teachers. Like there's – for us there's no difference."

David also mentioned that in his school all teachers and EAs work as a team, and understand that they are working toward a common goal. He explained, "How can we do it together? How can we support each other? So, we – I mean our common goal rallies everybody."

To foster collaboration, between teachers and EAs, both Amanda and James suggested involving EAs and teachers in the planning of different programs. James stated, "Involve as much as possible in the planning of the programs for their designated students." Amanda also mentioned, "So they need to be at the planning, they need to be at the evaluation meetings, they need to be there all the time. So it's how you engage them."

In the above comments, principals described ways in which they promote collaborative working relationships between teachers and EAs. They shared that providing them time for collaboration, involving them in different planning committees, treating them as professionals, and involving them in all staff meetings could foster the collaboration between EAs and teachers.

*Between Staff and Parents.* Improved collaboration between staff and parents is closely related to significant gains in several measures of school and classroom success. Principals were asked how collaboration between staff and parents was fostered in their schools. All six principals said that involving parents with school activities as much as possible provides the opportunity for both staff and parents to interact and collaborate. In their responses, they cited many examples of how they engaged parents in their schools. Some of the responses are stated below:

My parents are very engaged. First of all for us to write a weekly newsletter to let them know what is happening in the school on a weekly basis, just not informing them of a hot lunch. There is that, but it will talk to them about their role as parents; it may give them some tips of the questions they can ask at the conferences, when their child receives a progress report. The other thing is we have our 3-day conferences, 3 times a year. So, that's a time when they can come in and talk to the child's teachers. Many parents also volunteer for field trips, in the classroom, and for voyageurs. (Amanda)

We encourage the community and the parents to come in and volunteer. We encourage them to take some leadership. The parent council here is very active and very effective. On every Monday night, we have different kinds of things for parents to help them learn how to be better parents. On Thursday mornings, we have breakfast and a book program, where parents come in and sit with their kids and read, and they get a free breakfast to do that. So, in this way we encourage parents to come in and be an important part of their child's learning. (Martina)

I always try to be very open and very collaborative with parents and say if we do not work together this is not going to work. We really try to keep parents informed constantly of what is going on. We talk to the parents in interviews, they also can phone us any time. They are encouraged to come and help us in the classroom. (Angela)

Both David and Angela explained why sometimes it was difficult to involve and collaborate with parents. Angela said, "... to get the community more involved is a tough thing especially when both parents are working." David also concurred when he stated, "We have tried to increase their involvement. But they're not really interested ... they

don't really want to start putting in time during the day, and not all can." However, this principal concluded that collaboration between staff and parents could be fostered if they are involved in some discussions and planning and if parents see that their input is valued. Based on these responses, this is inferred that collaboration between staff and parents can be increased through better communication, more involvement and greater participation.

In summary, principals realized that fostering collaboration among the stakeholders was very crucial. In their opinions, some of the principals commented that providing time for collaboration, engaging others in different activities, and valuing their inputs were the most important vehicles to enhance collaboration among different stakeholders. From their comments, it also emerged that collaborative efforts of all stakeholders provided the strength to face any barrier or tensions in the implementation of professional learning communities.

#### Tensions and Barriers in the Implementation Process

Implementing anything new in the existing system is not an easy process. There will be some tensions or barriers in the implementation of professional learning communities. Participants were asked about challenges or barriers they encountered in the implementation process. Most of the principals identified that managing time for collaboration was the most important barrier. They mentioned that extra-curricular activities like football, soccer, badminton, voyageurs club, art club, dozens of things were going on for kids, and that these demanded staff time. EA's were involved in those activities, as were teachers. So trying to find time to sit down and work together was difficult. In this regard, Amanda said, "We're so busy, there are so many decisions to be

made, so that takes up a lot of our time. So time is definitely a barrier.” Martina commented, “Well I think the biggest barrier was and still is the time factor. Trying to find the time to do all kinds of things is really hard.” James mentioned that they had about an hour of staff meeting time per week to discuss the PLC issues, yet he complained, “Lack of time is the major concern.” In the same vein, David also acknowledged, “Time is always one of the biggest factors. Finding time for people to focus on student learning and reevaluating their own capabilities and teaching styles and strategies.”

Some of the principals mentioned that most of the stakeholders came to the school with preconceived notions of collaboration and professional learning communities. Some of the stakeholders also did not know anything about professional learning communities. Therefore, getting them to buy into the school vision, and overlooking their negativity to bring them under the same umbrella was really a problem. David said, “We have a lot of diverse interests and different levels of professional maturity – that is always an issue for effective collaboration.” Amanda mentioned that, “Getting everybody on board to believe in collaboration” was difficult. Angela also stated,

I think the barriers to effective collaboration; one is a mindset of where people are coming from – like their own mindset. So if you have parents that did not like that school before, that is a definite barrier. They have already come with a preconceived notion. The staff definitely came with a preconceived notion when we started professional learning communities. They saw it as a top down initiative from the director down and from the board. They felt that they had no say in whether they wanted to do it or not, they saw it as an add-on rather than as a way we do things. So that was a definite barrier.

Both Martina and Amanda acknowledged that involving parents was a great challenge. In their responses, they mentioned,

Many of those parents had a very negative interaction with school when they were kids. They do not feel good about the whole school process. Therefore, helping them feel welcome here is very difficult, and we are really working on it hard. The real barrier here is the way a lot of people are nervous about coming in here, and the way they are perceived. (Martina)

They are dealing with many other issues, and their child's schooling falls to the bottom of the list, when they do not know where they are going to get the next dollar from to put food on the table. Moreover, for some parents, the school, they have bad memories of school. So to walk into the school; a) they may have not done well in school themselves. Therefore, to come back to a school where there is haunting memories for some people that is pretty difficult. (Amanda)

Some of the principals viewed that 'extra cost' was another problem in implementing professional learning communities. In this point Angela mentioned that in the whole process of the PLC, one of the challenges was that they were trying to implement a program that was designed for big schools, but in their division, they had 14 smaller schools. So distance was a problem for the grade alike teachers from different schools to come together and discuss professional matters. In her response, she said, "You had to actually give them the traveling time to travel to meet together, pay for their mileage, and have each school trying to cover that. So that was one barrier." While talking about the implementation of ESL programs for the international students, Christina mentioned that finding out the sources of 'extra cost' was difficult. In her school, she got financial support from Parent Council to meet that extra cost to implement ESL program, as she mentioned, "If we would not have had a Parent Council that was able to be supportive, that would have been a barrier."

Some of the principals mentioned that one of the biggest barriers was finding suitable ways to collect data. In this regard, David stated that they had took some initiative to measure where their students were in comprehension, but they faced a lot of

problems to find out what kind of data collection devices they could use. That is why he said, “Having the instrument to provide some concrete data had been a challenge for us.”

Angela also faced the same problem while making up assessments. In her response, she mentioned,

The grade 3 math teachers had made up some assessments. How did they get them out to the other grade 3 math teachers to test whether the assessment was any good or not? Because when you make up an assessment, you know what a lot of that stuff means but when you give it to somebody else to test and they have to read it that was a little different. Okay we were making up these assessments, we got – teachers went through these assessments got the data and gave the data to their team leader or whomever they decided. That person collated the data, and that was a barrier, because not all teachers actually knew how to do that, or were not sure what to do with this data.

Both Angela and David indicated that heavy workload from division and Saskatchewan Learning was a barrier in implementing professional learning communities. Their responses are stated below:

Another huge barrier was Sask Learning. We were supposed to follow the Sask Learning curriculum, but we knew that this curriculum was huge and there was way more stuff in there than we could ever teach in one year. (Angela)

Sask Ed. has their expectations; our division office has their expectations; and then we have ours or what we feel is important, and everybody feels that theirs should take precedence. We work with our kids and our families in our school first, and then we try to respect what our division wants to whatever degree we can and we rely on our division as much as possible to protect us from over stimulation, if you would, from Sask Learning. So that would be a roadblock. (David)

Angela and David also identified some other barriers. They are stated below:

Teachers saw it as a top down initiative from the director down and from the board. They felt that they had no say in whether they wanted to do it or not, they saw it as an add-on rather than as a way we do things. So that was a definite barrier. (Angela)



Again, fear that you are going to be judged for what you do in the end, and that is huge in professional learning community because it was all – a lot of data based stuff. You know you are having students test scores now out there, and everybody wants to know where these test scores going, if that is going to the division, what the division is going to do with them. Like our director has time to look at everybody's test scores. Like that would be the least of the problems. However, you know they were – that was a huge worry. (Angela)

Constant staff changes, you know, you throw a new body into the mix, and personality can change the whole dynamics of how a staff operates. I think that is another barrier. (David)

These responses indicated that principals and staff members faced many barriers in implementing professional learning communities. From their comments, it has emerged that managing time, finding out sources for extra cost, diverse interests, preconceived mindsets, constant staff changes, burden of workload, fear of being ridiculed or judged, and getting some effective methods for data collection are seen to be the major barriers or challenges in implementing professional learning communities.

Principals also provided some suggestions to overcome some of these problems. Christina suggested that “You have to be flexible. I think having that kind of flexibility gives you the opportunity to even build a strong learning community.” While making the above comment, she explained that once she found out that they had 38 English Second Language students. Twenty eight of those students did not have access to school division programs because they were in a K-1 group. The teachers whose classrooms they were placed in did not know anything about teaching English as a Second Language. So in that situation if she had been rigid and stuck exclusively to the school plan that they had outlined the previous spring, there would have been no opportunities to address the problem of these 28 students, nor the needs of the six teachers in these classrooms. To solve this problem, she along with the help of other staff changed the school plan. That is

why she believed that to overcome barriers, principals should not be rigid with the school plan, they need to be flexible.

The issue of time appeared to be the most important barrier to collaboration. From the responses, it can be identified that both Martina and James experienced that managing time for collaboration was really a difficult task. To solve this problem, Martina said that:

One of the things our system does is about once a month; we get a day that we do not have kids here, and half a day is for teacher planning and half the day is for professional development. So those days are vital to work together as a team, and look at the strategies and the processes, and things like vision at those times.

In the same vein, Amanda also mentioned that, “We have designated one day a month towards student learning, and working on different issues of professional learning communities.” James also commented that:

From my perspective, lack of time is the major issue, and what have we done, well we have tried to protect our staff meeting time as much as we can, to deal with both issues, and things of more of a business nature I try to do electronically. Notices, memos, send those out electronically to save time. (James)

He advised all stakeholders to use technological supports as much as possible to save time. He also shortened staff meetings to allocate some time to deal with professional learning community issues.

Angela and Amanda said that building trusting relationships also can save time in the implementation process. They mentioned:

To convince stakeholders and achieve buy in, I would think that you just need to keep talking and communicating honestly to people and building relationships with trust. I think you have to keep building on trust and keep saying listening to their concerns, answering them, being honest and saying you know what, we do not have all the answers. We are doing the best we can. If you have some suggestions, we want to do this together. You have to walk the talk. (Angela)

You would have to work slowly, because you ultimately do not want to jump in and change things completely, because they are not going to trust you when you do that. Therefore, you have to tip toe around and get to know people and their style, and get them to trust you, and slowly get people to dialogue at tables, maybe at staff meetings, around a certain topic. (Amanda)

From these comments, it can be said that some of the barriers or challenges in the implementation process could easily be eliminated if all stakeholders built trusting relationships with each other. The principals believed that through cooperation a lot of things can be done quickly, which also can save time.

David complained that they could not cope with the pressures of following both the School Division's curriculum and Sask Learning's curriculum. He explained that Sask Ed. had their expectations, division office had their expectations, and then they had their own expectations. It was really a burden for them to follow different curricula and that was the reason students could not do well in the tests. That is why he suggested that, "We need to work with our kids and our families first, and then we should try to respect what our division wants." He emphasized that it is better to focus on one particular thing at a time.

To avoid the barriers in the implementation of professional learning communities, Martina suggested the need for a change of the preconceived mindsets of all stakeholders, and not to be afraid of being ridiculed. In her response, she said,

I go out to homes and visit, especially kids who are not attending on a regular basis. People will say things like, well I have done 14 of those visits and 2 of the kids are now attending on a regular basis. And they said, out of 14, only 2! And I see it just the opposite way. I say 14 visits and we have 2 kids that are attending better now. Change that mindsets. That its little steps that we are going to see, it is not going to be a huge change overnight. However, we need to continue that involvement to trust each other and be welcoming.

James believed that it was easy to avoid lots of barriers or challenges by having a shared vision and strategic plan of the implementation process. As he mentioned, “I think it is important for the administrative team to have a vision of where are we going to go, and what we need to do to get there?”

From the above responses, it has emerged that to succeed in spite of barriers or challenges in the implementation of professional learning communities, principals should be flexible, build trusting relationships, manage time for collaboration, have vision and a strategic plan, not be afraid of being ridiculed, focus on one particular initiative, and more importantly, work slowly, and step by step.

#### Issues of Sustainability

As with any other worthwhile initiative, sustainability is always an issue in the implementation of professional learning communities. Participating principals in this study were asked what in their opinion helps to sustain professional learning communities in their schools. In response to this question, principals mentioned some very important points. Some of the strategies identified earlier in the analysis come to the forefront as priorities for sustainability.

Both Angela and Amanda thought that focusing on vision is very important. In this regard, Angela commented, “Keep focusing on that vision – always go back to the vision that you had, even at the school level.” Amanda also said that, “You have to have a vision, and you have to somehow narrow that down to specific goals if you want to sustain PLC in your school.” She further mentioned, “Sometimes we need to find time to look beyond and make some changes, because we learn from our mistakes.”

Both Martina and Amanda commented that valuing people and building trusting relationships with the staff are the key elements to sustain professional learning communities. In her response, Martina stated that to sustain, “We need to value people and build trusting relationships. They have to trust us, we have to trust them, and we have to continually find ways to extend ourselves.” Amanda also demonstrated the same belief by stating that, “The relationships and building the trust so that everybody is comfortable with working together help it keep going.”

David pointed out that in implementing any new program, it is difficult to get all staff under the same umbrella. While implementing professional learning communities in his school, he experienced that there were some people who did not like this implementation. In this case, to sustain the implementation, he suggested that, “You’d need to retain those key people on your staff that have that intrinsic desire for professional growth. Look for those people that are self-motivated.” In the same vein, Angela also said, “You have to have people that are willing to support this all the way through.”

Both James and Christina observed that to sustain professional learning community, supportive administration is the key factor. On this point, their responses were,

Obviously, a focus by administration, and expectation that this is important, and not only the expectation but supporting the PLC in whatever way that we can. It is an adage of ‘what is inspected becomes expected’. If you are looking for it and looking for signs of it, then people have the expectation that, well, we should be doing this. (James)

So what sustains professional learning community in my school? It is not owned by the principal – it is owned by the staff. So the principal has to be supportive. (Christina)

Angela and Martina mentioned that teachers can play the important role in sustaining professional learning community, so taking initiative to involve teachers and providing time for them to meet together are very important strategies. Their comments were,

I think the big thing to sustain professional learning community is to have time for teachers to meet. If you do not have the time build into your day for teachers to meet so that you are almost forcing them to meet, they will collaborate if they have the time. If you say to them, you have to find the time it is not going to happen. It will once in awhile, but really, it will not happen, so there has to be time built in. So administratively, the system has to say, if we think this is that important, we have to give these people the time to meet. Without that, it is going to die on us. I think that is huge. (Angela)

One of the things that we have been doing at staff meetings is talking about the stories of success. Then it is really easy to figure out all the things your not doing, out of all the things your doing. However, having the teachers seduced, by sharing the stories at staff meetings help keep the staff interested in being involved and stretching that hand out to people even more. (Martina)

Martina further mentioned that, “I think unless we learn how to work together well, and care for each other and support each other we are not going to sustain it (PLC).” David also commented that,

Sustainability is sort of a process. It has to be renewed continually. It is a part of the professional learning community, and you are never satisfied with what you have. You are always moving on, and moving on. It is an ongoing process; there is no end to it. So we should create and point out needs in areas whether its curricular areas or whether its behavioral, or whatever component of educational life that people can possibly find areas to improve upon.

Based on these responses, to sum up, the message seems to be that to sustain professional learning communities, principals should focus on their school vision, support others, value people, build trusting relationships, retain key people who are self-motivated, and provide time for teachers to collaborate.

## Summary

In this chapter, the data emerging from the interviews were presented. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six principals who had been involved in the implementation of professional learning communities. Data were analyzed through an interpretational approach, and presented thematically according to the research questions. Actual quotes from the interviewees were also used to elaborate upon certain points of view.

The findings showed that most of the principals believed that there are mainly two roles of professional learning communities: first, to improve students' learning and second, to provide the opportunities for professionals to work together. Principals also mentioned that the concepts and practices of professional learning communities had been in their school for long time; however, the School Divisions recently initiated the implementation of professional learning communities in all schools.

Regarding the implementation process, the majority of the respondents stated that learning before leading, strategic planning and creating the vision, teaching the concept to others and engaging all stakeholders are essential steps in the initiation process. The data in this study also revealed that in the implementation process, to foster collaboration, principals should involve all stakeholders, build trust and collegial relationships, and empower all stakeholders to share decision-making, and practice shared leadership. Furthermore, all six principals noted that in the implementation process they themselves were actively involved. They variously referred to their roles as initiating, modeling, leading, facilitating, encouraging, and participating. The data analysis also revealed that this variety of roles was dynamic and fluid with the melding of educational, management,

and leadership, providing overall leadership for implementing professional learning communities.

Most of the principals viewed that shared vision was important and that it encouraged people's aspirations. In developing the shared vision, individual stakeholders identified the problems first then in staff meetings staff discussed and shared their views to set the strategies to move toward the goals or destination. Principals also stated that the role of collaboration in the implementation of professional learning communities was paramount. To enhance collaboration, principals pointed out that building trust, sharing expertise, and establishing learning community norms were the important factors.

From the findings of this study, it has emerged that managing time is the major challenge in the implementation process. Principals mentioned that extra-curricular activities like football, soccer, badminton, voyagers club, art club and dozens of other activities took staff time, therefore it was really difficult to manage time for collaboration. It also appeared in the data that most of the stakeholders came to the school with preconceived notions of collaboration, so getting them to buy into the school vision was another challenge. In some schools, with limited budget allocation, it was a great problem to initiate new programs. Some of the principals also said that following both the Schools Division's curriculum and Sask Learning's curriculum was a burden for them and they could not cope with the pressures of workload. Fear of being ridiculed or judged was another barrier in collaboration because teachers feared that they would be judged as incompetent if they asked for help or they might have a feeling of inefficacy. From the data it also came out that constant staff changes and getting some devices for data



collection are the main barriers or challenges in preparing for, and implementing, professional learning communities.

Regarding sustainability, most of the participants said that to sustain professional learning communities, principals should focus on their school vision, support others, value people, build trusting relationships, retain key people who are self-motivated, and provide time for teachers to collaborate.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of principals concerning the process and dynamics of the implementation of professional learning communities. In this chapter, a summary of the purpose and methodology of this research is presented, the literature relating to the research topic is reviewed, and the findings related to the research questions are discussed in light of the related literature. Significant conclusions that can be drawn from the data analysis are presented. This chapter concludes with a presentation of implications for theory, practice, and further research.

#### Summary of the Findings

A qualitative design was used to examine the problems in this study. The research consisted of semi structured interview questions developed from the literature review. Six principals, four females and two males, from two school divisions were selected to share their perceptions and experiences in implementing professional learning communities. The findings of each of the research questions are summarized in the following section:  
*Question One: What are principals' perceptions of the process and dynamics by which professional learning communities are implemented?*

All participating principals first highlighted the role of professional learning communities, and then they expressed their experiences with the implementation process. About the role of the professional learning communities, participating principals believed that there are mainly two roles: first, to improve students' learning and second, to provide the opportunities for professionals to work together.

Regarding the process of implementing professional learning communities, the analysis of the actual perceptions revealed that the implementation process included pre-implementation (self-education), the implementation process itself (training internal stakeholders), teaching the PLC concept to external stakeholders, and facilitating collaboration amongst all stakeholders.

Most of the principals affirmed that aspects of professional learning communities had been in their schools for a long time, but were not formally recognized as professional learning communities. However, all of them mentioned that the school divisions were first to take the initiative of the formal implementation, and as a result, it was perceived to be “top down.”

The analysis of the data revealed that after taking the initiative of implementing professional learning communities, principals followed similar steps, including gathering the information about professional learning communities, strategic planning, and creating the vision. The majority of the principals mentioned that taking courses from universities, attending conferences, reading professional journals, visiting other schools, and having dialogue with other administrators or teachers were good resources for information about professional learning communities. The responses also revealed that once the collection of information was done, most of the principals, together with other principals and directors then created a vision for the implementation process of professional learning communities.

Responses from the principals indicated that, once the strategic plan and creation of vision was complete, the next crucial strides towards the implementation of professional learning communities were explaining the concept of professional learning

communities to all stakeholders, obtaining buy-in from stakeholders, and engaging them in the implementation process.

From the analysis of the data, it emerged that in the implementation process, facilitating collaboration was the most important function of the principal. Principals in this study described how they shared the leadership and engaged all staff members in decision making for the development of PLC teams, what they would work on, and how these teams would interact with each other. Principals also said that building trust and establishing collegial relationships were important steps in guaranteeing the success of these initiatives.

In the analysis of the data, it was also revealed that parents needed to be actively involved in the implementation process. Principals noted that they were holding parent council meetings and some other parent groups, which encourage more active participation. Data also showed that principals were also actively involved in the implementation process, their roles include initiating, modeling, leading, participating, facilitating, and encouraging.

*Question Two: What is the relationship between shared vision and successful implementation of professional learning communities?*

Participants' responses regarding the relationship between shared vision and implementation of professional learning communities revealed that most of the principals saw shared vision as important, particularly as a vehicle for increasing people's motivation. In their opinions, without a shared vision, it was difficult to achieve commitment and without commitment, it was impossible to implement professional learning communities. Through their examples, they explained that they (along with the

other stakeholders) identified the problems first, then in staff meetings, lunch meetings and many other meetings they discussed and shared their opinions to set the strategies to approach the goals. Most of the principals acknowledged that they used this format to develop a shared vision for other aspects of professional learning communities.

*Question Three: What role did collaboration play in the implementation of professional learning communities?*

All six principals stated that the role of collaboration in the implementation of professional learning communities was paramount and without collaboration, the implementation would not have been accomplished. Most of the principals believed that through collaboration, they could build a trusting relationship and could share their expertise. Some of these principals also mentioned that through collaboration it was easy to establish learning communities' norms and practices. Some other principals commented that when all the stakeholders work as collective group that supports its members, they could face any challenges or barriers in the implementation of professional learning communities. In short, collaboration was seen as a catalyst for fostering a sense of shared responsibility among teachers, establishing more rewarding and long-lasting social and professional relationships among all stakeholders, and increasing teacher efficacy, teacher job satisfaction, and student performance.

*Question Four: What structures and process were used to enhance collaboration within the school?*

The principals mentioned different mechanisms for fostering collaboration among students, among teachers, between students and teachers, between teachers and EAs, and between staff and parents. Most of the principals described that students practice lots of

collaborative work in extra-curricular activities. They also mentioned that they encouraged students to work collaboratively through students' council, students' forum, group work, and field trips.

Regarding collaboration among the teachers, the majority of participants stated that teachers were encouraged to participate and contribute in staff meetings or grade-alike meetings. In order to enhance collaboration and develop collegiality among the teachers, these principals also organized professional development days and some other informal meetings or group discussions. All six principals recognized the importance of good student-teacher relationships. To foster the collaboration and nourish this relationship, they noted that improving teacher-student communication, valuing students' opinions, involving them emotionally, and encouraging them to participate are essential.

From the principals' responses, it was noted that to promote collaborative working relationships between teachers and EAs, providing time for collaboration, involving both in different planning committees, treating EAs professionally, and involving them in staff meetings were the priorities. Finally, to improve collaboration between staff and parents, principals mentioned that greater attention should be paid to better communication, more involvement and greater participation of parents and staff.

*Question Five: What were the challenges or barriers in implementing professional learning communities?*

The analysis of the data revealed that the majority of participating principals identified that finding time for implementation was the most significant barrier to implementation of professional learning communities. They mentioned that extra-curricular activities like football, soccer, badminton, voyageurs club, art club, etc. took

lots of their time. From the data analysis, it also emerged that diversity of interests, different levels of professional maturity and preconceived mindsets of all stakeholders regarding collaboration also acted as barriers. Principals further commented that because of preconceived mindsets, it was difficult to involve parents. Two principals also noted that 'extra cost' was another problem. They mentioned that organizing PD days, arranging group discussions or initiating new programs required extra funding and they faced lots of barriers in finding that money.

Some of the principals said that one of the biggest barriers was finding suitable ways to collect data. Other principals felt that workload (from both the school division and Saskatchewan Learning) was a barrier in implementing professional learning communities in their schools. From other individual responses, it emerged that constant staff changes was seen as another important barrier in the implementation process.

Principals also provided some suggestions to overcome some of these problems:

- be flexible
- focus on one particular issue at a time
- have a vision and a strategic plan to accomplish it
- assign some time for collaboration
- organize fundraising
- improve communication skills
- don't be afraid of being ridiculed
- most importantly, work slowly, step by step

Principals in this study firmly believed that in spite of some unavoidable barriers it is possible to implement the professional learning communities, if the above recommendations are followed.

*Question Six: What helps to sustain professional learning communities?*

Participating principals suggested that there are some strategies to be followed by principals to sustain professional learning communities. Some of the principals emphasized that school vision should be the focus, and the administrators should frequently remind the stakeholders about the specific goals. Two of the principals mentioned that administrators needed to be supportive and they should value other's opinions. They further commented that, by valuing others, it is easier to build trusting relationships. Principals also advocated allocating time for teachers to collaborate with each other. Based on some other responses, it can also be inferred that some principals believe that to sustain professional learning communities, there should be always some people who are energetic and self-motivated. From the findings of this study, it can be summarized that fostering collaboration, developing trusting collegial relationships among all stakeholders, valuing others opinions and using shared vision as 'up-front' guide are the main elements in sustaining professional learning communities.

### Conclusions and Discussion

A review of the research findings according to the research questions of the study is presented in this section. Conclusions are drawn from the findings with support from the literature. Some of the major themes of this study include: process and dynamics in the implementation of professional learning communities, relationship between shared



vision and the implementation process, collaboration as the main vehicle of PLCs, challenges of PLCs and issues of sustainability in the implementation process.

*Process and dynamics*

All principals in this study acknowledged the importance of professional learning communities. From their responses, it is noted that professional learning communities perform mainly two roles: first, to improve students' learning and second, to provide the opportunities for professionals to work together. This view, shared by all of the respondents, concurred with Speck's (1999) definition of learning communities:

A school learning community is one that promotes and values learning as an ongoing, active collaborative process with dynamic dialogue by teachers, students, staff, principal, parents, and school community to improve the quality of learning and life within the school. (p. 8)

This quote emphasizes that the main purpose of professional learning communities is to improve students' learning. Similarly, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) said that professional learning communities are referred to as communities of practice and can be characterized by staff members that work collaboratively, reflectively, and from an inquiry-based perspective to improve teaching practice and student achievement. Regarding the opportunity to work together, Sergiovanni (1994) also said, "Communities are collections of individuals who are bonded together by natural will and who are together bound to a shared set of ideas and ideals" (p. 48).

*PLCs as First-order Change.* As the principals realized the important roles of professional learning communities, they affirmed that they had engaged in professional learning communities in their schools long before these practices were formally recognized as professional learning communities by the School Divisions. Principals also mentioned that due to the fact that they had already been practicing a lot of norms and

practices of professional learning communities in their schools, it was not difficult for them to initiate the implementation process. This was echoed by Cuban (1988), as he stated:

First-order changes, then, try to make what already exists more efficient and more effective, without disturbing the basic organizational features, without substantially altering the ways in which adults and children perform their roles. (p. 342)

This quote implies that if existing practices are similar or related with the initiation then it becomes much easier to implement new aspects.

*Learning Before Leading.* It was revealed that principals followed similar steps to formally implement professional learning communities, which included gathering the information about professional learning communities, strategic planning and creating the vision. This may well have been due to the fact that that most were from the same system. The majority of the principals mentioned that they needed to learn the formal concepts of professional learning communities before implementing them. In order to learn about the concepts, principals took courses from universities, attended conferences, read professional journals, visited other schools and dialogued with other administrators and teachers. This attitude of learning reinforces Hord (2004) and Speck's (1999) comment that principals of learning communities are often referred to as "head learners", "models of life-long learning", and "instructional leaders". Speck further stated that as an educator, the principal must be a continual learner who researches, studies programs and innovations, interacts and talks with others about educational issues, and models life-long learning with clear focus on improving student and staff success. Bennis and Nanus (1985) also said that successful leaders are perpetual learners.

*The Centrality of Vision.* In the opinion of these principals, creating a vivid picture of where to go and how to go was crucial. Participants' opinions regarding the importance of creating the vision were congruent with Bennis and Nanus (1985) that vision presents a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization – a future that is better and more desirable in significant ways than existing conditions. It offers a 'target that beckons'. In this regard, DuFour and Eaker (1998) stated, "An effective vision statement articulates a vivid picture of the organization's future that is so compelling that a school's members will be motivated to work together to make it a reality" (p. 62). Renihan and Sackney (1999) also described the importance of a school vision and purpose in creating the building blocks upon which to build an effective school.

*Developing a Learning Orientation.* Another finding of the study is that once the strategic planning and creation of the vision was done then the next step was to explain the concept to others and engage all the stakeholders. Principals in this study noted that most of the stakeholders had their own preconceived mindsets. To explain the concepts of professional learning communities and convince them, principals opened a dialogue with their staff about how and why the school should implement a professional learning community model. This finding is in agreement with the role of principals to act as catalyst for the development of a learning orientation. Senge (as cited in O'Neil, 1995) postulated that principals with the greatest impact tend to see their job as creating an environment where teachers can continually learn, discuss, and develop new ideas and teaching strategies. Fleming (2004) also said that in order to explain the concepts of professional learning communities "principals structured gatherings for group learning that involved the whole staff" (p. 25).

*Engaging Others.* The most significant finding of this study is that developing a learning community requires the employment of methods that encourage the joint efforts of teachers, administrators, staff, students, parents, and other members of the community. A learning community cannot function in the isolation that has been the norm for many schools. Collaboration within a learning community means people working together, breaking down the walls of isolation built by solitary efforts of individuals inside and outside the school (Speck, 1999). All six principals in this study stated that they encouraged the joint efforts of teachers, administrators, staff, students, parents, and other members of the community.

While talking about engaging others, principals devoted considerable emphasis to parental involvement. Regarding the importance of parental involvement, respondents concurred with Renihan and Renihan's (1994) findings that parental involvement is related to decreased absenteeism, improved achievement and improved perceptions of school and classroom climate. A recent MetLife survey of teachers indicated that over 80% of teachers believed that many motivational, behavioral and academic problems of students can be resolved with family support (Tam & Heng, 2005).

*Principals' Own Involvement.* Principals in this study were actively involved in the implementation process. Their roles were initiating, modeling, leading, participating, facilitating, and encouraging. This response common to all respondents confirms Speck's (1999), observation that it can be seen that the principal's role includes resource finder, facilitator, shared-decision maker, innovative thinker, and student advocate. This variety of roles is dynamic and fluid with the melding of educational, management, leadership, and the balance of the interpersonal skills, providing overall leadership for building a

school into a learning community for all students. To emphasize the principals' roles and involvement in the implementation of professional learning communities, Murphy and Seashore Louis (1994) also suggested that, "Transformative school leaders must be able to balance a variety of roles, to move among them as needed, and to live and work with the contradictions or ambiguities that acceptance of multiple roles may bring" (p. 15).

*Shared Leadership/Decision making.* Participants in this study also confirmed the importance of shared leadership/decision making, and they described how they shared the leadership and engaged all stakeholders in decision making for the development of PLC teams, what they would work on, and how they would interact with each other. Many educational researchers have found that leadership in professional learning communities does not rest with the principal alone. In fact, it is a key task of the principals to develop the leadership capacity of the entire learning community. In this regard, Speck (1999) mentioned that within effective school learning communities, the principal empowers teachers and staff members to lead and share in decision making to develop curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Moller (2004), also found that principals of schools that functioned as learning communities saw it as "their responsibility to build the capacity of teachers to take on these [leadership] roles" (p. 145).

*Shared Vision as 'Up-front' Guide*

Responses regarding the relationship between shared vision and implementation of professional learning communities revealed that shared vision was commonly viewed as vital, and it increased people's motivation. In this regard, Senge (1990) stated, "A shared vision, especially one that is intrinsic, uplifts people's aspirations. Work becomes part of pursuing a larger purpose," (p. 207). He further commented that a shared vision

changes people's relationship with the organization, moving it from "theirs" to "ours". Now the question is how do educational leaders develop collegial relationships to form a shared vision? Sergiovanni (1990) described this aspect of leadership as "bonding" in which leader and followers have a shared set of values and commitment "that bond them together in a common cause" (p. 23) in order to meet a common goal. The shared vision becomes a "shared covenant that bonds together leader and follower in a moral commitment" (p. 24). In this study, through the examples, participating principals explained that they, along with the other stakeholders, identified the problems first, then in staff meetings, lunch meetings and many other meetings discussed and shared their opinions to set strategies to reach the goals. Most of the principals acknowledged that they used this format to develop shared vision for other aspects of professional learning communities. This finding is consistent with that of Zmuda, Kuklis and Kline's (2004) recognition of the concept of "collective autonomy" (p. 61). This was defined as a staff that agrees to collaborate to pursue shared goals. "To move from individual autonomy to collective autonomy, stakeholders must engage in collegial conversations about the school, its purpose, its beliefs, and its problems" (p. 61).

#### *Collaboration: the Vehicle of PLCs*

This study determined that the role of collaboration in the implementation of professional learning communities is crucial. This view shared by all the participants concurred with that of Little (1982), who recognized collaboration as a critical practice in effective schools. During the past decade, ideas from Senge (1990) have influenced schools to embrace team learning, rather than learning in isolation, as a strategy for improving school effectiveness. Fullan and Hargreaves (1991) also provided further

support for the benefits of collaborative cultures in schools such as increased teacher efficacy, teacher job satisfaction, and student performance.

Most of the principals believed that through collaboration they can build trusting relationships and share their expertise. In this regard, Darling-Hammond (1996) stated that “If teachers have opportunity for collaborative inquiry and learning, the vast wisdom of practice developed by excellent teachers will be shared across the profession” (p. 9). Some of the principals commented that, when all the stakeholders work as collective group, they could face any other challenges or barriers to implementation. This belief was echoed by Lieberman (1988) who noted that “Working in collaborative situations exposes teachers to new ideas, to working on problems collectively, and to learning from the very people who understand the complexity of their work best ... their own colleagues” (p. 43).

#### *Mechanisms of Collaboration*

The results of the data analysis revealed a variety of mechanisms to enhance collaboration among students, among teachers, between students and teachers, between teachers and EAs, and between staff and parents. From their responses, it emerged that creating collaborative culture, improving communication, valuing others opinions, treating teachers and EAs as professionals, developing collegiality, and building trusting relationships are significant vehicles to foster collaboration among the stakeholders.

*The Preeminence of Trust.* There was a strong indication from this study that building trust was a prerequisite for collaborative working relationships. On this point, some educational researchers stated that quality relationships are at the heart of a professional learning community and can only fully emerge in an environment of trust

(Lambert, 1998; Levey & Levey, 1995; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). Bryk and Schneider (2002) in a study of Chicago principals, also found that the building of trust amongst members of a school-based professional community was a foundational component of any effort at improvement. In this regard, Mitchell and Sackney (2000) described the presence of trust as one of the essential conditions needed for team building. While emphasizing the importance of trust in enhancing cooperation, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2000) stated that trust is necessary for effective cooperation and communication and the foundation for cohesive and productive relationships.

*Power of Communication.* This study revealed that effective communication amongst all stakeholders was one of the most vital aspects to enhance collaboration. Principals also stated that all stakeholders should be aware of the school vision, there should not be any communication gap among staff members, and people should be kept up to date about what is happening in the school. Regarding effective communication, Gardner (1990) observed “unhappy is a people that runs out of words to describe what is happening to them. Leaders must find the words” (p.18). He further stated that to attract people to his/her vision, a principal must not only find the words, but must be able to communicate them in a polite and respectful manner to teachers, parents and students. In this regard, Covey (1998) also described communication as “the most important skill in life” (p. 237).

*Valuing People.* Another important finding of this research was that to foster collaboration among stakeholders principals must value others’ opinions, contributions and endeavors. The importance of valuing the personnel of a school is also evident in the literature concerning instructional leadership. Gorton and McIntyre (1978) found that



effective principals had as their strongest asset “an ability to work with different kinds of people having various needs, interests, and expectations” (p. 16). On this theme, Niece (1989) commented that “effective instructional leaders are people oriented and interactional” (p. 5).

*Developing Collegiality.* The majority of the principals pointed out that collaboration can be fostered through developing collegiality. They discovered that promoting good relationships among teachers and other members in schools built collegiality. This was reflected in Sergiovanni’s (1995) discussion that, collegiality entails high levels of collaboration among members of a group, such as schools principal, teachers, and staff members. It is characterized by mutual respect, shared work values, cooperation, and specific conversations about teaching and learning. Deal and Peterson (1990) also suggested that within the process of collegial culture building, a principal and staff can transform a school population from a collection of ‘I’s’ to a learning community of ‘We’s’. The ability to build culture is an important leadership quality of a principal, and as a cultural norm, is essential for the establishment of a professional learning community.

*Treating Staff as Professionals.* The data of this study revealed that participants agreed that in order to enhance collaboration, teachers and EAs should be treated as professionals. This commonly identified theme concurred with Speck’s (1999) comment that a principal, being the leader of the professional learning community, must base all actions on the premise that all teachers and educational assistances are professionals and treat them as such. Similarly, Lambert (1988), spoke of the importance of “authentic relationships fostered by personal conversations, frequent dialogue, shared work, and

shared responsibilities” (p. 79). He further stated that if staff members interact and work with one another, they come to understand and respect each others’ experiences, values, and aspirations.

*Building Collaborative Culture.* Some of the principals mentioned that creating collaborative culture and engaging stakeholders in different activities can enhance collaboration among stakeholders. These principals’ perceptions were similar to those of Speck (1999), who was more prescriptive of the required elements of a collaborative culture in a learning community. She stated that a learning community includes the following “interactive and critical elements: mutual respect, essential conversations about teaching and learning, shared values and vision, clear expectations, time to share, cooperative teamwork, professional development, inquiry, and reflective practice” (p. 109).

Through the process of interviewing these six principals regarding the mechanisms for enhancing collaboration, it emerged that involvement of all stakeholders was essential. All staff members should take part in the implementation process and participation of all stakeholders is interrelated. The major finding of this study is that if all stakeholders work collaboratively then it is possible to implement the professional learning community in any school.

#### *Challenges of Professional Learning Communities*

Participants had faced many barriers in implementing professional learning communities in their schools. From their responses, it could be summarized that managing time, finding resources, preconceived and diverse mindsets, constant staff

changes, and burden of workload are seen to be the major challenges in implementing professional learning communities.

This research revealed that most of the participating principals felt that finding time was the most significant barrier. This reflects other researchers' findings that managing time for collaborative effort is a challenge in the implementation of professional learning communities (Hord, 1997; Leonard & Leonard, 2001; Mitchell, 1995). To elaborate on this, Abdul-Haqq (1996) explained that meeting after school is made difficult by extra curricular activities and the weight of teachers' personal and professional responsibilities.

From the data, it is noted that diverse interests, different levels of maturity and preconceived mindsets also acted as barriers in the implementation of professional learning communities. This view of the respondents concurred with Fullan and Hargreaves's (1993) observation that for generations, teachers have worked in a state of professional individualism with many formative underlying beliefs and attitudes that have developed over the years within the profession's culture.

Another major finding of this study was that constant staff changes acted as a barrier in the collaboration towards the implementation of professional learning communities. This is consistent with Donahoe's (1993) explanation that sometimes over dependence on principals or other staff members, structures and habits can cause a disruption in the collaborative efforts. Similarly, Copland (2003) mentioned that transition or turnover of key leaders, both principals and teachers, creates a challenge to sustainability for schools engaged in implementing professional learning communities.

There was a strong indication from this study that excessive workload from school divisions and Saskatchewan Learning was a barrier in implementation process. In this regard, Boyer (1995) stated that the structures of schools and school systems worked against collaboration among teachers. Hierarchical control, directive leadership, and unilateral decision-making were part of what Mitchell (1994) referred to as 'organizational learning disabilities'. In this regard, Fullan (2000) also said that the main enemies of large-scale reform are overload and extreme fragmentation.

From the data, it also came out that principals faced lots of troubles to find resources to initiate new programs in their schools. This is consistent with Knop, LeMaster, Norris, Raudensky and Tannehill's (1997) findings that burnout, not sharing the workload, insufficient budget allocations, and limited resources constitute potential cost barriers to collaboration.

#### *Issues of Sustainability*

It can be concluded from the results of this study that to sustain professional learning communities, principals are suggested to focus on their school vision, create a collaborative culture, provide administrative support to all stakeholders, and retain key people who are self-motivated.

*Focus on Vision.* Findings of this study indicate that in order to sustain professional learning communities, school vision should be focused and stakeholders should be reminded from time to time about the specific goals by the administrators. This belief of the respondents concurred with Roberts and Pruitt's (2003) suggestions that in profession learning communities, principals should ensure that the existing programs and practices are in alignment with the implicit direction of the vision statement. These

principals should publicly acknowledge the activities of learning community members who develop and carry out the vision. Principals need to review the vision with staff and revise as necessary. DuFour (1999) also regarded the “identification, promotion, and protection of shared vision and values as one of the principal’s most important responsibilities” (p. 14) to sustain professional learning communities.

*Collaborative Culture.* This study made it clear that creating a collaborative culture is the most important strategy in sustaining professional learning communities. This acknowledgement of the respondents was echoed by Uchiyama and Wolf (2002) who asserted “principals must ... create an environment in which teachers collaborate, exchange ideas, and develop tight collegial connections – and in which principals share governance with their staff members” (p. 81). DuFour (2004) also suggested that to sustain professional learning community model schools should provide time and encourage all stakeholders to work collaboratively. Principals in this study also mentioned that to enhance collaboration, teachers should be given time to collaborate. Morrissey and Cowan’s (2004) report echoed this concern. They indicated that one of the primary management functions of the professional learning community principal is ensuring that the necessary resources are available for collaborative practice to be initiated and sustained among the staff. Hord, 2004; Mitchell and Sackney, 2000; Rallis and Goldring, 2000; and Speck, 1999, agreed that providing time for collaboration is one of the most crucial resources.

*Supportive Administration.* Two of the principals mentioned that administrators needed to be supportive and they should value others’ opinions. They further commented that by valuing others it is easy to build trusting relationships, which is

another essential factor that can sustain professional learning communities. This finding is in agreement with Short and Geer's (1997) suggestion that it is the school principal who plays a key role in building a trusting environment, and that administrators have to 'walk the talk' by encouraging teachers to be risktakers, by being genuine in their beliefs in participative decision making, and by actively working alongside the others as true colleagues. Principals with such a leadership style 'trusted others and earned reciprocal trust' (p. 53).

*Retaining Key People.* It has been noted that to sustain professional learning communities, there should always be some people who are energetic and self-motivated. This finding is congruent with Copland's (2003) findings that to support changes and sustain the implementation, there is a need to retain key people to carry out the work. Regarding sustainability, some principals also mentioned that it is an ongoing process; there is no end to it. This was reflected in DuFour's (1988) observation that what the PLC model offers is a process, not a program. This model offers a process for addressing the very difficult and challenging task of implementing and sustaining initiatives that help all children achieve at higher levels and help all teachers become the very best teachers they can be.

#### Implications for Theory, Practice, and Research

The findings of this study revealed that all stakeholders and their collegial relationships are the main factors to the implementation of professional learning communities. With hard work and strong commitment, stakeholders can easily implement and sustain professional learning communities. A number of implications for theory,

practice and research emerged from this study. The final section of this chapter is a presentation of implications for theory, practice, and further research.

*Implication for Theory: Towards Sustainability*

The conceptual framework as described in the literature review (see Figure 2.1) incorporated the ideas of several researchers, among them are Speck (1999), Mitchell and Sackney (2000), and Eaker, DuFour, and DuFour (2002). Based on the literature review, it emerged that a professional learning community is the end result of a continuous process of the systematic building of collegiality and a community of learners in an atmosphere of an ongoing learning cycle. In this process, it is essential for the principals to provide support, motivate and encourage the stakeholders to develop a common vision based on the other elements of the collaborative process: developing collegiality, treating teachers as professionals, sharing leadership/decision making, involving parents and community in a culture of dialogue and reflection, and engaging in joint planning and evaluation. Ultimately, a common vision leads to the establishment of a professional learning community.

The examination of the framework (see Figure 5.1) represents the relationship among interrelated elements, challenges, and issues of sustainability in the implementation of professional learning communities. DuFour, and DuFour (2002) notes that the implementation of professional learning communities is a complex process. The findings of the study are congruent with the main themes or characteristics of professional learning communities, which are articulated in the literature review.

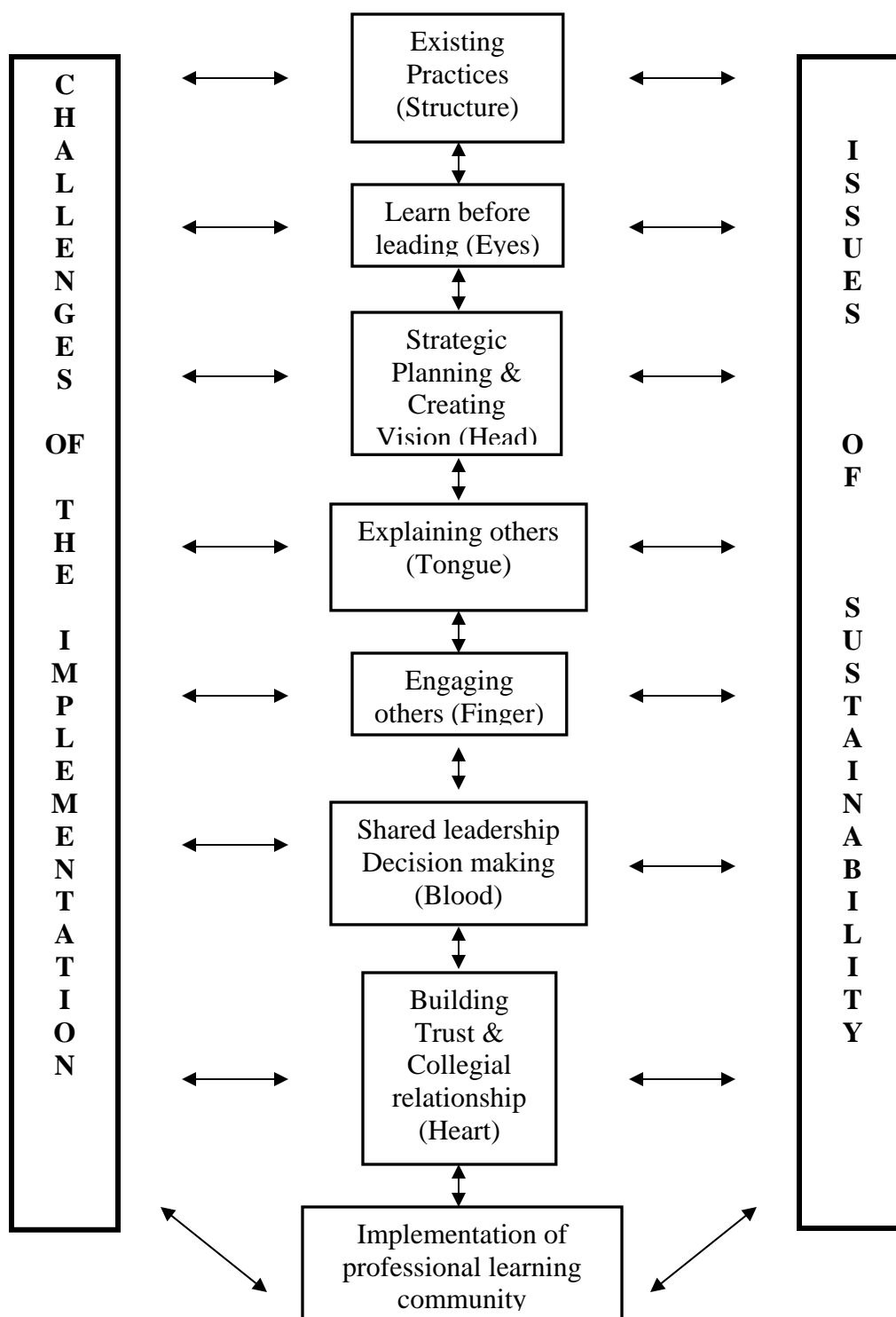


Figure 5.1. Implementation and sustainability of PLCs: A conceptualization.



Based on the findings of this study, it has emerged that the process of implementation for professional learning communities is a combination of several interrelated elements. These elements and related issues of the implementation process can be presented through the comparison with human body and its function. The implementation of professional learning communities is a first order change, because almost every school already practices some of the PLC concepts. These existing practices can be compared to the structure of the body. The first important element of the implementation process is leaders' own learning; leaders need to learn about professional learning communities before leading the implementation process. Regarding learning, Hord (2004) and Speck (1999) commented that principals of learning communities are often referred to as "head learners", "models of life-long learning", and "instructional leaders". This learning aspect of the implementation process can be compared with the eyes of our body.

The second element of the implementation process is crucial, which is to do the strategic planning and create the vision for the implementation of PLC. Participating principals in this study said that creating a vivid picture of where to go and how to go was critical. Participants' opinions regarding the importance of strategic planning and creating the vision are congruent with those of Bennis and Nanus (1985) that vision presents a realistic, credible, attractive future for the organization – a future that is better and more desirable in significant ways than existing conditions. This act of strategic planning and creating the vision is like the function of our brain.

The next important element is explaining the PLC concepts to all stakeholders; this involves considerable buy-in. In this respect, Fleming (2004) said that in order to

explain the concepts of professional learning communities “principals structured gatherings for group learning that involved the whole staff” (p. 25). This aspect of the implementation process can be referred to the tongue of our body.

Engaging all stakeholders (administrators, teachers, EAs, students and parents) is the fourth element in the implementation process. A learning community cannot function in isolation. Collaboration within a learning community means people working together, breaking down the walls of isolation built by solitary efforts of individuals inside and outside the school (Speck, 1999). This engaging of all stakeholders can be compared with the function of our fingers.

The fifth element is building trust and collegial relationships among stakeholders. Building trust and collegial relationships foster collaborative culture, and collaborative culture is the main driving force in the implementation of professional learning communities. That is why building trust and collegial relationship can be compared to the heart of the human body.

The sixth element is shared leadership/decision making. For the implementation of professional learning communities, leadership should be distributed and decision-making should be collaborative. In this regard, Speck (1999) mentioned that within effective school learning communities, the principal empowers teachers and staff members to lead and share in decision making to develop curriculum, instruction, and assessment. This aspect of disseminating leadership is similar to consistent blood flow to all parts of the body.

To define sustainability, Copland (2003) said, “Becoming sustainable meant schools needed to find ways to embed their reform work, and especially their inquiry

process, into the culture of the school” (p. 393). This definition of sustainability evokes that issues of sustainability in the implementation of professional learning communities are so important that it can be compared with oxygen. As the human body cannot live without oxygen, the implementation process also cannot exist without considering the issues of sustainability.

Leonard (1997, 1999b) revealed a number of potential barriers to collaboration. These barriers, centered on issues of teacher efficacy, time constraints, fragmented vision, competitiveness, and conflict avoidance. Other studies of collaboration addressed similar findings (Louis and Kruse 1995, DiPardo 1997, Knop et al. 1997, Kruse and Louis 1997, Welch 1998). This study has revealed that, in the implementation process, there are also some barriers or challenges. These barriers or challenges can be discussed through the metaphor of human wellness. If proper health care is followed then it is easier to avoid illness. In the same way if proper care is taken in the implementation process, the challenges or barriers can be overcome.

### *Implications for Practice*

A number of implications for practice emerged from this research. Many of these suggestions came from the participants themselves. Most of the principals concurred with DuFour’s (2004) observation that what the PLC model offers is a process, not a program. Furthermore, the process it presents is ongoing. He further explained that the process of implementing PLCs is inherently messy; it never runs flawlessly and we never get it right the first time. Therefore, in the implementation process, principals along with all stakeholders should keep in mind that passion is critical in this process.

When asked for suggestions that other principals who are interested in implementing professional learning communities in their schools could use. Most of the principals advised that it is important to undertake research first to understand what a professional learning community is, and what it should look like. All other responses show that in order to understand the concepts of professional learning communities, principals should take considerable time to take courses, attend conferences, read professional journals, and visit other schools and have dialogue with other administrators and teachers.

From the data, it has emerged that one of the primary management functions of the professional learning community principal is ensuring that the necessary resources are available for collaborative practice to be initiated and sustained. Consequently, principals and other administrators should attempt to provide time and support for staff for collaboration, and the provision of information and data for teachers to use in their practices. The relationships among the principal, teachers, and other members in schools can build collegiality. To enhance collegiality, principals should encourage and motivate others to work collaboratively.

Principals in this study mentioned that developing a learning community requires employing methods that encourage the joint efforts of teachers, administrators, staff, students, parents, and other members of the community. Principals particularly stated that because of diversity and different mindsets, it is difficult to involve parents and other community members. To involve more parents and community members, principals can use surveys, newsletters, report cards, notes, parent-teachers interviews and telephone calls to communicate with parents regularly. Principals can enhance active parents'

participation by engaging parents in meetings and by explaining alternative areas of important with them.

The importance of shared leadership/decision-making, as indicated by the findings of this study was echoed by Hargreaves and Fink (2006), who noted that sustainable and distributed leadership inspires staff members, students, and parents to seek, create, and exploit leadership opportunities that contribute to broader learning for all students. So in the process of implementing professional learning communities, principals should value others' opinion in the decision-making process and to involve others, principals need to share power.

From some of the responses, it was also revealed that to succeed in spite of barriers or challenges in the implementation of professional learning communities, successful principals: 1) have vision and a strategic plan, 2) have well-developed communication skills and, most importantly, 3) work slowly, step by step.

In the final analysis, building the collaborative culture of a professional learning community is a question of determination. A group of staff members who are determined to work together towards a common goal will find a way. Therefore, to implement and sustain professional learning communities, principals should always endeavor to have some key staff members who are energetic, self-motivated, and determined to work together for the accomplishment of the task.

### *Implications for Research*

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made for further research:

- This research was conducted with a small sample. While it is acknowledged that the results of a qualitative research such as this cannot be generalized, it might be beneficial to use a larger sample of participants from both rural and urban schools in a similar study.
- There needs to be more research attention focused on engaging staff in the implementation of professional learning communities in order to develop suggestions regarding how to involve all staff members in the implementation process of professional learning communities.
- It would be beneficial to conduct a further study to investigate particularly the challenges or barriers in the implementation of professional learning communities.
- There is a lack of in-depth research on issues of sustainability in professional learning communities as revealed in the literature. Therefore, additional study on issues of sustainability could enrich the literature.
- Another useful participant group for future research on the process and dynamics in implementing professional learning communities could be teachers, parents, and students. This participant group may provide different perspectives concerning the implementation process, which may lead to a better understanding of the process and dynamics of the implementation of professional learning communities.
- Finally, it would be valuable and interesting to study these same principals again in three to four years to examine how their perceptions have evolved.

### Concluding Comment

The purpose of this research was to examine the perceptions of principals in the implementation of professional learning communities at the school level. The researcher is grateful to the participant principals in this research for what he feels as an open and honest description of their experiences in implementing a professional learning community in their individual schools.

The professional learning community concept is a promising method of working together to affect the practices of schooling and raise students' success. However, initiating and sustaining this model demands hard work and collective commitment. As DuFour (2004) stated, it requires the school staff to focus on learning rather than teaching, work collaboratively on matters related to learning, and hold itself accountable for the kind of results that fuel continual improvement.

The major finding of this study was that the process and dynamics of implementing professional learning communities, included pre-implementation (self-education), the implementation process itself (training internal stakeholders), teaching the PLC concept to external stakeholders, and facilitating collaboration amongst all stakeholders. There was a clear indication from this study that time, funding, diverse interests, preconceived mindsets, constant staff changes, workload, fear of being ridiculed or judged, and evaluation/data collection methods were the major challenges in the implementation process. The most significant finding of this research was that to sustain professional learning communities, it was essential to focus on school vision, support others, value people, build trusting relationships, retain key people who are self-motivated, and providing time for teachers to collaborate.

This study revealed that the implementation of professional learning communities very much depends on the inner potential of school staff; on the ‘heads, hands and hearts’ of educators who work in schools (Sirotnik & Clark, 1988, p. 660). This study also determined that all stakeholders and their collegial relationships are the main keys to the implementation process. The perceptions of these principals clearly show that with hard work and commitment it is possible to implement and sustain professional learning communities in spite of some inevitable challenges.



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APENDICES

Appendix A

**Application to Ethics Committee and Ethics Approval**

## **Application for Approval of Research Protocol**

*To*

*University of Saskatchewan*

*Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Research*

**1a. Professor Patrick Renihan, PhD**  
**Department of Educational Administration**

**1b. Phase I: Anticipated start date of research study:** February 2006

**2. Title of study:**

An examination of principals' perceptions concerning the process and dynamics of implementation of Professional Learning Communities at the school level.

**3. Abstract:**

While there is no particular recipe to be followed in being successful in developing schools as learning communities, there are several attributes and behaviours which foster the growth of community building. The principal's vision is the leading factor in encouraging, supporting and implementing the characteristics required for creating a professional learning community. According to Hord (2003), much is written on the benefits and attributes of professional learning communities; however, the study and understanding of their creation is in its infancy (Hord). Leonard and Leonard (2001) also expressed the need for research in terms of addressing the role of principal's vision in creating and maintaining professional learning communities. The motivation for this research emerges from my academic research interests as well as a professional need to more clearly understand the function of the principals' perceptions concerning the implementation of professional learning communities.

**Funding:** Self-funded

**4. Participants:**

Participants will be school principals from a school division in a large urban setting. Letters will be sent to the Directors of Education of the respondents' schools, seeking permission to interview the principals of the selected schools (see Appendix A). Following the Director's approval, the researcher will send letters and consent forms to selected principals (see Appendix A), requesting their participation in the study.

## 5. Consent:

- a) A copy of the letter seeking the Director's permission to interview some principals in their school division is attached to this application (Appendix A).
- b) A copy of the correspondence requesting selected principals to participate in the study is attached to this application (Appendix A).
- c) A copy of the form soliciting participants' consent is attached to this application (Appendix A).

Each consent form:

- (i) Outlines in detail the purpose, length of time, and potential risks and benefits of participating in the study;
- (ii) Informs participants about the procedures involved in the study, the storage of data collected from the study, the confidentiality involved in the study, the volunteer nature of taking part in the study;
- (iii) Explains the researcher's readiness to be addressed questions at any point in the study at the contact information provided, and that the research has received approval on ethical grounds on [date] by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board to whom questions may be addressed at (306) 966-2084, and that interviewing principals of designated schools has been approved by the Director on [date].
- (iv) Provides space for the signatures of participants in the event they agree to participate.

## 6. Methods and Procedures:

The researcher will send correspondence to the Directors of Education of the principals, asking permission to interview the latter (see Appendix A) Following the Director's approval, the researcher will send correspondence and consent forms to the designated principals requesting to interview them. (see Appendix A).

The data collection will be done mainly through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) with the principals. The researcher will be the exclusive interviewer for all interviews. There will be two interviews. The first one (designed to introduce the study and related ideas) will last between 15 to 25 minutes. The second will last approximately 90 minutes, and will be tape recorded and transcribed. In the event there will be a need to clarify some findings or more information is needed, the researcher will request respondents to be available for possible follow-up interviews.

## 7. Storage of Data:

On completion of the study the interview questions and all data will be securely stored by the researcher's supervisor, Dr. Patrick Renihan at the Department of Educational Administration in the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan for a period of five years, and then destroyed.

#### **8. Dissemination of Results:**

The data collected from this study will be used to partially complete the requirements for the Degree of Master in Education in Educational Administration and will be shared with the faculty of Educational Administration at the University of Saskatchewan, and possibly in published articles, seminars and /or conferences. In respect of anonymity, pseudonyms will be used when referring to the school division, schools, and principals.

#### **9. Risk or deception:**

At the beginning of the study, participants will be duly informed regarding the purpose and nature of the research. (see Appendix A) There are not risks or deceptions involved in agreeing to participate in the study. Participation in the study will be voluntary, and so participants will be free to withdraw from the study at anytime as there will be no penalty that accrues or perceived to accrue as a consequence of refusing to participate or not. Direct quotations from the interviews will be reported, but identities of participants, their schools, and school division will be kept anonymous. This will be ensured through the use of pseudonyms.

#### **10. Confidentiality:**

Participants for this study will be principals from schools in an urban setting. To avoid the risk of participants getting to know each other, pseudonyms will be assigned to direct quotations. References that may identify a particular school or individual principal will be deleted from quotations. To ensure anonymity of participants, pseudonyms will be employed in reference to the school division, schools, and particular principals. In course of the study, every caution will be employed in respect of the rights and professional careers of the participants. All data and interview tapes will be securely stored for a minimum of five years at the University of Saskatchewan in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

#### **12. Data/Transcript Release:**

When the data collection is completed transcripts will be discussed with each participant in a conversation. Each participant will be well informed from the beginning up to the end of this research. The researcher will engage each participant in a conversation about his/her transcripts. The researcher will make use of e-mail, fax, and correspondence to acquire the consent of each participant with regard to the summary report on his/her transcript. Participants will be free to change or delete responses which they feel do not agree with the purpose of the interview. Each participant will be asked to sign a Transcript Release Form (see Appendix A). This

indicates that they agree with what was said in the transcript or what they intended to say.

**13. Debriefing and Feedback:**

Participants will be informed that the completed thesis will be available at the University of Saskatchewan's College of Education Library and the Department of Educational Administration, and that upon request, participants will be furnished with a summary of the report.

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**14. This research Project has been reviewed and is recommended for approval.**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Patrick Renihan, Faculty Advisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Student Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Department Head

**15. Contact Name and Information:** Md. M. Islam Konok  
101-606 Cumberland Ave.  
Saskatoon, SK  
S7N 1L5  
306-373-6184  
306-257-3774 (fax)



101-606 Cumberland Ave.

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Telephone: 306-373-6184

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e-mail: [mykonok@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mykonok@yahoo.co.uk)

April 3, 2006

Dear Director,

Prior to coming to Canada, I lived in Bangladesh where I worked as an English teacher in a college in Bangladesh for three years. I am currently a Masters student in Educational Administration, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. I am conducting a research related to the school principals' perceptions of the process and dynamics in the implementation of professional learning communities. This is in partial fulfilment of my Masters degree program. The purpose of the research is to examine the perceptions of principals in the implementation of professional learning communities at the school level. I am seeking permission from you to contact school principals from your school division to participate me in the study: the research is a qualitative study, and principals will be interviewed.

Confidentiality will be maintained and pseudonyms will be used through the study to ensure every effort is made to prevent identification of participants, school or school division.

In case you have any concerns or you would appreciate additional information, you may contact Dr. Patrick Renihan my advisor at 966-7620 or myself at 373-6184. If your preference is by writing, you may contact me at 101-606, Cumberland Ave. Saskatoon, SK. S7N 1L5, or if by e-mail my address is [mykonok@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mykonok@yahoo.co.uk)

Thanks for considering this request.

Yours Sincerely,

Md. M. Islam Konok

101-606, Cumberland Ave.  
Saskatoon, SK  
S7N 1L5

Telephone: 306-373-6185  
Fax: 306-257-3774  
e-mail: [mykonok@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mykonok@yahoo.co.uk)

April 4, 2006

Dear Participant,

Prior to coming to Canada, I worked in Bangladesh as an English teacher in a college for three years. I am currently a Masters student in Educational Administration, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. I am conducting a research on the school principals' perceptions of the process and dynamics in the implementation of professional learning communities. This is in partial fulfilment of my Masters degree program. The purpose of the research is to examine the perceptions of principals in the implementation of professional learning communities at the school level. As a qualitative study: I plan to interview principals. This letter, is an invitation to you to participate in the research.

Your participation in the research interview is completely voluntary. Interviews will be confidential and pseudonyms will be used to insure anonymity of the participant, school division, and your school.

I have included the interview guide for your perusal so as to give you an idea of what to expect as a participant. A consent form has also been included in this letter. If you wish to be interviewed please complete the consent form and return it to me in the self addressed-stamped envelop not later than February 28, 2006. In the event you may have any concerns or would like additional information, you may contact Dr. Patrick Renihan my advisor at 966-7620 or me at 373-6184. You may also contact me by letter or e-mail through 101-606 Cumberland Ave, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 1L5, and [mykonok@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mykonok@yahoo.co.uk) respectively.

Thank you for you considering to participant in this research.

Yours Sincerely,  
Md. M. Islam Konok

### **Letter of consent for participation in research**

You are invited to participate in a study entitled, **“Principals’ Perceptions of the Process and Dynamics in the Implementation of Professional Learning Communities.”** Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.

**Supervisor:** Dr. Patrick Renihan, Department of Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan; phone: 966-7620.

**Researcher:** Md. M. Islam Konok, Department of Educational Administration, University of Saskatchewan. Phone: 373-6184.

**Purpose and procedure:** The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of principals in the implementation of professional learning communities at the school level. The procedure to be employed to generate information will be through semi-structured interviews with participants. You will be interviewed twice. At the first interview, a consent form will be signed. The first interview will last between 15 to 25 minutes, and the second one will last approximately 90 minutes. Interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed later by the researcher for analysis. The researcher may request a follow-up interview with you in case additional information or a clarification is needed. You will have the opportunity to review the transcription and discuss any thoughts, add, alter, and delete information from transcripts as appropriate. You can also express concerns and reactions you have towards the researcher’s analysis. During the period of the study, the researcher will keep contact with you for clarification and additional information.

**Potential Risks:**

There are no foreseeable risks and there will be no deception associated with this research. Direct quotations from the interview will be reported. Confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured by the use of pseudonyms in respect of participants, their schools, and school divisions. The greatest care will be taken to protect the anonymity of participants but there may be the possibility that because the sampling is from a small, closed group of people (principals), respondents may be identifiable to others on the basis of what they have said.

**Potential benefits:**

This study has implications for both principals and school divisions interested in pursuing the implementation of professional learning communities in their schools. The findings of this study may be of interest to principals interested in transforming their schools into professional learning communities. The information from this study will be also valuable to school divisions as they reflect on their commitment to teacher professional growth and teacher collaboration time.

**Storage of data:**

Throughout the interview and the study period, the researcher will keep all tapes and transcripts in a safe and secure place. At the end of the study period, the data will be kept in a secure place at the office of Dr. Patrick Renihan, Department of Educational Administration for five years and in consonance with the University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

**Withdrawal:**

Participants are free to withdraw for any reason at any time without penalty. In the event of withdrawal, the data collected from the interview with you and tape recordings will be destroyed.

**Confidentiality:**

Data obtained from interviews with you will be used as a part of a Master thesis in partial completion for a Masters Degree in Educational Administration. The thesis document is a public document. The research may also be used in papers submitted to scholarly journals and/or presented conferences. In the thesis and in all documents participants will be referred to by a pseudonym in order to protect confidentiality.

**Questions:**

If you have any questions regarding your participation or your rights as a participant in this study, please feel free to ask at any point. You may contact the Office of Research Services at the University of Saskatchewan (966-2084) or the researcher, Md. M. Islam Konok at 373-6184, or e-mail me at [mykonok@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:mykonok@yahoo.co.uk) or my supervisor, Dr. Patric Renihan at 966-7620. The research has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Science Research Ethics Board on\_\_\_\_\_.

**Consent to participate:**

I have read and understood the description provided above. I have been accorded the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been satisfactorily answered. I am aware of the nature of the study and understand what is expected of me and also understand that I am free to withdraw at anytime in course of the study. A consent form has been given to me for my records.

---

(Signature of participant)

---

(Date)

---

(Signature of Researcher)

---

(Date)

### Transcript Release Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with [name of researcher]. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to [name of researcher] to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix B  
**Interview Guide**

### **Interview Guide**

1. In your opinion, what is the role of professional learning communities?
2. Please describe how the idea of professional learning communities was initiated at the system level in your school.
3. Describe your own involvement in the implementation of professional learning communities.
4. How were teachers informed of the implementation process? What were their initial reactions? What strategies did you use to achieve 'buy-in' one any teacher?
5. How important was teacher collegiality in the implementation of a professional learning community in your school?
6. In your school, how is collaboration fostered:
  - a) among students?
  - b) among teachers?
  - c) between students and teachers?
  - d) between teachers and EAs?
  - e) between staff and parents?
7. In what ways do you think these collaborative processes helped to implement a professional learning community?
8. What were the barriers to effective collaboration? What was done to address them?
9. How does a shared vision help in the implementation of professional learning communities? Tell me a story giving an example of shared vision.

10. How was distributed leadership used in the process of implementing professional learning communities?
11. How do you involve parents in the collaborative processes in your school?
12. What challenges or barriers did you encounter in implementing professional learning communities?
13. What in your opinion helps to sustain professional learning community in your school?
14. Do you have any suggestions or advice for other principals interested in the implementation of professional learning communities in their schools?