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**Perceptions of School Principals on Participation
in Professional Learning Communities as Job-Embedded Learning**

by

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Abstract

This phenomenological study focused on the perceptions of school principals who participated in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) as a form of job-embedded professional development. Principal Professional Learning Communities (PPLCs) have emerged as a vehicle for the professional development of principals, but there is little research available on how principals experience PPLCs or how districts can support principal learning in a PLC. This research sought to increase understanding of how principals experience learning in a PPLC, and to provide recommendations to districts interested in building leader capacity through PPLCs.

Aim

The purpose of this research was to explore principal perceptions of a PPLC experience that took place over the course of a year under the direction of a central office facilitator. The Principal PLC (PPLC) was nested within a larger PLC made up of a district's full administrative team. The layered PLCs were designed to increase support for principal learning as part of the larger leadership community. Research on PLCs as models of adult situated cognition and social learning systems helped provide a framework for understanding principal learning in PPLCs (Wenger, 2000). The questions guiding this interpretive research were (1) How do principals describe their experience in a district-wide administrative PLC? (2) How do principals describe their experience in a Principal Professional Learning Community (PPLC), led by a central office administrator?; (3) What have principals experienced in these PLCs that is beneficial to them?

Problem or Issue

The school principal plays a critical role in supporting development of the school as a learning organization (Wahlstrom, Seashore, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010), but principals often have little training, experience or support to help them lead the work (Cranston, 2009; Wahlstrom, et al., 2010). Beginning and veteran principals frequently need more support through job-embedded professional development to face the complexity and demands of their role (Wahlstrom, et al., 2010).

The new professional standards suggest principals are expected to demonstrate proficiency in leading a school as a system-wide learning community made of teacher PLCs (NPBEA, 2015). Principal professional development is often supported by a district's central office. However, there is a gap in research on the role of the central office in facilitating PPLCs as a means of professional development for principals (Honig & Rainey, 2014).

Research Findings

Research questions focused on principals' descriptions of their experiences and their learning in these PPLCs. Multiple interviews, observation data and PPLC meeting transcripts were analyzed to identify themes and develop a description of the essence of the lived experience of principals participating in a PPLC nested within a district administrative PLC and facilitated by a professional from the central office.

The primary findings from the study included that: (a) Participants described participation in PPLCs as valuable in providing connection, collegial support, collaboration, shared vision and dedicated time to focus on instructional leadership; (b) Principals experienced new learning and the collaborative work in PPLCs in relation to direct relevance as something they can apply to lead change in their building contexts; (c) Principals experienced a complex interior journey that included feelings of doubt, efficacy, trust, risk and self-awareness as part of PLC participation; and (d) Principals described that through participation in PLCs they gained greater understanding of the focus, structures and leadership of PLCs.

Conclusion/Discussion

The results of this study suggested that in a nested learning community, the diverse PLC layers can provide supported practice, common vision, purpose, and collegial support across the system. The use of a district level PLC can provide a vehicle for delivery of topical professional development for principals and central office leaders. The use of protocols, activities and simulations in the PPLC experience provided supported practice and helped leaders envision their work in their contexts. This supports previous research on PPLCs (Honig & Rainey, 2014) and aligns with the theoretical framework of situated cognition (Wenger, 2000). The PLC may help districts create more supportive and collaborative systems, which have been found to increase leader efficacy (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008).

Recommendation for districts included that central office leaders interested in implementing PPLCs focused on supporting development of principals as instructional leaders need to ensure system supports are structured for access to job-embedded leadership opportunities. Central office leaders also need to evaluate the system structures to identify obstacles and alignment challenges that prevent principals from being able to conduct turnaround work with teachers. Further, the district's alignment of leadership calendars and opportunities will better support the development of joint enterprise for principals in a PPLC. Preplanned instructional leadership opportunities may ensure principals have opportunities for experiential learning as they apply new learning in their buildings.

Research Implications

The findings of this research suggest there may be a complex relationship between autonomy, investment, meeting the needs of individual leadership contexts and achieving joint enterprise. This may be an area for future research. This study followed the first year of an initiative to develop principal professional learning communities (PPLCs) within a nested learning communities model facilitated by central office. The use of one district layer of common professional development through a PLC book study and a subsequent PPLC layer focused on supporting implementation of learning demonstrated one pathway to support principal learning. However, the study represents a

first year in what is planned to be a long-term initiative. As a first-year effort in PPLC development, this study only provides a glimpse of the start of a change process and does not look closely at subsequent years, group discourse or interactions, or the effects on teacher or student layers. These would be important areas for future research on PPLCs.

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Author Biography

Jennifer Gaudioso has worked in education for twenty-seven years. She held various teaching roles in K-12 literacy and for the past twelve years has worked in school and district administration. She earned a Master's degree in reading followed by leadership certifications at St. Joseph's University. She graduated from Drexel's Ed.D program in Education Leadership and Management in August, 2017.