STORIED RESEARCH INTO THE ADOPTION OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

In the Graduate Academic Unit of Education

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This dissertation is accepted by the
Dean of Graduate Studies

THE UNIVERSITY OF NEW BRUNSWICK

April, 2014

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is organized into four articles, a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue provides a brief overview and statement of the problem, definitions of terms, and a discussion of the methodology, as well as identification of the research questions. The first article traces my transition into the world of a doctoral student and how it parallels my recent immigration into rural New Brunswick. The border-crossing model (Giroux, 1992) provides the framework to examine the dynamics of transition as I explore my border-crossings into these two communities, in which I have recently been both thrust and openly embraced, using self-study autobiography to interpret and connect my own shifts in consciousness. Crossing into both communities, I bump up against unfamiliar norms and standards. Research communities of practice and collaborative study with seasoned researchers are potential solutions. This article provides the reader some understanding of my personal motivations to believe that the PLCs have the potential to foster teacher professional growth. The second article contains a review of related literature including information on rural education, professional learning communities, foundational principles of a professional learning community and the impact of professional learning communities on student and teacher learning. This review provided the opportunity to look at a possible model for adopting PLCs in rural schools. In the third article I present the narrative inquiry which focuses on the experiences of teachers in rural New Brunswick schools to reveal how a PLC model for professional development was adopted at their schools and whether this implementation had an effect on their practice. Three teachers' stories reveal their PLCs provided limited professional growth, the teachers having turned to other sources of professional development and

provide feedback to policymakers to enhance the implementation of PLCs in rural schools. The fourth article captures the impact and implications of various educational reforms on communities. It reveals the imposition of these reforms from without the community rather than the organic development from within as well as the detrimental effects that an economic perspective of the reform of rural schools has had on rural communities. What results is a clear connection between government policymakers' economic perspectives to the reform of rural schools and the outmigration of youth from their rural communities. With a locally influenced curriculum linking the classroom and cultural politics, students can learn to develop their deliberative powers to remain and address community issues. By drawing on my analyses of rural education I make recommendations for education reform that more closely meet the needs of rural communities. Finally, the epilogue ties together the four articles by recognizing the common threads. At the interface of these articles lies the theme of the vitality of community in policymaking. My focus develops from myself as an individual learning to adjust to rural life as a graduate researcher, to the voices of the teachers who were involved in their local PLCs, to the local community and its need to develop deliberative powers, and finally to the wider awareness of the policymakers who try to implement educational reforms. At the heart of each paper lies the role of the community as it adjusts to the challenges of change.

DEDICATION

To my muses, past present and future:

To Rhoda, Mike, Lauren and Stacey

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation is a milestone in my academic and teaching career. This journey has opened me to experience life from new perspectives. From teacher to student, from urbanite to farmer, and from educator to researcher, I have witnessed fundamental changes in my thinking and outlook. I wish to acknowledge the support and encouragement of those who guided me.

To the teachers and neighbours who generously gave of your time and contributed to this effort, you are warmly acknowledged and appreciated.

To Ellen Rose and Barbara Barter, members of my dissertation committee, I am grateful for your sage advice and steady guidance. You have taught me that there is always more to know and express.

To my doctoral supervisor, Karen Sullenger, who provided unwavering faith in my abilities, you have sustained me throughout as a guide and friend. You are an exceptional teacher with unlimited patience and endurance. I would never have reached this turning point in my life without your optimism and inspiration. I will be eternally grateful.

To my nieces, Lauren and Stacey, who continue to show me how bright the future will be, thank you for your love and support.

To my mother, Rhoda, who sent me on a journey to wear a ‘squashed hat’, I feel your pride, even though you are no longer here.

To my husband, Mike, you have endured this struggle more than anyone will know.

Your balance and grace taught me how to find my own. I love you!

Table of Contents

PAGE

ABSTRACT ii

DEDICATION iv

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS v

Table of Contents vii

List of Figures xi

Prologue 1

Background 2

Definition of Terms 3

Professional Learning Community 4

Rurality 4

The Research Questions 7

Research Approaches 9

My Role as Storyteller 14

Organizational Plan of the Study 16

References 19

Article I: When Will I Stop Being from Away: A Doctoral Researcher's Relocation into the World of Educational Research 23

Background 26

Methodology 30

Finding my Guides 31

The Doctoral Process 34

PAGE

Finding My Place 34

The Research Topic 34

The Methodology.....35

Positioning Myself.....37

Concluding Thoughts.....39

References.....43

Article II: Professional Learning Communities in Rural Schools: A Review of Literature 46

Where Did the PLC Concept Come From? 47

Fundamental Principles of Professional Learning Communities.....50

Focusing on Student Learning 51

Collaborative Culture 54

Culture.....55

Structure of Collaboration.....55

Focus of Collaboration.....56

Shared Values and Vision.....57

Collective Responsibility.....58

Reflective Professional Inquiry.....59

The Professional Learning Community as Professional Development 59

Professional Development in Rural Schools.....61

Advantages of a Rural School Becoming a Professional Learning Community...63

PAGE

The Next Step: A Model to Assist Rural Schools in the Process of Actualizing PLCs....67
The Lom PLC Actualization Model....69
Phase 1: Initiation....72
Phase 2: Implementation....72
Phase 3: Institutionalization....73
Conclusion....75
References....77
Article III: A Narrative Inquiry into Professional Learning Communities in Rural Schools....87
The Movement of Reform in Professional Development....89
The Professional Learning Committee....93
The Introduction of Professional Learning Communities in New Brunswick Schools....95
The Introduction of the DuFour PLC Model in the Aberdeen School District....99
The Introduction of the DuFour PLC Model....102
The Introduction of the DuFour PLC Model in three Aberdeen schools 104
Methodology....105
The Participants and Their Schools....108
Adopting the DuFour PLC Model in Three Rural Schools....110
Beaufort Elementary School....111
Argyle Middle School....113

Greenfield High School 117
The Lessons I Learned from These Teachers' Stories.....120
Recommendations.....124
References.....130
Appendix A.....134
Article IV – Rural Education Reform Responsible for Outmigration: The Consequences of Ignoring the Local Community 135
Methodology.....137
Complexity of Characterizing Ruralness, Rural Communities, and Rural Education 140
Education Reform and Culture Promotes the Demise of Rural Communities 146
Breaking the Link between Rural Education and Outmigration.....149
Developing Deliberative Powers 152
A Different Kind of Rural Education.....156
References.....160
Epilogue 165
Adapting to Teaching in Rural Schools.....167
Final Thoughts 173
References.....176
Curriculum Vitae

List of Figures

PAGE

Figure 1. The PLC actualization model 71

Prologue

When I first began this study, my focus was on the experiences of the rural teachers in their PLCs. I wanted to understand how these PLCs operated and what impact they had on the teachers who participated in them. However, in the process of gathering stories for this study, I discovered other narratives rising to the surface. These narratives revolve around the various reforms that are being implemented in rural schools. From school consolidation to standardized curriculum, school districts aim to prepare students for a global employment market in the most economically viable ways. In New Brunswick, school districts are geographic areas that include both urban and rural communities. As a result, when implementing reforms, little account is given for the unique circumstances confronting rural students, teachers and administrators. Rural schools are often located far from students' homes, necessitating long bus rides. Our students often travel more than one hour to and from school, arriving tired and sleepy. In addition, rural schools are regularly in a state of flux. Policymakers, with an eye to economics, look to consolidation of smaller schools. The result is an atmosphere of uncertainty for both students and teachers. From year to year, rural teachers may be unaware of where they'll be teaching or if their positions may be eliminated. Consequently, the life of a rural teacher is full of uncertainty. Those who are fortunate enough to keep their teaching positions find that they must learn to adapt to challenging circumstances in their practice, such as multi-level classes, inclusion of a wide range of students, and insufficient resources, just to name a few. Or, many must teach a variety of subject areas for which they have little training (Gibson, 1994). What often results is high levels of attrition (Holloway, 2002).

My conversations with the teachers who participated in my study of rural teachers in PLCs led me to believe that those who stay the course, like the teacher participants in this study, find the collegial atmosphere to be enormously supportive and the lifestyle within a small rural community to be a rewarding experience. These teachers referred to their various forms of professional development as the means to adapt to the constantly changing circumstances in their teaching practice. My own teaching experience was also enhanced by my professional development and was the inspiration for beginning my work on this dissertation.

Background

In order to provide teaching excellence in light of escalating expectations from society and to stay current in a world made constantly smaller through globalization, teachers seek professional development. For example, in New Brunswick, where I teach, policymakers utilize the results from provincial standardized testing to determine if schools are meeting objectives. When test results suggest inferior student achievement, it has been my experience that teachers are held accountable by administrators and parents to seek solutions. Our search for strategies to ameliorate our practice leads us to a variety of sources of professional development, essential to individual teachers' growth as well as organizational change in schools, both of which are necessary for true educational reform to occur (Borko, Elliott, & Uchiyama, 2002). Based on my previous research (Lom, 2007), my colleagues here in New Brunswick seek professional development offered by universities, the New Brunswick Teachers Association (NBTA) or the school district office to improve their craft and increase their practical knowledge and/or develop new instructional practices. But, since rural communities tend to be distanced

and road conditions can make travel difficult, rural teachers often find it too challenging to meet with colleagues in other schools or attend university courses, limiting the chances for professional growth.

As a means to ameliorate this situation, I learned from my conversations with colleagues that professional development initiatives in New Brunswick have focused on professional learning communities (PLCs). Follow-up conversations with provincial and district policymakers led me to understand that it was the culture and support system inherent in the characterization of PLCs that influenced this decision. This led me to research PLCs revealing a plethora of studies that endorsed the PLC concept as how organizations should work in order to create success because effective schools exhibit the characteristics of a professional learning community (DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, 2005; Hord, 2004; Leithwood, Jantzi & Steinbach, 1998; Lezotte, 2005; Louis, 2003; Louis & Marks, 1998; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Preskill & Torres, 1999). In fact, I found that PLCs are described as the "surest, fastest path to instructional improvement" (Schmoker, 2006, p. 105) because of the on-going, structured teacher collaboration generating collective responsibility for student learning ultimately resulting in improvements in student achievement (Hord, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Schmoker, 2006).

Definition of Terms

Since the terms 'professional learning community' and 'rural' have many connotations, at this point it is imperative to be clear about what I mean when I refer to PLCs and how I perceive the term, rural.

Professional Learning Community. For the purpose of this study, I selected the following definition for a professional learning community: "a school in which professionals (administrators and teachers) continuously seek and share learning to increase their effectiveness for students, and act on what they learn" (Leo & Cowan, 2000). This definition most closely reflects the kind of culture and purpose that was described to me by the provincial policymaker I spoke to. My review of literature exposed the use of a variety of terms in place of professional learning communities such as "learning communities," "communities of practice," "collaborative communities," and "continuous improvement teams" (Schmoker, 2005). Although these terms were meant to identify the existence of a PLC, further examination showed that each of these groupings varied to some degree. What they did have in common was the aim to meet the foundational principles of PLCs.

The foundational principles of a professional learning community include (a) focus on student learning; (b) a culture of collaboration of practice; (c) reflective dialogue; (c) shared vision and values; and (d) collective responsibility (Buffum & Hinman, 2006; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Easton, 2004; Fullan, 2006; Hord, 2004; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Louis and Marks, 1998; Roy & Hord, 2003; Schmoker, 2006; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell, and Valentine, 1999; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001).

Rurality. Rurality, as I have learned from a variety of sources, is often defined in ways that can be arbitrary, complex and usually context specific. So, when I was grappling with how I would represent the concept of rurality in this dissertation, I was asking myself if I should defer to how rural researchers define rurality or if I should rely

on definitions offered in government documents, such as census reports? Is 'rural' a term people use to characterize themselves? Does the term 'rural' refer to a particular backdrop or is it used in reference to the nature of the associations of the people who live there? My investigation began with the literature.

The concept of rurality did not become an issue until something different developed; specifically, urban. Even though a plurality of rural conditions has existed through history, it didn't become a social/cultural problem until in modern times (Small, 2001). Coladarci (2007) recognizes several criteria that can be considered in developing a definition of rural as a geographical concept , namely "population size, population density, proximity to an urbanized area, type of economic activity, income and educational-attainment levels, commuting patterns, and the many other empirically ascertainable factors" (p. 2). Additional criteria consider social representations such as, local commitment, a community of interest, a culture, or way of life (Du Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman & Clemenson, 2001). I fear that relying on a definition of rural that is exclusively geographically based contributes to the perspective that people are merely numbers on a graph and their individual circumstances are insignificant. In that case, a suburban setting with proximity to urban services and infrastructures may be considered rural. Additionally, a tight-knit community of immigrants, who settle into an area to facilitate their adaptation into a new environment may be classified as rural by researchers, despite their surrounding urban setting. Hence my dilemma for defining rural in this dissertation is a multi-pronged monster with which to contend.

The geographic characterization is an important consideration when describing the participating rural schools, because, their district is considered, by provincial

policymakers, to be rural due to their remote locations. On what basis is the term 'remote', and thereby rural, used by these policymakers? My research into New Brunswick census (Statistics Canada, 2011) revealed that no less than 45% of its population is considered as rural and since 1981, the term 'rural' is given to "persons living outside centres with a population of 1,000 and outside areas with 400 persons per square kilometre". Du Plessis, et al (2002) recommend that for the analysis of localized issues, enumeration area census numbers should be used.

On the other hand, members of my local rural community portray rural as a connection to the land and place as well as a kinship with the people who live there. Their ability to cope with the idiosyncrasies of rural life is based on an acknowledged interdependence by giving to or doing for each other what is expected from them. In other words, they have the feeling that each person is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. For them, rural life means a heritage or family roots deeply entrenched in this geographic area, along with a life centered on its natural environment, its challenges and sublimity. Additionally, by focusing on the social aspects of rurality rather than the geographical ones, I am able to include the sense of community within the participating schools and their relationship with locals in the area where they are situated since these distinctive characteristics contrast with my earlier urban school experiences.

Therefore, my own views about how to characterize rurality are influenced by both the literature on rural education, local perspectives, and geographical representations from New Brunswick census. Both my life experiences in urban Montreal and rural New Brunswick have informed my perceptions. Urban centers like Montreal, promote a style of interaction that is rationalized, objectified, and detached. In this urban context, I shared

no common mores with my neighbours; we simply acknowledged our proximity with a nod of the head. Tönnies (Loomis, 1957) labelled this form of association as *Gesellschaft* (impersonal associations based on the rational pursuit of industry, self-interest and contracts with diverse beliefs). In my short time as a rural resident I have become enmeshed in the lives of my neighbours and their children. Our collective sense of loyalty is typical of the *Gemeinschaft* (Loomis, 1957) associations depicted by Tönnies. Consequently, for the purpose of consistency in this study, rural will be a term designated to communities of population living outside centers of approximately 1,000 people, as portrayed by Statistics Canada. Additionally, rural will also be a term used to describe these same communities that consist of closely-knit people whose connection to the area has been generational. Each of the participating schools in my study of PLCs in rural schools is located in small rural centers of populations of less than 1,000 residents and drawing their student population from the tiny rural communities within bussing distances of no more than forty minutes each way.

The Research Questions

When I first began this study, my focus was on the experiences of the rural teachers in their PLCs. I wanted to understand how these PLCs operated and what impact they had on the teachers who participated in them. My interviews with the teachers were led by three guiding questions:

1. What is the nature of professional learning communities in rural New Brunswick schools?

2. Do rural teachers view their participation in a professional learning community to be professional development? If so, in what way?

3. What impact has the participation in professional learning communities had on these teachers' practice?

However, once I had a clearer picture of the issues addressed in these questions, I became curious about how the PLCs were introduced to the district and implemented in the schools. My research into implementation of reform initiatives in education led me to understand that when an innovation is evaluated, questions arise regarding the implementation, integrity, impact, institutionalization, maintenance, and the ability to replicate the success (Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999, p. 254). Conversations with the provincial professional development specialist, the district official responsible for teacher professional development, and the principals at the three participating schools were guided by the following questions:

1. How was the PLC concept chosen for a process for professional development?

2. Why was the DuFour, Eaker, DuFour (2005) PLC model chosen?

3. How was the chosen PLC model introduced to the district and school administrators?

4. In implementing the PLC concept was there a certain set of characteristics that policymakers were looking to implement?

5. Are policymakers considering the implementation of PLCs as part of the teacher evaluation process?

My research into the concept of community as a component of a professional learning community also took me in new directions. The term community, first used in 1910, was used to refer to the trade and services available in rural areas that surround a central village (Harper & Dunham 1959). Depending on the context, community may refer to a geographic place, the association of a people living in a particular place or the common life experienced by a group of people. This investigation led me to look closer at the professional communities of which I was a part as a teacher, a graduate student, and a rural resident. I wondered: Did my transition into the world of a doctoral student parallel my recent immigration into rural New Brunswick? Additionally, I was drawn to learn more about my own rural community, to which I immigrated from an urban tradition. I wondered: What does rurality mean and whose perceptions are influencing my own ideas about rurality? I was also curious about the relationship between the local rural schools and the surrounding communities they serve. I learned from Corbett (2005) that rural schools are contributing to the outmigration of rural communities. I wondered: Can this negative influence of rural schools on the communities they serve be reversed? What resulted was a series of articles which focus on both my own entrance into the research community and the relationship between rural schools and their supporting communities, all of which are featured in this dissertation along with the main study of PLCs in rural schools.

Research Approaches.

Stories are one means by which people attempt to make sense of the complex human condition: to create some order out of the chaos of competing and contradictory experiences; to bring into dialogue the world of the real and the world of the imagination.

Since stories provide renditions of how life is perceived, it seems especially useful to capture the situated complexities of teachers' work and classroom practice, often messy, uncertain, and unpredictable. Gough (1998) reminds us that telling stories about one's life is a process – not of documenting the truth of what exactly happened. Instead, the act of telling the story is a process of recording how the teller of the tale presently sees his/her position in relation to the subject/topic being discussed.

In this dissertation, my intention is to provide a glimpse into the lives of rural teachers, the schools in which they teach and the reforms that impact rural schools and their surrounding communities. However, as the overarching narrative of the adoption of the PLC concept in rural schools in my rural community was unfolding, what began to emerge was the impact of educational reforms on many rural communities. Additionally, Gough's (1998) assertion that stories are meant to be told to allow readers to be able to see others and themselves in new ways rang true for me. While listening to the participating teachers tell their own stories about becoming rural teachers, I began to consider my own journey from urban teacher to rural teacher and from teacher to graduate student. In this way, the rural community context of this dissertation is another character in our stories, shaping the teaching experiences of the participating teachers, as well as my own as a graduate student researcher.

The research approach I chose to examine my own transition from teacher to researcher was self-study autobiography. Autobiography requires me to take stock in my past, seizing it as something to be weighed, assessed, and evaluated. The self-study forces me to distance myself and do a second-reading of my experiences guided by the demand that I confront myself honestly and own up to the trouble spots in my history.

The stories told by the teachers who participated in my study of PLCs in rural schools 'fused' with my own experiences and impelled me to think in hindsight about what my own experiences have been. As LaBoskey (2004) explained, our experience is always influenced by that of others and our stories are always intertwined with those of others. Widdershoven (1993) goes as far as suggesting that, "We only become aware of the significance of these experiences by telling stories about them and fusing them with other stories" (p. 7).

In a similar vein, in my second article, in order to better understand why policymakers consider the PLC concept to be an effective means of teacher professional development, I needed to investigate the history behind the development of the PLC concept. According to Gadamer (1979), understanding is not a subjective behaviour, but also includes both the "history of those who understand and the history of what is being understood" (p. 112). By examining the thematic threads linking texts, I sought the roots and influences that motivated pioneers such as Rosenholtz (1989) and Little and McLaughlin (1993) to extol the virtues of such benefits of the PLC concept as shared norms and beliefs, collegial relations, collaborative cultures, reflective practice, professional growth, and mutual support and obligation. However, simply remembering the past, by reviewing the events that led to the present has little value, if these remembrances are not connected to the overall narrative. In other words, to understand the adoption of PLCs in rural schools, I needed to trace the evolution of the philosophy to understand how past events served as a vehicle for tracing the trajectory of the PLC movement. Therefore the narrative of the PLC movement emerges as an interlocking discursive configuration (Freeman, 1993).

My third article takes the reader into the rural context through the eyes of rural teachers. Despite their practices being unique to the community in which they work, teachers are united in their efforts to provide students with a rich learning experience. According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) what we know in education comes from telling each other stories of educational experience. Bring us together and we will talk in narratives; from anecdote to explanation, our stories reflect how we look to improve our practice. These lived experiences have been translated into rich narrative stories useful for both teaching and research. Within the structures of their narratives, the lives of the rural teachers in this study are meshed with their perceptions of life within their rural context. My desire was to interpret across these various personal accounts in order to investigate and represent the storylines and broader societal narratives which informed them. I wanted to explore not only the teachers' private constructions, as is commonly the focus in narrative research, but also the collective interpretations and constructions of these teachers' perspectives. My challenge was to draw out the linguistic and cultural resources they represent in order to provide the reader with an authentic picture of rural teachers and the professional learning communities they are part of.

My objective was to understand the rural teacher's experience in professional learning communities. Just as a story unfolds the complexities of characters, relationships, and settings, so too can complex problems be explored in this way. Not only conscious but also tacit knowledge is carried along in stories. Not only personal but also contextual knowledge moves within them. In Maclntyre's (1984) view, our lives are understood as enacted narratives. We are burdened with a past for which we are accountable even though it is not all of our own making and with a future that is both

unpredictable as well as foreshadowed by preconceived images. The constraints of the past and foreshadowed futures at each point of my writing suggested particular directions within which to proceed. My choices were therefore not arbitrary. There is no past that is not in some way carried into the future and there is no present which is not informed by some past experience. In telling their stories, these teachers not only reveal their present teaching and community contexts, but also their past experiences as learners and educators.

Narrative inquirers devote more space in their written works to fewer individuals than other forms of qualitative research do. No single story provides a full understanding of the rural teacher's experience, but each provides "pieces for a 'mosaic' or total picture of a concept" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 88). Amy Shuman (2006) refers to the process of applying the personal story to a universal one as "transvaluing". This method of re-framing involves the personal acquiring the status and value of the communal or universal. Repeated storylines are important in understanding the complete experience of rural teachers in professional learning communities and can shed light on the rural teacher's experience and on the interrelationships between collective and individual experiences.

Teachers in rural schools encounter many common conditions: isolation, extra demands on time, smaller schools, just to name a few (Gal, 1993; Mitchem, Wells & Wells, 2003; Seltzer & Himley, 1995). Despite the small number of teachers participating in this study (three rural teachers), these narratives contain universal accounts of human progress, perfectibility, decline and loss within a framework of rural culture, because narrative is sensitive to the subtle textures of the participating teachers'

thoughts and feelings. Their stories travel backward and forward in time, reflecting their growth as educators and learners and with the resonance provided by the reader, some tacit elements become more explicit.

The fourth article reflects the effect educational reforms are having on rural schools. Once again, I chose self-study autobiography as a means to connect my own stories with those of residents in my local rural community. Their stories provide a prospective vision of life as a future with a field of possible options, expectations and intentions, but also a retrospective view at a past time lived and experienced. Their reflections and anecdotes provide the vehicle for understanding the issues facing the very survival of the community and revealed dilemmas and concerns about the youth and local schools.

Additionally, I examined a variety of texts and documents. My analysis was informed by content analysis which doesn't provide definite answers, but gives insight into the shortcomings and unacknowledged agendas and motivations of others. I was not looking to perform discreet linguistic analysis, but rather sought thematic threads that linked these texts to each other and informed my representation of the reforms being imposed on rural schools by political policymakers.

My Role as Storyteller. When I reflect on my teaching practice, my motivations for professional growth, and the impact of my teaching contexts, I can see the influences on my choice of research topic and research method. I lived and taught in Montréal, in both the private and public school systems, having access to a variety of forms of professional development. I have been both a teacher and a school administrator. Now I

live in rural New Brunswick. Each of these experiences contributes to multiple perspectives, both distant and near.

My approach to learning has been constructivist following the philosophy of progressivism. In the early 1970's I was introduced to John Dewey and his beliefs about the school acting as a community offering students the opportunity to be involved in real, guided experiences. For Dewey, human life is a continuous process of constructive adaptation to an individual's environment with culture fostering the growth in intelligence (Eisner, 2002). Based on Dewey's philosophy, my approach to teaching has been a child-centered learning environment utilizing an inquiry-based curriculum in a school that develops life-long learners.

Another influence on my approach to learning has been Lev Vygotsky who identified the importance of social interactions on the learner. Cognitive development results from a dialectical process whereby a child learns through problem-solving experiences shared with someone else. The outcome is a shared knowledge of the culture inherent in the learning community. This culture is supported by four main characteristics: 1) the group consists of a diversity of expertise - expert to novice based on what is being learned; 2) there is a common objective to advance the collective knowledge; 3) there is an emphasis on learning how to learn, developing critical thinking skills of the members; and 4) the group develops processes to share and assess what is learned (Lave & Wenger, 1996).

My interest in the PLC concept stems from these educational perspectives. I wanted to learn if there was a professional development model that could be work-embedded, focusing on student learning, fostering reflective dialogue and empowering

teachers in decision-making. Moreover, unlike the one-shot professional development workshops I experienced in my career, PLCs are on-going. I expected that the teachers I would interview would be singing the praises of the PLC concept and able to demonstrate much professional growth from their experiences.

Organizational Plan of the Study

This dissertation is organized into four articles, a prologue and an epilogue. The prologue provides a brief overview and statement of the problem, definitions of terms, and a discussion of the methodology, as well as identification of the research questions.

The first article traces my transition into the world of a doctoral student and how it parallels my recent immigration into rural New Brunswick. The border-crossing model (Giroux, 1992) provides the framework to examine the dynamics of transition as I explore my border-crossings into these two communities, in which I have recently been both thrust and openly embraced, using self-study autobiography to interpret and connect my own shifts in consciousness. Crossing into both communities, I bump up against unfamiliar norms and standards. Research communities of practice and collaborative study with seasoned researchers are potential solutions. This article provides the reader some understanding of my personal motivations to believe that the PLC concept has the potential to foster teacher professional growth.

The second article contains a review of related literature including information on rural education, professional learning communities, foundational principles of a professional learning community and the impact of professional learning communities on student and teacher learning. This review provided the opportunity to look at a possible model for adopting PLCs in rural schools.

In the third article I present the narrative inquiry which focuses on the experiences of teachers in rural New Brunswick schools to reveal how the chosen PLC model was adopted at their schools and whether this implementation had an effect on their practice. Three teachers' stories reveal their PLCs provided limited professional growth, the teachers having turned to other sources of professional development, and provide feedback to policymakers to enhance the implementation of the PLC concept.

The fourth article captures the impact and implications of various educational reforms on communities. It reveals the imposition of these reforms from without the community rather than the organic development from within as well as the detrimental effects that an economic perspective of the reform of rural schools has had on rural communities. What results is a clear connection between government policymakers' economic perspectives to the reform of rural schools and the outmigration of youth from their rural communities. With a locally-influenced curriculum linking the classroom and cultural politics, students can learn to develop their deliberative powers to remain and address community issues. By drawing on my analyses of rural education, I make recommendations for educational reform that more closely meet the needs of rural communities.

Finally, the epilogue ties together the four articles by recognizing the common threads. At the interface of these articles lies the theme of the vitality of community in policymaking. My focus develops from myself as an individual learning to adjust to rural life as a graduate researcher, to the voices of the teachers who were involved in their local PLCs, to the local community and its need to develop deliberative powers, and finally to the wider awareness of the policymakers who try to implement educational

reforms. At the heart of each paper lies the role of the community as it adjusts to the challenges of change.

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Article I: When Will I Stop Being from Away: A Doctoral Researcher's Relocation into the World of Educational Research

Eight years ago I simultaneously left behind urban life and my teaching career. Crossing borders into academic and rural communities, I confront cultural contexts with which I have limited experience. The metaphor of border-crossing speaks to issues of identity and diversity when people enter different cultural contexts/communities crossing oft-times invisible boundaries. The research literature is replete with examples of such border crossing, from crossing intellectual to geographic to ethnic cultural boundaries. In *Building Communities of Difference,* Tierney (1993) briefly discusses the notions of difference and border crossings. Traversing the borders between cultures and communities, we learn to develop our own voice while coming to terms with how the socio-cultural forces have "altered, silenced or distorted" our histories (Tierney, 1993). The resulting dialogue and understanding of differences dissolves the boundaries to incorporate and co-inhabit borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1999). The struggle is evident as we constantly cross these borders, subsequently existing in a state of tolerable discomfort with one another while confronting our differences (Tierney, 1993). My transition into the world of a doctoral student parallels my recent immigration into rural New Brunswick. The border-crossing model (Giroux, 1992) provides the framework to examine the dynamics of transition. In this paper, I explore the border-crossings in which I have recently been both thrust and openly embraced, using self-study autobiography to interpret and connect my own shifts in consciousness as I cross these borders.

Learning to live a scholarly life and growing into a scholar are similarly irresistible, and sometimes painful. Graduate students learn to represent their philosophical stance in a

widening array of disciplines for epistemologies, methodologies, and theoretical approaches to study educational phenomena. Since my move into a rural community, I need to navigate the cultural vagaries that connect residents to the place and its history. These challenges, at times, are overwhelming. Should things be this difficult? How do I negotiate each of these new roles? These reflections lead me to consider the parallel spaces between the realms of graduate study and rural life. My recent arrival into the world of academia is accompanied with a discovery of how much I don't know. Being a teacher with 32 years' experience, accustomed to being mistress of my domain, I am unaccustomed to this sense of strangeness, and unfamiliarity. As a graduate student researcher, the ever-expanding levels of insight are the keys to my success. Can I justify the stance I take toward the main principles of ontology, ethics, epistemology and methodology? Is there room for uncertainty, I wonder?

Meanwhile, I am learning to adjust to rural life - a culture, different from my more familiar urban culture, with its unique interactions and language. The urban influences that formulated the foundations of my worldview can no longer be my guiding principles. Montreal was my hometown, but never drew me to a strong sense of commitment. On the other hand, many residents of rural settings have a significant attachment to place (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Kemmis, 1990). This is not to say that rural people exclusively experience a sense of place. However, in my experience, the concept appears to be more pervasive in literature on rural communities than urban and suburban places (Theodori and Luloff, 2000). An understanding of place is vital to understanding "the nature of our relationships with each other and the world" (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 622). Its power is profound. However, that which unifies my neighbours isolates me. My

rural roots are not deep enough. Some scholars distinguish between residing and inhabiting a place (Orr, 1992). To inhabit a place is to be conscious of one's relationship to it. As yet, I don't have enough social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) to be considered a resident. But does that mean that due to my paucity of deep roots that I must remain in the status of a tourist or visitor, in the local parlance – a come-from-away?

Since I am learning to adjust to life in these two worlds simultaneously, it seems natural to seek links in my progress of adaptation. Gloria Anzaldúa (1999) would say that I am living in a "borderland ....a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary....a constant state of transition" (p. 25). To map the terrain of commonality between the rural and academic communities, I sought out areas of discomfort and tension: challenges that defy simple solutions. There is no single axis of similarity or difference. In fact, I have focused my exploration on three borders of commonality: cultural borders, language borders, and identity/knowledge borders. Making these borders visible and intelligible creates an opportunity to examine my experience as a doctoral student and how my transition into the research community can resonate with fellow neophyte researchers as they cross similar borders. Borders are intrinsically about deference to authority and following proper procedures, and thus they highlight the ways that social and cultural institutions shape identity. The ease of crossing cultural borders has varied and gate-keepers may choose to facilitate this or to create barriers. It can be difficult to create a space for border-crossing when, on each side of the border, the cultural prescriptions and ideas about 'proper behaviour' may be very different. Similarly, language borders are imbued with value and power. They can be crossed and/or deconstructed. The choice of language and the use to which it is put is

central to a community's definition of itself in relation to its natural and social environment. A key question inevitably is what practices are valued and how. Acceptance within a community is contingent on knowing how to successfully cross these borders.

Background

Many of my unanticipated stresses come from behavioural expectations within each community. Some transitions I had experienced professionally, as I changed schools or assumed an administrative role, didn't prepare me for the challenges of adjusting to a new existence in the rural and academic communities. As a rural teacher I was living in the same community as my students. I was unfamiliar with the protocol for meeting students' parents in the local pharmacy while selecting personal products. Additionally, how familiar could I be with supervising professors; is hugging inappropriate, or could I ask about their personal lives? My prior university experiences were thirty years ago when students and teachers did not travel in the same social circles.

What factors account for variations in the ease of transitioning? Miller (1981) proposes three factors that guide my adapting to a rural community: my prior experience; understanding the responsibilities of roles I am assuming; and the amount of strain of expectations from community members. Meanwhile, Young (2001) suggests that adapting to the research community is fraught with a fundamental uncertainty in the field of educational research about not only what is and is not education research, but also about what knowledge counts, by what evidence, and according to whom. Both as a graduate student and a rural resident, there are revelations of new levels of expectation. In each case, adaptation involves new vocabularies to learn, new responsibilities to

assume and new relationships to cultivate. None of my prior knowledge prepared me for these journeys. For enlightenment, I turn to the literature to discover if my reactions are unique or part of a shared experience.

Border-crossing, first introduced by Giroux (1992), in his research on culture, power and pedagogy, is utilized to discuss transitions when crossing geographical borders. His premise is that existing borders between cultures are meant to be challenged and redefined through pedagogic conditions that enable students to deconstruct and challenge existing borders. In her analysis of Giroux's border crossing and pedagogical theories, Jackson (1997) asks if the central focus of universities is to challenge or to uphold the status quo. Young (2001) warns that because education is a multidisciplinary field, there is no canon or core methods of research. As a doctoral student I have been introduced to a wide range of epistemologies and theoretical approaches. However, in the role of educational researcher why am I expected to follow a particular canon of theory?

My decision to end a career as classroom teacher was not uncomplicated. Like many teachers, my identity was synonymous with my profession. As an educator, I saw my role as a guide, putting my efforts into helping my students realize that the intimidating subject of English literature can be attainable and relevant to their lives. I wanted to convey to my students that I had high expectations of them, but I would support them every step of their way. Some would react with puzzled looks, but occasionally, a student would look at me and squint her eyes as if to say, "*Okay. I'm with you. I'll give you a little more*." Krall (1988) calls this moment a "decision to proceed….an act of trust in the significance of personal knowledge" (p. 469). My students trusted my certainty of what they could do, and I trusted that they would meet

my expectations with their efforts. Years of experience as an educator sustained my confidence and assurance in my role. Buoyed by anticipation of personal growth, I decided to begin a new journey as a graduate student. However, in this unfamiliar role, my self-confidence has eroded; I no longer experience previous levels of self-belief. My identity is my professionalism – I am a teacher. Oddly, in the research community, this 'passport' hasn't eased the border-crossing. During the past four years I have been part of a research collaborative, at the invitation of my supervisor. With trepidation, I accepted the challenge to participate in research out of my area of expertise – science education. Subsequently, my identity as a collaborative researcher is not credible to my experienced colleagues. Where I was once consulted for teaching advice and guidance, as a researcher, I am relegated to a position of inferiority and ignorance. Despite my heavy luggage of experience as an educator, I am perceived as one without a history or knowledge. No one in my research collaborative turns to me for opinions on analysing the data or the literature review, because of my limited science background. And yet, my expertise in teaching writing provides one source for my experience to be recognized. O'Donnell et al. (2009) suggest that with a time gap in becoming a graduate student, there are often such problems as a drop in skill levels and unfamiliarity with changes in technology. For me, these issues were not the stumbling blocks I experienced as I re-entered graduate school. Taking on the role of a student after years at the front of the class didn't present insurmountable challenges. I had taught reading and writing strategies for years, so neither skill presented stumbling blocks. In addition, teaching at a technologically advanced school had pressured me into learning a wide variety of research and processing skills.

Similarly, my transition into the rural community provided a deeper understanding of my border-crossing into the academic community. Purchasing our house and surrounding land in rural New Brunswick fulfilled my hope for the future. Despite a successful career as classroom teacher and school administrator, the promise of urban life had become tarnished. Like many naive urbanites, I clung to the romantic idea that rural life would lead to freedom, independence, inner peace, an easier way of life and self-sufficiency. It was not until the move was complete that I discovered that my romantic notions of simple, unfettered rural life were largely illusionary. I never realized how challenging isolation would be, living a distance from local services and businesses. Since our home is in a remote location, driving distances and time are major considerations. In addition, not having grown up in this place, I have no history in the community. Researchers from a variety of disciplines have confirmed that our behaviour, emotions, dispositions, and thoughts are "indeed shaped not just by our genes and neurochemistry, history, and relationships, but also by our surroundings" (Gallagher, 1993, p.12). What results from the dislocation is a sense of isolation resulting from a lack of attachment with other members of the community who have been acquainted for generations. They have an innate appreciation for rural life. The geographical characteristics are not the only factors affording 'locals' with a valued lifestyle. They also treasure the low population density and smallness as benefits of rural life. There is a close-knit bond that unites my neighbours to the place and community. This bond is Gemeinschaft (Loomis, 1957), a sense of kinship, place, and mind. Do I have the skills to respond to the challenge of adjustment in either community? In line with Bourdieu's (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) notions of capital, the acquisition of such skills would

enable me to 'invest' my efforts in adapting to my new communities and would result in a greater 'return' on such an investment.

Methodology

The research design guiding this investigation is self-study autobiography. Once utilized primarily by teachers looking to better understand their practice, self-study is the exploration of one's self, actions, and ideas. It is autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political, drawing on one's life. This study meets the principal characteristics of self-study in that it is self-initiated, self-focused, and improvement-aimed (LaBoskey, 2004) by grappling with issues in my role as doctoral researcher. Giroux (1992) emphasizes the need to learn from narratives that illuminate how differences are concretely expressed within communities, arguing for a dialectical notion of narrative where stories serve to construct an ethical discourse critically interrogating hegemonic narratives. The narrative structure employs the telling of stories as a means of sharing perspectives and formulating arguments to explain viewpoints. My foray into the world of academia through the eyes of a middle-aged rural doctoral student has triggered my awareness of the significance attached to considering all of life's experience as grounds for becoming a narrative researcher, leading me to inquire into my beliefs about learning and living. I began this inquiry examining my own practice, choosing a self-study for direction because it was my 'self' that was in conflict in the new contexts. I needed to come to terms with what was happening to me during this transition to become effective researcher. The end result of self-study research is often a "tangible product . . . that is transferable to colleagues' and thus answers questions that facilitate the generation of new knowledge for the profession" (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003, p. 151).

Border-crossing is a metaphorical framework able to provide graduate students some insights into their own transitions.

Finding My Guides

Jackson (1997) explains that in every transition into a new culture there is someone who "knows" and is willing to instruct someone who doesn't. Experience doesn't speak for itself, but is given shape and meaning through language. Teaching didn't prepare me for the linguistic rigors of research discourse. At the invitation of my supervisor, I recently joined her research project on science education, in the hope of honing my research skills, despite my lack of science knowledge. This experience in a science research collaborative is often frustrating. As an English teacher lacking science knowledge and language, I mostly listen to colleagues' discussions, devoid of the appropriate semantics to make significant contributions. Similarly, my neighbours' rural dialect, foreign to my urban ears, adds to my feelings of inadequacy. Being deficient of effective vocabulary, I turn to mentors in each community for guidance.

In a rural community there are long-time residents who possess credibility/voice because of their social capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). They are respected, not just for their generational connection to the place, but for their sustained efforts to maintain and preserve local history and culture. My acceptance is contingent on their endorsement. My nearest neighbour, who welcomed and continues to introduce me to the local traditions and culture, is my rural guide. Similarly, in the academic world, my guides are senior faculty who regard graduate students as neophytes to research. Metz (2001) posits that the role of the professors in a doctoral program is to enable graduate students to understand researchers from quite different disciplinary traditions of theory and method

and to facilitate our ability to explain our own work across the same divide. Eventually I will be sufficiently immersed to demonstrate knowledge of the theoretical landscapes.

Graduate students are encouraged to take their place as part of the research community – attend and present at conferences, publish research results, and become part of a research network. In order to attain entry into this esteemed community, it is vital to determine a theoretical philosophy. Therefore, for a while, I have been struggling to develop my theoretical stance. I have wrestled with how to fit it in the scholarly conversation. Without doubt I am "terrorized by the literature" (Becker, 1986, p. 140). However, I find Becker's assurances are extremely helpful: "none of us invent it all from scratch," scholarship is a cumulative enterprise, and "we depend on our predecessors" (p. 140). My own transition into the academic community has led me on cursory but tortuous expeditions through various interpretive paradigms. Becker suggests that the element of choice is less free than some students and scholars would believe and that a whole host of small, practical choices made early on commit us to a paradigm. This suggests an approach that is organically developed; rather than choosing a structure to fit ourselves into, we fit it into place by making a relationship between scholarly work and our own. Reading about theory supports, challenges, refines, upholds, churns up, or spits out my uncertainties.

In the process of identifying my theoretical philosophy, I am asked to examine experiences from various perspectives: to recall significant educational experiences and to describe and order them; to stand back from those experiences in a state of critical self-awareness; to look at them from the viewpoint of others and to draw meaning from them by relating them to the larger social context. As a teacher, I followed progressivist

ideology, after an early introduction to the writings of Dewey in my pre-service years. Teaching in independent schools, I was at liberty to follow the social constructivist methods of Vygotsky (1978). My classes were collaborative environments. The advantages of collaborative learning can be traced to the social constructivist movement which sees learning as an active and creative process involving an individual's interaction with his or her physical environment and with other learners (Kirk & Macdonald, 1998). Accordingly, when I first crossed the border into researching methodologies, qualitative methods were synchronistic with my beliefs about investigating human interactions, life could be represented as it was lived: helping sort through the complexities of how to manage the emotional components of people's stories and experiences, 'giving voice' to points of view of people who are marginalized in society. Subsequently, narrative inquiry in which the researcher remains faithful to the participants who share their stories, while at the same time crafting a scholarly narrative, became my methodology of choice. I could turn to the writings of Clandinin, Connelly, Josselson, and Conle as my spiritual guides into this quest. Their foundational involvement with the narrative stance as a form of inquiry offers me a new understanding of the role of the researcher and my relationship with study participants. From their writings, I can draw the lines between life, teaching, and researching: all inquiry reaches into life, life advances theory, and theory shapes life.

Rural life also demands a certain amount of positioning. Where do I fit into the local community? In Montreal, I never had any social interactions with my neighbours, nor even know their names. They were merely familiar faces greeted with a nod of the head. Conversely, in this small rural community, I am known as a teacher, so most visits

with neighbours involve discussions about the state of education. Their points of reference are their own educational experiences at the primary and secondary levels. None attended university, but see it essential for their children and grandchildren to do so. In these discussions I guard my statements and vocabulary and take my lead from the philosophies expressed. Knowing one's place in any community is an essential component to fitting in. I turn to neighbours and elders in the immediate area to understand how to cope with many complexities. Their foundational knowledge provides advice for coping with the multiple challenges of adapting to an ever-changing environment.

The Doctoral Process.

When I began my quest for a doctoral degree in education, members of my examination committee asked me to position myself within the scholarly academy. It was important that I map out and understand the landscapes – those bigger issues that need to be resolved.

Finding my place.

The research topic. Deciding on the topic of my research was the simplest of all tasks. The focus of schools has been to develop educational excellence for students. But, in my view, this priority has not extended to the professional needs of teachers. Scheduling, the driving force in most schools, takes little or no account of creating a culture of professional growth. As a result, schools are not environments that encourage teacher learning. Instead, teachers have been taught to rely on the provincial or district offerings, which are mainly curriculum related. If they do seek professional development from universities, it is to gain certification, the main purpose of which is to provide an

increase in salary. Also, teachers are not afforded the professional deference to decide on their own source and manner of professional development. And yet, knowing how resourceful teachers can be when it comes to their students, I have wondered how many times they have contributed to their own oppression by simply remaining silent. As professionals, teachers must be contributors to the evolution of schools for both themselves and their students. It is not that teachers are disinterested; rather they feel there are too many obstacles to overcome. Most recently, with the upsurge of popularity of professional learning communities (PLCs) as a grassroots form of professional development, I began researching the experiences of rural teachers in my local schools to learn more about their experiences in school PLCs. Do they consider their participation to be professional development? Do these experiences differ from my own professional development in urban contexts, where professional development opportunities were abundant?

The methodology. How I feel and what I believe about society and the world has a direct effect on how I have chosen to investigate and represent it. The object of my research is to bring to life the particular contexts and circumstances that I live with and to evoke characters, actions, spaces, and senses to build subjective, situated knowledge; I want to "transform collected materials into vivid, detailed accounts of lived experience that aim to show how lives are lived, understood and experienced" (Kiesinger, 1998, p. 129). My investigations and scholarly reviews of qualitative methodology have led me through the minefields of phenomenology, ethnography and eventually led me to find my place in the world of narrative inquiry.

Narrative is used in the sense-making phase of research in that listening to and sharing stories helps us to understand experiences and create shared meanings. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) have described narrative as "a way of understanding experience" and have stated that "experience is the stories people live" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxvi). This vantage point offers a way of approaching research because "stories lived and told educate the self and others, including the young and those such as researchers who are new to their communities" (p. xxvi). Narratives form a structure within which to think about our daily lives and about the magic and mess of human possibilities. To tell stories is an innate part of being human; we narrate our lives to make sense of them, in the same way as my rural neighbours rely on narratives as a means to explain, inform and influence within our community.

Similarly, rural teachers' practices are unique to the community in which they work. However, we are united in our efforts to provide students with a rich learning experience. Bring us together and we will talk in narratives; from anecdote to explanation, our stories reflect how we look to improve our practice. These lived experiences have been translated into rich narrative stories useful for both teaching and research. Noddings (1991) views stories as having "the power to direct and change our lives'' (p. 157). In the early 1990s, researchers such as Carter (1993), Connelly and Clandinin (1990), and Van Manen (1991) focused on the benefits of collecting stories. The purpose was to ''capture the richness and indeterminacy of our experiences'' resulting in narrative stories as ''a central focus for conducting research in the field'' (Carter, 1993, p. 5).

Within the structures of their narratives, the lives of my rural colleagues in this study are meshed with their perceptions of life within their rural context. My aim is to interpret across these various personal accounts in order to investigate and represent the storylines and broader societal narratives which informed them. I explore not only their private constructions, as is commonly the focus in narrative research, but also the collective interpretations and constructions of these teachers' perspectives. My challenge is to draw out the linguistic and cultural resources they represent in order to provide the reader with an authentic picture of rural teachers and their PLCs.

Positioning myself. Crossing the border into the world of academia has led me away from what has been familiar as a teacher into new areas of uncertainty. There are new lexicons to express my knowledge about such areas as ontology, epistemology, and axiology. My encounters with experienced researchers, through readings and conferences, have now enabled me to find myself on surer, firmer ground. Along the way, I have started to understand my position within the on-going conversation in qualitative methodologies. According to Gadamer (1979), understanding is not a subjective behaviour, but also includes both the "history of those who understand and the history of what is being understood" (p. 112). Just as a story unfolds the complexities of characters, relationships, and settings, so too can complex problems be explored in this way. Not only conscious but also tacit knowledge is carried along in stories. Not only personal but also contextual knowledge moves within them. In Maclntyre's (1984) view, our lives are understood as enacted narratives. We are burdened with a past for which we are accountable even though it is not all of our own making and with a future that is both unpredictable as well as foreshadowed by preconceived images. The same conditions

apply in narrative inquiry. The constraints of the past and foreshadowed futures at each point of my dissertation writing suggest particular directions within which it can proceed. My choices are not arbitrary. There is no past that is not in some way carried into the future and there is no present which is not informed by some past experience. In telling their stories, teacher/participants in my research not only reveal their present teaching and community contexts, but also their past experiences as learners and educators within a rural context.

Since narrative is a rendition of how life is perceived, it seems especially useful to capture the situated complexities of teachers' work and classroom practice, often messy, uncertain, and unpredictable. By choosing narrative inquiry, I look to capture the whole story. Rural teachers have a particular relationship with their context. After all, most rural teachers, unlike their urban counterparts, live within the community in which they teach (Howley & Howley, 2004; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). We are neighbours, teammates on local ball teams, and critical lifelines in this rural context. I am an immigrant to the rural community. Growing up and then teaching in the concrete confines of downtown Montreal, I only sensed that rural life was different from my own, but had to rely on authors' narrative representations to provide me with a glimpse of rurality. Since moving to rural New Brunswick, I have become immersed in a new milieu; I rely on colleagues and neighbours to help me make sense of the challenges I face. We mainly communicate using narratives. Similarly, my colleagues in the local rural schools share stories of their students, their classroom experiences, and their professional growth. MacIntyre (1984) concludes that "it is because we understand our own lives in terms of narratives, that narrative is appropriate for understanding others" (p.

211-212.) We make sense of the changing human and non-human world through narratives. It is because of this visceral link to story that I am using narrative inquiry for this study.

Most of all, I can see why stories are such a powerful force in the two communities I inhabit. "Narratives of personal experience are ubiquitous in everyday life (Riessman, 1993, pp. 2-3), the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful" (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 1). It is not only the illuminating narratives that I aim to elicit in both academic and rural communities, but through them, I discover how I position myself within them. I remember a line from my study of the German poet, Goethe, in my undergraduate courses: "To know yourself, see what others are doing; to know others, look into your own heart". Studying the experiences of my teaching colleagues is enmeshed with my personal perspective; I sense tensions to position myself within the research community and the rural context of the study. Examining my experiences in adjusting to rural life also reveals that my interpretations contain the history of my own self and experiences. Thus, researching the experiences of local teachers in PLCs is an act of analytic reflexivity, "It entails self-conscious introspection guided by a desire to better understand both self and others through examining one's actions and perceptions in reference to and dialogue with those of others" (Anderson, 2006, p. 382).

Concluding Thoughts

My assimilation into the rural and academic communities is far from complete. I continue to make detours that provide both greater understanding and confusion simultaneously. Like all good learning, the process must remain my focus and so I

continue to chart my queries and doubts. Understanding my place in the contexts cannot be simply an event in my mind. Neither is it a question of trying either to separate myself out of my contexts in order to understand them, nor to leap out of my former urban world of teaching into that of a rural academic by an act of empathy. Instead, my understanding of experiences is a kind of unity of me and others, a relationship between us, and an intertwining of histories at a very subtle level. My border crossing has been both literal and metaphoric. Literally, I crossed geographic and cultural borders when I moved to rural New Brunswick. The transition has been more challenging than I would have expected. To neighbours I am a 'come from away' underscoring our language and cultural differences. Meanwhile, metaphorically, I crossed into an unfamiliar world of graduate studies. DuPraw and Axner (1997) note that cultural boundaries are delineated by differences in communication style, among other things. Despite years as an educator, my neophyte researcher status brings a deficit of position and voice. Crossing into both communities, I bump up against unfamiliar norms and standards. My experiences show that border-crossing can provide the framework for understanding the challenges and benefits of the metaphorical journey of becoming a graduate student. Giroux's (1992) border pedagogy underscores the need to challenge and resist existing boundaries of knowledge and create new ones. Despite my floundering, as a risk-taker, an inherent characteristic for graduate students, I am intellectually prepared for the challenges of entering unfamiliar territories. Joining the science research community was outside of my area of expertise. My lack of experience and knowledge resulted in a silenced voice and feeling devalued. Rather than being marginalized, graduate students need to be encouraged to develop their own voice within the discourse, challenging, crossing,

remapping, and rewriting borders as they enter into counter-discourse with established boundaries. In addition, Giroux (1992) suggests that "those designated as Other must reclaim their histories, voices and visions..." (p. 33). Without the knowledge of experience in the research community, my explanations often step on the metaphoric toes within the academy. Similarly my 'fancy city clothes' deter my acceptance at local gatherings where I never know what kind of food to bring. Often I am able to use my experiences as an educator to facilitate my meaning-making with the content of theories – helping me to reclaim my voice. In addition, by including me in her own research studies, my doctoral supervisor has widened the community border to make it inclusive and complimentary of my otherness.

Finally, as graduate students we are encouraged to develop independence in thought and autonomy in research. However, research collaborators also uphold me spiritually. Their guidance has sustained me through the challenges of my transitions. Pallas (2001) warns that the future of educational research is doomed unless at least some educational researchers engage across some communities of practice. But, doctoral research is purposely independent and individual. In her analysis of Giroux's theories, Jackson (1997) asks if the central focus of universities is to challenge or to uphold the status quo. A platform to sustain a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and joint research in graduate programs would address the common struggles and isolation. Our assimilation is ongoing; detours provide greater understanding and confusion simultaneously. Understanding our common experiences is an intertwining of histories at a subtle level. Utilizing the border-crossing framework in a metaphorical context offers

fellow graduate students insights into their transitions – a model I wish had existed for me.

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Article II: Professional learning communities in rural schools: A review of literature

Becoming a professional learning community (PLC) is a process that takes not only time, but also a commitment from teachers and administrators. A school's potential to becoming an effective professional learning community is contingent on the presence of certain key elements.

Evidence suggests that schools exhibiting these key elements have improved student achievement, positive learning environments, teachers holding higher expectations for achievement and behaviour, reduction in achievement gaps, and changes in teacher instructional practices compared to schools without them (Scribner, Hager & Warne, 2002). This literature review examines five areas relevant to the understanding and implementing of PLCs as a form of professional development in rural schools: where the PLC concept comes from, foundational principles of PLCs, the PLC as professional development, professional development in rural schools, and the advantages of a rural school becoming a PLC.

In the last few decades much has been learned about professional development and school improvement. The literature is replete with examples of schools journeying through changes in the quest for improved student achievement. The effort to reform schools to improve student achievement is not an easy quest as noted by a plethora of examples of reform efforts that have not accomplished the intended results (Craig, 2009; Lytle, 2002; Sack, 2002). Sack (2002) proposes that the problems of school reform often happen when districts try to implement one-size-fits-all solutions without taking into account the individual school context. Recommendations from researchers on how to achieve high levels of student achievement through school reform have been gleaned

through both positive and negative examples (Easton, 2004; Fullan, 2002; Hord, 2004; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Lytle, 2002; Schmoker, 2004).

Professional development that focuses on improving teacher knowledge, skills and dispositions is considered to be an essential element to teacher growth and school reform (Borko, Elliott, Uchiyama, 2002). Since the new standards and frameworks driving reform efforts do not provide specific guidelines for teaching, Wilson, Peterson, Ball, and Cohen (1996) noted that ‘‘the burden of adding to, filling out, and revising the visions is left to the teachers. We can see that most teachers would have to learn an enormous amount to make the reforms workable’’ (p. 474). Often, the reforms ask teachers to make changes in their beliefs in addition to learning new knowledge and skills. Spillane (1999) notes that teachers are “key agents” (p.144) to changes in classroom practice and thus the responsibility for change falls squarely on the shoulders of teachers both individually and collectively. Building on the capacity for PLCs to encourage teacher collaboration, most recently, one of the most popular movements in teacher professional development has been the professional learning community concept.

Where did the PLC concept come from?

Reviews of literature on the changes that have taken place in teacher professional development since the 1980’s often cite Thomas Guskey (1986), a quantitative researcher in evaluation of learning, for his views on teacher professional development. In 1986, Guskey noted that altering teacher beliefs and attitudes can only be achieved after changes in student learning outcomes are evidenced. That is, once teachers have actively engaged in using curriculum changes in their classrooms, they will embrace the theoretical/philosophical underpinnings for change. Guskey (1986) also had several

recommendations for staff developers considering how to effect change in teacher practice: 1) Changes need to be presented in a clear and explicit way; 2) Personal concerns of teachers need to be addressed in a direct and sensitive manner; 3) The purveyor of new practices must be seen as a credible person; 4) Recognition that change is a gradual and difficult process for teachers; 5) Teachers need to receive regular feedback on student learning progress; 6) Continued support and follow-up must be provided; and 7) Follow-up procedures need to include time for collegial sharing. Primarily, Guskey challenged staff developers to find more creative ways to help teachers translate new knowledge into practice.

When reviewing the research on teacher knowledge, Lee Shulman (1986) and his concept – pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) – is noted as a significant turning point in the conversation. Shulman (1986) expressed concern that too much focus in staff development is on pedagogy and that the missing factor is teacher content knowledge. In other words, the professional development of teachers, up until the 1980's, was looking to change teacher classroom strategies and not attempting to improve teacher knowledge of the content they were delivering. Like Guskey (1986), Shulman's focus was the evaluation of teachers; their recommendations for what teachers need for professional growth was aimed at an educational reform that would be measured by student achievement.

A few years later, the discussion concerning teacher learning shifted from examining what a teacher needed to know to the effect of the school leadership on teacher growth. The seminal work by Susan Rosenholtz (1989) brought teachers' workplace factors into the discussion of teaching quality, maintaining that teachers who

felt supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those who did not receive such confirmation. In other words, the focus was on school administration to provide a climate of learning to facilitate teacher growth. Further, Rosenholtz found that teachers with a high sense of their own efficacy were more likely to adopt new classroom behaviours and also more likely to stay in the profession.

The 1990's presented a new focus for teacher learning that introduced the importance of collaboration. Little (1990) suggested that students benefit when the teachers in their schools work in collaborative teams. In 1993, McLaughlin and Talbert confirmed Rosenholtz's findings and suggested that when teachers were involved in collaborative research and the subsequent learning, they were able to develop and share knowledge from their experience. Adding to the discussion, Darling-Hammond (1996) cited shared decision-making as a key to curriculum reform and the transformation of teachers' roles in schools where structured time is provided for teachers to work together in planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, and sharing feedback. These attributes characterize the beginnings of a movement toward professional learning communities.

In 1998, Etienne Wenger provided a framework for the type of working relationships that develop when co-workers enter a community through which individuals develop and share the capacity to create and use knowledge. He termed this form of working together as a 'community of practice'. The basis for this form of organization within a larger environment has three components: a joint enterprise that is understood and continually renegotiated by its members (similar to a common vision); a common

purpose that binds members together into a social entity; and the shared, communal resources that members have developed over time. Wenger suggested that communities of practice develop around issues that matter to its members. As a result, even if outside directives attempt to influence or mandate the direction of the group, it is the community, not the mandate, that produces the practice, because it is a self-organizing system. Consequently, communities of practice that develop naturally have a free-flowing creativity and have the capacity to strengthen the organization and address issues (Wenger, 2001). Membership in these communities is voluntary, based on a personal investment that members maintain. These types of informal communities of practice have the potential to become building blocks used by school leaders to nurture the development of more formal professional learning communities (Nelson, LeBard, & Waters, 2010). Thus the formidable movement supporting professional learning communities in schools became a popular initiative, intended to address issues deterring student achievement while providing teacher professional development. Some school districts mandate participation in these collaborative learning teams. However, Buffum and Hinman (2006) warn that PLCs should not be the 'reform du jour'. Instead, PLCs are about "*establishing lasting new collaborative cultures*" (Fullan, 2006, p. 10). As opposed to traditional disconnected professional development, PLCs can be a powerful alternative as teachers engage in focused cycles of instruction, assessment and adjustment of instruction (Schmoker, 2004).

Fundamental Principles of Professional Learning Communities

The sustained improvements in student results that today's educators seek "will not occur in an isolated, privatized, freelance culture, where no one knows what anyone

else is doing or what each other's operative goals are" (Schmoker, 1999, p. 111). Preskill and Torres (1999) suggest improved student achievement may be realized through PLCs because they have the capacity to recognize the value of the intellectual capital of each member. In addition, PLCs capitalize on the human capacity within schools to reach common goals as all teachers work as learners alongside their colleagues (Louis, 2003). Generally, PLCs are composed of teachers, although administrators and support staff may participate as well (Bolam, McMahon, Stoll, Thomas, & Wallace, 2005).

As educational leaders attempt to implement the PLC concept as a form of professional development, experts draw attention to essential specific components: focus on student learning, collaborative culture, shared values and vision, collective responsibility, and reflective professional inquiry (DuFour, 2004; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Hord (1997) warns that establishing a professional learning community within a school is not a quick or spontaneous process. It requires an educational leader's dedicated and intentional effort. Each component develops at its own pace, many times overlapping.

Focusing on Student Learning. A targeted focus on student learning is critical for a successful PLC. Collins (2001) warns that organizations which strive to achieve greatness need to choose one focus for their work and keep their eye on the target at all times. In the 'good to great' transformations included in his study, "there was no single defining action, no grand program, no one killer innovation, no solitary lunch break, no miracle moment" (p. 14) that suddenly transformed the organization to "great." Rather, the process of becoming "great" resembled working endlessly toward a common goal,

"building momentum until a point of breakthrough" (p. 14). In a PLC, the focus is on student achievement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004; Hord, 2004; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Sigurdardottir, 2010), even though some suggest that a PLC is about teacher development or changing organizational structures (Craig, 2009). Everything else is simply a means to an end (Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Wenger, 2001). The focus on student learning is realized when time and resources are dedicated to activities aimed at ensuring student learning. Schools operating as PLCs devote time to participate in activities focused on improving student achievement on a regular basis (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Hord, 2004; Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Sigurdardottir, 2010). This scheduled collaboration on student learning is an essential element in implementing a PLC in a school. Experts recommend that school districts must allocate the resources necessary to support these structures in order to produce improved student achievement (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Hord, 2004). In a school operating as a PLC, there is a learning environment that supports learning so that each student achieves to his or her greatest potential (Hord, 2004). Sparks (2005) recommends restructuring positions to provide assistance to struggling students and altering schedules to allow time to do the important work of a PLC. However, becoming a PLC entails meaningful changes to demonstrate a true commitment to student learning. There are significant implications when the focus shifts from teaching the curriculum to a focus on learning. By asking such questions as "what do we want each student to learn?" "how will we know when a student has learned it?" and "how will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?" (Buffum & Hinman, 2006; DuFour, 2005), teachers embrace the critical elements of a PLC. This process focuses

educators' efforts on teaching and learning, by engaging in a dialogue about instructional techniques and analyzing student work in a collaborative setting (DuFour, Eaker and DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Louis, Kruse & Marks, 1996; Schmoker, 2006).

A critical element to the focus on student learning is the analysis of student achievement. In a PLC, teachers analyze summative data to facilitate future planning. Moreover, experts recommend that time be spent developing common assessments based on a common curriculum and then follow up by analyzing the student results in collaborative meetings (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; Hord, 2004; Schmoker, 2006; Stiggins, 2005) Using results to inform teaching in order to promote higher achievement is what Stiggins (2005) calls 'assessment for learning'. This is a profound shift from traditional methods of assessment to evaluate the absorption of concepts by students. Stiggins (2005) notes, "Rather than relying on assessment as the source of information used to decide who is rewarded and punished, we use assessment as a road map from start to ultimate success" (p. 77). In a PLC, this use of assessments results in additional learning for teachers by collaborating with colleagues on how to provide improved instruction. As discussed in the next section, becoming better teachers through regular collaboration with other teachers is also a fundamental principle of PLCs.

Therefore, not only does the focus on analysis of student achievement serve as feedback on the instructional process, but teachers in a PLC can also plan for situations when students are not learning. DuFour (2005) suggests that the support for not learning should be a timely response that is treated as an intervention rather than a remediation. This response is paired with the underlying belief that every student can learn (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004; Lezotte, 2005; Louis & Marks, 1998; Saphier, 2005;

Stiggins, 2005). DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Karhanek (2004) propose that a specific plan of interventions should be developed at the school level to define the response. This student-specific response is vital for a school which professes to have learning as its main focus. Therefore, this enlightened use of assessments demonstrates commitment and strategic focus on improved student learning, a cornerstone of a PLC (Buffum & Hinman, 2006; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Fullan, 2000; Hord, 2004; Louis & Kruse, 1995; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Schmoker, 2006; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2001; Wenger, 1999).

Collaborative culture. Another fundamental principle of the PLC concept is collaboration. This principle draws directly from the 'community of practice" introduced by Etienne Wenger (1998) where co-workers share the capacity to create and use knowledge.

The collaboration outlined in the PLC literature focuses on student learning by participants actively engaging in dialogue. PLC collaborative teams are characterized as having participants work interdependently to reach common goals concentrating on improved student learning (Andrews & Lewis, 2002; Buffum & Hinman, 2006; DuFour, Eaker & DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Lee & Smith, 1996; Leo & Cowan, 2000; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Roy, 2007; Schmoker, 2006; Strahan, 2003;). The culture of collaboration is a distinguishing factor in characterizing schools as PLCs (Martin & Martin, 2010). An examination of this culture of collaboration necessitates a review of the core components that help to build this collaborative environment, including culture, structure, focus, and shared vision and values.

Culture. According to Schein (1996) culture is a shared set of assumptions about how the world is and should be that influences the perceptions, thoughts, and behaviours of a group of people. Within an organization, this culture is described as the "laws of the road" (Preskill & Torres, 1999, p. 155). Rosenholtz (1989) contrasted schools with and without a collaborative culture. She determined that in a collaborative culture "requests for and offers of advice and assistance seemed like moral imperatives....Teacher leaders were identified as those who reached out to others with encouragement, technical knowledge to solve classroom problems, and enthusiasm for learning new things" (p. 208). In order for the collaborative discussion about improving teacher practice to be effective, PLC members must have a high level of trust and mutual respect (Hord, 2004). An environment safe from blame permits collaborative members to be open and honest, without worrying about egos, and share concerns about their practice and student results. It also encourages focus on the group goals, collective accountability, and a sharing in the successes of each participant (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002; DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Karhanek, 2004; Easton, 2004; Fullan, 2006; Hord, 2004; Louis & Marks, 1998; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1995; Scribner, Cockrell, Cockrell & Valentine, 1999). In addition, this open sharing elicits innovative ideas for heightened student achievement.

Structure of collaboration. The size of the collaborative group in a PLC is not specific. Collaborative teams can range in size and composition from the entire professional staff of a school to grade level or department groups (DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). Generally, staff members meet in various groups on a regular basis. For example, the whole faculty may meet monthly while smaller collaborative teams meet weekly. Rural schools that tend to be smaller often have a strong sense of

collegiality among their teachers, supporting close interpersonal relationships. In such settings professional development is often enhanced by teaming and by small, task-oriented group formations. Thus, the necessity and opportunity for shared professional learning are heightened.

However, one key factor, identified by experts to be essential for PLCs to function is time built into the teaching day for the group to meet. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker and Many (2006) advise that time for collaborative teams to meet become part of the usual school routine so that all teachers involved are available to participate (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). Peterson (1994) warns, "Teachers need time to meet, talk, think, and interact. When time is scarce, the dialogue and exchanges of information are more often superficial and focused on immediate problems, issues, or obligations" (p. 11). Teachers in schools with PLCs identify time as a vital factor in the success of their work (Wood & Anderson, 2003). Therefore, a supportive structure necessary for effective PLCs includes job-embedded time for collaboration (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2006; Hord, 2004; Louis, Toole & Hargreaves, 1999; Schmoker, 2006). In rural schools where teachers have multi-course and/or multi-grade classes and no time for preparation periods, scheduled time for professional development is vital.

Focus of collaboration. The focus of collaboration in PLCs is another key factor. Experts agree that the overall focus needs to be on student learning. Once goals are established the plan to take action to meet them is the new focus. The focus on specific goals with targeted results increases the possibility for immediate impact on student learning (Conzemius & O'Neill, 2002). When goals are the target of a PLC's mission it keeps the members focused and on task. Goals provide motivation "which they find

personally compelling, as well as challenging but achievable. Having such goals helps people make sense of their work and enables them to find a sense of identity for themselves within their work context" (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004, p. 6). In addition, team goals are appropriate for both desired results as well as how the group works together (Conzemius and O'Neill, 2002). To develop a culture where members feel they can effectively impact student learning, PLCs need to experience short-term successes and/or continuous small victories in the sense that success builds success (Schmoker, 2004).

The use of assessments focuses collaboration around goals. DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many (2006) encourage collaborative teachers in PLCs to develop common assessments, administer the assessments and then take the time to analyze student results. They further recommend that these assessments be based on the curriculum that precisely defines what students should know and be able to do. Analyzing results in reflective dialogue promotes discussion about instructional strategies to improve future instruction. Assessment developed and used in this way is considered to be assessment for learning (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006; Stiggins, 2005). Thus, the collaborative work centers around what teachers want students to learn, how they will assess the learning, and what feedback will be exhibited if the students have not learned the objectives (Buffum & Hinman, 2006; DuFour, 2005; Hord, 2004).

Shared values and vision. In a PLC, teachers express a shared set of values or beliefs. These core beliefs and the way those beliefs are demonstrated in individual behaviour and school policies serve as a foundation for the school's mission (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 2004; Saphier, 2005). One characteristic of the vision of PLCs is

continuous focus on student learning; for example, envisioning students as capable of improved achievement. This concept leads to the creation of shared values. The unifying factor of a "shared vision among the staff, supports norms of behaviour and guides decisions about teaching and learning in the school" (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2000, p. 5). This encourages all school staff to engage in activities that are aligned with their beliefs about learning. Delving into the real meaning behind words to create a common understanding is a powerful activity that promotes a collaborative culture.

A vital component of a PLC is the steadfast belief that all students can achieve at higher levels (Lezotte, 2005; Saphier, 2005; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2000; Stiggins, 2005) despite obstacles "even if they are far behind academically and need a significant amount of time to catch up. Educators who carry this belief into their practice are not unrealistic about the obstacles they and their students face. They simply have not given up" (Saphier, 2005, p. 86). These shared values lead to positive actions toward successful student learning, resulting in improved overall student achievement. Saphier (2005) endorses the necessity of shared vision and values because "Strong professional learning communities produce schools that are engines of hope and achievement for students" (p. 111).

***Collective responsibility*.** School leaders who value shared authority and collegiality are critical in setting the stage for fostering effective PLCs through developing a vision focused on teacher learning to produce better student outcomes and changing the forces that guard the status quo (Cowan & Pankake, 2004; O' Malley, 2010). Fullan (2002) prescribes that teachers need to increase their knowledge and skills

through professional development programs that focus on the shared expertise of individuals, in order to improve student achievement. Teacher involvement in planning professional development is recommended to ensure that areas of knowledge and skills that are relevant to teachers are addressed (Desimone, Porter, Birnam, Garet, & Yoon, 2002). Furthermore, to deviate from status quo, schools need a "supportive peer reference group and a communication network with the larger system" (Williams, 1999, p. 84). However, the element of choice is also an essential factor for successful PLCs.

***Reflective professional inquiry*.** Some of the methods that demonstrate a focus on student learning include: teachers conducting action research, designing and evaluating student assessments, data analysis, lesson study, critical friends groups, case discussions, curriculum design, peer coaching, portfolio development, shadowing of students, and study groups (Easton, 2004). Thus, collaborative time is centered on student learning through revision of instructional strategies, and analysis of student performance. Members learn from one another's expertise as they perform collaborative analysis of student work (Hord, 2004; Schmoker, 2006). This reflective dialogue on teaching and learning is an important component of a successful PLC (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006; Hord, 2004; Marks & Printy, 2003; Schmoker, 2006; Wenger, 1999). Above all, collaboration in a PLC is designed to be continuous and include concrete and specific talk about teaching practice (Schmoker, 1999).

The professional learning community as professional development

Professional development is intended to expand a teacher's repertoire of well-defined and skillful classroom practice. Research on effective schools and the variables that contribute to improved student achievement focus on the need for high quality

professional development (e.g., Ball & Cohen, 1999; Darling-Hammond, 1996; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Guskey, 1986; Little, 1993).

However, a major critique of professional development for teachers is that it often falls short of its goals because it is fragmented and incoherent, lacks intellectual rigor, fails to build on existing knowledge and skills, and does little to assist them with the day-to-day challenges of improving student learning (Sparks, 2002). When accruing a list of approaches for 'powerful' professional development, Sparks (2002) focuses on three: 1) the use of student work as data to guide and motivate teacher learning; 2) a small number of goals to provide meaningful purpose for teamwork; 3) the matching of student learning outcomes with the types of curriculum, instruction and assessment that will achieve those ends. Each of these approaches is addressed in the professional learning community concept.

Additionally, the research on effective professional development refers to school culture, collaboration, learning, teacher researchers, and learning communities (Grodsky & Gamoran, 2003; Morris, Chrispeels, & Burke, 2003). To some researchers, the development of collaborative learning environments is the most important factor in ensuring effective professional development (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). In addition, the development of positive relationships and their impact on teaching practices are making their way into the literature on the relationship between PLCs and effective professional development.

The professional learning community concept is a keystone of a movement in which teacher learning and teacher knowledge is moving to the front in the advancement of the profession because it focuses on instruction; is sustained and on-going, rather than

short term or episodic; provides teachers the opportunities to learn from one another; encourages teachers to influence how and what they learn; and engages teachers in thinking about what they need to know (Hawley & Valli, 2007). Furthermore, Huitt (1999) recommends creating job-embedded opportunities for learning and growth. Little (2006) references a large body of research suggesting that conditions for improving learning and teaching are fortified when teachers collectively question their teaching routines, examine a variety of conceptions concerning teaching and learning, find ways to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and practice supporting one another's professional growth. By fostering a collaborative culture, schools encourage teachers to participate in PLCs, organize the sharing of responsibility for the same students and apportion time to meet and discuss individual students' strengths and weaknesses. As a result, teachers are given the opportunity to sit in on lessons in other teachers' classrooms, conduct research, plan together, analyze student work in groups to cultivate a mutual understanding of excellent and acceptable work, and share successful methods and teaching strategies. Schools that foster a collaborative culture organize programs, like peer-coaching and peer-observation of each other's classrooms, to enable teachers to help each other. As a result, teachers become experts in particular teaching methods and strategies then teach them to others. This kind of support system is especially valuable in schools that are not located in large urban communities where consultation with teachers in groups may be available.

Professional Development in Rural Schools

According to Statistics Canada (2011), which ascribes the term 'rural' based on population density and distance from urban centers, the majority of schools in Atlantic

Canada are located in rural communities. Provincial educational policymakers in each of the Atlantic provinces designates professional development opportunities to be for all teachers, regardless of their urban or rural context. However, teachers in rural areas have some unique challenges (Blum, Yocom, Trent & McLaughlin, 2005; Jaramillo, 2000; Taylor, 2000): a) they are often required to teach multi-level classes; b) they must supervise several extracurricular activities; c)their schools have limited resources; and d) they face a wide variety of student abilities in each classroom, with limited access to professional assistance (Taylor, 2000; Williams, 1999).In addition, they must be familiar with the unique needs of the community, since rural teachers often teach in schools located within the area/community where they grew up and their students' parents are often their neighbours. Global provincial professional development for teachers does not take any of these issues into account.

Whereas urban teachers often have a variety of sources to access professional development with universities and a variety of schools within travel distance, research has revealed four unique limitations for rural teachers' access to professional development: rural schools have limited access to university courses and provincial budgets have restricted the funding available to teachers to travel to conferences and courses; the large distances between schools restricts the opportunities to collaborate and triggers a sense of isolation; often rural teachers are required to supervise several extracurricular activities, thus limiting their time for advanced learning; a high rate of attrition impedes on-going staff development projects (Berkeley & Ludlow, 1991).

Perhaps the most formidable challenge to creating effective professional development, regardless of an urban or rural location, may be the prevailing school

culture, which generally considers a teacher's proper place during school hours to be in front of a class and thereby isolating teachers from one another and discouraging collaborative work (Abdal-Haqq, 1995). This traditional culture does not place a premium on teacher learning or permit teachers the opportunity to make decisions about their professional development needs. Abdal-Haqq (1995) recommends that teachers need time to understand new concepts, learn new skills, develop new attitudes, research, discuss, reflect, assess, try new approaches and integrate them into their practice, and time to plan their own professional development. She also suggests that principals can facilitate opportunities for professional learning by instituting two broad approaches to finding time for teachers to collaborate: extracting time from the existing schedule or altering teacher utilization patterns. Principals can nurture and develop teachers' professional growth as part of the school culture by creating consensus, promoting shared values, ensuring systematic collaboration, encouraging experimentation, and promoting the self-efficacy of teachers (Deal & Peterson, 1990; DuFour & Berkey, 1995; Wineberg & Grossman, 1998). Principal leadership can support the culture and the organizational dynamics offering opportunities for teachers to talk about teaching and learning, observe each other teach, plan, design, research, and evaluate curricula, and teach each other what they have learned about their craft (DuFour & Berkey, 1995; Wineberg & Grossman, 1998).

Advantages of a Rural School Becoming a Professional Learning Community

Professional learning communities have the potential to positively influence schools because working together to improve student achievement becomes the routine work for everyone in the school. For example, Louis and Marks (1998) find a correlation

between teachers organized into PLCs and the organization of classrooms for learning and academic performance. They found that "in schools with professional communities, students achieved at high levels" (p. 558). Schools utilizing PLCs were characterized by collective responsibility for student learning and subsequent improvement on student assessments (Louis & Marks, 1998). Additionally, Strahan's (2003) study finds improved achievement over three years of PLC implementation in three elementary schools that had not typically been associated with high performance. Other studies by Thompson, Gregg and Niska (2004) and Buffum and Hinman (2006), found that schools using PLCs had positive trends in student learning, lower failure rates, and improved scores on standardized tests.

While there is much research done on the advantages of PLCs in schools, few of these schools are rural. Rural schools tend to have some natural advantages for building community and collaborating on school improvement (Chance and Segura, 2009). The small size of rural schools tends to promote cooperation among teachers, enabling them to improve instruction in ways that develop naturally within the context of their daily practice (Howley & Howley, 2004). It is easier to build trust and collaboration in smaller, rural schools that include fewer teachers, who live within the community in which they teach and interact in a variety of ways within the community (Hickey & Harris, 2005). Also, because of their knowledge of resources within the community in which they teach and live, teachers are more familiar with various local resources, which could be helpful in developing school programs and student achievement (Howley & Howley, 2005). Third, rural communities tend to share common values and a sense of community (Howley & Howley, 2005).

Studies show that the PLC is an effective method for meeting the professional learning needs of rural teachers because they address issues such as funding and isolation (Sargent & Hannum, 2009). In addition, PLCs could potentially be a cost-effective strategy for teacher professional development in impoverished rural communities. Many aspects of effective PLCs can be supported without the need to pay for teachers' transportation and room and board to attend offsite training sessions. For this reason, cultivating PLCs may be a particularly desirable strategy for the improvement of teaching and learning in resource-constrained settings. Finally, since PLCs are built on the foundations of co-operation, collaboration, and consensus, teachers and administrators are able to work together to accommodate such changes. Rural schools tend to be smaller and by necessity, more collaborative than their urban counterparts (Lom, 2007), thereby providing more opportunities at hand to create this culture of learning and facilitate the existence of professional learning communities.

In one case study of a rural high school which had significant improvement in student achievement over a five-year period, Chance and Segura (2009) were able to demonstrate that a school's effort to develop a collaborative culture, and a movement toward shared leadership, both key characteristics in PLCs, along with scheduled time for teachers to meet, contributed to developing successful collaborative efforts that, in turn, led to improved student achievement. Decisions were made through consensus, which ultimately resulted in a shared vision of instruction and curriculum. Another contributing factor that supported this improved collaborative culture was the closeness of the rural community. The teachers in this rural school attributed the small size of the school, typical of many rural schools, and the fact that the teachers lived in the same community

in which they taught, supported their desire to be more collaborative with their colleagues.

When Hord (2004) looked to study the effect of five schools adopting the PLC concept, she included a rural school that was quite different from the other schools in the region both in atmosphere and educational results. In 1992, when she began her work with the rural school, the concept of PLCs was just emerging. Subsequent to studying these five schools, Hord's team began to speculate on how to assist other schools for implementing the PLC concept. One of her conclusions was that each individual school's context impacted the means and methods of implementation. A collaborative professional culture, such that may be found in smaller rural schools, develops when teachers and administrators share a common vision about what constitutes effective teaching and learning, and willingly share responsibility for decisions about school goals and pedagogy in order to achieve that vision (Chance & Segura, 2009). In addition, the development of a collaborative culture was seen as dependent upon the unique combination of individuals within each school thereby suggesting the implications of leadership in generating a cultural change in schools. In many rural schools the principal, as the instructional leader, consistently behaves in a way that promoted collaboration and teacher leadership (Chance & Segura, 2009).

The road to an effective PLC is messy and disorderly. Schools that make transformations to PLCs experience the natural conflict and dissention as part of the change process (Craig, 2009); however, group members usually learn how to respond to the various reactions to change in an effective manner while continuing their development as a PLC (Morrissey & Cowan, 2004). Collaboration means learning to deal

with the individual reactions to new information and situations. Often, when teachers view themselves as active members of teams rather than passive implementers of someone else's plan, they work together to overcome their fears of change (Schmoker, 2004). Marks and Printy (2003) propose that "as teachers inquire together, they encourage each other toward answers for instructional problems" (p. 374). Thus, collaboration is a form of professional development connected to the daily life of teachers and grounded in the questions and concerns of teachers (Novick, 1996). The fundamental learning unit is the team, not the individual (Huffman & Jacobson, 2003). However, it is important not to lose sight of the individual's role in a collaborative team.

Effective collaboration to improve student instruction is evident when "teachers and administrators work together, share their knowledge, contribute ideas, and develop plans for the purpose of achieving educational and organizational goals" (Leonard & Leonard, 2001, p. 10), relying on the internal expertise of team members (Schmoker, 2005). In addition, Wallace and Poulson (2003) suggest that leaders of effective PLC schools "work with the staff to foster development of school culture where the staff find meaning in their work and are motivated to learn and solve problems with a greater degree of collaboration than typifies many schools" (p. 230). In other words, democratic leadership described as supportive shared leadership (Hord, 2004) embodied in delegation and empowerment is recognized as a key component of a professional learning community.

The Next Step: A Model to Assist Rural Schools in the Process of Actualizing PLCs

Research shows that the PLC concept provides a viable process for positively impacting student learning and teacher efficacy. It engages educators, guided by positive

principles and values, as discussed earlier, in collaborative dialogue and planning within a safe environment for diverse ideas and beliefs. By using collaborative inquiry teachers explore new ideas, current practice, and evidence of student learning by using processes that respect them as the experts on what is needed to improve their own practice and to increase student learning. Researchers, such as Hord (2004), counsel that PLCs are meant to evolve within a culture of collaboration and shared leadership.

The literature offers guidance on what key principles need to be present for a PLC to function effectively. These key principles include a focus on student learning, collaborative culture, shared values and vision, collective responsibility, and reflective professional inquiry that need to be present for the successful adoption of the PLC concept (DuFour, 2004; Feger & Arruda, 2008; Hord, 1997; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). However, since PLCs are expected to evolve from within the school community, rather than be mandated, it is crucial to involve teachers in the process of implementation. Indeed, any teacher or school leader can begin the conversation about initiating PLCs at their school. It is actually preferable that the school community be active agents in the process of putting PLCs into practice. But, while the idea of beginning a PLC is embraced by a group in the school, the challenge is to discover where to start. Often the implementation process is expressed in abstract terms that stymie effective actualization, for example: generally the resources available are recommended checklists, matrices, or rubrics offered by the DuFour group (e.g., DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006) and others (e.g., Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2012) on such websites as www.solution-tree.com. What is missing from these

lists is a clear, dynamic model to guide any school group with the process of putting PLCs into practice at their school, regardless of its unique context.

After researching about how some schools adopt PLCs, I found various levels of success (e.g., Leo & Cowan, 2000; Hord, 1998; Jones & Stanford, 1973; Kruse & Louis, 1993). What was missing from each study was a set of recommendations to guide schools through the process of setting up a PLC. There were caveats about not preparing the ground for the PLC concept to successfully develop. For example, Sparks (2005) warns that time to meet, in general, does not guarantee the development of the collaborative culture necessary to result in improved student achievement. In addition, Howey and Collinson (1995) remind readers that collaboration cannot be mandated or contrived in nature. Nor can norms of collaboration "spring spontaneously out of teachers' mutual respect and concern for each other" (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 44). But no researcher was offering readers a guide through the process to a school moving from hearing about PLCs, to creating PLCs, and finally considering the PLC as the school's method for improving student engagement and teacher efficacy.

The Lom PLC Actualization Model. The model I have designed is intended to guide any sized group, or administrator, through a transparent process of meeting the criteria of PLC principles in their school. This model (see Figure 1) is informed by my years of teaching and administrative experience, along with processes that have impacted my own practice, as well as the research literature (e.g., Collins, 2001; Fullan, 2001; Hord & Sommers, 2008) on how various organizations successfully implement change that is endorsed by stakeholders. In addition, my research into the adoption of PLCs in rural schools (Lom, 2014) led me to understand that policymakers may mandate the PLC

concept to be implemented in all schools, but may not provide a clear process for implementing it. Additionally, principals in this study were assigned the responsibility for the implementation of the PLC concept at their schools. Without sufficient guidance and knowledge of the PLC concept, I found the system of meetings that evolved in these rural schools had limited impact on teacher learning.

When I was designing the model, the criteria were that it needed to be dynamic, taking into account the unique context of each school, as well as individual leadership styles, and allowed for adequate time to take its place within the teaching community to create a shared sense of purpose and direction. My intention was to delineate a clear procedure, but not to be so rigid as to make the process inflexible or unresponsive to local contexts.

The Lom PLC Actualization Model (2014)

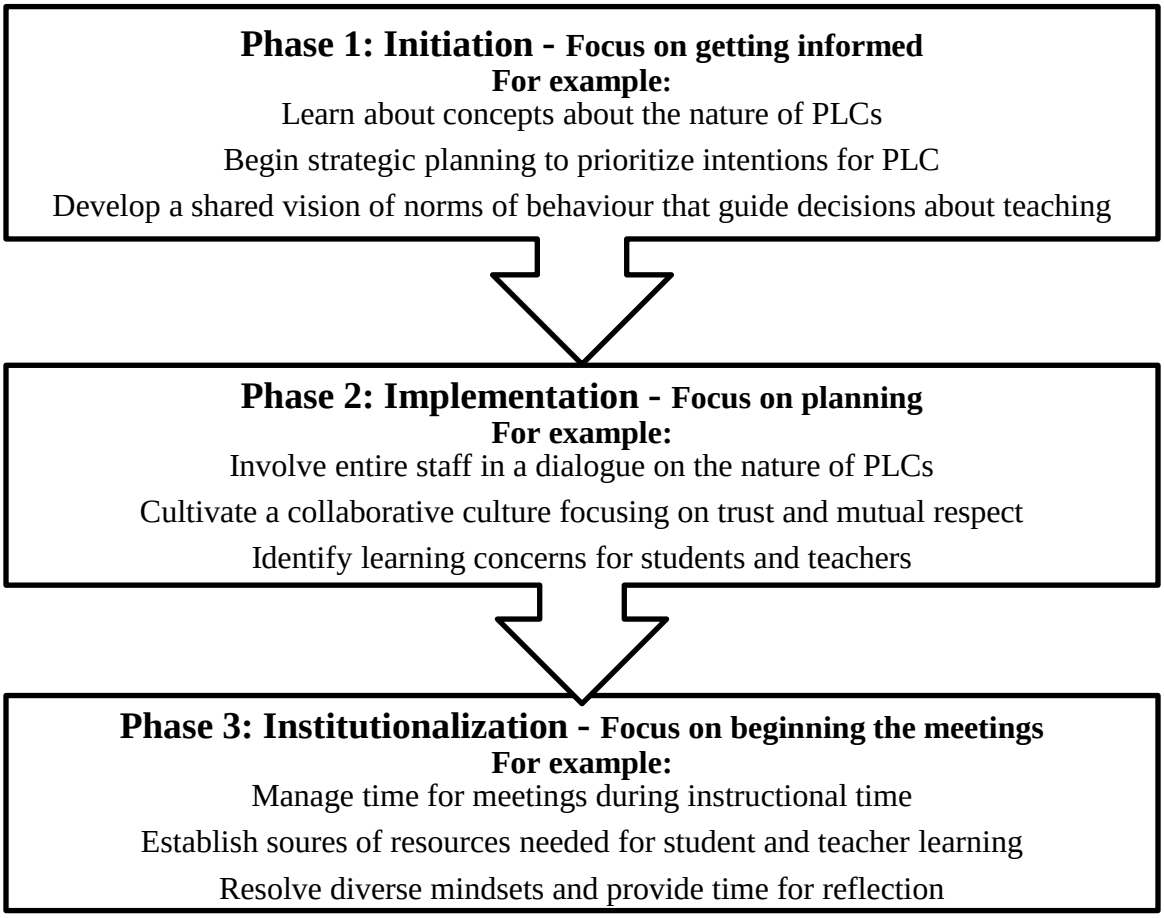

Figure 1: The PLC actualization model: A way to effectively engage PLCs into a school

The actualization model, I propose, consists of three phases as a most effective way to ease the process of adopting PLCs, from inception to embedded in the life of the school. In the figure, each phase consists of three examples that are not presented in a special order, nor limited to just the three offered, but rather should be considered direction for the conversations that need to happen at that phase of adopting the PLC concept.

Phase 1: Initiation. This first phase focuses on getting informed about the PLC concept and its intent. Understanding the key principles such as focus on student learning, collaborative culture, shared values and vision, collective responsibility, and reflective professional inquiry is essential before considering how to strategize for the school's adoption of the PLC concept.

Once there is a clear understanding of these principles, the planning for creating priorities begins. At this point it is important to identify who will participate in the PLC. The literature (Hord, 2004) recommends that membership is voluntary and not mandated. All who will be involved in the PLC are then included in setting priorities that are related to the school's mission and context. Once these discussions are underway, the participants will be able to articulate what is their shared vision of policies and norms of behaviour that guide decisions about teaching and learning in the school.

Challenges that may occur in this phase are where to access the information about the PLC concept and reaching consensus concerning the strategic plan and developing a shared vision. Sources of information are available online, in journals and texts. Additionally, the efforts to reach consensus will be enhanced with honest and open discussion that makes room for dissention.

Phase 2: Implementation. The second phase focuses on the kinds of planning needed before meetings can start. At this time the information gathered and decisions made in the first phase are taken to the larger group in the school. Discussions, about what was considered in the first phase (the principles of PLCs, the structure of the meetings, and the goals that may be accomplished in the PLC meetings) take place.

Additionally, these discussions should include talk about the means to make the culture collaborative. This collaboration cannot be mandated (Howey and Collinson, 1995) or be expected to spontaneously emerge (Rosenholtz, 1989). The responsibility falls on those with more authority to initiate actions that reduce the sense of vulnerability of those with less power (Bryk and Schneider, 2002). Trust allows relationships to grow to a point where people feel free to take chances because the idea of fear and/or isolation is minimized. Teachers are engaged in leadership roles and encouraged to make links with others in the school, allowing for honest discussion about improving teacher practice and student engagement. The focus of the collaboration may be on group goals, collective accountability and a sharing in the successes of each participant.

The challenge at this point is how to develop a collaborative culture. Conzemius and O'Neill (2002) recommend that collaboration functions best when focused on clear goals. By working on common assessments or means to gather student data, that will impact discussions in phase three, the participants can experience short-term success that will encourage future positive discussions.

Phase 3: Institutionalization. The third phase focuses on managing the factors that allow the PLC to be embedded in the life of the school and be sustainable. By this time those involved in the PLC are acquainted with the principles, feel that they are part of a collaborative culture and want to begin to have meetings that focus on student portfolios or other data derived from student assessments. Meeting on a regular basis is facilitated by scheduling time during the instructional day so that teachers are available to participate. Peterson (1994) warns that if time is not dedicated for regular PLC meetings,

the discussions that ensue become superficial or focused on immediate obligations, making it hard to sustain the goals that have been established

It is also important at this phase, to look at the resources needed. Although PLC participants learn from one another's expertise as they perform collaborative analysis of student work, they also need access to a variety of resources. Identifying these resources in areas such as social services, universities, and consultants, as well as the means to access them, will provide the support needed to address a variety of issues that impede student engagement and success. An investigation for the materials that foster teacher growth is also performed in this third stage.

Another issue that arises in this phase is dissention. Not all members of the school community will easily endorse the PLC concept. For example, some might feel that it is merely another unwelcomed addition to an already heavy workload. It is in this phase that the PLC group addresses the diverse mindsets of staff who continue to feel unsure about the effectiveness of the PLC concept.

Finally, it is in this third phase that some reflective time needs to be included. Buysee, Sparkman, & Wesley (2003) explain that knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience. If the PLC is going to be an effective means of improving student and teacher learning, participants need to look back on the experience and talk about what changes will make the PLC more efficient.

One challenge that may occur in this phase is group attrition. Some participants may begin to feel that they no longer wish to participate in the PLC. Since participation in a PLC should be voluntary, there needs to be provisions to allow the flow on

membership in and out of the PLC to be tolerated and encouraged. Therefore, while some participants may choose to leave the PLC, they may be replaced by new members who may have been hesitant at first, but now wish to participate.

Conclusion

To be effective, teacher professional development needs to be, collaborative, reflective and focused on student learning. This review of literature reveals that professional learning communities have the potential to improve educational practice through reflective collective learning, focused on student work, within a supportive community context. However, two issues come visible.

The first issue is that while the literature offers a plethora of sources to understand the nature of PLCs, what is missing is guidance for the process through which a school adopts the PLC concept. The actualization model I propose provides a school with a clear understanding of where to begin. Not only does this model provide a set of phases to follow, but also directs the discussion needed for participants to have transparent conversations about their practice, that as educators, we tend to lack when isolated in our individual classrooms.

The second issue concerns the lack of literature about rural schools adopting PLCs. Rural schools, isolated, smaller and with limited resources have difficulty accessing effective professional development for their teachers. By adopting PLCs, rural schools can begin to transform into more successful places of learning for both teachers and their students. With a strategic focus on student learning, a collaborative work culture built around a shared vision and values, rural educators can positively impact student achievement in a dramatic way. The foundation of the PLC concept facilitates teachers to

leave the isolation of practice traditional in rural schools and embrace an open, sharing environment characterized by reflective dialogue and mutual support found in collaborative work.

While there have been many studies of PLCs in urban schools (e.g., Phillips, 2003; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008), more research is needed to better understand how PLCs function in rural schools. Because teachers in rural areas have some unique challenges (Blum, Yocom, Trent & McLaughlin, 2005; Jaramillo, 2000; Taylor, 2000) such as teaching multi-level classes, limited resources, and a heavy workload, in addition to being familiar with the unique needs of the community, it is possible that the adoption of PLCs in rural schools is different from the PLCs in urban schools. We need to better understand the impact of PLCs on rural student learning and teacher professional development, and the strategies used by rural schools in adopting the PLC concept. Although professional learning communities have emerged in recent years as a popular strategy for school improvement, there needs to be greater understanding on its long-term effect, especially in rural schools.

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Article III: A Narrative Inquiry into Professional Learning Communities in Rural Schools

Growing up and then teaching in the concrete confines of downtown Montreal, I only sensed that rural life was different from my own, but had to rely on fictional renditions to provide me with a glimpse of rurality. Since moving to an organic farm in rural New Brunswick, I have become immersed in my new milieu and jumped at the opportunity to work as a tutor in the local high school. I noticed how different the schools were, compared to those I had previously experienced. And, upon talking to teachers, how different teachers' lives were. The rural context impacted these teachers in many ways. My main curiosity was how they met their needs to grow professionally.

Throughout my teaching career, professional development (PD) and opportunities for professional growth were very important to me. Interest in rural life led me to move to rural New Brunswick and my interest in PD led to a doctorate that focuses on rural teacher PD. My conversations with colleagues in these rural schools left me wondering about how their professional growth was being addressed. I wondered whether their experiences in PD were as beneficial as mine in Montreal. After all, teaching in rural schools involves its own challenges such as a) often being required to teach more than one subject at several levels; b) supervising several extracurricular activities; c) needing to be familiar with the unique needs of the community; and d) facing a wide variety of student abilities in each classroom (Taylor, 2000; Williams, 1994). My own PD experiences helped me improve my teaching practice and overcome my own challenges. However, rural teachers face a variety of obstacles when seeking PD, not the least resulting from isolation and a lack of funding. How did these teachers, and provincial/district policymakers address these obstacles, I wondered.

When preparing my Master's thesis I interviewed New Brunswick rural teachers about their PD experiences. The issues about PD available to them echoed my own concerns when I taught in Montreal. They needed more time, more opportunity to confer with colleagues and better access to resources. The traditional form of PD in New Brunswick has followed a top-down format of in-service workshops, one-time sessions, and district curriculum and/or subject meetings. Recently, I learned that policymakers' focus for PD in New Brunswick had turned to professional learning communities (PLCs.). Several questions immediately came to mind: Could PLCs be a cost-effective strategy for teacher PD in rural schools with limited funding, avoiding the need to pay for teachers' transportation and room and board to attend offsite training? Would rural schools, tending to be smaller and, by necessity, more collaborative, be a natural fit for effective PLCs? Do PLCs help rural teachers address issues that hinder student achievement?

I was motivated to better understand both the PLC concept and the PLC experiences of teachers in three New Brunswick's rural schools. My survey of the literature about PLCs in rural schools found that studies mostly focus on the effectiveness of the PLCs for meeting the professional learning needs of rural teachers by addressing issues such as funding and isolation (Sargent & Hannum, 2009). What is missing is a view of the experience from the teachers' perspectives. Most concerning for me is that the majority of research about PLCs is located in urban schools and educational facilities. However, the majority of schools in Atlantic Canada are located in rural communities. So I wondered if participating in a PLC satisfies rural teachers' needs for professional growth. Since I live and teach in a rural community, I wanted to focus my attention on

the PLC experiences of rural teaching colleagues in the local school district. Unlike most educational research on PD in which the voice is often that of the researcher, this inquiry tells the stories of rural teachers in their own voices. I interviewed three teachers, their principals and district policymakers in the local rural district. Consequently, following the backstory of the PLC movement, a description of the PLC concept, and the depiction of PLCs' introduction in New Brunswick schools, this narrative inquiry tells the stories of the adoption of a PLC model through the background of administrators and teacher stories in three rural schools in my local School District and focuses on the experiences of three of their teachers in their fledgling PLCs.

The Movement of Reform in Professional Development

Reviews of literature on the changes that have taken place in teacher professional development since the 1980's often cite Thomas Guskey, for his views on teacher professional development. In 1986, Guskey noted that altering teacher beliefs and attitudes can only be achieved after changes in student learning outcomes are evidenced. That is, once teachers have actively engaged in using curriculum changes in their classrooms, they will embrace the theoretical/philosophical underpinnings for change.

Guskey (1986) also had several recommendations for staff developers considering how to effect change in teacher practice: 1) Changes need to be presented in a clear and explicit way; 2) Personal concerns of teachers need to be addressed in a direct and sensitive manner; 3) The purveyor of new practices must be seen as a credible person; 4) Change needs to be be recognized as a gradual and difficult process for teachers; 5) Teachers need to receive regular feedback on student learning progress; 6) Continued support and follow-up must be provided; and 7) Follow-up procedures need to include

time for collegial sharing. Primarily, Guskey challenged staff developers to find more creative ways to help teachers translate new knowledge into practice.

When reviewing the research on teacher knowledge, Lee Shulman and his concept – pedagogical content knowledge – is noted as a significant turning point in the conversation. Shulman (1986) expresses concern that too much focus in staff development is on pedagogy and that the missing factor is teacher content knowledge. In other words, the professional development of teachers, up until the 1980's, was looking to change teacher classroom strategies and not attempting to improve teacher knowledge of the content they were delivering. Like Guskey (1986), Shulman's focus was the evaluation of teachers; their recommendations for what teachers need for professional growth was aimed at an educational reform that would be measured by student achievement.

On the other hand, Susan Rosenholtz (1989) focused attention on teachers' workplace factors when discussing teaching quality, maintaining that teachers who felt supported in their own ongoing learning and classroom practice were more committed and effective than those who did not receive such confirmation. In other words, the focus was on creating a climate of learning to facilitate teacher growth. Further, Rosenholtz found that teachers with a high sense of their own efficacy were more likely to adopt new classroom behaviours and also more likely to stay in the profession.

The 1990's introduced the importance of collaboration in teacher learning. Little (1990) suggested that students benefit when the teachers in their schools work in collaborative teams. In 1993, McLaughlin and Talbert confirmed Rosenholtz's findings and suggested that when teachers were involved in collaborative research and the

subsequent learning, they were able to develop and share knowledge from their experience. Adding to the discussion, Darling-Hammond (1996) cited shared decision-making as a key to curriculum reform and the transformation of teachers' roles in schools where structured time is provided for teachers to work together in planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, and sharing feedback. However, prevailing school culture considers a teacher's proper place during school hours to be in front of a class, thereby isolating teachers from one another and discouraging collaborative work (Abdal-Haqq, 1995). This traditional culture does not place a premium on teacher learning or permit teachers the opportunity to make decisions about their professional development needs.

In 1998, Etienne Wenger provided a framework for the type of working relationships that develop when co-workers enter a community through which individuals develop and share the capacity to create and use knowledge. He termed this form of working together as a 'community of practice'. The basis for this form of organization within a larger environment has three components: a joint enterprise that is understood and continually renegotiated by its members (similar to a common vision); a common purpose that binds members together into a social entity; and the shared, communal resources that members have developed over time. Wenger suggested that a community of practice develops around issues that matter to its members. As a result, even if outside directives attempt to influence or mandate the direction of the group, it is the community, not the mandate, that produces the practice, because it is a self-organizing system.

Researchers have encouraged principals to nurture and develop teachers' professional growth as part of the school culture by creating consensus, promoting shared

values, ensuring systematic collaboration, encouraging experimentation, and promoting the self-efficacy of teachers (Deal & Peterson, 1999; DuFour & Berkey, 1995; Wineberg & Grossman, 1998). Principal leadership can support the culture and the organizational mechanisms by which teachers talk about teaching and learning, observe each other teach, plan, design, research, and evaluate curricula, and teach each other what they have learned about their craft (DuFour & Berkey, 1995; Wineberg & Grossman, 1998). Abdal-Haqq (1995) recommends that teachers need time to understand new concepts, learn new skills, develop new attitudes, research, discuss, reflect, assess, try new approaches and integrate them into their practice, and time to plan their own professional development. She also suggests that principals can facilitate opportunities for professional learning by instituting two broad approaches to finding time for teachers to collaborate: extracting time from the existing schedule or altering teacher utilization patterns.

In *Organically Grown* (2001), Wenger referred to communities of practice that develop naturally, have a free-flowing creativity and have the capacity to strengthen the organization and address issues. Membership in these communities is voluntary, based on a personal investment that members maintain. These types of informal communities of practice have the potential to become building blocks used by school leaders to nurture the development of more formal professional learning communities (Nelson, LeBard, & Waters, 2010). These attributes characterize the beginnings of a movement toward professional learning communities. Thus the formidable movement supporting PLCs in schools became a popular initiative. Rather than including disconnected professional development, PLCs have the potential to be a powerful alternative as teachers engage in

focused cycles of instruction, assessment and adjustment of instruction (Schmoker, 2004).

The Professional Learning Committee

When I first heard about professional learning communities I wondered if it was just another single action bias. I first heard the term 'single action bias' used by environmental researchers (e.g., Wagner & Zeckhauser, 2012; Weber, 2006) to refer to the one action decision-makers take to solve a problem, reducing the probability of additional actions because the first action suffices in reducing the feeling of worry or vulnerability. For decades, researchers have sought such an action or 'silver bullet' that could satisfy professional learning needs of teachers. When I learned that the PLC concept was considered as a possible means to positively impact student achievement, mainly because it received the endorsement of a long list of researchers (McLaughlin, M. & Talbert, J., 2007; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008), I wondered if this was a single action bias in teacher professional development. However, my research revealed that the PLC concept is favoured by these same researchers mainly because studies (McLaughlin, M. & Talbert, J., 2007; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008) of PLCs revealed that it raised expectations for students, improved instructional practices, and increased student learning and achievement outcomes. Learning communities are grounded in the assumption that knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience (Buysee, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003).

A PLC is made up of "team members who regularly collaborate toward continual improvement in meeting learner needs through a shared curricular-focused vision"

(Reichstetter, 2006, p.1). Therefore, the PLC model, as described by DuFour (2005) and Hord (1997) involves components such as a collaborative culture, focus on student learning, shared values and vision, collective responsibility, and reflective professional inquiry. However, certain elements are needed to facilitate the adoption of PLCs in a school: supportive leadership; collective challenging, questioning, and reflecting on team-designed lessons/instructional practices; and team decisions on essential learning outcomes and activities based on the results of common formative student assessments. Therefore, the goal of PLCs is to make educators more effective through continuous inquiry and improvement.

The introduction of PLCs could address several issues that hinder school districts from providing effective opportunities for professional learning. In rural schools, particularly, the PLC has the potential to effectively meet the professional learning needs of rural teachers because it could address issues such as funding and isolation (Sargent & Hannum, 2009). In addition, PLCs could potentially be a cost-effective strategy for teacher professional development in impoverished communities. Many aspects of effective PLCs can be supported without the need to pay for teachers' transportation and room and board to attend offsite training sessions. For this reason, cultivating PLCs may be a particularly desirable strategy for the improvement of teaching and learning in resource-constrained settings such as rural communities. Finally, since PLCs are built on the foundations of co-operation, collaboration, and consensus, teachers and administrators are encouraged to work together. Rural schools tend to be smaller and by necessity, more collaborative than their urban counterparts (Lom, 2007), thereby providing more opportunities at hand to create this culture of learning. However, efforts

to introduce this model into school districts, including both urban and rural schools, have had a wide range of results and reactions.

For schools to effectively implement PLCs they need to be collaborative communities of professional learners which operate as communities of reflection and inquiry. A school culture that fosters collaboration and supports risk-taking and respect is essential to nurture intellectual curiosity and growth. Additionally, the role of the principal in implementing a PLC is key. The role of the principal is to empower teachers and staff members to lead and share in decision-making to develop curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Speck, 1999). From this perspective, leadership in a professional learning community does not rest with the principal alone.

Based on my experiences with the rural schools in my local school district, it would seem that these small, geographically isolated schools would be rich ground in which PLCs could flourish. In these schools, collaboration is essential, particularly because teachers are required to teach multi-level classes and a wide variety of subject areas. Many of the challenges these rural colleagues face in trying to access effective PD for professional growth or in search of new strategies to promote student learning and achievement could be overcome in a reflective, collaborative atmosphere of inquiry. I was interested to see how these local schools implemented their PLCs and whether they were fostering professional learning.

The Introduction of Professional Learning Communities in New Brunswick Schools

To begin my investigation, I needed to understand why the PLC concept was chosen for provincial-wide adoption. My conversation with the provincial specialist in PD provided me with the backdrop of the PLC story in New Brunswick. She explained

that student results in international testing weren't at the level expected and research suggested that the culture and support system inherent in the PLC concept was needed to foster an improvement in student learning. She insisted that despite the fact that the decision to introduce PLCs in schools was a provincial one, it was left to the districts to develop the method of introducing and implementing PLCs in their schools. "Where districts had responsibilities for schools it would truly be a district and school initiative that would have provincial support rather than a provincial initiative that had school support" (Field texts). Additionally, a decision was made to hire Richard DuFour and his PLC adoption support documents available through his website.

> Their work appeared to be very practical and also very accessible to us. So we explored what we would like to do. And then set about a plan that would see us use the DuFour model and any other accompanying models that would get us that kind of culture. We wondered about the investment that we needed to make, so we formed a partnership with Solution Tree. (Field Texts)

In addition, policymakers felt that the DuFour model of PLCs addressed several pedagogical issues in New Brunswick schools.

> We looked through the literature and saw so many of the respected educational researchers talking about the PLC model. We recognize that you know whatever model we chose had to look at learning. It had to look at educator collaboration and it really had to be evidence based. So the DuFour model covered those aspects and the simplicity of the questions that they ask I think really struck a chord with educators. That business about what is it we want students to learn. How will we know if they've learned it, you know, or if they haven't? And also the business that it was looking at the whole range of students and where New Brunswick is such an inclusive province it spoke to us in terms of every child mattering. That every child's level of achievement is important. (Field Texts)

Moreover, when provincial policymakers were considering an introductory conference on PLCs, school districts were already onside with the idea.

> Many of the districts had already intended or invested in sending some of their people to the DuFour summit workshop institute and so there was a fairly decent base on which to build when we started to look at provincial investments with Solution Tree so we did work toward bringing to the province a professional learning community conference. (Field Texts)

Efforts were made to bring principals onside with the idea of using PLCs as PD in individual schools.

> We also brought the ideas forward when we had principals' meetings. So that would probably have been our first introduction in 2004 when we had principal meetings we would have introduced it to the system at that time. And in each subsequent year we would have had an emphasis on professional learning communities at the annual principals' meeting. (Field Texts)

However, once the PLC concept was introduced to the principals, these same provincial policymakers, as well as district specialists in PD, recognized that simply implementing PLCs in schools where collaboration already existed did not preclude the existence of other PLC characteristics such as the development of teacher expertise or the use of data to effect change in teaching methods.

> What we did is we revised our educational school review instrument, making sure that when the reviewers went out to work with the school on how to improve, that the PLC culture actually was very evident and in progress. What we discovered was that a lot of people talked about being PLC but not that many actually had it working well. (Field Texts)

In an effort to improve the implementation of the chosen PLC model in schools, a provincial four-day 'PLC academy' was organized.

> So we went back to the drawing board and we instituted a PLC academy so we would have more expertise built up in the district to help schools become better at what they said they were doing but in fact weren't doing particularly well. (Field Texts)

However only 65 participants across the province would be invited to attend, and district offices were asked to determine who would participate.

> We suggested that a district would be in the best position to know who they wanted to train and lead team for PLCs and districts handled it very differently. In one district they sent district office people because they felt that they would take the lead. In another district they sent a group of principals from a variety of school levels. Another district sent the staff of a school saying if they could make it happen in one school then they would be able to grow it. So districts took different approaches to the people that they wanted to train in this PLC academy. (Field Texts)

Apparently the provincial policymakers were still dissatisfied with the introduction and implementation of the chosen PLC model in the schools, so a second attempt to inform educators and administrators was more inclusive.

> What has happened is there hasn't been a particular follow up to the academy. But what we've done is we've widened the circle where there were 65 people involved in the academy, we then brought a PLC institute to the province where there were 800 participants. (Field Texts)

However, once again it was the school districts who were left to determine who could attend the institute. Some financial considerations were involved in this decision.

> Solution Tree came to Moncton (the largest city in New Brunswick located in the south of the province) and the department paid for the registration. Again it was open to districts making sure that they had a healthy representation at the institute so they were allocated a certain number of seats. If they wanted to they could buy extra seats and several districts did. (Field Texts)

Each year following the institute there have been follow-up workshops whose attendance was again determined by the school districts.

> The next year, the professional learning community's assessment institute was held, because much of what you need to do, is driven by deciding on what it is you need to assess, or getting the evidence or the information. This summer we're doing the response to intervention workshop. (Field Texts)

Since then, the Department of Education has made funds available for District allocation to support a school's implementation of the chosen PLC model.

> One of the ways the department supports the on-going growth of PLCs is that each year we look at a major event that would help increase the knowledge or expertise that's available at the district. The other way we support PLCs is in our professional development budget we have a line item that is for PLC school-based grants. So what we carve out of a budget and put in a protected area if that school must have access to money to work at PLCs. And again the money goes to the district, the district makes decisions about how that money is distributed although the department preference is that every school have the opportunity to benefit from that money. (Field Texts)

Now that I had a clear picture of how PLCs were introduced to Districts, schools, administrators and teachers, I was curious as to how the chosen PLC model was being implemented in the rural schools in my local School District.

The Introduction of the DuFour PLC Model in the Aberdeen School District

The Aberdeen School District, where I live and tutor, is located in northern New Brunswick. There are 27 schools with 583 full-time teachers and 7,700 students. Geographically this district encompasses 1,800 square kilometres, one of the largest in the province. I chose to situate the study here because since I have moved to this community I am becoming more aware about its history, geography and social characteristics. Since rural teachers are uniquely influenced by their context, I believe my familiarity with the community, its characteristics and dilemmas can effectively set the context for each teacher's story. Like many rural teachers, we live within the community in which we teach (Howley & Howley, 2004; Schmuck & Schmuck, 1992). We are neighbours, teammates on local ball teams, and critical lifelines in this rural context.

I use the term 'rural' to describe the Aberdeen school district context. Although the term rural may refer to different contexts, even within the same country (Whitaker, 1983), for the purpose of generalization, I have included criteria with both geographical and sociological descriptives. The use of geographic terms reflects "easily measured considerations" (Coladarci, 2007, p. 2) that will include the governmental terms for defining a rural context. The use of sociological terms that "distinguish rural places" (Coladarci, 2007, p. 2) to include the less tangible means to recognize the relationships of rural residents. Therefore, for this study, my use of rural is a term designated to communities of population living outside centers of approximately 1,000 people, as portrayed by Statistics Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011). Additionally, rural will also be a term used to describe these same communities that consist of closely-knit people whose connection to the area has been generational. Aberdeen is a fairly 'typical' rural area in New Brunswick. There are five towns/villages within the environs of this school district, each with a population of less than 1,000 people. The predominant language is English, both within the communities and each of the schools. There is virtually no cultural diversity. In fact, when we moved into the community, we were the first and only Jewish family. There are two small First Nation reserves within the Aberdeen school district. Each reserve has its own elementary school, so their children are not included in the district schools until middle or high school. The only place where the two cultures interact is at the First Nations gas stations, where gas is sold at a reduced price. Lack of contact between these two cultures results in some misconceptions concerning the different lifestyles.

The participating schools are each located in three of the small rural centers and draw their student population from the tiny communities within bussing distances of no more than forty minutes each way. One of schools (the high school) busses a small portion of their students from a nearby First Nations Reserve.

The organizational structure of these rural communities is fairly simple. Each one centers on its school (if it still exists) and church. Physical facilities include a volunteer fire department and post office. What people seem to value innately is a sense of kinship with the land and community and a general feeling of security and safety. Overall, people cherish family above all else, striving to hold the family unit together. Even if children leave home to further their education, they may return to the ancestral home at some time.

Most of the families who live in the environs of the Aberdeen School District are at least the third generation that was born and lived in their present homes. Our homes are generally old and modest, but well-kept and neatly decorated. Most of us are able to feel security in knowing that positions in the community are solid. Longtime residents are respected for their "folk" knowledge and their resourcefulness that comes from years of independent living. In general, we don't rely on the services of city centers, but have learned to depend on the local services or our own skills, to handle any situations that arise from life in the rural community.

Originally, most of the families were involved in farming, either growing potatoes for a large food producer in the area. In the fall, the schools close for three weeks, to enable the students to help with the potato harvest. Some of the farmers raise beef or dairy cattle while others work in the woods, logging for local mills. When many of these

mills closed down in the past ten years, what resulted was a detrimental movement of families out of the community in search of gainful employment. Some of the adult children have had to move west to seek employment, instead of inheriting and trying to keep the family farming or logging business going. What has resulted is the depletion of children from the small rural schools that dot the community, and eventually, the determination by the Aberdeen school district policymakers to close many of these schools and consolidate the children into larger schools located in some of the small towns/villages in the area.

For the majority, life is generally insulated within the community; many, especially the women, have never travelled out of the province. The women carry on the traditions of their mothers and grandmothers. They each record the milestone events of every local family in their own small notebooks, as a reference for the dates of anyone's birthday, anniversary or deaths. Social gatherings include three important components: food, people and stories. Often our local gatherings are opportunities to connect with friends, family and acquaintances. All generations in the family attend together. We talk about our lives, past and present and, in the process, show that we share common values as a community.

The introduction of the DuFour PLC model. To understand how the chosen PLC model was introduced in the Aberdeen School District I was able to meet with a PD specialist. She explained to me that the principals who were invited to attend the PLC Academy were those who showed interest in PLCs at the regular principal meetings. Later on, there were workshops on how PLCs should be looking at assessment data and on how to organize a PLC. Since every school in the district was expected to send

representatives to each workshop, the District believed "there has been a fair amount of training and every school should have somebody who is familiar with it or encouraged to push it. Every school should have somebody who's been trained on some part of the PLC to promote it within the school" (Field texts). Additionally, support documents were made available to all teachers in the province through the teacher Intranet portal. These documents were sourced from Solution Tree, a website created by Richard and Rebecca DuFour and Robert Marzano, which aims to provide "a comprehensive range of educational resources, strategies, and tools for teachers and administrators" and claims to be "recognized as the premier partner for inspired professional development" (http://www.solution-tree.com/about/overview)

As a follow-up there are District reviewers who visit schools to determine if the PLC model is being effectively implemented.

> There are reviewers who come in, make observations and there's a discussion about what area the school might want to concentrate on for improvement. There would be recommendations in the report that the principal would have but the principal would share that report with the staff and with their school support committee. Our superintendent would certainly have a copy, but the focus is on growth. If the evidence is there that there is very little PLC activity or expertise then we should really be able to hone in on that and rather than be punitive, find a way to help that school grow into a better PLC culture. (Field Texts)

From what has been observed thus far, this district specialist feels that many schools have not successfully adopted the PLC model. "It's trying to convince them that PLC it's a process it's not a thing". In fact, there were only three schools out of the 27 in the District that she recommended I visit and include in this study. As far as she was concerned, the rest haven't adopted the PLC model.

> Although all schools are required to have a PLC, some schools are calling team meetings or subject meetings PLCs. Even if the school is trying to develop a PLC, they aren't using assessment data to focus their discussions. (Field Texts)

Additionally, she sees part of the problem being school "priority and commitment. Because it comes down to where do we get the time?"(Field Texts) In some schools, there are PLC meetings and planning meetings. But for her it's a matter of understanding the focus and purpose of a PLC.

> We suggest that the PLC focuses on data and be able to determine where your students are weak? They should be setting up graphs to see where the children are at. Then I am told by the principals that 'Well we can do that, but when do you want us to plan? I'm trying to tell them that this should be part of your planning. That's where you're going that should be determining where you're going to start to plan. They see it as an extra, but it's part of purpose. The PLC is based on student learning. (Field texts)

Our conversation left me wondering about how the PLC model was being implemented in the District's schools. At this stage of the study, I needed to talk to principals and teachers in the Aberdeen District to understand how the PLCs were implemented. Since I was guided by the District specialist to focus on three particular schools, I contacted each of their principals.

The introduction of the DuFour PLC model in three Aberdeen schools. All three schools are located in small villages. For more than fifty years, each has had an integral role in their respective communities – hosting local musical and drama presentations, blood donor clinics, and community sporting events. Students are bussed from the surrounding rural areas. While farming and logging have been the main means of support, over time the closing of mills and reduction of small family farms has resulted in many families becoming single parent to allow the other parent to seek employment in

other provinces. In other cases, families have had to move away for gainful employment resulting in a steady reduction of students at each of the schools. One school, Greenfield High School, is situated close to a First Nations' reserve and students at this school come from both the surrounding rural communities and the reserve.

From my conversations with the principals, I learned that in each school it was the principal who first introduced to the teachers the idea of PLCs. Principals at two of the schools (Argyle Middle School and Greenfield High School) were chosen by the district office to attend the PLC Academy. The principal of the Beaufort Elementary School introduced the model to her staff after learning about it from district meetings and her own readings (Field texts). Each participating principal permitted me to all invite teachers at their schools, who might be interested, to be involved in the inquiry. As a result, three teachers (one elementary teacher, one middle school teacher, and one high school teacher) volunteered to participate. I contacted each of the teachers and arranged for individual, open-ended interviews. Each of the principals was receptive to an open-ended interview as well.

Methodology

Since my conversations with teaching colleagues in local schools tend to be told as stories of their experiences, it seemed appropriate to select narrative inquiry to tell the teachers' stories of their experiences in PLCs.

I visited the three teachers in their classrooms and talked about life as a teacher in a rural school, their practice, their schools, and their experiences in PLCs. In each interview, which was audio-taped and transcribed, I used open-ended prompt questions. Some of these questions were: Tell me about your teaching and university background?

Tell me about the PLC you are part of? How effective is your PLC? (see Appendix A for complete list) Once I reviewed our interview tapes, I arranged for follow-up interviews that had to be conducted over the telephone because of the participants' busy personal and professional commitments. For the purpose of anonymity, I have used fictitious names for the teachers, principals, schools and school district. Since the writing of this article, school districts in New Brunswick have been redistributed and renamed, thereby further ensuring that direct connection to the geographic area and school district are not possible.

In order to address the trustworthiness of this narrative inquiry, I used several recommendations made by Riessman (1993) to address this issue. Each teacher had the chance to read over transcriptions as a member-check and an opportunity to add or change any statements to better reflect their thoughts. None of the participating teachers met each other or were aware of the other's involvement in the study. Additionally, I have included the actual statements made by each of the participating teachers, have provided thick, full descriptions of the teachers and their contexts, and made clear my own background and positioning within the context.

In addition to hearing the teachers' and principals' stories, I met and talked with a learning specialist in the District who has worked with some district teachers on action research projects and with a New Brunswick Department of Education specialist responsible for teacher professional development. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed and subsequently included in the collection of field texts.

The teachers' stories provide the reader the chance to hear their authentic voices. Each teacher tells his/her own unique story, reflecting strong cultural and personal

preferences. Additionally, my own rural context is woven into my writing. These rural teachers' experiences are reclaimed, with rich descriptions situating the narrative (Grumet, 1987). As I analyzed their narratives, these rural teachers' interests and biases, often hidden in the normal course of living, are exposed for inspection. In this way, neither self nor life can be separated from my formation of conclusions concerning rural teachers' participation in PLCs (Grumet, 1987).

My creation of the research texts involved three interpretive devices typically used in narrative inquiry: broadening, burrowing, and re-storying (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Broadening, a form of generalizing, allowed me to understand each teacher's character, values and way of life from the events they recount. In this way I could set up the general context of each of the PLCs and how they have impacted the professional lives of these teachers. Consequently, I was able to create a picture of the temporal and social contexts of these collaborations. In the process, broadening revealed the influences and complexities of each school's professional knowledge landscape.

Another step I took in examining these teachers' stories was burrowing. In this stage of analyzing the stories, I reconstructed events from multiple points of view, including those of the teachers involved in this inquiry, the perspectives of their administrators, in addition to my interpretations of the field notes. Burrowing laid open the emotional, moral and aesthetic qualities that led me to question why PLCs are associated with these feelings and what their origins could be. Thus, I examined closely how each teacher connected their PLC experiences together to make personal and eventually, collective sense of them, revealing tough realities and stark details.

Finally, re-storying captured the experiences in teachers' professional knowledge landscapes in terms of individuals' and groups' actions and meaning-making, particularly with how the PLC story has been lived over time. Thus the tensions and dilemmas in teachers' lives became visible. In addition, competing and conflicting stories bumped into one another. Thus, the narratives in this study refer to broader societal patterns of meaning, thereby acknowledging the rural context within which participants' stories were enmeshed.

The Participants and Their Schools

Each of the teachers was excited to take part in this inquiry, partly because they had never been approached to participate in research and also because they were eager to share their stories. I very much appreciated their candour and honesty.

Jessica, the youngest, is a first-year teacher at Beaufort elementary school (Kindergarten-grade five), the smallest of the participating schools, with only twenty-eight students and three teachers, one of whom acts as principal part of the time. As is common in small rural schools with limited resources, many creative allowances, including multi-grade classes, had to be made to provide a complete curriculum. Due to a decreasing student population (at the time of writing, there were twenty-eight students attending), the district has slated the school for closure, causing teachers to feel very tentative about their positions. Jessica is an enthusiastic first-year teacher of a multi-age/level (kindergarten to grade two) class of sixteen students. In an effort to keep down costs, Jessica was hired as a long-term supply instead of as a full-time contract teacher. In her last years of high school, Jessica moved from small town Ontario to the rural New Brunswick community where she is teaching.

Sarah is a language arts/resource and methods teacher at Argyle middle school (grades six to eight). This school has six teachers who teach eighty students. Most students are from lower socio-economic rural families. In my conversation with Alfred, the principal, I learned that since a neighbouring school offers a French immersion program, Argyle's student population has been negatively affected. First, parents believing that a French immersion program offers their children a stronger academic background have been choosing the neighbouring middle school over Argyle. Second, as a non-immersion school, Argyle's students tend to have weaker academic abilities, many with learning and/or behavioural disabilities. Consequently, Alfred explained that students at Argyle have limited success on provincial assessments in math and literacy. As a result, but for different reasons, the number of students at Argyle, like at Beaufort, continues to drop annually, affecting Argyle's ability to offer a full range of courses and extra-curriculars.

Like Jessica, Sarah grew up within the rural community in which she teaches. Her mother, a retired teacher from Beaufort elementary school, (a feeder school for Argyle middle school), influenced Sarah's choice of profession. After the arrival of her two children and four years of supply teaching, Sarah acquired her position as language arts/resource and methods teacher at Argyle middle school twelve years ago. In the year following this inquiry, Sarah will be taking an educational leave to begin studying for her Master's degree, so that she can become a resource and methods specialist. Because of District budget decisions, Sarah is aware that when she returns as a full time educator, it may not be at Argyle.

Like Sarah, Evan also grew up in the same rural community surrounding Greenfield High School (grades nine-twelve), where he teaches chemistry, physics, biology and math. Greenfield has 320 students, two administrators and sixteen teachers. One of the communities served by Greenfield is a First-Nations reserve. Evan explained that there has been a history of cultural conflict between the Caucasian and First Nations students, so the school is still learning how to best meet the needs of students from both communities. Additionally, Evan talked about his concerns that while Greenfield offers a full range of courses, very few are at a university preparatory level, so only a small percentage of the students enter post-graduate programs and even less are successful when they do.

Ironically, Evan himself graduated from Greenfield in the 1980's. However, where Sarah was inspired by her mother to enter the teaching profession, teaching was not Evan's first career after graduating university. Instead, he chose to work as a forestry analyst for fifteen years. Like Sarah and Jessica, Evan began his teaching career as a supply teacher for two years and began his present position four years ago. Also like Sarah, Evan, looking for a better grounding for his teaching practice, began to study for his Master's degree in education. However, without reimbursement from the District, when tuition costs doubled, Evan was forced to abandon his studies.

Adopting the DuFour PLC Model in Three Rural Schools

Each of my conversations with the three teachers helped me piece together a clearer picture of the challenges they face in small rural schools and the variety of forms that their PLCs have taken. Their experiences and reflections show that there is no single PLC model that has been implemented in the Aberdeen School District.

Beaufort elementary school. Jessica seemed quite nervous when we first began our conversation and I wasn't sure if that was because she had never been interviewed for research or because she was worried that, as a new teacher, she was being evaluated for her practices and ideas. Jessica's lack of confidence was palpable, not a feeling foreign to me as I remembered my own unsteady start in my teaching career.

> Jessica: I haven't been teaching for that long. I'm quite young still. I didn't find that the education degree I have….like it helps me in some aspects, but not teaching to the multilevel. You have to make sure you're covering, and that was very overwhelming for me.

Jessica also talked about some of her other challenges as a young teacher. Her K-2 blended class (not an unusual situation in small rural schools) involves the application of three different curriculums. Never having been confronted with this challenge, I couldn't imagine how daunting it must be.

> Jessica: It was quite a struggle with the three curriculums blended into one. When I first came just trying to fit all the curriculums into all the lesson plans and making sure that I'm covering what each grade needs. I don't feel comfortable teaching some of the things because I'm not trained in it.

I wondered where Jessica turned when she needed advice or support. I was surprised to learn that when she can't find the answers herself, instead of finding help with the other two teachers at Beaufort, Jessica turns to teachers she met at district meetings.

> Jessica: Things that are new I don't have any background in which I found quite difficult because I pretty much had to teach myself how to use them. Also, we had math target meetings and I met a couple of other teachers there that gave me some websites I could go on and they gave me a couple of booklets that I could use and read through. So that really helped. If I'm struggling with anything they're very accommodating and willing to give me suggestions and things like that. I go to people that I already know.

Another source of support is Jessica's former supervisor-teacher in a neighbouring elementary school with whom she acquired her practicum experiences.

> Jessica: I have other teachers at other schools who taught me for four months how to be a teacher pretty much so I felt comfortable enough to ask them for help and guidance.

However, despite Jessica's assurances that there was collaboration and a closeness among colleagues, meetings in Beaufort's PLC were not specific enough to meet her needs for growth or practical guidance.

> Jessica: Lots of discussions that we have are very generic for K to 5. So if we're talking math we're talking K to 5 math. Also as a first-time teacher I found it quite difficult marking them, for like the March report cards. Like I wasn't quite sure what they were asking. Am I marking them too high? Am I marking them too low?

So if her PLC was not providing answers, I wondered if Jessica sought other sources of PD. Her response surprised me, because instead of referring to the isolation and travel time and expense to find such PD, her response spoke of decisions made by the District policymakers to restrict PD access from teachers like Jessica who do not have a tenured contract. However, Jessica assured me that her colleagues at Beaufort do return from PD sessions provided by the district and share with her what was presented.

> Jessica: We always have a meeting after and they'll be, well this is what we talked about. This is what we learned and do you have any questions about it? So I'd be, oh that's really interesting and be able to have a conversation about it. It's nothing major or anything it's just they do share what they've learned. So I'm not totally out of the loop.

From what Jessica was telling me, although her needs were great, her PLC was not offering sufficient support. When I addressed this issue with Monica, the principal at Beaufort, she explained that as far as she was concerned, the PLC was an opportunity to reflect on issues at the school.

> Monica: I realized we were operating as a professional learning community when I did some reading about it, long before it was ever called a professional learning community. We meet once a week. We will come with issues, I just believe that you have to sometimes ask the important questions. One important question that you really think about and open it up, and learn and feed off of each other's conversations and what they're saying. And we come up with some really interesting ideas that go beyond what we're doing, and some reading. Like where we think we need to grow and things we need to work on to become better for the students and everything.

So while Monica feels the PLC at Beaufort is working well to address school issues, Jessica's experience shows that Beaufort's PLC has limited impact on her practice. For Monica, it is a lack of data-based discussion that needs addressing.

> Monica: One thing I think we need to improve on as a professional learning community is to really implement more of looking at the data.

As I listened to Jessica's story several questions came to mind: Why would a small school like Beaufort be challenged to implement a PLC that satisfies the teachers' needs for professional growth? Did Monica's own lack of experience with PLCs and lack of PD about PLCs detrimentally affect her ability to implement an effective PLC at Beaufort? And finally, in a school of three collaborative teachers, like Beaufort, why didn't the PLC develop organically? I hoped that I might have a clearer picture of PLCs in rural schools after visiting other schools in the Aberdeen School District.

Argyle middle school. Sarah was eager and excited to be interviewed. Since she was expecting to begin her own Master's research, she was hoping to learn about how research progresses during our time together. My first meeting with Sarah was over the telephone and later in her classroom at Argyle. In both conversations, Sarah exuded more confidence than Jessica. She had a stronger sense of her role as a teacher and her

professional learning needs seemed more focused and specific. She talked of taking advantage of PD opportunities offered to teachers across the province.

> Sarah: The material that I use for the program is just something that I received training in so I do use that quite a bit. It was a three-day really expensive training program that happened in the Fall, kind of at the beginning of the school year. It was a provincial offering because it was all paid by the Department of Education. Teachers were from all over the province.

In addition, she admitted that she made reading professional material a priority.

> Sarah: I've learned from experience and I like to read educational books to help me; books that deal with behaviour management I found to be very helpful. I get my resources or find resources through the instructional books, or the catalogues that will come in. They kind of give you ideas of things that you can do to work with some students.

However, when Sarah needs help with issues in her teaching practice, she relies on the support of her colleagues at her school, Argyle middle school.

> Sarah: I would describe myself as independent because at a rural school you don't usually have lots of people to talk to because you're probably the only one teaching the subject. But we have collaboration. We have informal meetings. I always like to get together with my colleagues and hash out different things. Sometimes first thing in the morning Joe will come in to see me before classes start and just talk about certain things that are on his mind as far as Language Arts.

As the resource and methods teacher, Sarah provides colleagues with practical instructional recommendations, "I let them know that the material that you gave them was a little bit over their heads. You might want to do this or things like that".

Meanwhile, some younger colleagues introduce her to electronic resources.

> Sarah: I get a lot of web sites and their ideas cause Joe really likes to surf the net, so he always tells me about really good web sites where I can get certain kinds of information, or activities and things like that.

This collaboration is what Sarah feels is the heart and soul of the PLC at Argyle middle school.

> Sarah: I think, it is a great PLC. Just to be able to get together with teachers that teach the same subject and just to be able to bounce ideas like that would be my number one thing to do for professional development

Sarah explains that her PLC consists of herself and Joe, the other language arts teacher and that their discussions focus on student learning. Their schedules were designed to accommodate time to meet.

> Sarah: Last year Joe and I would have a prep period where we would spend time having a meeting to discuss like the results of student learning and to go over and see the areas where we need to improve the marks and things. And then we would work on our intervention so we have an intervention block where we can help the students learn the skills that they need to improve their writing.

But these discussions also involved some planning and curriculum adaptation.

> So it was really good bumping ideas off of one another. What worked and what didn't work and what we would like to see happen with the program. And what we can do for future activities.

I then wondered if the introduction of PLCs has changed the way teachers communicate at Argyle.

> Sarah: I guess when I first started teaching you are by yourself. You are all by yourself, nobody shares and don't even bother asking because, you know, this is my stuff. But I find now there's more sharing of ideas and even materials. And I really like being able to share resources with Joe back and forth.

Sarah's depiction of Argyle's PLC left me wondering if her PLC discussions were based on student data, making it different from what Monica found lacking at Beaufort. Sarah was quick to respond that at Argyle, the PLC meetings are founded on student results on District assigned assessments.

> Sarah: We take a look at running records and those are how we formally assess students at or below reading level. And, of course, we do look at the standards of how students perform in their rating. And

> we take a look at that and see what areas we need to focus on especially for our intervention groups.

However, Sarah admitted that the PLC discussions at Argyle, like the ones Jessica described at Beaufort, are not exclusively based on data, but also ad hoc issues that arise for the teachers.

> Sarah: Usually we would jot down some kind of notes, like when we weren't meeting and write them down for agenda items. We try to meet at least once every two weeks or so. When we started our meeting we would say, ok these are the things that I would like to suggest and these are the things that he would like to discuss. From there we just talked about them.

However, it was at this point in our conversation on PLCs that Sarah had the same tone of frustration in her voice that I heard when she talked about District bureaucracy.

> Sarah: Lately, Alfred has been giving us some agendas in advance that will give us a chance to think about the issue, so that we have enough time to think about them instead of wasting time thinking about them at the staff meetings. I usually type up the minutes and I send them to him. Alfred requires the note; he needs to have the notes so he knows what's going on in the school.

When I completed my conversations with Sarah, I wondered what caused Alfred, her principal, to initiate recent requirements of agendas and compulsory minutes. My conversation with Alfred revealed that there was pressure from District expectations to meet provincial policy to account for the existence of PLCs in New Brunswick schools.

> Alfred: We're responsible for implementing PLCs into our school. We were directed by the district to create PLCs. Sometimes if I'm not pushing it then it's not moving. They're trying to direct us also that certain things are important and we should be up on this stuff. I do feel that we have to be given latitude within our school, but we also have to be held accountable. We also have to be checked in by the district. And I think our district is aware of that. (Field texts)

While my conversations with Sarah gave me a greater feeling for how the PLC in a rural school could assist teachers by focusing discussions on student learning and strategies based on assessments, several new questions came to mind: If two teachers meet to talk about their students, is this a PLC? Have PLCs become for District administrators a new source of accountability and assessment of teachers? If a PLC is implemented in a school, rather than developing organically, is it as effective for teacher growth? I hoped my last set of interviews could give light to these queries.

Greenfield high school. Due to a busy teaching schedule and family responsibilities (young children and an ailing mother who lives with the family), Evan and I mainly conversed over the telephone, and could only meet briefly in his classroom at Greenfield. I was eager to hear from Evan how the implementation of PLCs for professional development has gone.

> Evan: I would say in the last three years is when we set up the PLC group based on the courses we were teaching and having meetings within those groups. It was initiated by our principal who was vice-principal at the time. She had read the DuFour book and thought this was a great thing.

Like at Argyle, the implementation of the PLC model at Greenfield had transitioned to one with organizational requirements. Evan talked about how new strategies had been imposed.

> Evan: This year they actually wrote down and made up the groups. Last year there was some flexibility. The challenge that we have in a small school such as ours when we're trying to do this is a lot of teachers are teaching both math and science. And I know last year some teachers that were doing both would go to the math PLC one week and the science PLC the other. Everyone is required to be in one of them.

At this point in the conversation, Evan's frustrations were palpable and he was able to express clearly why he was unhappy with the adoption of the PLCs at Greenfield.

> Evan: It's somewhat effective but I'm certainly not necessarily a fan. Now some schools are exercising it and some are doing just what they need to do to keep somebody happy somewhere. Are we really a professional learning community when your principal dictates this is what we're doing? There's no formal agenda, but we do have to take minutes to submit to the vice-principal who puts the minutes in the binder so when the superintendent shows up they go over the minutes. I see it very much more as a check box or you know. Superintendent this is what our school was doing.

As a result, Evan feels that the province's goal of teachers acquiring professional learning through the PLCs is not being met at Greenfield.

> Evan: I think if we met once a month that would be sufficient but the principal's goal is that we meet once a week for an hour. I think she wanted us to meet every week but you know with other school demands, school improvement plans and such that hasn't happened. I don't see a lot of professional development there.

However, Evan did note that there were some PLCs at Greenfield high which he felt provided some usefulness.

> Evan: If there are two Science 10 teachers then they'll meet and work on common assessment and maybe with the performance assessment results and look at the curriculum. And so there is collaboration going on within that PLC framework. I think the literacy one - the literacy specialist who was stationed at our school did attend some of those meetings. I think most of the meetings last year. And both the principal and vice-principal come from a language arts background. So they spent probably more time in that group than the other groups.

Additionally, Evan felt confused about what the real purpose of PLCs is.

> Evan: Now the other two science teachers who both teach Science 10 thought it was great, because they thought they had more time to sit and do common planning. But that's what they see as the purpose of the PLC was to do common planning. At least we've talked as a group of teachers and we kind of have this mission planned where we'd like to go with our programs. And that did come out of the PLC process, so that would be a positive thing.

Evan also wondered aloud if limiting the membership of the PLC to the same teaching colleagues, as in other staff meetings, reduced the effectiveness of the PLC.

> Evan: But, when you're in your own local PLC, you know, the gene pool is quite small. It's mostly teachers leading teachers. You're still dealing with the same people you always deal with.

All these reflections left Evan wondering if the groups are in fact PLCs or something different.

> Evan: I don't see where I've done anything differently over the last four years as a teacher in the way I present. Sometimes a principal says we're doing this or we're doing that as part of our PLC and you know I'm often wondering is this PLC? Or is it their interpretation of it?

Evan questioned the provincial policy to adopt the PLC model for professional development. His scepticism is indicative of his attitude toward other policy initiatives that were implemented with limited effect.

> Evan: What concerned me was the DuFours published a book two years ago and all of a sudden all the schools in New Brunswick want to implement it. I'm thinking ok, you publish a book two years and the province is going to implement it? Has this been around and tested enough? Should we be chasing this? That concerned me. Are we going after this too quick? You sit down read a book think this is great and implement it...is it going to stand the test of time?

Evan continued to reflect on how the Greenfield high PLCs were initiated and reflected on whether the District having principals responsible for implementing the model, as they understood it, made for a disjointed approach across the various schools in the District.

> Evan: I'm just not a big PLC fan and I'm kind of I'm still weighting things. And part of it maybe our principal's interpretation of what PLCs are as well and some of the approaches that we're using. And so there are two schools twenty miles apart and their interpretation of what a PLC is was quite different. The principal bought in to this PLC stuff from day one and has promoted her vision and, of course, the District sees what we're doing and flagged us as one of the three schools in the district that are promoting PLC and thinks it's just great.

Finally, our conversations ended with Evan's warning that although he has not made up his mind about whether PLCs are beneficial for most teachers, as far as he is concerned, he is left unsure.

> So I'm a little bit skeptical of this PLC. I don't feel my profession itself has improved a great deal through the PLC model for our school. Would that have maybe naturally evolved and you know some decisions of getting together, you know improving things or did that involve and include the PLC process? I think the jury is out on that.

The Lessons I Learned From These Teachers' Stories

Reviewing these teachers' experiences, I discovered six important lessons about the implementation of PLCs in these rural schools: a) PLCs can have a positive impact on teacher retention; b) PLCs don't always evolve as a result of the collaborative climate in a school; c) PLCs are sometimes used to address district accountability; d) PLCs may be used for school or program planning instead of reflective professional inquiry based on assessment data; e) PLC implementation, structure and organization are sometimes based on the principal's vision of a District policy, not necessarily adoption of a philosophical approach to teacher professional growth; and f) teachers who participate in PLCs may still be confused about what constitutes a PLC.

When I first moved into the Aberdeen rural school district and began to work with students in the local high school, conversations with local teachers led me to believe that the teachers' strong sense of community, both in and out of school, could provide rich ground in which the PLC concept would flourish. Despite the concerns these teachers have expressed about their PLCs, one definite advantage that became evident was the positive impact on retention. All three teachers admitted that they had not been adequately prepared to teach in a rural school. Often teachers who lack adequate initial

preparation for teaching are more likely to leave the profession (Haar, 2007). As a first-year teacher, Jessica struggles with a variety of challenges such as how to adapt the provincial curriculum to her students. Darling-Hammond (2003) suggests that mentoring can potentially provide the support to positively impact retention. It was through her PLC that Jessica's colleagues were able to mentor her by sharing their professional development experiences. In addition, Sarah's PLC with her language arts colleague provided some opportunity for collaborative professional growth. For Evan, his PLC provided assistance with teaching techniques and curriculum implementing. I surmised that their PLCs are providing some form of support through their collaborative culture that is positively impacting retention at their schools, since none of these teachers are considering leaving their schools or the profession, despite their frustrations. Since each of their PLCs involves collaboration, it is partly due to the collaborative culture in each of their schools that these teachers feel somewhat supported.

However, the PLCs in each school did not evolve out of this collaborative culture. In fact, the provincial specialist emphasized that the PLC model was chosen for teacher PD "because that model (DuFours on PLC) would get us that kind of culture". Unlike Wenger's (1998) communities of practice, the foundation for PLCs, the PLCs at each of these schools did not develop organically in a collaborative culture or as the result of shared authority (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). When I spoke with the provincial specialist in teacher development, I heard how there was major concern about poor results by New Brunswick students on national and international tests. The subsequent policy change involved introducing PLCs in an effort to "create a culture and a support system that really follows the tenant in professional learning

communities" (Field texts). So these PLCs didn't evolve as a result of the collaborative climate in each school, but were devised to create a culture of collaboration. This perspective is contrary to what DuFour (2005) recommends. He notes that the culture of collaboration should be the way a school operates before they try to adopt the PLC concept. "A collection of teachers does not truly become a team until they must rely on one another, and need one another, to accomplish a goal that none could achieve individually" (p.40). There are profound shifts in a school's culture as it develops into a PLC. At its heart, it is a shift from teaching to learning and isolation to collaboration. These shifts in perspective are part of the discussions that take place in advance of PLC adoption. As a result of the demands the Aberdeen District is making on its schools, the three principals, Alfred, Monica and Louise, are all requiring the submission of minutes to ensure that collaboration is taking place. This imposition of organizational strategies, such as agendas and minutes, was made in the second year. Each principal required the PLCs to submit these documents in an effort to meet accountability requirements set by the District reviewers. What results is an atmosphere of distrust, counterproductive to collaborative culture that fosters effective PLCs (Hord, 2004). Additionally, both Sarah and Evan refer to the submission of minutes and agendas as unwelcomed additions to their workload. This imposition may be part of the reason that Evan developed a cynical attitude toward the PLCs at Greenfield High.

However, it is not just the imposition of accountability that has rendered the PLCs less effective than they could be. I learned that PLCs may be used for school or program planning instead of reflective professional inquiry based on assessment data (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker & Many, 2006). Young teachers like Jessica look within their schools for

solutions to such challenges in their classrooms as how to effectively mark student papers, but her PLC is working on the school's five-year plan. Meanwhile, Sarah enjoys bouncing ideas off colleagues, but her PLC focuses on methods of intervention for challenged students. Finally, Evan is concerned about new District assessments of students in the subjects he teaches, but for him, the focus of the PLC is to meet the District's policy rather than meet the needs of its teacher members. Hord (1997) explains that what makes the difference between study or support groups and PLCs is the honest reflection of the group members about their own practice, intentionally seeking ways to do their work better, and continually building their capacity to do so. Since their PLCs are not based on reflective inquiry, these teachers admitted to looking to other sources of PD, such as Evan and Sarah enrolling in Master's programs.

The teachers' stories reveal that no two schools' PLC is the same. One possible reason for the various differences in the PLCs at each of the schools could be because the adoption of the chosen PLC model at these rural schools has been based on each principal's vision of what a PLC is. The introduction of the PLC model was made through principal PD and some teacher PD. The principals of Beaufort, Argyle and Greenfield schools talked about learning about the PLC model from District provided PD or materials. None of the three teachers mentioned attending the District PD on PLCs. As a result, the PLC implementation, structure and organization are based on each principal's response to a District policy, not necessarily adoption of a philosophical approach to teacher professional growth. In an effort to demonstrate that PLCs were adopted, principals were able to provide agendas and minutes. Additionally, at Greenfield and Argyle, PLC membership was assigned and attendance was taken.

Without a firsthand experience of how a PLC functions, each of these principals relied on structures that were familiar.

Finally, like these teachers, I too was unsure if what these teachers were experiencing was any different from department or team meetings. DuFour (2005) warns, "A school does not become a PLC by enrolling in a program, renaming existing practices, taking the PLC pledge, or learning the secret PLC handshake" (p.33). Instead a school needs to align itself with the professional learning community concepts in advance of implementation. Otherwise, DuFour predicts the teachers will be confused and could see little benefit to the model. Evan's experience supports this perspective. He didn't see much difference between teams that worked together to address issues at the school in the past and the new PLCs. Jessica was told by her principal, Monica, that her meetings with the other two teachers at Beaufort, focusing on writing the school's three-year plan for literacy and math, constituted a PLC. Finally, in Sarah's PLCs at Argyle, discussions focused on intervention methods and a sharing of ideas with colleagues. The result is teachers like Evan are left wondering, "Is this PLC? Or is it their interpretation of it?" By 'their' Evan is referring to the District administrators.

Recommendations

With this narrative inquiry I hoped to open an important window into the world of PLCs in rural schools. Although my recommendations are based on the stories of three teachers from one school district, they do reflect the implementation of PLCs that was standardized throughout New Brunswick schools through the PLC Academy and other PD materials and workshops provided to all provincial schools. Also, it was the assigned task of all principals to introduce and implement PLCs in each New Brunswick school.

Whether a school is located in a rural or urban context, some of the challenges of adopting the PLC concept are common. Managing time, finding out sources for extra cost, diverse interests, preconceived mindsets, burden of workload, fear of being ridiculed or judged, and getting some effective methods for data collection can challenge principals when implementing PLCs. However, rural principals have additional challenges that hinder effective implementation of PLCs. First, whereas, urban schools have close proximity within the city environs that allow for principals the opportunity to meet, confer, and possibly collaborate, this is not the case for rural schools. Large distances between rural schools, prevents easy collaboration for principals (Speck, 1999). As a result, as seen in the three schools in this study, principals only meet at district sponsored meetings, where agendas preclude the issues to be addressed. Additionally, the distance from universities or district offices can also result in less to no involvement of specialists in PLCs as compared to urban schools.

Another difference between urban and rural schools that affect PLC implementation is school size. Rural schools tend to be smaller with fewer teachers than their urban counterparts. As a result, there may be just one PLC, as seen in the Beaufort School. Consequently, it is not possible for different PLCs to learn from one another on challenges such as how to effectively collaborate or how to use data to address improvements in classroom instruction. Additionally, the more teachers in the school, the greater the opportunity is to have variability in PLC composition. In small rural schools with few teachers, as Evan accounted, "the gene pool is quite small. You're still dealing with the same people you always deal with". This lack of diversity in the composition of

the PLCs in a rural school can result in the same interpersonal issues to affect all decisions and make implementation that much more difficult for principals.

While there is little research of the implementation of PLCs in rural schools, the only other research of district PLC implementation in New Brunswick (Brien, Williams, Briggs, 2009) examines district office educators' and the principals' responses to two surveys that examine the interactions among district educational leaders and measure the impact they had on the implementation and sustainability of school-based PLCs. What is missing in the conversation are the voices of the teachers who participate in these PLCs. The honest accounts by these rural teachers of their PLC experiences show that there is no uniform model of the PLC, but rather each school seems to have uniquely adapted the model to meet the district requirements. What becomes clear is that rural teachers often rely on one another for support and feel a strong sense of community with their colleagues.

Even though none of these rural schools were following the district mandated PLC model, as described by DuFour (2005), the potential to evolve exists. Individual schools need to be allowed to progress through the development of the PLC with consideration of their current culture (e.g., collaboration, leadership) (DuFour, 2005; Hord, 1997). Each of the teachers talked about the sharing, co-operation and collaboration at their schools. Studies (Collins, 1999; Kearney, 1994) show that small rural schools like these, not encumbered by overwhelming administrative bureaucracy, tend to be more co-operative and have better personal communication between administrators and teachers. Additionally, at its inception, each school had made attempts to implement the PLC model as was recommended in the documents and PD that was

offered by the district. Since it is the principal in rural schools who acts as catalyst for the development of learning orientation, these principals needed greater support for implementing the PLC model.

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 (Senge, 1990). In rural schools, often distanced from District offices or university resources, the principal carries the responsibility of initiating new learning opportunities for their teachers and are also responsible for teaching themselves. When promoting the conceptual foundations of PLCs, the principal's role includes resource finder, facilitator, shared-decision maker, innovative thinker, and student advocate (Speck, 1999). Consequently, the principal needs to be well versed and knowledgeable. 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". Most importantly, principals and administrators need to learn before leading. That is, steps such as gathering information about PLCs, strategic planning and creating a vision all support successful implementation of PLCs. Hord (2004) recommends that in order to learn about the PLC concepts principals need to take university courses, attend conferences, read professional journals, visit other schools and dialogue with other administrators.

The Aberdeen rural school district expected principals to implement the PLC model in their schools despite not having experienced a PLC themselves. Ball (2004) recommends that principals gain knowledge and skills necessary to implement learning communities by participating in their own learning community. No PLC for principals

exists in this rural school district. Devoid of this experience and to ensure that the District policy to implement the PLC model is being followed, these rural principals instituted some organizational structures that they could monitor. However, the literature is clear that PLCs require a collaborative leader who is willing to share the power (Speck, 1999). Therefore, PLCs should not be means of teacher accountability nor a source of teacher assessment.

Moreover, these rural principals had challenges adopting the PLC model because implementing PLCs is a process. The literature provides a myriad of sources to understand the nature of PLCs. Additionally, there are warnings from researchers about what does not work when considering how to implement PLCs. For example, Sparks (2005) warns that merely creating meeting times does not guarantee the evolution of the collaborative culture essential for improving student achievement. Meanwhile, Howey and Collinson (1995) remind readers that collaboration cannot be mandated or contrived. Nor can norms of collaboration "spring spontaneously out of teachers' mutual respect and concern for each other" (Rosenholtz, 1989, p. 44). What is missing is guidance on the process to facilitate educational leaders to implement PLCs in schools. I believe that the Lom PLC Actualization model (Lom, 2014) I designed could provide rural principals or any school governance group with this kind of guidance. The model provides a three phase process that takes a school through the evolution of exploring the potential of PLCs, to enacting the PLCs, and finally embedding the PLC into the life of the school.

These rural teachers' experiences provide a lens to view the successes and challenges of adopting PLCs. Their experiences can facilitate the evaluation of decisions by policymakers and administrators in how best to implement the PLC concept. School

leaders will be better prepared to anticipate issues and situations by being proactive with support and resources to ensure successful adoption of PLCs. The example of implementation of PLCs in rural New Brunswick schools in this narrative inquiry is a testament to the need for more research on PLCs in rural schools. The recommendations provided here identify key areas of research that need addressing.

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Appendix A

Introductory interview questions

1. Tell me a little of how you came to be teaching at your school?

2. Can you tell me a little bit about your teaching background?

3. Can you tell me a little bit about your university background?

4. Had your experiences at university prepared you for teaching in a rural school?

5. What 3 words would best describe your experience as a rural teacher?

6. What influenced your thinking about how you teach?

7. What kinds of things have you enjoyed doing the most about teaching in a rural school?

8. What has been your worst or most stressful experience?

9. How would you describe the kinds of students you teach?

10. Do you think students benefit from going to a rural school?

11. What parts teaching at a rural school do you like best?

12. Would you recommend to other perspective teachers that they become involved in teaching in a rural school?

13. What kind of teachers do you think would be interested in teaching in a rural school?

14. Tell me about the PLC you are a part of.

15. How did the group form?

16. Who is part of your professional learning community? Who is not?

17. How effective is your professional learning community?

18. What does it enable you to accomplish professionally?

19. Has it changed your practice? If so, in what way?

Article IV: Rural Education Reform Responsible for Outmigration: The Consequences of Ignoring the Local Community

Before my relocation to rural New Brunswick in 2005, I was a Montrealer - a "city girl". Like most of my fellow urbanites, my perception of ruralness was of an idyllic uncomplicated country life derived exclusively from TV shows like Lassie or The Waltons where life was inextricably tied to the land and nature and the characters easily sailed through challenges and difficulties. As I began to settle into my unfamiliar rural surroundings, I discovered that the fictional context portrayed was more romantic than realistic. The reality is that despite families in my remote, sparsely populated area of New Brunswick being joined by bonds of time and experience, farming here for generations, thereby forming an inseparable connection to this rural landscape, many local people are unable to sustain a rural existence and are forced to make the difficult choice to leave. Neighbours and friends are struggling against the forces of a political economy aimed to destroy the principle of local self-sufficiency. DeYoung and Theobald (1991) in their study of the role of rural schools in the community noted that as rural communities acquiesce and become further enmeshed in a cash-driven economy rather than one based on barter and exchange of services, they are, at the same time, losing control of their ability to retain institutions they had originally built and maintained. Therefore, with the reduction of postal and medical services, deteriorating infrastructure, and limited access to broadband transmission, many businesses are vacating New Brunswick rural communities. Even though the lifestyle that once was linked exclusively to agriculture and the family farm eventually expanded to include forestry, the closing of mills in my local rural communities is one cause for the outmigration to urban centers, often separating and dividing families.

Another mainstay of the rural community being lost in this wave of outmigration is the rural school. When I began tutoring students at my local schools, I also discovered that this outmigration from rural communities has been disastrous for the survival of rural schools. In fact, the very survival of our rural communities has been inextricably linked to the presence of local schools (Doeden, 2001). While rural residents struggle against the forces of a political economy which seem aimed at destroying their principle of local self-sufficiency, policymakers continue to consolidate small schools and bus their children out of the communities. As Howley (1994) explains, these decisions are driven by the false belief that larger schools are more economically viable than their smaller rural counterparts. Studies (Floyd, Abbott, & Faber, 1983; Howley & Smith, 2000; Lu & Tweeten, 1973; Spence, 2000; Zoloth, 1976) have shown that my students' long bus rides negatively impact their achievement, homework completion, eating and sleeping habits, participation in extra-curricular activities, and family and peer group relations. However, the irony is that when school consolidation is being considered, my rural neighbours are responsible for proving the benefits of the smaller school, rather than the policymakers building the case for consolidation. What results is another cause for the steady outmigration from the school-less communities.

Additionally, for all that rural schools are the elemental core of their community, political and economic pressures give rise to educational reforms that have become a key factor in outmigration. For example, much of the literature (e.g., DeYoung & Theobald, 1991) suggests that the modernist perspectives on how rural education should be organized and what should be taught either come from an urban perspective or represent a national public schooling mission in which students are national resources to be

prepared for careers in science and technology. Therefore, since rural education reform is exclusively under the influence of those with power, instead of those within the community, their decisions reflect cost-effectiveness priorities. While these policymakers claim to base their determinations on scientific research, I question to what extent do research recommendations for rural educational reforms reflect the best thinking of those most knowledgeable about rural education? How relevant is rural educational research that has been done by urban academics? Since the 1990's rural researchers such as Howley (1994) and Cotton (1997) recognized that for too long rural schools are considered inconsequential and consequently under continual attack: for being too small and located in communities characterized as not valuing education, for not offering a comprehensive curriculum, and for being inefficient. In this paper I demonstrate that allowing schools to use a critical pedagogy of place that corresponds with the rural lifestyle and values of the community can develop students' deliberative powers and change the schools' detrimental effect on rural communities.

Methodology

This story of the role of education in the outmigration of rural New Brunswick communities is interwoven with three voices: my own, those of my neighbours and other members of the community and other rural researchers. The combination of experiences of moving to a rural community, negotiating the social network and conventions of rural life, my role as an educator and graduate student and managing a farm have shaped the nature and direction of this narrative. While local people and neighbours have been friendly, my membership in this rural community has not been automatic. Urban life and its isolating tendencies didn't prepare me for the demands of life in the country. As

someone “from away” I often depend on locals’ knowledge to foster what Bourdieu (1974) calls my social and cultural capital, slowly learning to navigate the obstacles of community acceptance or geographic freedom that is to be expected in rural life. On the other hand, my urban background does provide a unique and valued perspective to interactions with my rural neighbours. Being enmeshed by living and teaching in this rural community affords me the opportunity to honestly reflect the values and concerns of my neighbours and other locals. What results is a fuller narrative than I would have developed from a Geertz-like (1975) observational and detached viewpoint. This sharing of our stories creates a means to share our perspectives and frame assertions to explain our common and/or differing viewpoints.

Since I based this narrative on personal, observational and research data, two research approaches informed my analysis: self-study autobiography (Bullough and Pinnegar, 2001; LaBoskey, 2004) and qualitative content analysis informed by the methods described by Krippendorff (1980). With self-study autobiography I sifted through my private experiences and conversations with locals in my community to derive insights into issues involved in rural life and educational reform. My own narratives and those of neighbours often revealed our differences and provided the foundation for interrogating the hegemonic narratives (Giroux, 1992). Conversations with neighbours at social gatherings mitigated my urbanite perspective that kept me unaware of the complex and multifaceted issues that threaten the equilibrium of rural life. Frequently, locals highlighted their distress over the closing of local mills, the reduction in public services, the closing of local schools, and the outmigration of the youth.

My analysis of research literature on rurality and reform of rural education was informed by qualitative content analysis because it focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text and interpretation of text that reveals the conditions behind a specific "problem" and the essence of that "problem" which lie in its assumptions (Van Dijk, 1997, p. 353). The goal of content analysis is "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study" (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992, p. 314). What I found useful in content analysis was the drawing of thematic threads. I was not looking to perform a structured linguistic analysis of each text, but rather sought to find links between documents through thematic analysis and comparison. Paying attention to how a particular phenomenon, in this case, rurality, is represented in a variety of sources, can lead to a clearer understanding of biases and influences. Opinions about rurality can therefore be linked to opinions on a number of other related subjects, such as educational reform, because there is an intrinsic logic between different opinions and meaning connected to them.

Generally perceived as the product of the post-modern period because it does not provide one true view or interpretation of the world, content analysis provides a means to make assumptions explicit by giving the researcher a view of the "problem" from a higher stance to gain a comprehensive perspective of both the problem and the viewer. But, since facts are never neutral and are always embedded in contexts (Malinowski, 1944), content analysis focuses on how language, as a cultural tool, mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge. In other words, content analysis is meant to provide a higher awareness of the hidden motivations in others and ourselves - not by providing unequivocal answers, but

by making us ask ontological and epistemological questions, such as how the text reproduces and transforms social life. My purpose in utilizing content analysis was not to provide definite answers, but to give insight into the shortcomings and unacknowledged agendas and motivations of other researchers as well as knowledge based on continuous debate and argumentation.

I chose content analysis to 'unpack' the writings of noted theorists. Rather than choosing methodologies that rely exclusively on a coding process, or recursive writing, or the extraction and development of stories about everyday encounters, by informing my review of texts with content analysis, I could rely on my experiential knowledge of rural life and rural education to situate the analysis so that the reader can weigh the evidence with an understanding of the rural experience in mind (Finlay, 2002). The analytic credibility depends on the coherence of my argument: readers will judge the trustworthiness of the process by how my analysis uses evidence from the selected writings to support the main points and whether the building tasks of language converge toward a convincing explanation (Gee, 2005). Pierre Bourdieu (1992), whose work has influenced my own thinking, was most passionate about demolishing and reconstructing 'givens' that disguise themselves as scientific facts. I was able to study the content with reference to the meanings, contexts and intentions contained in the discussions of rurality.

Complexity of Characterizing Ruralness, Rural Communities and Rural Education

Childhood summers in Montreal were bearable because we could sometimes skip the noise and intense heat emanating from the pavement and concrete by escaping to 'the country'. Our cottage by the lake set the context for my perception of 'rural' life. My rural neighbours were other urbanites, also seeking respite from the stifling summer in

the city. Now, as a 'rural' resident and graduate student, trying to characterize rurality, I am grappling with my impressions formed in these earlier times in contrast with the reality I live daily. I am learning that definitions used in a variety of sources are often arbitrary, complex and usually context specific. For example, do I defer to how rural researchers define rurality or do I rely on definitions offered in government documents, such as census reports? Is 'rural' a term people use to characterize themselves? Does the term 'rural' refer to a particular backdrop or is it used in reference to the nature of the associations of the people who live there? I began my investigation by turning to the literature.

My review of the literature about rurality and rural education revealed perspectives that can be characterized as two major polar opposites: the political and the scholarly. The political perspective often hinged on two contexts: demographic (defining a population or place as rural based on population sparseness) and economic (an area is rural based on a single dominant economic activity or land use, usually farming). For example, Canadian rural development and regional development reports (Goldenberg, 2008) focused on economic growth, while Statistics Canada (Mendelson & Bollman, 1998) focused on the population density and distance from urban centers. In fact, federal and provincial governments generally rely on three types of criteria to define a rural society: 1) The number of inhabitants, 2) the ratio of inhabitants to open land, and 3) type of economic activities, such as agriculture, fishing, food production and exploitation of raw materials. Meanwhile, other rural researchers focused on three contexts: 1) social - a composite approach by social scientists to define rural by combining instruments that measure values, behaviors, beliefs and/or feelings of individuals living within a particular

community), 2) psychological - self-identity of members of a rural community, based upon attitudes of interactions with other members, and 3) cultural - rural residents are perceived to be slow-paced, homogenous, and reluctant to give up tradition. For example, sociologists Bushnell (1999), Cloke (1987), and Newby (1986), who researched the cultural experiences of rural life, the sociology of agriculture and the effects of land ownership, power and conflict, studied the diversity of rural populations, the changing economics in rural contexts, and the decline in rural communities.

For a vernacular perspective on the concept of rurality, I turned to my neighbours and other members of my local community. Their focus was more environmental and social. For them, rural is a connection to the land and place as well as a kinship with the people who live there. The kinship within my community and the hardships that are confronted together form the background for my neighbours' representation of ruralness. What I see daily is that my neighbours *have* a perception of similarity to each other in lifestyle and beliefs. Their ability to cope with the idiosyncrasies of rural life is based on an acknowledged interdependence by giving to or doing for each other what is expected from them. In other words, they have the feeling that each person is part of a larger dependable and stable structure. Our distances as dots on political rural population maps are made insignificant when necessity brings us together. As a rural community we represent a world view that reflects both ancient and modern values. For many in my community, rural life means a heritage or family roots deeply entrenched in this geographic area, along with a life centered on its natural environment, its challenges and sublimity. They talk of distances as a given, relational support systems as a certainty, and nature as both a friend and a foe. For example, written contracts are often considered to

be a sign of distrust; instead, a verbal agreement and handshake between neighbours is usually sufficient. Additionally, most of my neighbours generally mistrust far-away, official sources of power. The reception I received when I first moved to this rural community was warm and friendly. Yet, I quickly learned that my ability to acquire membership was contingent on involvement in communal events such as a fund-raising breakfast for a neighbour suffering the effects of fatal illness or house fire, where labour is divided amongst community members. But, I have also experienced their suspicions concerning those who do not have their generational connection to the community and the area. Local families have been kind, generous and helpful, but as someone who feels like an urban expat, I am regarded as an immigrant. My acceptance into this community has been a gradual process reflecting neighbours' attitudes toward those urbanites who have come and gone from this community over time. Community locals are still expecting my husband and me to suddenly disappear one night, despite our efforts to prove this place to be the home we have chosen. Only an accumulation of years to prove my commitment, would afford me a place in the community as what I think of as 'similar'.

My own views about how to characterize rurality are influenced by both the literature and local perspectives. Both my experiences in Montreal and rural New Brunswick have informed my perceptions. Urban centers, like Montreal, support the perception of professional life, promoting a style of interaction that is rationalized, objectified, and detached. In this urban context, I shared no common mores (Mellow, 2005) with my neighbours; we simply acknowledged our proximity with a nod of the head. While I saw my neighbours heading to work or playing with their children, I had

limited direct personal contact with only a few. Tönnies (Loomis, 1957) labelled this form of association as *Gesellschaft* (impersonal associations based on the rational pursuit of industry, self-interest and contracts with diverse beliefs). In my short time as a rural resident I have become enmeshed in the lives of my neighbours and their children. I have also experienced the "death by a thousand cuts" that this community is suffering due to outmigration. It is hard to characterize rurality and not also reflect this deterioration. Like a shipwrecked crew, members of my community cling to one another and this land with ties that are 'soul deep' as they wave farewell to those who must leave for economic reasons, tearing them apart, yet ironically bringing them closer together.

It is impossible to discuss the complexities of rurality without focusing on the role of the rural school within the community. For example, in Montreal, my students considered their school to be merely a building, which functioned only as an academic institution where some athletic events were also held. On the other hand, my rural students carry a special allegiance to our rural school, mainly because it holds a special place in the life of our community. So integral is the role of the rural school to the community that it is perceived as the cornerstone to its viability (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999). Our local school is where we congregate for political meetings and is the polling station on Election Day. Furthermore, cultural events such as concerts, art exhibits, and fundraisers provide us the opportunity to meet with our neighbours and share a common experience. Prom night is a major event in the community. We congregate around the entrance of the high school to celebrate the parade of graduates as they smile shyly in their colourful and unfamiliarly formal attire. Finally, despite the rural school symbolizing potential and future, when our entire community assembles in mid-June at

the local high school to attend the graduation ceremonies, we feel the sadness of saying farewell to the bright young minds who will be leaving.

As a typical rural teacher who lives within the same community as my students and their families, it didn't take me long to recognize that my relationships with students would extend beyond the classroom. Struggles they and their families experience are issues we face together. Catastrophic events, like flooding, unite us as a support system, relying on each other to overcome each hardship. Therefore, unlike my teaching experience in Montreal, where students entered my life with the morning bell and as quickly exited at the end of the day, as a rural teacher I am a member of an extended family with each student. We meet each other at the rink, on the ball field, or at the homes of common friends. The strength of this connection is both demanding and enriching. Parents will want to discuss their children's academic issues anytime we encounter one another – could be while buying groceries or pumping gas. The rewards are in the understanding that evolves when I can learn about my students' "lifeworld" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973). It is unmistakably this relational rural lifestyle that drew me to this rural existence. While my acceptance as a member of this rural community has been slow and arduous, my position as a teacher has afforded me some social capital. Many parents of my students turn to me for advice concerning their children's schooling. Often, their own educational experiences ended in one room schools by grade 12. Therefore, their confidence to make educational decisions for their children is lacking. Frequently, they will turn to me to help them demystify the vagaries of the educational system.

Education Reform and Culture Promotes the Demise of Rural Communities

What I have learned from living and teaching in a rural community as well as investigating the literature on rural education is that much of the reforms being implemented in rural schools are shaped by urban/political values. Policymakers form their decisions for educational reform around the results of educational research, in which little attention is given to the influence of culture or "rural meanings" (Howley et al., 2005). Reforms are based on the same perspective that frames their definition of rurality: economics and demographics rather than cultural and social needs (Ball, 1998; Miller, 1993; Kannapel & De Young, 1999; Tickly, 2001). Despite its intrinsic value within the community, the very existence of the rural school is determined not by the members of the local community, but by the provincial and district policymakers. Framed by their urban/political viewpoint, they consider schools viable or not, thus resulting in the policy of consolidation of smaller schools because they are deemed inadequate to economically meet the demands of curricular offerings (Cotton, 1997), despite evidence that demonstrates small schools to be an effective means to educate youth (Cotton, 1997; Fanning, 1995; Howley, 1994). Many have argued that student achievement in small schools is at least equal, and often superior, to student achievement in large schools, based on achievement measures such as school grades, test scores, honour roll membership, subject area and assessment of high-order thinking skills (Cotton, 1997). A school does not have to be big, and by extension, urban (Howley, 1994). In her review of studies that compare the effectiveness of small and large schools, Cotton (1997) found that students in small schools, such as the ones in my local rural community, have a more positive attitude toward their subjects. This would seem to be self-evident, since our

classes tend to be smaller, giving each of our students the attention the child needs from their teacher and the opportunity to be heard and seen more often than in larger classes (Howley, 1994).

Sadly, the consolidation of our rural schools succeeds in stretching, and in some cases even severing the bonds that have historically linked our schools with our communities (Mulcahy, 2009). Members of my local community lament the domino effect of a school closing serving as a reminder of the fragility of the existence of the community. When threatened for closure, so integral is the school to the vitality of rural communities that they run the risk of disappearing altogether (Miller, 1993). The closing of a local mill and the subsequent unemployment did not have the crushing impact on my local community as did the District's decision to close the local elementary school. Many families who lost their jobs at the mill, were willing to remain in the community and seek seasonal work, in order for their children to grow up here. However, the main consequence of the school closing was that the children will have to be bussed to the consolidated school in the next town. Consequently, some parents are moving out of the community in order to avoid the hours of time their children would spend traveling. As a result, with time, only the elderly will remain, and eventually, the community may disappear altogether.

While the threat of losing their school can be a near fatal blow for any rural community, the educational philosophy promoted through the urban universal curriculum in rural schools also has the potential to threaten the very existence of the community. While my local community follows traditional rural values, rooted to the land and drawing pride and purpose from hard physical work, exhibiting loyalty to our home

territory and a perception of time that extends across generations, our local school itself and the curriculum being taught has contrary objectives. The urban values that predominate in the provincial school curriculum prepare my students to leave the community and seek post-secondary education in urban settings. Most local parents I spoke with would prefer if their children chose to stay and make a life within the community. However, the intrinsic values in rural schools are disconnected with those of the community they serve. The collective sense of loyalty depicted in typical *Gemeinschaft* associations and that is encouraged in students' rural "lifeworld" is discounted in their school experience. The reality created in our rural schools is that there are two purposes for education: 1) to identify the above average students to enable the most talented youth to rise to the top of the socio-economic status system, which likely entails a movement into an urban center; and 2) to teach the skills and norms of an urban society to ensure common beliefs and values in all members of the society. It is these *Gesellschaft* values of acting in their own self-interest that are intrinsic in the curriculum of rural schools. This system is based on a meritocratic society in which the best and brightest work at the highest levels for which they earn the highest rewards (Hurn et al., 1982). Students are evaluated on an individual basis, even when participating in group work. Even their athletic participation is rewarded with MVPs for individuals who excel, despite the team spirit that predominates their involvement. Thus, the "hidden curriculum" and "hidden cultural influences" (Yon, 2003) within schools are the basis for the cultural transmission and enculturation within my students' formal educational system. As a result, since my local rural school is required to implement an urban-based curriculum in order to keep in step with their urban counterparts, it is also contributing to

its own demise (Kannapel, 2000). Rural students who succeed are encouraged to leave the community to further their studies. For those who remain it is a struggle to find full-time employment, most eventually heading to western provinces instead of settling for seasonal work. So, for rural schools like mine, it is the urban-based systems of socialization, such as extracurricular activities (i.e., debating), that aim at influencing students to adopt *Gesellschaft* urban values and to migrate out of their rural communities.

Breaking the Link between Rural Education and Outmigration

My experience living in a rural community bears out Corbett's (2007) assertion that "an important part of a rural education is learning to leave because leaving is an opening up to possibilities' (p.). However, what I have learned from my students is the change in perception that is the consequence of this urban-based rural education. My conversations with many of my students indicate that they feel alienated from the values being presented at school. Some of them find the merit-based urban model to be problematic, which Howley et al (1996) suggest can account for many of them choosing to leave education behind as an impractical preparation for their lives in the community by teaching rural youth that their communities and traditional lifestyles have nothing of value to offer. Additionally, Corbett (2007) contends that "After learning to leave, a person can always return" (p. 269). Census statistics of rural New Brunswick contradicts this assertion, demonstrating that those who return are elderly, retirees, or unemployed adult children – none of whom provide much hope for the continuing existence of their community. In fact, if there is any chance for rural communities to flourish it is by finding a means to provide a hopeful future for their youth.

Content analysis of a variety of policy documents concerning rural education in Canada shows that rurality is characterized using demographics, "open country and settlements with communities of 2,500 or fewer residents" (Statistics Canada, 1998), "small towns, villages, and hamlets with fewer than 1000 people" (Weibe, 2001), and "communities of fewer than 5,000 people" (Bennett, Delorey, Oland, & Yuill, 2013) or with geographic features including "small farming communities" (Manitoba), an area with small schoolhouses located in farming or mining communities" (Canadian council on learning, 2006), and "CSDs (census subdivisions) where 5% to less than 30% of the employed residents commute to any CMA (census metropolitan area) or CA (census agglomeration)" (de Plessis, Beshiri, Bollman, & Clemenson, 2001). What is missing from rural school policymaking are the vernacular notions of rurality and the important role of the rural school in the community. If rural education is to meet this challenge of teaching youth to recognize that there is a future in their community, it must also reflect the distinctions of circumstance. My area of rural New Brunswick is predominantly a farming community. Most of the crops grown are potatoes, which are sold to a large, international food processing company in the area. However, rural people to the south and east of the province are mostly involved in the fishing industry. Each community is influenced by its source of revenue and faces issues and challenges that result. However, the drive to standardize curriculum and its implementation in New Brunswick is built on the economic assumption that disregards the importance of place, with its local issues and politics. For the past 150 years, improving rural schools has also meant reshaping and redirecting them into a standardized system because the educative influences within rural communities are viewed as inefficient, unprofessional (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999), and

insufficient, what with reduced funding, poor teacher retention, and small school populations (Cotton, 1997). Therefore a standardized educational system (Gruenewald, 2003) is the means by which schools may accomplish industry's demands for efficiency and globalization through the social organization of the school, the curriculum, and the pedagogy. During my teaching career, I have witnessed decisions about the reforms of each of these three areas to be dominated by the cult of efficiency, seeking to institute a system in which schools are, as DeYoung and Theobald (1991) suggest, to be graded and standardized. In this regard, educational efficiency has long been linked with economic viability as seen in economies of scale rationales, borrowed from industrial models (Kannapel & DeYoung, 1999).

While the curriculum does have the potential to support the values of the community or to work against them, in order to sustain their rural communities, my students need to learn knowledge and skills that contribute to the wellbeing of the social and ecological places they inhabit (Gruenwald, 2003). For example, instead of offering courses that are meant to support the individualistic and nationalistic competitiveness of globalization by exclusively preparing them for university, they should have the option to learn about farming methods, small business management or how to address local ecological issues. But my teaching colleagues are not afforded the opportunity to create a locally relevant curriculum, because provincial and district policymakers follow the assumption that efficient education of our youth is best provided in an institutional environment where educational decisions are not left to chance (Cranston, Kimber, Mulford, Reid & Keating, 2011; Mulcahy, 1999). My own teaching experiences in both urban and rural New Brunswick confirm the perspective that the movement to ensure

students meet a national or global standard of achievement focuses on setting provincial standards that all urban and rural students are required to meet, with a common curricular focus meant to equip all students to participate in society. Therefore, since the emphasis of New Brunswick's curriculum is standardization, not the preparation of my students to participate effectively locally, what results is that our rural schools have become vehicles for "educating our youth to leave" (Corbett, 2005; Haas & Nachtigal, 1998), "creating a one-way flow of youth" (Corbett, 2007; Howley & Howley, 2000) and "resources draining much of the vitality from our farming community" (Friedland, 2002). Local crops, timber, and minerals "flood out of the local economy to supply and bolster the consumer culture" (Nachtigal, 1994). It is just these economic and social realities that are fueling the demise of rural communities.

Developing Deliberative Powers

> *Under the current legislation in many jurisdictions when a school is slated for closure it is not the school board that is required to justify, on the basis of evidence, that a different school, additional bussing and consolidation will result in higher educational quality for the students. Rather it is put upon community groups to mount the case for their schools. (Corbett & Mulcahy, 2006, p. 129)*

When members of rural communities are responsible for making economic and political decisions, they are participating in a deliberative democracy while maintaining their ideological footholds. In such a deliberative democracy, citizens share a commitment to the resolution of their collective problems through public reasoning. In this pluralistic association, citizens may have diverse preferences, convictions and ideals concerning the conduct of their own lives. As a result, members don't think that some particular set of preferences, convictions or ideals is mandatory. Therefore, in a

deliberative democracy, community members recognize one another as having deliberative capacities that are vital for entering into a public exchange of reasons and for acting on the result of such public reasoning (Cohen, 2005). To acquire an understanding of the processes by which they can mobilise themselves politically to improve their own lives, rural citizens need to become aware of methods of resistance. For example, in a deliberative democracy, community involvement would be a key factor in the determination of rural school reform (Casey, 1998). The unique qualities of *Gemeinschaft* in rural communities has the potential be the foundation for these deliberative powers, similar to the kinship which sustained pioneer settlers in the face of adversity from outside forces such as colonizers (Hillyard, 2007).

However, political resolutions of rural issues reflect disparate values. Below I offer three examples of how the New Brunswick government undermines deliberate powers in local communities. The first example demonstrates how the political standpoint to resolve such concerns as resource development or unemployment in rural New Brunswick has led to decisions that are economically driven in contradiction to the scholarly warnings of community fallout. In an effort to create jobs and rural sustainability, the New Brunswick government is encouraging mining companies to test drill for natural gas deposits in my local rural neighbourhoods. The process of determination of the presence of natural gas is hydraulic fracturing (fracking) which involves fracturing shale rock by injecting pressurized water to release the gas. Most of this exploration would take place in rural areas that are presently agricultural. Environmental researchers suggest that this practice can have a negative effect on surrounding wells, resulting in residents moving away; subsequently, they recommend a

halt to the drilling. Community members worry about the loss of agricultural land and the pollution of aquifers. Others worry that protests against fracking could discourage mining companies from investing in the province, resulting in a loss of potential employment in the same areas.

Therefore, local residents seeking to form an opinion concerning the detriments or benefits of the test drilling and possible subsequent mining in the area turn to the conflicting political and scholarly perspectives. Because of a lack of clear information, my neighbours remain confused, unable to draw on deliberative powers for a unified direction as a community. These same people have been able to address earlier external pressures with a unified voice developed over time and kinship. Ironically, neither the government officials nor environmental researchers making these recommendations live within these rural communities.

My second example of political undermining of community deliberative powers concerns the closing of the local elementary school. After the closing of the local mill and subsequent redistribution of residents seeking other employment, the local elementary school was deemed too costly and scheduled to be closed. A vibrant parent group within my community mounted a protest and insisted on a meeting with the provincial and district policymakers. Despite their intense efforts, the response was that a one-year reprieve was to be granted, but the closing is now scheduled for the end of this school year. The residual consequence of this affair is that, many members of my community feel powerless when arguing against the government policymakers. Many wonder whether anything can be done to prevent the government policies from emptying their community.

My third example of government response to community deliberative powers consists of two controversial incidents which demonstrate that it is possible for opposing forces to find a middle ground to resolve rural issues. When the New Brunswick Department of Education determined that the early French immersion program should be eliminated, a broad community of New Brunswick parents mounted a sustained protest. The result was that the French immersion program was revised but with policy review slated annually. In a second controversy, the New Brunswick Department of Education looked to eliminate a three-week school break in October when students would be able to assist local farmers during the potato harvest. Local potato farmers urged policymakers to reconsider this policy because it would have a detrimental economic effect. The outcome was a compromise between policymakers and parents/farmers to provide the best possible program based on curriculum research and economic viability for the rural community and the Potato Break continues to be an option for students who need to work on the harvest. In both cases, the citizens utilized their deliberative powers to redirect the reforms intended by policymakers to ones which benefitted the community and their children as well as the schools.

When government interventions destabilize the overall atmosphere of well-being in a rural community, what results is a general feeling of powerlessness. As seen in the example concerning the use of rural lands for mining, many residents who oppose the fracking methods and are concerned about the effect it may have on their water supply have voiced the opinion that residents will leave the community before witnessing this form of destruction to their land. Similarly, if children lose their school and need to be bussed out of the community, many parents choose to move closer to the school and out

of their rural area. Finally, and most importantly to this paper, when the school curriculum does not reflect the values within the community, parents will move from the rural area to have their children attend schools whose curriculum more closely matches their expectations. What becomes clear is that these kinds of interventions and the ways that curriculum is presently developed has a direct connection to the outmigration of rural communities. If they are to survive, a new approach is needed.

A Different Kind of Rural Education

The link between the outmigration of rural communities and the current reforms in rural education can be broken with the fostering of deliberative powers in rural schools. In order to become responsible and cogent community members, rural education has the capacity to develop deliberative powers. It is not sensible for rural schools to continue to utilize an urban-centered curriculum. My conversations with many of my rural students indicate that they feel alienated from the values being presented at school. Some of them find the merit-based urban model to be problematic, which can account for many of them choosing to leave education behind as an impractical preparation for their lives in the community. Often, the perceived lack of relevance of rural schooling may be enhanced by a rigid curriculum, designed for a context (and sometimes culture) removed from that in rural areas. Research on place-based education reveals that my students would have a greater tendency to remain in our rural community if they were provided with a greater understanding and appreciation for life in that place (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). Gruenwald's (2003) critical pedagogy of place challenges students to examine critical issues that threaten their communities and learn how to find solutions. By creating a link between the classroom and cultural politics, critical pedagogy of place encourages

students and teachers to experience and interrogate the local environmental and social contexts as part of the school curriculum. This kind of pedagogy challenges educators to expand the school experience to "foster connection, exploration and action in socio-ecological places just beyond the classroom" (Gruenwald, 2003, p. 9). This requires that teachers learn from and about the rural context in which their students live their lives, and interpret and understand it in a way which leads to the development of appropriate teaching and learning methods and materials.

Designed more from a scholarly and vernacular perspective of rurality, the critical pedagogy of place as described by Gruenewald (2003), and adopted in our rural schools, can take rural education one step closer in preparing our youth to question the decisions of policymakers based on economics and to foster the bond that connects them with their communities (*Gemeinschaft*).

> Schools need more freedom and flexibility to create courses that reflect the local economy and environment and to adapt course material to take advantage of the resources readily available in the local context. Locally developed courses would increase rural students' interest in school and contribute to their ability to make a living and a life in their home communities. (Mulcahy, 2009, p. 27)

As educators, we need to re-examine the purposes of education so that we may equip our students with the tools they need to make conscious choices about living well in their own communities. Pedagogy of place has the potential to prepare students to be active citizens, able to contribute to and work for change (Bartholomaeus, 2009).

Critical pedagogy of place, specifically, links the classroom with cultural politics. In this kind of rural school curriculum, we teachers and our students actually experience and investigate the places outside of school that are the local context of the community's

shared cultural politics. This involves readily adaptable, sustainable resources of innovative methods and materials for training, teaching and learning. Professional learning communities (DuFour, 2004) within and between schools can provide a network for teachers to share and disseminate these resources. What could result is that our rural youth would learn how to live well in their environment and identify ways to change the thinking that injures and exploits neighbours and communities. In a practical sense, this approach may potentially lead to community-based action research and school-community collaborations. For example, to address the issue of fracking in rural areas as presented earlier, a school curriculum influenced by critical pedagogy would involve the topic of fracking, in a variety of science and humanities courses. Students could be better equipped to determine for themselves, as well as assist their parents/neighbours to better understand the various implications on both sides of the argument. Thus, with a critical pedagogy of place, our students could learn to question the traditional approaches of sustaining communities and ecosystems and to question what needs to be changed and what should be conserved. Environmental advocacy, for example, encourages a more rational approach to resource-based industry that would not see the depletion of our natural resources. A focus on local culture and values could encourage our youth to seek the means to sustain our local communities and rural culture.

While there is a long research tradition concentrating on what the community can do for the school, recent research presents a multidirectional perspective. For example, Mulford (2007) identifies this relationship between a school and its community as linking social capital in which the school's pedagogy facilitates a community's capacity to influence its own future. The enquiry process inherent in the professional learning

community framework provides teachers with the opportunity to gather evidence about a contextually relevant questions, goals, needs or problems. This, combined with a shared model of pedagogy, enables grounded professional discourse that informs teachers about their teaching and provides a means to overcome some of the traditional impediments to providing students with the knowledge to develop their deliberative powers.

There is still time to preserve the best that our rural schools can offer their surrounding communities. Rather than abandoning rural schools as economically unsustainable, policymakers should be focusing on what could be instead of what is. Issues such as how can rural schools be organized to maximize their capacity to foster democratic values as students learn about active citizenship and deliberative powers, and how schools can learn to use advantages of scale to best serve our rural students and their communities should be included in a rural curriculum. Because of the centrality of schools in our rural communities, rural schools have the potential to function as both catalyst and role model for addressing a wide range of community needs and options for the future.

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Epilogue

Rural schools hold a special position in their proximate communities. Each is vital to the surrounding community. While they are 'schools' by day, in the evenings they are transformed to theatres, athletic venues, and community halls. Consequently, they are places where teachers, students, parents, and alumni encounter one another both professionally and socially. Yet, despite its lifeblood role in the community, rural schools are barely on life support. Mainly, economics is putting rural schools on the endangered list. With jobs dwindling, families move to urban centers for employment causing student population in rural schools to decrease. Decisions about the viability of a rural school are made by policymakers outside the community. Government officials often view rural schools as economically inefficient buildings and deem closures and subsequent consolidation as the only possible means to offer education to rural students. In addition, the provincially imposed curriculum aims at preparing students to leave their community to participate in the larger society and economy. But, rural parents conversely hope their children will learn the necessary literacy and numeracy skills and then stay close to home after graduation. These challenges create palpable frustration in rural communities and their schools.

As suggested by Kannapel and DeYoung (1999) the problem with reform in rural education can be understood by examining two interrelated questions: a) who controls the schools and b) who do the schools serve? In Canada, education is under provincial jurisdiction. While this level of government is more closely connected to the local community than that at the federal level, these policymakers continue to see students as individuals who will serve a wider society rather than members of a smaller community

who will work to sustain the community's viability. Consequently, rural schools are seen to serve the wider Canadian society which is predominantly urban.

My article, "Rural Education Reform Responsible for Outmigration: The Consequences of Ignoring the Local Community" offers some explanations on how we have arrived at this juncture of considering rural schools as dinosaurs close to extinction. I suggest a change in focus for the curriculum in rural schools to one which incorporates a place-based critical pedagogy. This form of pedagogy advocates that, as part of the school curriculum, students and teachers actually experience and investigate the places outside of school that are the local context of shared cultural politics. In this way, rural youth can identify and create material places that teach them how to live well in their environment and identify ways to change the thinking that injures and exploits other people and places. In a practical sense, this approach can lead to community-based action research and school-community collaborations. Thus, students learn to question the traditional approaches of sustaining communities and ecosystems and to question what needs to be changed and what should be conserved. Theobald (2002) warns that the responsibility for changing rural students' belief that success is only found in urban settings, falls on the shoulders of rural teachers who need to challenge this kind of message to stem the rapidly growing tide of migration out of rural communities. He suggests that incorporating the circumstances, conditions and dilemmas of rural communities into core subject teaching will provide students with a closer bond to the place they live as well as help them recognize the potential to improve circumstances within the community. Like I was, the majority of students in teacher preparation programs are urban (Theobald, 2002) with little understanding of teaching and living in a rural community. In New Brunswick, if pre-

service teachers plan to remain in the province to begin their careers, they may find placement in a rural school, considering the majority of schools in New Brunswick are located in rural areas (Statistics Canada, 2011). In order to prepare them for "an intellectual connection to local circumstances" (Theobald, 2002, p. 10) teacher preparation programs need to be geared toward special environments, such as rural communities (Barker & Beckner, 1987). But even so, the adjustment to rural life is a challenge, as I have learned.

Adapting to Teaching in Rural Schools

As I noted in my article, "When Will I Stop Being From Away: A Doctoral Researcher's Relocation into the World of Educational Research," transitioning and adjusting to rural life is more than merely movement into a new environment. The bordercrossing I experienced is not uncommon for urban teachers who accept a position in a rural school. Once I settled into the rural community, it was a matter of finding my place and voice within the community – challenges that were equally arduous as I entered the academy as a doctoral student. While as teachers we are prepared to assist students who change schools and enter new communities, we are unprepared to handle those challenges ourselves. No preparation for meeting these obstacles is offered in either pre-service teacher programs or in any professional development. As a result, teacher retention in rural areas tends to be low. None of the three teachers who participated in my research presented in "A Narrative Inquiry into Professional Learning Communities in Rural Schools" were unfamiliar with rural life, with two actually growing up in the community where they presently teach. Moreover, each of the principals also grew up in rural communities or the community surrounding their schools. Therefore, it seems clear

that in order to keep rural schools as viable entities and to adopt a critical pedagogy of place, there needs to be greater effort on the part of teacher preparation programs to provide courses and practice teaching opportunities in rural areas. Barker and Beckner (1987) and later, Theobald (2002) believe that rural universities ought to specialize in rural teacher preparation and suggests that it is their moral obligation as well. The key component of any teacher preparation program is the practicum. White (2006) recommends that an effective practicum in rural schools should enable prospective teachers to develop an understanding of the links between the classroom, the school and the wider rural community issues. After all, as teachers, we are keenly aware that effective teachers learn as much as they can about their students because most of the knowledge we acquire about them is directly related to the locale or immediate community from which the student comes. She acknowledges that rural teachers in particular need to be acutely aware of and respond to community issues. The only way to provide pre-service teachers with an understanding of how crucial the understanding of a rural community is to being an effective teacher, is to experience it firsthand. Halsey (2005) proposes that pre-service teachers need the opportunity to observe and experience the rural settings and to contemplate how to respond in terms of pedagogy and as a member of a rural community (p.42). The emphasis, therefore, should be in developing a positive feeling about country life and its challenges and possibilities for a lifelong teaching.

One of the challenges of teaching in a rural community as perceived by urban pre-service teachers is the isolation (White, 2006). This isolation can be seen as both geographic and professional. As I noted in my article "When Will I Stop Being From Away: A Doctoral Researcher's Relocation into the World of Educational Research", adjusting to rural life is contingent on finding those guides who can assist in the

transition. The professional isolation comes because teaching specialties do not enjoy critical mass in any but the largest rural schools. A lone high school math teacher may constitute the entire mathematics department. Such was the situation for Jessica in Beaufort school, being the only teacher of the K-3 class. However, rural schools tend to operate as small unique communities. The impersonality and social distance, which tend to be key features of professionalism, are neither prized nor cultivated as part of daily life in rural communities. Therefore, despite their professional training, rural teachers tend to retain the social practices cultivated by their upbringing and reinforced by their everyday experience. Consequently, in schools where teachers are the only one teaching a subject, Howley and Howley (2004) recommend the district seeks to establish a PLC that networks teachers across the district, perhaps through the use of broadband services, or in the case of the solitary math teacher, to establish cross-disciplinary PLCs within the school. In fact, it is the smallness of rural schools, with the personal character of the relationships among staff, and the active engagement of educators with the life of the community that accounts for their positioning to be fertile grounds for the development of PLCs.

So, if rural schools are ideal niches for PLCs to be effectively implemented, why are the teachers in this study so soured to it after only one-year implementation? Why aren't their PLCs providing the professional growth they seek? To understand this phenomenon is to examine the factors that led to the introduction of PLCs in these schools.

For decades, researchers have sought the 'silver bullet' that could satisfy professional learning needs of teachers. Most recently, the PLC concept, developed in an

effort to find ways to raise expectations for students, improve instructional practices, and increase student learning and achievement outcomes, has been endorsed by a long list of researchers (McLaughlin, M. & Talbert, J., 2007; Nelson, 2009; Vescio, Ross & Adams, 2008) mainly because an important feature of learning communities is that they are grounded in the assumption that knowledge is situated in the day-to-day lived experiences of teachers and best understood through critical reflection with others who share the same experience (Buysee, Sparkman, & Wesley, 2003).

Most importantly, a rural school's sense of community should be fertile ground to develop the PLC principles of shared vision, collaboration, and shared responsibility. As a group of people who shave common interests and values, rural schools are themselves communities, because teachers and administrators both value their rural lifestyle, work together to address common issues and also live in close proximity to each other and the school. My expectations, before beginning this inquiry were that the PLCs in these rural schools would be prime examples of how PLCs address teachers' professional needs. I was surprised to discover that none of the teachers found their PLCs to adequately meet their desire to grow professionally. What they all did endorse was the fruitful dialogue with colleagues, the opportunity to be less isolated and address common issues, even if the purpose was common planning.

The term 'single action bias' is often used by environmental researchers (e.g., Wagner & Zeckhauser, 2012; Weber, 2006) to refer to the one action decision-makers take to solve a problem, reducing the probability of additional actions because the first action suffices in reducing the feeling of worry or vulnerability. When I first heard about PLCs I wondered if it was just another single action bias. During my teaching career, I

have experienced a variety of forms of professional development; whether it was one-shot workshops or reviewing video-taped lesson studies, nothing impacted my professional growth as much as conferring with colleagues to address common issues. In fact, the opportunity to plan, develop, implement and evaluate a common curriculum with a team of colleagues at my high school had the most impact on my teaching practice. The dialogue and collaboration was based on a common goal. Before we could begin our discussions, we had to ensure that we had a common vision for this curriculum. Follow-up discussions were based on data from our newly-created students' assessments. This experience was a milestone in my teaching career. It enriched my practice and reinforced my belief that teachers need to experience similar opportunities.

In their synthesis of a five-year study, Pankake and Moller (2002) described the readiness of schools for the development of PLCs. They noted that high-readiness schools had, among other factors, proactive principal leadership who utilized purposeful decision-making. These proactive principals promoted the building of strong cultures of collaboration, giving recognition and encouraging teacher leadership. In other words, teachers who are in schools with proactive principals share a school vision, initiate and facilitate change strategies, and are encouraged to utilize expertise as needed. These principals demonstrated purposeful decision-making by nurturing and supporting a common vision throughout the school, supporting a shared vision related to student learning, balancing individual and organizational needs, and proactively bringing the right people together to solve problems. These principals understand that effective teamwork is fundamental to success and are willing to work on working together with their teachers.

None of the teachers who participated in this inquiry regarded their principals as the proactive leaders that Pankake and Moller (2002) describe. Instead, they spoke of direct control in the make-up of the PLC groups, what is discussed in PLC meetings and high levels of accountability for the operation of the PLCs. Morrissey (2000), in a study of leadership capacity of principals, encourages principals to create structures that ensure the sharing of leadership and decision-making. Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) reinforced this point by stating that principals need to distribute leadership by providing teachers with opportunities to take leadership roles related to teaching and learning.

My conversations with the principals revealed that they saw their roles in the development of PLCs to be monitors, schedulers, and assessors. I saw no evidence of shared leadership or movement in that direction. I can only account for this by wondering if these principals had been adequately acquainted with what their role is in developing PLCs in their schools. Although some did attend the province's and district's professional development concerning the development of PLCs in their schools, the knowledge of how to initiate shared leadership in their schools was not actualized.

If these schools hope to become effective PLCs, they will need to address the overall organizational culture of the school. Issues such as shared leadership will need to be addressed. McLaughlin and Talbert (2007) recommend that voluntarism over inclusiveness is another hurdle for these schools to overcome. They propose that PLCs are effective when teachers volunteer their participation, as opposed to the mandatory inclusion in the collaborations that presently exists in these schools. However, McLaughlin and Talbert (2007) also note that influences that may work against a change

in school culture could be conditions stipulated in teacher contracts and the accountability pressures imposed by school districts and government agencies. Schools often choose to stick with known practices rather than experimenting with classroom innovations derived from PLC decisions, in order to ensure acceptable results on test scores. My conversation with the provincial specialist in professional development led me to understand that it was the student results in international testing below the level expected that impelled policymakers to look for a means to address student achievement. Additionally, the PLC concept was chosen because research suggested that the culture and support system inherent in PLCs was needed to foster an improvement in student learning. However, since the initiative was left in the hands of districts to implement, no focus was given to foster change in school cultures. As a result, as McLaughlin and Talbert (2007) warn, if teachers are required to participate in "contrived collegiality, the organizational change will not move beyond rituals of collaborative practice to meaningful joint work to improve teaching and learning" (p.60). For this reason, I have little hope that PLCs will be successfully adopted at these schools, and expect that it won't be long before the next "silver bullet "for teacher professional development will be introduced.

Final Thoughts

The immediate purpose of this dissertation was to examine the adaptation of the PLC concept in rural schools. Along the way I became engaged in self-reflection that directed me to question my place within both the academic and rural communities. I believe that self-knowledge is one of the most powerful forms of knowledge. When we know ourselves, then we are better able to reach inward and pull out what is best in us to help others and improve society.

When I cast my mind back to those muses who influenced my philosophical approaches, Maslow's (1954) hierarchy of needs is foundational. To recap, Maslow ranked personal needs into five levels: The five levels of needs are (from most basic to highest): physiological (such as food, water, and air), safety (such as shelter), belongingness (belonging to a group), self-esteem (sense of self-identify and self-worth), and self-actualization (sense of self-purpose and fulfillment). Applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs to my own motivations as an educator, researcher and rural resident are relatively straightforward. I choose to live in a rural area to meet my physiological needs and feeling of safety. Cleaner water, air and self-produced food provide me the confidence of a healthier lifestyle than my experience in downtown Montreal. Like days gone by when trust was not an issue to be questioned, my car, home and barn remain unlocked, just like my neighbours'. The self-actualization that results from continuing my education into my sixth decade provides me with a sense that my growing and learning is an on-going process. However, the belongingness that I feel in the academic and rural communities sustains my greatest sense of fulfillment.

If I am honest with myself I must admit that one of the primary things I get out of my relationships with others is a sense of belonging and self-esteem. Belongingness is met through my association with other teachers and academics as well as my rural neighbours. Being a teacher and a farmer give me a sense of place in society. I believe my work is important and makes a contribution to society. I can hold my head up and answer with pride when I am asked what I do for a living. Meeting self-esteem is also evident in my inter-dependent relationships. We rely on feedback to bolster our egos, to give us the needed lift to face the more difficult parts of our workday. Our sense of

belongingness and self-esteem are inextricably linked. If we belong, we have a basis for feeling good about ourselves.

This has been a long and somewhat winding path through a maze of motivations. I firmly believe that being part of a community is an essential component to our sense of completeness. Teachers need the support of a PLC to ensure they are able to provide their students with best practices, rural residents need their neighbours to cope with the challenges that rural circumstances present and researchers need the collegial research community to strive to improve society. It is this sense of community that has driven me to begin my career as a teacher, move to a rural residence and become an educational researcher.

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