LEADING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES
THAT FOCUS ON STUDENT LEARNING

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Dedication

Mahalo nui loa to my parents,

Patricia Jo and Keith Verdell, and family members

Marianne, Ed, Carol, Meredith, Keith, John, and Nani.

Sweet the rains new fall.
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Abstract

Hawai‘i’s public schools are adopting statewide reforms aimed at preparing all students for college and career opportunities (Hawai‘i Department of Education [HIDOE], n.d.). These shifts reflect national reforms and require school leaders to learn new roles and responsibilities to ensure rigor and consistent practices across grade K-12 settings (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). It is messy and complicated work because changing one function of the statewide organization can significantly impact other parts. The state’s system-wide adoption of Hawai‘i Common Core Standards (HCCS), for example, has implications for professional development and curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices (HIDOE, n.d.). This study describes the current federal and local education climate and explores the power of professional learning communities (PLCs) to meet the challenges of current reforms.

A case study was conducted at Makana Public Charter School (MPCS), a pseudonym, to address the question, “How can a school effectively develop and sustain professional learning communities that focus on student learning?” The study finds that, while the principal plays a key role in establishing supportive conditions for PLCs, teacher leadership is critical to the effective implementation and sustainability of these communities of practice. In this study, the principal demonstrated a strong background in instructional leadership and professional development. This foundation appeared to help him understand the steps and nuances required in establishing supportive conditions for collaborative practices such as allocating resources, establishing a culture of trust, involving faculty in key decisions, and guiding interactions within the PLC meetings.
Teacher leadership was also key in the implementation of PLCs as this role group supported and held one another accountable for achieving shared agreements around academic and behavior expectations. This study can inform the work of others who are interested in leveraging collaborative practices to impact professional learning and improve student outcomes.
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1. Background on Participants
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Professional learning communities (PLCs) are viewed by researchers and practitioners as a powerful way for schools to implement professional development that gets results (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 1993; Hord, 1997a; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; WestEd, 2000). Across the country states have adopted more rigorous standards and assessments to put all students on a path toward college (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices and Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010). Hawai‘i’s public school system is adopting the Hawai‘i Common Core Standards (HCCS), a curricular framework that defines knowledge and skills that students should master at each level from grades K-12 (Hawai‘i Department of Education [HIDOE], n.d.). Hawai‘i is also part of the multi-state Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium (SBAC) that measures student progress through college and career readiness indicators and to which the HCCS are aligned. Further, the state recently launched the STRIVE HI Performance System (SHPS), a high-stakes accountability index used to compare and competitively rank the state’s public and public charter schools, primarily using SBAC results. Hawai‘i’s Department of Education is promoting PLCs as the way for schools to implement, monitor, and get results given this new performance and accountability system (HIDOE, n.d.).

Equipped with 75-million dollars received through a competitive, federal grant, entitled Race to the Top (RTTT), the HIDOE developed an ambitious strategic plan to support the shift to these new systems of HCCS, SBAC, and SHPS (USDOE, 2013).
Public school officials across Hawai‘i are tasked with implementing a set of priority strategies in the areas of common standards, supports for students to learn these standards, assessment practices, educator accountability systems, and mentoring for new teachers. The Hawai‘i public school system developed its own version of PLCs, data teams, to support the complexity of teaching and learning required by the HCCS. The Hawai‘i State Department of Education is promoting PLCs as the structure through which teachers can best work collaboratively to build their practices and promote optimal learning conditions for all students (HIDOE, n.d.). Across Hawai‘i, public schools, including public charter schools, are leveraging collaborative practices to support the transition to HCCS, SBAC, and SHPS reforms.

Hawai‘i Department of Education’s promotion of PLCs to usher major reforms is consistent with a national movement. Definitions of collaborative communities across the states mirror the major tenets of HIDOE’s definition. For example, DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, and Many (2010) call their communities of practice PLCs and say this model supports “an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 11). Hord and Sommers (2008) also label their model PLCs and argue that the most essential work of PLC teams is to meet together to “learn deeper content knowledge and more powerful instructional strategies” with the purpose of “investigating the differentiated and sometimes unique ways that students learn” (p. 2). Finally, Besser (2010) writes, “Professional learning communities is what we are; Data Teams is what we do” (p. 2), qualifying Reeves’ results-driven process which counts on a team concept
to bring educators together to have conversations about teaching and learning. Common to each of these definitions is the tenet of groups of educators working collaboratively and purposefully to improve professional practice and student achievement results. When essential components, such as teachers meeting regularly to agree on learning targets, determine levels of student performance, plan lessons, share teaching strategies, and reflect on this process are in place, PLCs can create conditions that support improved teaching practices and student learning (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Schmoker, 2005).

As the principal of a Hawai‘i public middle school that serves seventh and eighth grade students, I was interested in gaining a deeper understanding of the purported power of PLCs to support the implementation of Hawai‘i’s new performance and accountability system. This topic was timely because Hawai‘i public schools, including charter schools, had already been ranked according to a SHPS index and would fully implement HCCS and SBAC in the 2014 until 2015 school year (HIDOE, n.d.). Professional learning communities, using data teams, are being promoted by the HIDOE as the means through which teachers can work to collaboratively learn the skills required to teach and assess the higher levels of rigor required by the HCCS and ensure consistent implementation of these new standards across K-12 settings. My goal in conducting this research was to inform my own practice and that of others in using PLCs, through data teams, to support the implementation of the HCCS, SBAC, and SHPS.

After reading extensively on research and practice about this work that can be referred to as PLCs, data teams, and communities of practice, among other terms, I became more aware of key conditions and components typically required for these types
of communities to thrive. I define the word *thrive* using Hord’s (1997b) terminology, meaning that within PLCs an iterative cycle occurs as teachers take a critical look at their practices and generate new knowledge and understandings about teaching and learning. Thriving PLCs count on key components being in place – distributed and facilitative leadership, a common vision, collective learning and application of the learning to support student needs, shared teacher practices, and supportive conditions that include physical and human capacities (Hord, 1997b).

This study looks at one school, Makana Public Charter School (MPCS), a pseudonym, and the efforts of the school’s principal, curriculum coach, and classroom teachers to implement the SHPS components through the implementation of PLCs. Located in Kailua, Hawai‘i, MPCS is a Conversion Charter School, governed by an independent school board since converting from regular public school status in 2000. During the period of the study, approximately 330 students in grades kindergarten through sixth attended the school. As a public school, MPCS is accountable to meet benchmarks established by SHPS. While public charter schools in Hawai‘i are permitted to be more creative than traditional public schools in designing curricula that support a particular thematic or philosophical approach, they are still required to administer the state accountability assessments.

Makana Public Charter School implemented PLCs as a means to fulfill professional development needs required by SHPS. During the period of my study, school personnel were learning new roles and responsibilities to make the shifts required by this new accountability system. These shifts require teachers to develop new practices
while ensuring alignment of curriculum and consistency of rigor school-wide (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). At this particular charter school the school principal was the primary leader of the school. The curriculum coach was a teacher leader who had been released from classroom teaching assignments to provide curriculum, instruction, and assessment and professional development supports to other teachers at the school. The principal of MPCS implemented PLCs starting with the 2013 until 2014 school year as a means to support professional development at the school.

The research question for this study was, “How can a school effectively develop and sustain professional learning communities that focus on student learning?” Ensuring high-quality professional development will be critical to the success of Hawai‘i’s performance and accountability system. According to Strickland (2009) high quality professional development helps teachers build content and pedagogy and positively impacts teacher effectiveness and student learning in the classroom. That Hawai‘i’s public schools can achieve desired results by implementing PLCs is speculative. While highly regarded educators have endorsed learning communities as a way to improve teaching practices and student learning results, PLCs are still considered an emerging model for school improvement. Few empirical studies in the area of PLCs exist (Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008). Further, after extensively reviewing and synthesizing literature on PLCs, Hord (1997b) concedes, “Admittedly, what the researchers have not given us is guidance about initiating and developing such structures” (p. 58).

Much of the implementation decisions related to staff development around HCCS, SBAC, and SHPS are left to schools to figure out how to implement these shifts and plan
professional development. The goal of this research project was to learn about and document how school leaders, including the school principal, curriculum coach, and teacher leaders, leveraged mechanisms developed within their school’s PLC to support teachers to make the significant shifts required by these reforms. DuFour (2006) declares that schools will need a new model of professional development that develops the capacity of educators to work together to share knowledge, resources, and skills. This study aimed to discover how school leaders at MPCS instituted core practices of PLCs that focus on student learning and built the capacity for collaborative practices to become deeply embedded within the culture of the school.

Case study methodology was applied in this research. In a case study, an investigator explores a real-life, contemporary, and bounded system (Yin, 2009). There would be just one opportunity to document some of the practices of MPCS’s implementation of PLCs as the school adopted new initiatives around HCCS, SBAC, and SHPS. While my initial interest for this dissertation focused on the role of the curriculum coach in the implementation of PLCs, early visits to the school and interviews with key participants piqued my interest in the role of leadership in general. I expanded the focus of my study to include the role of leadership at the school in leveraging PLC practices that focus on student learning. Understanding the role of leadership by the school’s principal, curriculum coach, and teachers in the implementation of PLCs became central to my work. Consistent with case study methodology, this research was conducted to develop an in-depth understanding of a context and discover and explore dominant themes and issues. By conducting this study I was able to add to the knowledge base
around the implementation of PLCs, particularly in relation to the HIDOE initiatives and steps required for putting structures in place.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

Across the nation, school systems are promoting various forms of PLCs as a way to bring about optimal learning environments in K-12 settings (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 1993; Hord, 1997b; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; WestEd, 2000). Over the past 20 years, PLCs have gained credibility as a professional development tool that helps teachers develop new knowledge and skills. More recently, PLCs have come into vogue as a way to support a paradigm shift to Common Core State Standards and new accountability systems (USDOE, 2013). Along with implementing new state standards, schools are also adopting new assessments and accountability systems. Quality implementation of PLCs may support the deep culture shifts that will be required by this new performance and accountability system.

The notion of groups working together to achieve results is not a new concept in American education. Dewey (1938/1963) promotes the application of real-life contexts as a means through which social issues can be fully explored. He contends “problems which induce inquiry grow out of the relations of fellow beings to one another” (p. 42). This education reformer could be considered an early adopter of PLCs. Yet, it has been only over the past two decades that PLCs have begun to build momentum in K-12 school settings (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2010). About twenty years ago, research efforts focused on defining and exploring the potential of PLCs. More recently, interest has shifted to examining the practices of this professional development model (Mitchell & Sackney, 2001). Given the increased levels of rigor required by national standards and current
climate of accountability, collaborative communities continue to play an important role in schools today.

Researchers have identified significant mechanisms that characterize PLCs and separate this movement from other types of staff development. While there is no agreement on an exact number or explicit mechanisms, proponents of PLCs share a passion about job-embedded practices that emphasize teacher learning and keep student benefits at the center of their efforts. DuFour et al. (2010) define PLCs as an “ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve” (p. 11). The authors emphasize that the goal of PLCs is to improve student learning through sustained and job-embedded practices. They describe a cycle in which team members work together to clarify student learning expectations, monitor student learning, and provide timely interventions that include support and additional time for learning when students do not meet established benchmarks. The authors promote key tenets in their model, emphasizing a collaborative culture that focuses on learning rather than teaching, collective inquiry into best practice teaching strategies, an action orientation, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Similarly, Hord, Roussin, and Sommers (2010) emphasize the focus of their PLC model is the learning and teaching that occurs in a school. The authors maintain “only by increasing the effectiveness of teaching quality which results in higher student outcomes are PLCs made to be worthwhile” (p. 2). Hord (1997b) claims the elements of supportive and shared leadership, a shared vision, collective learning and application, peer review
and feedback, and supportive conditions and human capacities are key to ensuring successful academic outcomes.

DuFour’s (2004) model for PLCs emphasizes three big ideas, beginning with an unyielding focus on students. The author contends that the function of schools is to ensure that students achieve at high levels and that instruction, programs, and policies must be in alignment with this focus. He argues that if students are expected to learn at high levels, adults must also be constantly learning through job-embedded practices. The second big idea promoted by the author is that PLCs are most effective when they operate within a collaborative culture where teachers work in teams, are authorized to make decisions, and share collective responsibility for student successes. The final big idea the author advances is a focus on results, in which educators systematically monitor student learning, look for evidence of growth, and provide timely interventions when students do not perform. The author also implores schools to ask three questions to support a focus on student learning:

What is it we want our students to learn? How will we know if each student is learning each of the skills, concepts, and dispositions we have deemed most essential? How will we respond when some of our students do not learn and how will we enrich and extend the learning for students who are already proficient? (pp. 14-15)

DuFour and Marzano (2013) believe that teams should study curriculum frameworks to determine what students will need to know and be able to do within units of instruction, develop guides to pace instruction, choose instructional strategies, build common formative and summative assessments, and analyze evidence of student learning and respond immediately when students do not make expected gains. The authors emphasize
that educators must use “evidence of student learning to inform individual and collective professional practice and to fuel continuous improvement” (p. 15).

Reeves (2010) identifies three critical components of what he terms high-impact professional learning. He cites an emphasis “on student learning, rigorous measurement of adults’ decisions, and focus on people and practices, not programs” (p. 21) as essential elements. He contends that professional learning must significantly impact student results. He further explains that this focus on people and practices includes balancing student benefits with observations of professional practice. Reeves (2010) promotes an action research cycle that begins with a research question to link professional practices with student results. This process incorporates a description of the targeted students and corresponding achievement data from more than one source, such as annual tests, classroom performance data, and professional practices including the use of a scoring rubric. This cycle helps educators monitor how well their teaching practices are impacting student performance over time.

Yet, the PLC concept is still considered an emerging model for professional development. Few published and peer reviewed studies have examined the effect of this reform movement on teaching practices and student achievement. Vescio et al. (2008) reviewed research on the impact of PLCs on teaching practices and student learning. The researchers note, while literature promoting the concept is plentiful, they found only 11 studies that were both empirical and addressed essential characteristics of PLCs. They conclude that all 11 studies supported the idea that participation in PLCs contributed to changes in teaching practices and eight of these studies provided some evidence that
PLCs impacted student learning. More recently, Lomos, Hofman, and Bosker (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of studies of PLCs to determine if there was a positive and significant relationship between PLCs and student achievement. They examined three of the same studies that Vescio et al. (2008) determined had met empirical standards, along with two additional studies. Lomos, Hofman, and Bosker (2011) conclude, while the statistical impact was relatively small, there was a positive and significant relationship between PLCs and student achievement.

Despite this absence of evidence, there is much enthusiasm about the power of PLCs to impact student achievement (McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; Fullan, 1993; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; WestEd, 2000). DuFour and Eaker (1998) contend that developing the skills of educators to work together as PLCs is “the most promising strategy for sustained, substantial school improvement” (p. xi). A number of researchers and professional organizations have made similar claims regarding the potential for PLCs to improve schools. The National Staff Development Council embeds the notion of collaboration within its definition of professional development. The organization promotes the practice of teams taking collective responsibility on iterative cycles of learning. With teachers, she finds that participation in collegial groups resulted in “powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice and that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners” (p. 27). Hord (2007) reports that teachers who participated in PLCs were more willing to assume a collective responsibility for student achievement. Additional teacher benefits of PLC involvement included reduction of isolation, improved morale, and even lower rates of absenteeism.
Hord (2007) concludes when teachers participated as members of PLCs, they were more likely to close achievement gaps between high and lower performing groups of students and students made greater academic gains in mathematics, science, history, and reading. Hord et al. (2010) contend that PLCs are only worthwhile in the service of strengthening teaching practices that result in student benefits. The researcher noted that schools that implement PLCs have better informed and committed teachers resulting in increased academic gains for students.

DuFour (2004) argues long-term sustainability of the PLC model requires a departure from traditional staff development practices. As few as ten years ago, teacher training was typically delivered through one-day workshops with information that was not supported or sustained in practice (Joyce & Showers, 2002). DuFour (2004) concludes that quality implementation of PLCs requires staff development measures that will bring about deep culture shifts within schools. He cautions unless key practices are instituted, the PLC movement could meet the fate of other well intentioned reform models that were launched, not supported with adequate professional development, and then abandoned before gains could be adequately assessed.

DuFour (2004) contended essential conditions had to be in place before a meeting could be considered a PLC. His use of the term PLC applied specifically to educational contexts. He maintained three big ideas – ensuring students learn, a culture of collaboration, and focus on results – must be in place before a group can call itself a PLC. Yet, a decade later, there is still no universally accepted term or definition for this process that, in education settings, typically involves teams of educators taking collective
responsibility for student achievement results. Communities of Practice, PLCs, and Data Teams are some of the more common names that have been used to label the movement. Wenger and Snyder (1999) use the term Communities of Practice and describe this work as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (p. 139). Hord’s (1997b) definition describes members of a school community who are united in their efforts to share a common vision, work and learn collaboratively, visit and review instruction, and participate in shared decision making. Reeves (2010) maintains that his model, which he coined Data Teams, takes the concept of PLCs a step further by requiring groups to use data and be accountable within the context of goals that are SMART – specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and time based. Vescio et al. (2008) condenses this type of work to its essence, stating, “At its core, the concept of a PLC rests on the premise of improving student learning by improving teaching practice” (p. 82).

Seeking middle ground, Roy and Hord (2006) looked for commonalities amongst noted proponents of PLCs. The two researchers reviewed 15 years of studies comparing organizational scope, leadership, collective learning and application, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared practices of PLCs. One thread across the models studied was a focus on student learning rather than teaching. Roy and Hord (2006) explain ensuring that all students learn at high levels was emphasized over teaching well. Further, the PLCs studied emphasized a deprivatization of practice, in which teachers interact collaboratively by reviewing lessons, examining student work, analyzing data, solving problems together, and jointly developing lesson plans. Roy and
Hord (2006) refer to these elements of PLCs as job-embedded professional development. The researchers note, “When professionals learn together and focus on student results not only do they learn about their craft, but they also enhance student learning” (pp. 499-500). Roy and Hord (2006) also find the researchers they studied appear to share overall agreement about the key practices of PLCs and any differences arose more out of an emphasis of one characteristic over another.

**Supportive Conditions and Barriers**

In addition to key tenets, proponents of PLCs also delineate supportive conditions that must be in place to ensure the viability of this reform model. Hord (2004) insists that supportive conditions include both physical conditions such as time and space for meetings, and human factors that “encourage and sustain a collegial atmosphere and collective learning” (p. 7). In their studies of six schools that showed high readiness for PLCs. Hipp & Huffman (2004) find that the schools with critical attributes of structures and collegial relationships in place are able to make the deep culture shifts required to move from planning to full implementation of PLCs. The authors identify structures as resources, facilities, and communication systems. They delineate collegial relationships as caring relationships, trust and respect, recognition and celebration, risk taking and a unified effort to embed change.

Implementing and sustaining PLCs that focus on student learning can be challenging. Strong, supportive leadership, particularly that of the school principal, is required to build and sustain PLCs (Eaker & Gonzalez, 2006). Supovitz (2002) argues that just organizing teachers into groups will not result in improved teaching practices
and student outcomes. Principals must actively build a culture for PLC work by ensuring supportive conditions are in place. Roy and Hord (2006) find that schools with weak trust relations had little or no improvement in students’ reading and mathematics scores. The researchers note that a competitive environment is also a barrier to effective PLCs and can lead to teams fighting for resources, attention, and power. The researchers further contend that conflicts in PLCs are inevitable but disagreements can lead to positive outcomes as long as participants are able to manage and resolve them. Through professional development, faculty members can develop and maintain effective collaboration skills and group norms.

Case study research indicates that there may be a relationship between school culture and the sustainability of PLCs. A rural, Southwestern, grade four through six school with high teacher turnover and low student achievement implemented key practices of PLCs to improve outcomes (Olivier, 2004). While student performance improved in reading and mathematics subject areas, the faculty could not resolve differences in beliefs about student’s abilities to learn more rigorous content and the reforms were not sustained. Other schools have able to make the culture shifts required for successful implementation of PLCs. Fleming and Thompson (2004) studied five principals able to put key practices of PLCs in place and sustain commitment toward the model. The principals each distributed leadership by involving teachers in choosing topics for faculty meetings, planning staff development and budget decisions, and developing school-wide classroom management systems. These school leaders were also accessible and highly visible, attending grade level meetings, visiting classrooms, and
maintaining open-door policies. When surveyed, their faculties responded positively about their respective principal’s skills in building a culture that supported PLCs. Hord and Rutherford (1998) identify the lack of structured time to meet as perhaps the most critical barrier to the implementation of PLCs. Roy and Hord (2006) note that most school schedules do not support collegial conversations. The authors contend that time to implement important aspects of PLCs, such as reflective dialogue, examining student work, alignment of curriculum, and clarifying school goals, needs to be programmed into the work day. A number of strategies are available to afford structured meeting time such as extending the school day (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2003), building time into the school day that frees up teachers while their students attend special elective classes such as art, music, and physical education (Burnette, 2002), and building common planning periods into a school schedule (DuFour, 2003).

**Developing Lots of Leaders**

Literature in the area of implementing PLCs typically includes an emphasis on the importance of shared and supportive leadership (Hord, 1997b). DuFour and Fullan (2013) underscore this premise by encouraging schools to develop “lots of leaders” (p. 19). The authors contend that across role groups, each person within an organization needs to do his or her part, both as an individual and member of the collective organization. The authors add whether members are administrators, teachers, or from another role group, each must see themselves as a part of and not separate from the system and participate in addressing challenges their organizations face as the culture changes from being teacher to learner focused. The authors add that each member can also help the organization
establish coherence regarding purpose and goals, ensure that data is transparent and results are used to inform practice, have a sense of efficacy, manage resistance, and celebrate successes. DuFour and Eaker (2008) maintain that a strong leadership team is essential, especially in the early phases of implementing a PLC, and every individual within the organization must “serve as advocates for and monitors of” (p. 24) the system.

With leadership identified as key component in successful implementation of PLCs, it is important to understand how to develop this potential within an organization. Drago-Severson (2009) introduces a new model for leadership worthy of consideration. She discusses complex challenges that leaders in today’s organizations face and provides strategies to build leadership capacity. To bring about coherency she recommends linking professional learning and adult learning theory with practice. In addition to implementing the typical components found in most PLCs the researcher encourages schools to build a supportive culture for adults by fostering mentoring practices, teaming, shared leadership, and collegial inquiry.

The school principal plays a critical role in ensuring that supportive conditions are in place so that PLCs can operate effectively (Hord, 1997b; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010). In a study of the world’s best schools Barber, Chijioke, and Mourshed (2010) attribute significant improvements to effective leaders. Hord and Hirsh (2009) claim that principals can improve the performance of PLCs by promoting positive messages to participants about working together instead of in isolation, involving others in shared decision making, sharing data, teaching facilitation and decision making skills, sharing research about best practices of PLCs, and taking time to build trust. Eaker and Gonzalez
(2006) agree principals play a significant role in the development of systems and processes that involve collaborative teams in professional learning cycles. The researchers explain that these cycles typically include clarifying essential skills and knowledge, developing common assessments, and providing timely interventions to students.

While principals play an important role in cultivating supportive conditions for PLCs, DuFour and Marzano (2011) contend this reform effort also counts on widely dispersed leadership. Lambert (1998) asserts schools must build leadership capacity when adopting reforms. She explains schools have developed leadership capacity when a significant number of teachers share a common vision for the school and support current reforms. These reforms could include a program or schedule and be generalized to include the implementation of PLCs. DuFour and Marzano (2011) add that principals must be able to identify and develop teacher leaders to facilitate their school’s collaborative teams. The authors note key traits principals should look for when selecting teacher leaders, such as an ability to influence colleagues, enthusiasm for the PLC process, and a sense of efficacy and problem solving abilities. Allison (2010) adds it is important for teacher leaders to develop their coaching skills so that they can help teams understand data within its larger context. This approach requires teacher leaders who possess facilitative skills such as listening, being able to clarify statements, and the ability to support teams to make commitments about next steps that impact teaching and learning processes.
Researchers also tell us that leadership capacity exists within every teacher and needs to be developed (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Vescaio, Ross, and Adams (2006) assert when teachers are actively engaged in PLCs, their professional knowledge increases and student learning benefits. They contend this knowledge generates from daily practices of teachers and can be understood through reflective work with others who share similar experiences. Peery (2011) suggests shared decision making is a key factor in school reform and structured time must provided for teachers to work together in planning instruction, observing each other's classrooms, and sharing feedback. Wheatley (2006) makes a case for involving teachers as leaders in collaborative processes:

> We know that the best way to create ownership is to have those responsible for implementation develop the plan for themselves…It simply doesn’t work to ask people to sign on when they haven’t been involved in the process. (p. 68)

Speck and Knipe (2001) assert “the ideal is that teacher leadership becomes so embedded in a school that when a principal leaves, teacher leaders are able to carry on the change process and provide continuity to the work” (p. 88).

Huffman and Hipp (2003) traced two schools’ journeys as each worked toward more robust implementation of PLCs. Both schools used Hord’s (2007) five dimensions of PLCs to ensure consistent practices within their school settings and to provide a framework against which a school’s progress can be measured. Hord’s (1997b) dimensions revolve around shared practices of leadership, values, and vision, collective learning and application, supportive conditions, and shared personal practices. Each school administered a PLC questionnaire to their respective faculty members to assess use of the dimensions and used the results to inform discussions and practice. One of the
schools used information gathered from the questionnaire in the category of shared values and vision to spark a conversation about whether the school was truly meeting its mission of offering a high quality education to all of its students. The authors credit this strategy with bringing about renewed interest in professional development and support for the addition of an after-school study hall program at the school. At the second school, the authors found that familiarity with the dimensions provided a common language that supported a focus on this organization’s vision and agreement by all teachers to be held accountable for student gains.

Over the past 20 years, PLCs have emerged as a promising strategy for school reform (DuFour et al., 2010). While variance exists in titles and key components for this movement, a growing body of research and practice indicates that students benefit when their teachers work within a context of collaborative communities to improve teaching and learning practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 1993; Hord, 1997a; McLaughlin & Talbert, 1993; WestEd, 2000). However, experts agree that PLCs require a shift from a focus on teaching to ensuring all students are learning at high levels (DuFour et al., 2010). DuFour (2004) caution that the benefits of PLCs can only be realized when key practices are in place, such as sustained, job-embedded learning, supportive conditions, a culture of trust, and collaborative and shared leadership practices. Shared leadership is also an important element of school leadership, and researchers lay out parameters for leading and participating in collaborative communities. PLCs offer a professional development model that can help schools meet increased expectations of teaching and learning within a culture of increased accountability measures.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The question I posed for this study is, “How can a school effectively develop and sustain professional learning communities that focus on student learning?” My research took place at a public charter, K-6 grade school that is located in an urban area of O‘ahu. This setting provided a unique opportunity for study because, after what staff described as a history of starts and stops related to professional development, the school would be implementing PLCs in the fall 2013. The school principal, hired in June 2011, had experience as an instructional leader, serving as an elementary mathematics teacher, mathematics specialist working within a school district, and principal in schools in Hawai‘i and the continental United States. To support the school’s professional development efforts, an additional full-time curriculum coach had been added to the staff, complementing a half-time assessment coordinating position already in existence. Given the principal’s background as an instructional leader and the additional commitment of resources to launch PLCs, this context provided a distinct opportunity for study. Further, the work of implementing PLCs aligns with my own school’s efforts to implement collaborative teams. The majority of MPCS’s students matriculate to my school for seventh grade, so learning about their school’s systems could inform my work as I align practices between the two learning institutions.

Context

Makana Public Charter School’s vision is “Path to Excellence in Learning and Life”. The school aims to prepare students to become active, productive, and contributing
citizens in a democratic society, develop responsible, caring, and capable lifelong learners who are committed to continuously improving themselves and their communities, and achieve the school’s Expected School-Wide Learning Results (ESLRs). These ESLRs lay out expectations for students in the areas of academics, citizenship, critical thinking, quality work, communication, and ethical use of technology. The school also promotes the development of student inquiry, exploration, and independent thinking skills.

Makana Public Charter School first opened in 1964 as a public school within the HIDOE. At one time the HIDOE considered closing the school because of declining enrollment. In 1994, the school’s policy setting committee, the School Community Council, applied for and was granted charter school status, which, at the time, was referred to as Student-Centered School Status. In 2000, the school became one of the DOE’s first two conversion charter schools, meaning that these schools had converted from regular HIDOE schools to public charter schools, as opposed to other schools that began as charters. While governed by an independent school board, as with all public charter schools in the state, MPCS must comply with numerous federal and state laws, policies, and programs.

Like all public and public charter schools in Hawai‘i, MPCS is accountable for SHPS benchmarks. Students at the school take annual state assessments that currently test proficiency of the Hawai‘i Content and Performance Standards and, starting in the 2014 until 2015 school year, will test students on HCCS. In August 2013, the state released the first annual results of a new accountability and improvement system, SHPS, that replaces
components of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). STRIVE HI Performance System results were reported for MPCS in the areas of student proficiency in reading, mathematics, and science, student growth in reading and mathematics, chronic absenteeism, and achievement gaps. Using these results, HIDOE classifies schools into categories, from high achieving to low performing. Based on the school year 2012 until 2013 results, MPCS was classified as a Continuous Improvement School. Overall, students at MPCS scored at a rate of 91 percent proficiency in reading and 86 percent proficiency in mathematics, in grades three through six on the state proficiency exams. The school has been accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges since 2006 (HIDOE, n.d.).

Design

Consistent with interest in processes rather than outcomes (Merriam, 2008) I chose to adopt a qualitative approach for my study. Qualitative research design methodology was applied to carry out this study that took place at MPCS. Maxwell (2013) describes the difference between quantitative and qualitative studies as a distinction between variance theory and process theory. The author points out that quantitative researchers use the mathematics concept of variance to describe contexts and look for statistical relationships between different variables. These investigators create quantitative or mental models to describe contexts. Maxwell (2013) reasons, in contrast, that qualitative researchers use process theory to approach their work. Qualitative researchers focus on people, situations, and events. Qualitative research explores the processes that connect these foci and seeks to explain these connections by analyzing
how some situations and events influence others. Maxwell further professes that understanding the goals of a study can help a researcher determine whether to use a quantitative or qualitative methodology as a paradigm for research. He declares that the strength of qualitative research derives from its orientation toward process and the application of an inductive approach and emphasis on descriptions rather than numbers. The author defines intellectual and practical goals that can be best explored through qualitative methodologies. Because MPCS was just beginning its journey to implement PLCs, I was more interested in the processes by which the school attempted to establish supportive conditions, put key practices in place, and work toward sustainability of this reform model.

Within this qualitative research context, I selected the case study method to examine extensively strategies schools use to sustain PLCs that focus on student learning. Yin (2009) emphasizes that technically, a case study investigates current phenomenon within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not defined. He contrasts case study work that occurs within real life settings with laboratory experiments in which phenomenon is separated from its context or controlling the context while manipulating one or more variables. In contrast to Yin’s model, Stake (1995) defines case studies as a method of inquiry that researchers use to explore programs, events, and activities in depth and notes that this method is defined by time and activity. Yin (2009) maintains that the case study method allows investigators to study real-life events within authentic contexts. He cites small group behaviors as one example of an appropriate context for study. I implemented case study methodology for
my research because I wanted to explore individual and group interactions related to PLCs within a natural setting.

The author further states that case studies are preferred when a researcher is asking how or why questions about contemporary events, when these events are taking place within a current context, and when the researcher does not intend to manipulate the events through experimentation. For my study, I aimed to learn about nuances of PLC implementation, understanding what Maxwell (2013) cites as the contexts within which the participants act and the influence of the context on their actions. Consistent with case study methodology, the goal of my research at MPCS was to construct rather than test theory. As this school took steps to implement PLCs I worked to identify and document the initial conditions and track incremental actions and decisions that affected the paths taken by the principal, curriculum coach, and team of sixth grade teachers.

**Data Collection**

Data collection methods for this study included the following means: formal, individual interviews with the principal and the curriculum coach, observation of data team meetings, and a focus group interview with the team of sixth grade teachers who were involved in PLCs at the school (see Appendices A-F for permission forms and questions). I asked the interviewees questions about their involvement with PLCs, what aspects they believed were working or not working, and what they thought could be improved about the school’s reforms around PLCs. Participants were asked a series of eight to ten questions during 45 to 60 minute interviews or the focus group meeting. I designed questions for each of the interviews around key PLC components defined by
Hord (2007). I developed interview questions related to aspects one might find in a well developed PLC, such as distributed leadership, a shared vision that is consistently articulated, shared practices, supportive conditions, resources, professional development, and barriers.

This study took place at MPCS, from August of 2013 through February of 2014. The research documented the actions of school leaders around the implementation and sustainability of PLCs that focus on student learning. I conducted an informational meeting with the principal and curriculum coach prior to the start of the study. During the study I interviewed the curriculum coach, taking notes by hand. I also conducted an interview with the school principal, which I recorded. I also observed PLC meetings. At the beginning and throughout the first semester of the 2013 school year, school leaders planned regular PLC meetings, meeting with one or two grade levels of teachers at a time. At a typical PLC meeting, the principal, a principal in training, two curriculum coaches, and three teachers from a particular grade level come together for a period of approximately an hour to an hour and a half. I observed two separate PLC meetings, in which sixth grade teachers met, occurring about a month apart. I facilitated the focus group session on different school day. This focus group consisted of three sixth grade teachers.

All of the data was collected at the school site. One principal, one teacher leader, who is a curriculum coach, and four sixth grade teachers volunteered to be interviewed and observed for the study. The four teachers on the sixth grade team were each responsible for teaching one subject area, mathematics, English, social studies, or
science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, or STEM. I interviewed the principal in his office and the curriculum coach in her classroom, which also served as a meeting room for the PLC meetings that I observed. I conducted the focus group meeting in a regular teaching classroom that was available on the day of this activity. My research was observational using audiotapes augmented by written notes.

**Data Analysis**

I triangulated the data collected between the interviews, observations of data team meetings, and focus group interview to look for common themes, consistency, and discrepancies across these items. Creswell (2009) reasons validity can be claimed when there is coherency across several sources of data. I looked for prevalent themes across these platforms and pieced together a narrative that tells the school’s story through themes that emerge during the data analysis and interpretation. Consistent with steps delineated by Creswell (2009), I transcribed the interviews, read through these transcripts and my field notes to get an overall impression of this information, and then conducted a detailed analysis by coding the data. In coding the data, I first established categories when I was able to connect phrases and sentences by similar topics. I then separated this information into major topics, unique topics, and leftover topics (Creswell, 2009). I used a computer software program, ATLAS.ti, to code the topics. I identified themes, made meaning from the data, and then connected themes within a narrative to tell the school’s story of developing and sustaining PLCs that focused on student learning.
Threats to Validity

Validity measures how well the results that we conclude from our observation mirror reality (Maxwell, 2013). I considered the following threats that Maxwell (2013) cautions could derail the credibility of my study’s conclusions. One threat to consider is researcher bias, which happens when the investigator searches out and finds or confirms only what is expected. One strategy for reducing my own researcher bias is reflexivity, which means that I must constantly think about my potential biases and how I can minimize their effects.

Reactivity is another potential threat. Will interviewees speak openly about their experiences? The threat of reactivity will be present if participants believe they are not following school policies or procedures. This threat could be present if staff members fear reprisal from their principal and through their school’s evaluation system. Because I am also an administrator, serving as a school principal, it could be inferred that I am aligned with the MPCS principal. I was concerned teachers would not be as forthcoming with perceived weaknesses. To control for this threat, at the start of sessions I reminded participants that pseudonyms were being used for the school’s name and participants and interview transcripts would be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. The permission forms that the participants signed also included this information. I did not record but took copious notes during the data team observations.

Interpretive validity is present in a study to the degree that the researcher accurately portrays the meanings given by the participants to what is being studied. The researcher’s goal is to "get into the heads" of the participants and accurately document
their viewpoints and meanings. One useful strategy for obtaining interpretive validity is “member checking” which means discussing one’s findings with the participants to see if they agree and making modifications so that the researcher accurately represents their meanings and ways of thinking. Similarly, there could be a third, confounding variable that influences a change. For example, in the PLC, teachers could go through the motions and do their work at department meetings. Member checking with the curriculum coach helped me counter descriptive validity, in which I misheard, did not transcribe or remember correctly what was said in the interviews, focus group meetings, or during PLC observations.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study. During the period of the study, a limited number of interviews, one each, were conducted with the curriculum coach and principal. Just one focus group session was administered. If I had conducted more interviews and focus group sessions, I would have collected more data for this study. Further, the length of the study was less than a full school year. The data teams that were observed were in the beginning stages of implementation. If the data teams had been studied for a full school year, I could have observed a full cycle of implementation. A longer period of study might have provided more opportunities to learn about strategies the school employed and their impact as the school worked to fully implement PLCs. Through further study additional data teams could have been interviewed and observed over longer periods and more insights gained about strengths, need areas, and strategies.
for sustaining the model. This additional information might tell a richer story about MPCS’s journey to implement PLCs.

Another limitation in the study is that I did not use a tape recorder during the curriculum coach’s interview or the two data team observations because I believed that its use would inhibit candidness. The curriculum coach was new to her position and the PLC process was a new initiative at the school. The two data team meetings that I attended were the very first and second meetings in which the principal and teachers were enacting the data team process. Peery (2011) observes for some teachers it is difficult to participate fully in data team meetings. They might be concerned that the instructional strategies they used in the past were being scrutinized. Teachers may have been reluctant, especially initially, to participate in meaningful conversations about instruction and learning. The principal had worked hard to build trust amongst the faculty in the process and they would be sharing their successes and challenges related to teacher practice and student learning. I also wanted the curriculum coach to be comfortable and forthcoming during our interview. At the data team meetings, I wanted to be as discrete as possible so that my presence would not inhibit the conversations.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the question “How can a school effectively develop and sustain professional learning communities that focus on student learning?” Applying case study methodology, I conducted research on one school’s efforts to implement PLCs. School leaders at MPCS put foundational pieces in place during the 2012 until 2013 school year and fully implemented PLCs in the fall of 2013. I collected data over the first semester of the school year from September through December 2013. I interviewed the school’s principal and curriculum coach, each individually, conducted a focus group session with a teaching team of three teachers, and observed and took notes during two data team meetings. I used the data management software program, ATLAS.ti to code the transcripts that documented each of these sessions. I first reviewed the transcripts for key phrases and developed categories for the common themes that emerged. Using ATLAS.ti I linked and then sorted each of these key phrases and sentences to the corresponding categories. I then looked for themes and patterns within and across these sorted categories.

I determined that two categories, supportive conditions and a focus on student learning could serve as unifying themes for the other categories. For this paper, the supportive conditions theme includes the categories of structural conditions and human capacities. In describing supportive conditions at MPCS, I categorized the school’s provision of resources such as an additional teacher coordinating position, schedule adjustments, and time for PLCs to meet as supportive conditions related to structure.
identified the elements of trust, a shared vision, principal leadership, instructional leadership, and shared leadership within the category of human capacities. The second theme that emanated from the data was the school’s focus on student learning. I found examples within the school’s implementation of PLCs in which personnel at the school collected and monitored student achievement data, provided interventions for students who were not meeting or were exceeding benchmarks, shared instructional practices, considered barriers, and evaluated results. I reported the data, noted patterns, and drew conclusions for my study within the context of these unifying lenses. The theme of sustainability was also evident across the interviews and I conclude this chapter with a discussion of effective practices that appear to be in place and recommendations that might be considered to sustain and strengthen the PLC model at MPCS.

**Data Teams**

The principal informed me that MPCS used a data team model and that the school’s PLC and data team practices were informed by education consultant, Reeves’ (2010) work. Besser (2010) observes that the Reeves’ Data Teams approach promotes “evidence-based conversations on teaching and learning” (p. 2). Reeves’ (2010) Data Teams model employs a six-step process for monitoring and evaluating Data Teams’ performance. These steps require the Data Teams participants, at each meeting, to collaboratively collect and chart data, analyze the data and prioritize needs, set short-term goals, select instructional strategies, determine results indicators, and monitor and evaluate progress” (p. 3). The curriculum coach at the school informed me that the MPCS PLCs met by grade level with one data team in place for each grade level from grades
kindergarten through six. At the time of my interview with this individual, three months into the school year, the school had completed two rounds of data team meetings. Table 1 lists the primary participants of the study, their roles, and years at the school and in the profession.

**Table 1**

*Background on Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Number of Years at School</th>
<th>Number of Years in Profession</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Head of School</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum Coach</td>
<td>Lead for Professional Development, Targeted Reading Instruction Teacher</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher L</td>
<td>Grade 6 English Language Arts Teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher D</td>
<td>Grade 6 Social Studies Teacher</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher P</td>
<td>Science and STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) Enrichment Teacher</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher M</td>
<td>Grade 6 Mathematics Teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme 1: Supportive Conditions

Structural Supports. personnel. Louis and Kruse (1995) contend that structural supports must be in place for PLCs to function at optimal levels. Allocating resources for personnel who take responsibility for aspects of PLC implementation is an example of this type of support (Hord & Rutherford, 1998). The data collected within my study indicate that the curriculum coach played a key role in the organization of PLCs at MPCS. In the past, the school had employed a half-time assessment coordinator who primarily scheduled and administered school-wide testing. The curriculum coach noted there had been no capacity to organize and facilitate the PLC meetings. The principal stated the school “needed an extra person who can help with not just the management of the tool and data collecting but work with a professional team that can really look at the results and determine next steps.” The curriculum coach echoed this concern, “There wasn’t much time left for coordinating curriculum or setting up the data team process.” In this new capacity the curriculum coach was responsible for ensuring that the data team meetings were scheduled and agendas prepared for each meeting. She also facilitated the meetings that I observed, guiding the discussions, documenting decisions on a white board that was visible to the entire group, and accessing a computer to check and share information about curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices with meeting participants. Teacher L’s comment in the focus group session indicated that the consistency of professional development at the school had improved, “I mean, they’ve simply followed through with having the meetings!”
**physical structures.** Makana Public Charter School also supported PLCs with physical structures, which Hord (1997a) explains can include the designation of space, allotment of time and set schedule for meetings. Data teams met in the curriculum coach’s portable classroom for approximately one hour per meeting. When teachers did not meet as PLCs during the week, they had a 90-minute period in which to collaborate to plan curriculum, instruction, and assessment activities. They were provided with release time for both the data team meetings and team planning times, during the school day while their students attended specialty subject areas such as physical education and Hawaiian studies.

**Human Capacities. principal sets the tone.** Hord (2007a) includes the categories of trust, respect, feedback, collegial relationships, and risk taking in her definition of human capacities. Louis and Kruse (1995) underscore that mutual respect and trust are important to PLCs because participants need to be willing to share successes and challenges in their practice, give and accept feedback and work to improve professional practice. Leadership actions, particularly those of the principal, seemed to play a significant role in creating an intellectually safe environment in which both staff and students could grow.

The principal also possessed a hands-on management style that seemed to help him gain this faculty’s trust and willingness to implement new reforms. Teacher L reported “if the janitor is out and garbage bags need to be emptied, he’ll drag the cart around and empty the garbage bags.” While these actions may not appear directly related to PLC work, they seemed to establish the principal as someone with whom they wanted
to work alongside, because he was invested in the school at all levels. “It doesn’t surprise me when I see him walk in the classroom,” Teacher D said in the focus group interview, contrasting the current situation with past instances in which prior principals seemed to visit classrooms only when there was a problem. With the current principal, she observed, “He’ll just wander in,” adding that he would casually observe the students and get first-hand knowledge about teaching and learning practices in the classrooms. Teacher L said that staff members are willing to work harder because they know that the principal is working hard, too, and his presence in the classrooms indicates that he puts students first.

**principal as instructional leader.** The current principal’s previous experiences as an educator and instructional leader seemed to help him gain credibility with the staff. Participants in the study consistently described a marked difference in the way that professional development initiatives were implemented and sustained from past principals to the current principal. Prior to the current principal’s arrival at the school, the curriculum coach noted that there were “starts and stops” related to the adoption of new programs and initiatives at the school. Teacher L referred to it as “jumping around” and the curriculum coach stated:

We didn’t have a lot of professional development in curriculum areas and when we did, it wasn’t sustained. We would attend a workshop but then we might not hear about what we learned again. It wasn’t reinforced back at school. We have a poor history of professional development and implementation of PLCs.

At the time of my interview with the MPCS principal in December of 2013, he was serving in his third year as the principal of the school. During our interview, he told me
that he had been a teacher at the K-6 level for the first ten years of his professional career and an administrator for the next ten.

He said he was given the opportunity to be a teacher leader early in his career as a classroom teacher when he served on a committee that was charged with choosing a new mathematics series for his district, which is a cluster of schools located within a geographic region and to which his school belonged. He explained that this experience helped him comprehend the notion of being both a teacher and a leader at the same time, adding that he was able to “understand the rationale and background” related to the new curriculum in the way a school leader might understand the big picture, while applying “what I was learning directly,” in his role as a classroom teacher. He also stated, throughout his career, as a teacher, administrative trainee, and then a certified administrator, he had benefited from mentoring and shadowing experiences with veteran administrators.

He said that he drew on this foundation in instructional leadership when he implemented PLCs at his school. Teachers at MPCS noted that the principal was able to plan next steps and make necessary adjustments to keep the PLC work moving forward. Teacher D spoke about how the principal was able to make things happen at the school. Teacher P explained, “He knows how to make doable action items,” noting that the principal does not spend a lot of time talking about a new initiative, but brings out tools, provides background information, and helps the staff identify steps that can be put into place. Teacher D said that he also follows through on plans and makes sure that others on the staff do, too. In the past, she recalled, a principal would get started on a new initiative
and not follow through. She added that the current principal is making PLCs a priority because he makes a commitment to attend the PLC meetings even though he may have other seemingly urgent activities to tend to at the same time. She emphasized that these actions by the principal create an understanding that the PLC initiative is important. She added that she would expect if any faculty member were having doubts about participating in the initiative, the principal would have a talk with the individual to let him or her know that the initiative was a priority in which the individual needed to participate.

**student-centered vision.** At one of the data team meetings, participants discussed criteria for student awards given at recognition assemblies at the end of each quarter. The issue at hand was whether a child who had shown outstanding academic performance but had not been a strong role model for citizenship should be recognized before the student body. The curriculum coach referenced the school’s vision, asking, “What is the model Makana student?” Teacher L said that the awards should reflect the “whole child” concept that MPCS is united in developing. Teacher D promoted consistency of practice by teachers when choosing students for awards, stating that teachers needed to ensure that each student selected “represents the best of our school.” Teacher P stated, “consistency is important” when recognizing students. The principal also promoted alignment of practice when teachers select students for school awards, stating, “Teachers should share their criteria such as no missing assignments, for example.” The data team agreed that consistent criteria for school-wide awards should be developed and then shared with the faculty prior to the next school year.
Participants in this study consistently emphasized this focus on developing well-rounded students. When I asked the principal about the school’s vision for students, he said, “We have a whole child focus and it’s one of the unique features of our school. We care about our students, we pay attention to them beyond academics and emphasize higher level thinking.” He added that the school promotes lessons that encourage “outside the box thinking” and “making connections that they can apply to real-world contexts,” noting that while course grades are given, learning is not just about the grade.

He also emphasized the need for students to be able to make mistakes in a safe environment. In the focus group interviews, teachers’ comments mirrored his sentiments. Teacher L stated, “I like to teach them to think outside the box,” and as a school “we’re all on the same page with that.” She added, “I like for them to take away that learning is not just about the grade that you receive, that really more meaningful learning takes place when you can make a connection and take that with you. Of course, grades are a way to measure, but it’s more than just the grade.” Teacher D noted that the school staff members have “a whole child focus.” She added that the school is a place where students are encouraged to develop higher-level thinking and work in an environment where it is safe to make mistakes.

Teacher P provided an example of how the school promotes critical thinking, “One way we’re stretching learning is through inquiry in science. For example, we give a complex problem, how to write big numbers,” and “there are easy to very difficult problems in the assessment.” He emphasized, “The main thing to me…is to send out students who can think.” I asked the curriculum coach how the faculty had come to
consensus around a common vision for the students. She said that the MPCS vision had been developed during the school’s last accreditation process, in the 2009 to 2011 school year. A committee of school representatives developed the vision with input from stakeholders to meet a component required to earn accreditation. This vision statement is posted on the school website and referenced by faculty during decision-making processes. While the current principal was not at the school when the vision statement was developed, he and the faculty embraced it and it seemed to provide a foundational piece upon which PLCs could build.

*teacher leadership.* The literature around PLCs speaks of the need for “lots of leaders.” I found that leadership was distributed through a vision shared amongst faculty, decision-making processes that resulted in the adoption of new curricula, and shared teaching practices. DuFour and Eaker (1998) declare:

> What separates a learning community from an ordinary school is it’s collective commitment to guiding principles that articulate what the people in the school believe and what they seek to create. Furthermore, these guiding principles are not just articulated by those in positions of leadership; even more important, they are embedded in the hearts and minds of people throughout the school. (p. 23)

The school’s shared vision provided a guidepost for MPCS staff members as they met in data teams and discussed their work. While the school’s vision is succinctly stated “Path to Excellence in Learning and Life” faculty members referenced this vision of a Makana student, worked toward a common understanding of the vision, and invoked it when making decisions.

The principal also worked to distribute leadership by forming a decision-making body with whom he met on a weekly basis. This team included a vice principal in...
training, full-time curriculum and part-time assessment coordinators, and the principal. The principal expressed that he constantly feels the need to justify this redirection of resources from the classroom to administration by answering, “So what do you do for me, exactly?” With his newly formed administrative team, he is working to bring out their voices as they move from having a single classroom to a school-wide perspective and make decisions that impact the entire school. He described the additional supports from the vice principal in training and new full-time curriculum coach position a dream, stating, “For me personally, I have really benefited from this arrangement because, in the past, I felt like I was in it alone,” noting that he headed a smaller elementary school, which typically has only one administrator “and then being a charter school, we’re further isolated. When we do attend DOE meetings a lot of the information doesn’t relate to us.” The principal said that he understood that he would not always have a vice principal in training, who was funded by the state and that the school could not afford to purchase a school funded vice principal in the future.

Putting distributed leadership into action, the principal allowed staff members to choose new curriculum programs for the school. The principal described for me the steps the teacher leaders took to select a common mathematics and then a common English Language Arts curriculum. He explained how, as a new principal, he was cognizant that moving too quickly with major changes could result in resistance, and he had also witnessed schools that had taken as many as five years to make a significant change. He described how he went about setting up the first committee that would make a decision about the adoption of a new English Language Arts curriculum.
Participation on the decision-making committee was voluntary with the principal first asking for volunteers and then asking staff directly to ensure both upper and lower grade levels were represented. A sense of urgency for this work came from the shift that Hawai‘i public schools were required to make to HCCS and new accountability systems. The principal wanted to ensure that instruction at MPCS was aligned with these new standards. During this curriculum selection process, teachers who joined the committee selected two programs to look at in depth and reported out to the whole school faculty on several occasions. All teachers then received training on the new curriculum from the vendor. The principal said that he understood that “everyone was…nervous about having staff representatives make decisions,” and that trust was important to the process. He followed a similar process for the adoption of the school’s new mathematics curriculum and the school will continue to follow a similar process when adopting impactful or school-wide changes in the future.

In reviewing the data it was apparent that other staff members were also leading the effort. Part of the implementation plan for PLCs at MPCS included the addition of a full time curriculum coach to support the process. The individual hired in this role had taught for eight years in grades two, three, and four at MPCS and had been asked by the principal to step into the role of curriculum coach during the 2013-2014 school year. In our interview, this teacher leader told me that one of her first actions in this capacity was to develop a job description and then present it to the principal for his approval. With his agreement, she became responsible for overseeing professional development practices at the school around the adoption of HCCS curriculum, monitoring and reporting data on
various national, state-wide, and school assessments and trend data, tutoring students with reading gaps, and facilitating PLC work at the school. In preparation for this role she attended a training session titled *Coaching Matters*, offered by national consultant, Joellen Killion.

**Theme 2: Focus on Student Learning**

**Scaffolding the Process.** After finding evidence of supportive practices for PLCs at MPCS, I turned my attention what Hord (2007) declares the essential purpose of PLCs in schools, “to ensure that all students learn at high levels” (p. 492). I scoured the data I had collected for ways in which the MPCS faculty was supporting student learning, consciously and collaboratively working to become more competent in their professional practice, and applying elements of the Data Teams six-step model. In our interview, the principal described the process he went through to launch his own version of a data team model at his school. He said that he first found resources to release teaching teams from their teaching responsibilities so they could meet together for 90 minutes per week. It was important to him that teachers used this meeting time for professional conversations rather than perfunctory talk, such as planning field trips. He described his actions:

> I sat in with each grade level team over the span of a month last year. I just set a date with each team and asked them to bring an assessment and we went through the process step by step. We triaged the kids on each assessment, looking at how many were proficient and how many were not. We brainstormed interventions for the students who were not proficient. We talked about which students could benefit from classroom interventions and which would need more intensive interventions. We whittled the number of students needing intense interventions down.

He noted that these practice sessions helped teachers understand the importance of having common assessments and curriculum so that they could have collaborative conversations.
It seemed that the principal’s background knowledge of instructional leadership and understanding of Reeves’ Data Teams helped him guide his own school’s data team meetings. His knowledge of students from classroom observations and reviews of their individual data seemed to both help him gain insights on student strengths and needs and support decision-making processes in the data team meetings. In the focus group session, Teacher L noted that the principal, “…really…knows who the kids are and he reviews their data and their history. He’ll even remember small facts.”

**Common Practices.** At the time the school had implemented a common assessment tool to provide data for evidence-based discussions. The staff was implementing a common mathematics curriculum and was selecting a common English language arts and mathematics curriculum to facilitate comparisons and conversations around shared instructional practices. After sharing his perceptions about his role in putting foundational pieces in place to support a PLC environment at MPCS, the principal then reflected on current practices at the school. He noted that, with multiple data points in place, from the assessment and common curriculum programs, the school was able to monitor whether students were learning:

That’s an exciting part. This year, everyone has done at least two or three assessments now, so, they have at least four data points. You can start really seeing progress and that the interventions are working.

At both data team meetings, participants referenced several sources of data. These pieces included Hawai‘i State Assessment scores in reading and mathematics, STAR reading and mathematics screening and progress monitoring assessments that were administered to each student at the school, performance on teacher assignments and benchmark
assessments, and report card grades. The data teams also calibrated findings across measurement tools. The following conversation took place at the second data team meeting:

Principal: Does our STAR assessment align, line up with performance, for example, the Watch data we’re using to target students?

Teacher D: STAR is generous. I would have more (students) on Watch but using STAR I only have one student on Watch.

Principal: That’s the caution with using assessments. They’re just a snapshot. Teacher reports give a stronger or more comprehensive, more accurate view of data.

Teacher D: The impact of homework grades can sway Jupiter grades; it can sway the overall grade.

Principal: Right, Jupiter grades can skew the grade so you can’t get an indication of whether a student really understands the concepts or not. We might relook at our grading policies.

In this back and forth conversation, the participants were looking for consistency and accuracy across the assessments used by the schools. The STAR assessment is a standardized testing tool that the school uses to determine how well students are performing in reading and mathematics areas in grades two to six. In this data team conversation Teacher D shared her observation that the STAR test results did not identify all of the students who could benefit from participating in the school’s Watch Program, in which underperforming students were targeted for additional learning supports. Doubek (2010) who endorses Reeves’ Data Teams model, emphasizes that data collected can come from a variety of sources but should be valid and reliable measurements of what students know and are able to do.
While the data teams participants I observed at MPCS were using common data collection tools to track student performance, they were also finding inconsistencies in reporting student achievement levels across these tools. Teacher D shared that even teacher grades, when recorded on an online, commercial grade book tool, JupiterGrades, may not accurately reflect a student’s achievement levels because students can earn grades for assignments that do not necessarily indicate whether a student has mastered a concept, citing homework grades as an example. The principal responded that the school may need to get on same page with criteria for reporting grades. This data team discussion allowed participants to consider how well the school’s assessments were informing practice, noting gaps, and planning adjustments to improve accountability systems at the school.

**Available Interventions.** At the two data team meetings I observed, participants discussed curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in relation to student performance. The curriculum coach facilitated both meetings. Teachers discussed groups of students that could benefit from additional supports. I was able to classify the school’s interventions into three categories – interventions that could be applied within the regular classroom setting, targeted programs for some students who were not meeting benchmarks in reading and mathematics, and intensive programs such as special education, for students with more severe needs.

In discussing possible interventions for students, the curriculum coach stated that providing support for students does not always require additional class time. She said that, during a regular class period, teachers could provide instruction that addresses
different levels of learners at the same time, break assignments down through a process referred to as chunking, and shorten assignments for some students. She also proffered a suggestion that the school might lengthen the English Language Arts period to an hour for the entire school. Beyond interventions that could be applied within the general classroom setting, the school also offered reading tutoring during the day and an online reading program after school. The group noted barriers whether extra services were offered during the day or after school. Students who received tutoring during the school day missed either academic or enrichment classes. In affording after-school services, the school was dependent on the parent to get the student there and parents had not always followed through in the past. Students who met eligibility criteria were considered for Section 504 and special education accommodations.

At these data team meetings, teachers also had opportunities to share teaching and learning challenges and get advice from the group. Teacher D asked for feedback with an individual student, reporting:

I have a student who is struggling. She seems to lack skills and rushes through assignments. For example, she doesn’t go back to the text to find an answer but the assignment requires students to go back to the text to show evidence of the answer. Does she need more instruction or is she just rushing to finish first?

Teacher L was also willing to share a concern:

One student who is struggling lacks skills and rushes through assignments. An example is that she doesn’t go back to the text to find an answer but the assignments requires students to go back to the text to show evidence
of the answer. Does she need more instruction or is she just rushing to finish first?

Teacher L shared concerns she had about another student:

I didn’t see growth from the pre to post test with this student. For example, he throws letters in that don’t belong, words are missing letters, and he doesn’t put an e at the end of words. He has more trouble with spelling.

Consistent with Reeves’ Data Teams process, team members delved to get more information and generated suggestions in response: “What do you notice are strengths and need areas?” “Does she have a diagnosis? Has an evaluation been completed?” “What strategies are we offering these students?” “Have you touched on inferring?” “Have you tried having students highlight words they already know before they read the text?” Finally, “Have you tried different configurations, such as 1:1 and working in small groups during class time?”

Collaboratively, the group made decisions to address concerns about student learning while considering possible barriers. The principal spoke about the need for cutoff scores to determine which students would receive extra help or, if exceeding standards, benefit from enrichment opportunities. At one meeting, seven students with learning issues were discussed. From this group, one student was placed in the school’s Watch program and two would be considered for special education eligibility. Supports and plans for monitoring were set in place.

**Collaborative Culture.** There are also examples of teachers engaging in collaborative practices outside of the data team meetings that support student learning. When I posed a question about shared practices at the focus group session, Teacher P
replied that in smaller schools, it can be difficult to have a discussion about a common assessment. He explained that with just one teacher per content area in sixth grade:

> When you say, how come I got an eighteen where another teacher got a different result, there could be different teaching practices going on, whereas what we’re doing is…different…because we’re each in our own content. But, we definitely have a lot of sharing about students, we talk about what we see, what works, what doesn’t and what problems we are having.

At this same focus group meeting Teacher L provided an example in which the sixth grade teachers integrated their instructional practices. When students were writing a research paper for Teacher P’s science classes, she helped them with writing and has also helped to support writing components required for social studies projects. Teacher P added that the three teachers worked together to agree on writing standards for the sixth grade. Teacher L said they also worked to align practices with the fifth grade classes and noted that the sixth grade skills had better research writing skills because of the extra practice they had in fifth grade.

**Discussion**

Over the course of my study, I found many practices in place at MPCS to promote the sustainability of PLCs and the Data Teams model at the school. The principal appeared to play a critical role in putting supportive conditions in place and promoting a focus on student learning. He told me that he has worked to build a culture in which teachers act with purpose and intent, rather than out of compliance. When I interviewed him about the Data Teams process, he said, “I want to do it in a way so it’s not a compliance driven place; this is really a meaningful process. I don’t want to just fill the forms because they’re due.”
The principal was enthusiastic about the school’s progress with data teams. “That’s the exciting part,” he exclaimed during our interview adding “this semester, everyone’s done at least two or three assessments and we’ve been able to follow data points and see that interventions are working and make adjustments when we’re not getting the student achievement gains we want.” While the principal stated that he believed that maintaining the meeting times was critical, he expressed that, at this early stage of implementation, it was important that Data Teams process continue to be modeled for the teachers. He said that he is still guiding the process by facilitating meetings but does want to gradually release this responsibility to the teachers. He said, “I’m not confident right now that they would be able to look at the data and say, ‘hey, you got better results; how did you do that?’” without his guidance. He did say that he has received positive responses from teachers who have been able to use the Data Teams process to inform their teaching practices.

The principal had a background in instructional leadership, was able to build trust amongst the faculty by being visible in the classrooms, knowing students well so he could contribute to the Data Teams discussions, involving others in making decisions, and sharing leadership authority with an administrative team. The curriculum coach played a key role in structuring and facilitating the data team meetings and ensuring that student supports were delivered and monitored as agreed upon at the data team meetings. The teachers I observed and interviewed seemed to have bought into the overall plan, embracing a common vision for students, adopting new curriculum frameworks for English Language Arts and mathematics subject areas, expressing confidence in the
principal and the direction in which he was leading the school, and participating in the data team process.

While the school’s shared vision about educating the whole child and developing critical thinkers was maintained even with leadership changes, data systems can be more difficult to sustain. Reeves (2010) writes not everyone shares the same level of enthusiasm about data and it is important that educators have opportunities to connect data to teaching and leadership decisions. He suggests participants need to have experiences in which they see data as more than numbers, but as a means to improve their teaching and learning practices. While he provides an explicit, six-step model for Data Teams, he also writes that the process can be shaped to meet an organization’s needs. Implementation of this model is in the beginning stages at MPCS and the principal indicated that he plans to build teacher capacity to facilitate the data team process through professional development and continued practice. He also plans to introduce more components of the model, such as collaboratively scoring student work and selecting exemplars to guide instructional practices. With continued professional development and practice, teacher leadership capacities should continue to build so that responsibilities, such as facilitating data team meetings, can be gradually released to them. Further, if the school continues to track data points and respond to these indicators by making adjustments to curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices, they will reap the benefits of collaborative communities
He lau ka huaka‘i hele i ka pali loa. This phrase, translated, means “a shade to cover my journey’s long climb.” It hails from an ancient chant that the Kipu‘upu‘u wrote to honor their leader, King Kamehameha the Great. The Kipu‘upu‘u were runners and spear fighters named for the icy, cold, and pelting rain of their homeland, Waimea. A brilliant strategist, the king would order these warriors to sneak up on enemy camps, creeping alongside streams to mask the sounds of their movement and then pounce, letting their spears fall, like rain, on their unsuspecting targets. Kamehameha would then bring forth his regular troops to complete the mission (Desha, 2000). As lei were draped upon Kamehameha’s statue in Honolulu today in celebration of his legacy, I thought about the themes of leadership, community, and optimism in the stories of the Kipu‘upu‘u and my own huaka‘i, my three-year journey toward a professional practice doctorate.

Kamehameha Day celebrations were not the only events taking place this week. Hawai‘i’s state superintendent of education appeared in the news to announce 18 changes to a newly implemented Educator Evaluation System (HIDOE, 2014, June 12). Hawai‘i’s public school principals had scrambled to comply with a directive to rate each of their teachers on five components of this tool that was being used to evaluate and on some aspects rank teachers against their peers across the state (Kalani, 2014, May 1). The system was first piloted at the start of the 2011 school year and fully implemented in all public schools in school year 2013. On a side note, the EES was mandated for
implementation at all public but not public charter schools, which is why I did not address the system within my research project.

United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan had recently swooped into town to promote the state’s progress on the RTTT grant that included the implementation of EES. After initially being placed on high-risk status, the state had since made significant progress on the promises it made in its grant proposal to implement a teacher evaluation system based, in part, on student outcomes, develop state data systems, and turn around underperforming schools. Hawai‘i had also agreed to adopt national common core standards and then joined the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium to create tests aligned with these standards (HIDOE, n.d.). In noting Hawai‘i’s progress, Duncan said:

The only way you get better is to challenge the status quo. The only way to accelerate the rate of change is to do something different. The progress has been extraordinary. Hawai‘i, by any objective measure – is one of the fastest improving states in the nation – top five states, that’s top 10 percent in the nation. (HIDOE, 2014, March 31)

Back to the superintendent’s press conference in which changes to EES were announced, a group of Hawai‘i public school principals, current and retired, most likely had known this announcement was imminent. After all, a workgroup with broad representation, including principals, met all year to consider recommendations to the system, and updates were being shared at regularly scheduled principal’s meetings. But the dispirited school leaders did not wait for the outcome and, instead, applied tactics that could have been borrowed from the Kipu‘upu‘u, enlisting community leaders and joining forces with the local teacher’s and principal’s unions to pelt criticism on the state’s
current reforms, including EES, publishing the results of a critical survey, authoring op-ed pieces, holding press conferences, lobbying the Board of Education, and calling for changes in top leadership. A news article deemed the Hawai‘i public school principals hamstrung by current reforms, noting, “The school leaders say their ability to make decisions at the school level has been stymied by ‘top-down’ management by the Department of Education, and that sweeping academic reforms the state pledged for its federal RTTT grant have dragged down morale at their schools” (Star-Advertiser, 2014).

This fray is mirrored in the national context. Schmoker (2011) makes a strong case for common curriculum and assessments. In his book, *Focus: Elevating the essentials to radically improve student learning*, he insists what a typical child learns “in the same course and in the same school, varies tremendously from teacher to teacher; what you learn depends on what teacher you have” (p. 13). Duncan (2009) rallied support for education reforms by tugging democratic strings, declaring:

> I believe that education is the civil rights issue of our generation. And if you care about promoting opportunity and reducing inequality, the classroom is the place to start. Great teaching is about so much more than education; it is a daily fight for social justice. (para. 18)

On the other side of the debate, outspoken advocates like Ravitch (2013) caution that a business model is driving changes in public education and current reforms are fueled by myths that schools are failing. She points out that on the National Assessment of Education Progress, which has been used to sample reading and mathematics achievement since the early seventies, scores have risen steadily and are at their highest point ever. She insists the current emphasis on accountability has narrowed curriculums to subjects that can be tested and opposes the use of scores to determine the quality of
teachers and schools. She attempts to rally educators to support her position noting “it is time for parents, educators, and other concerned citizens to join together to strengthen our public schools and preserve them for future generations. The future of our democracy depends on it” (p. 9).

Sahlberg, (2013) an education reformer from Finland, writes and speaks about ways in which his home country and other top school systems have achieved results. He contends, “High-performing school systems are doing well because they’ve found a way to empower people in their school systems to do their best” (p. 38). He notes in addition to building a well-educated teaching force, high achieving school systems promote teaching underpinned by “collaboration rather than isolation, autonomy rather than top-down authority, and professional responsibility rather than bureaucratic accountability.” Sahlberg labels competition among schools, prescriptive curriculum packages, and high-stakes performance and accountability reforms “toxic” (p. 39). He argues that teachers and students must work in environments in which teaching and learning can take place without fear of failure. He insists teachers should have control over what they teach, how they deliver instruction, and how they assess their students.

Fullan (2014) takes a position similar to Sahlberg’s in professing current education policies imposed by RTTT are using the wrong drivers of accountability, individualistic solutions, and fragmented strategies. Fullan counters better alternatives can be found in capacity building, collaboration, and systems of support. He advises principals to loosen focus on accountability and instead concentrate on capacity building by supporting collaborative cultures. At the same time, he tells school leaders charged
with implementing accountability and performance mandates to understand the big picture but also work from the ground up by developing the capacities of teachers around instruction and learning, areas not defined in HCCS.

My understanding of complexity theory, learned in our professional practice program, provides insights and tools to help me balance my work as a leader in a knowledge era while addressing mandates from a highly bureaucratic system still rooted in the industrial era. Uhl-Bien, Marion, and McKelvey (2007) suggest leadership models from the last century supported factory work and mass production but are not well suited for the current knowledge economy, which is based on intellectual capital. The researchers developed a framework for Complexity Leadership Theory and contend that all organizations have bureaucratic functions but can also be nimble enough to resolve adaptive challenges that require more creative solutions. Heifetz and Linsky (2002) distinguish technical challenges from adaptive. Technical challenges can be difficult but have known solutions and can be resolved with current knowledge. Adaptive challenges can only be addressed by mobilizing collective communities and changing habits, altering beliefs, and building skills. Heifetz and Linsky (2013) contend that adaptive challenges “require experiments, new discoveries, and adjustments from numerous places in the organization or community” (p. 8).

While federal and state governments are defining what schools must do through performance and evaluation systems, helping people know how to accomplish this work is an adaptive challenge. Bradbury and Lichtenstein (2000) describe a “space in between” (p. 306) production where relationships are built and adaptive challenges can be
addressed. I believe that professional learning communities belong in this “space in between”. The opportunity to conduct research at this particular charter school, MPCS, was optimal for me because the school was implementing goals that were similar to those of the school where I serve as principal and was implementing them within a context that shared similarities with my own setting. When I began my study over a year ago both schools, MPCS and mine, were in nascent stages of PLC implementation. Both schools were leveraging collaborative practices to support the adoption of federal and state forms. Their school’s history of uneven efforts at staff development was similar to those at the school where I worked.

When I started as principal at my school in January 2012, PLCs had been in operation for over three years. A curriculum coordinator scheduled meetings, set deadlines, and collected the quarterly, common assessments each team was required to administer and submit. Teams met at least once a month to agree on student outcomes, develop and score common assessments, and use the results of these assessments to reflect on practice. While the mechanics of PLCs were in place, I could not discern that the commitment of time and resources were impacting anything of significance. The teaching teams appeared to be more concerned with completing required reports and meeting deadlines. They were choosing goals that were easy to agree on and accomplish, such as quarterly vocabulary tests that could be scored quickly. Yet, there was no evidence that teachers were tracking data to determine whether their teaching practices were impacting student learning.
From the literature I studied, my case study work with MPCS, and own experiences back at my own school, I gained a deeper understanding of theory and practice related to PLCs. I started to apply what I was learning from champions of the PLC movement, Hord, Reeves, Fullan, and DuFour and my side-by-side experience in which I was observing and generating ideas from MPCS to practices at my own school. I encouraged our school’s data teams, which met by content areas, to choose goals that they cared about and freed up some of the compliance issues that had limited their creativity. For example, in the past, there was a requirement that an entire team had to implement the same goal over the course of a quarter. Achieving consensus meant that the team often picked a goal everyone could agree on rather than one that would make a difference for teaching and learning. We were also able to get agreement on common instructional practices to support the HCCS and related assessments, foundation pieces upon which collaborative communities can build. Like MPCS, with continued training and practice our school can build the capacity and leverage collaborative practices that get results.

Newmann and Wehlage (1995) argue, “if schools want to enhance their organizational capacity to boost student learning, they should work on building a professional community that is characterized by shared purpose, collaborative activity, and collective responsibility among staff” (p. 37). This assertion has implications for policy makers. While I was able to find abundant information about key components recommended for successful PLCs (Hord, 2007; DuFour et al., 2010; and Reeves, 2010) limited research is available, almost ten years after Newman and Wehlage’s declaration,
about how to actually build these types of collaborative communities (Mindich and Lieberman, 2012). My study of MPCS adds one example for consideration, but studies of longer duration and schools more advanced in practice are needed (McLaughlin & Talbert, 2006). Further, Hawai‘i’s statewide implementation of PLCs to address new performance and accountability systems provides innumerable opportunities for study. Outcomes, shared early on, could be critical to the success of the state’s current reforms and lend credence to the designation of data teams as a priority strategy for all schools. Similarly, the credibility of PLCs could be enhanced with more studies that meet rigorous standards for research. These types of studies could build confidence in the field if studies can link effects to collaborative practices of PLCs and data teams (Vescio et al., 2008).

Professional learning communities afford structures through which participants can define and take ownership in their work. It is in this “space in between” where, back at my own school, we reflect on past and present practices and determine next steps on our journey to develop a professional learning community and where, as articulated by Hord and Tobia (2014) participants “organize themselves and engage in purposeful, collegial learning” and “learning is intentional and its purpose is to improve staff effectiveness so all students learn successfully to high standards” (p. 25). I believe this “space in between” also provided room for the collaborative culture we built within the professional practice program. Palmer (2004) believes we need a supportive community as we work toward our inner truth. He maintains we are “reaching in toward our own wholeness, reaching out toward the world’s needs, and trying to live
our lives at the intersection of the two” (n.p.). This opportunity brought together school leaders from across the state and gave us a space in which to reflect, hone our skills, and get inspired about our individual and collective practices.

The Kipu‘upu‘u warriors stripped wood for their spears in Waika, a verdant forest shrouded in mist. As they prepared for war, they were said to be deep in thought, not about the upcoming battles, but in reverence to the beauty of the forest and loved ones whom they might not see again. Like this shrouded forest, our program has provided a place for reflection and preparation. Wheatley (2009) insists, “There is no power greater than a community discovering what it cares about” (p. 166). As a community of practitioners, we gained skills and built relationships that will help us be more successful in our individual and collective journeys. We know resources, properly channeled, are abundant. We are optimistic about the future and roles we can play individually and together to affect change, particularly in areas of equity and social justice. Like kipu‘upu‘u, we will change the world by distilling as mist, punctuating like raindrops, and impacting with the force of a hurricane. For now, he lau ka huaka‘i hele i ka pali loa. A shade to cover my journey’s long climb.
Appendix A

Consent Form for Team Meeting Observations

University of Hawai‘i

Leading Professional Learning Communities that Focus on Student Learning

My name is Lisa DeLong. I am a graduate student at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH) in the College of Education. As part of the requirements for earning my graduate degree, I am conducting a research project. The purpose of my project is to understand and describe the journey of one curriculum coordinator as she plans and implements professional development on Common Core State Standards through professional learning communities at one public charter school. I am asking you to participate because you are an educator involved in this type of work.

Activities and Time Commitment: If you participate in this project, I will observe your participation in several professional learning community meetings during the fall 2013 semester. The study will take place from August 2013, until December 2013. The professional learning community meeting will be scheduled during the school day by your principal. I will observe the meeting for approximately 50 minutes. During this time, I will take hand-written notes to document the processes, interactions, and conversations that I observe. As a part of this study, I am also interviewing your principal and curriculum coordinator and conducting a focus group interviews with teachers who are participating in professional learning communities at your school.

Benefits and Risks: There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in these interviews. I hope, however, that the results of this project will inform professional development practices in the areas of professional learning communities and Common Core State Standards to the benefit of students. I believe there is little risk to you in participating in this research project. If however, you become stressed or uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions or discussing topics with me during the interview, we can skip the question, or take a break, or stop the interview. At any time, you may withdraw from the project altogether.

Privacy and Confidentiality: During this research project, I will keep all data in a secure location. Only my University of Hawai‘i advisor and I will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the UH Human Studies Program, can review research records. After I transcribe the interviews, I will erase/destroy the audio-recordings. When I type and report the results of my research project, I will not use your name or any other personally identifying information. Rather I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.
Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time without any penalty or loss. Your participation or non-participation will not impact your rights to future services at the College of Education.

If you have any questions about this research project, please call me at (808) 234-4376 or email me at delongl@hawaii.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the UH Human Studies Program, by phone at (808) 956-5007, or uhirb@hawaii.edu.

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date this signature page and return it to:

Lisa DeLong, Principal Investigator at: (808) 234-4376

I have read and understand the information provided to me about participating in the research project, Sustaining Professional Learning Communities that Focus on Student Learning

I have read and understand the information provided to me about participating in the research project, Sustaining Professional Learning Communities that Focus on Student Learning.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this research project.

Printed name: _________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________

Date: ______________________________

You will be provided with a copy of this consent form for your records.
Appendix B

Consent Form for Focus Group Sessions

University of Hawai‘i

Leading Professional Learning Communities that Focus on Student Learning

My name is Lisa DeLong. I am a graduate student at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH) in the College of Education. As part of the requirements for earning my graduate degree, I am conducting a research project. The purpose of my project is to understand and describe the journey of one curriculum coordinator as she plans and implements professional development on Common Core State Standards through professional learning communities at one public charter school. I am asking you to participate because you are an educator involved in this type of work.

Activities and Time Commitment: If you participate in this project, you will be asked to participate in a focus group session during the first semester of the 2013 school year. The study will take place from August 2013, until December 2013. The focus group meeting will be scheduled during the school day by your principal. I will ask you and the other participants questions about your school’s professional development practices, including participation in professional learning communities, for about 50 minutes. During this time, I will record the discussion that takes place. As a part of this study, I am also interviewing your principal and curriculum coordinator and conducting a focus group interviews with teachers who are participating in professional learning communities at your school.

Benefits and Risks: There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in these interviews. I hope, however, that the results of this project will inform professional development practices in the areas of professional learning communities and Common Core State Standards to the benefit of students. I believe there is little risk to you in participating in this research project. If however, you become stressed or uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions or discussing topics with me during the interview, we can skip the question, or take a break, or stop the interview. At any time, you may withdraw from the project altogether.

Privacy and Confidentiality: During this research project, I will keep all data in a secure location. Only my University of Hawai‘i advisor and I will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the UH Human Studies Program, can review research records. After I transcribe the interviews, I will erase/destroy the audio-recordings. When I type and report the results of my research project, I will not use your name or any other personally identifying information. Rather I will use pseudonyms (fake names) and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.
Voluntary Participation: Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time without any penalty or loss. Your participation or non-participation will not impact your rights to future services at the College of Education.

If you have any questions about this research project, please call me at (808) 234-4376 or email me at delongl@hawaii.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the UH Human Studies Program, by phone at (808) 956-5007, or uhirb@hawaii.edu.

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date this signature page and return it to:

Lisa DeLong, Principal Investigator at: (808) 234-4376

I have read and understand the information provided to me about participating in the research project, Sustaining Professional Learning Communities that Focus on Student Learning

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this research project.

_____ Yes, I agree to be recorded during the meeting observations.

_____ No, I do not agree to be recorded during the meeting observations.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this research project.

Printed name: _________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________________

You will be provided with a copy of this consent form for your records.
Appendix C

Consent Form for Interviews

University of Hawai‘i

Leading Professional Learning Communities that Focus on Student Learning

My name is Lisa DeLong. I am a graduate student at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH) in the College of Education. As part of the requirements for earning my graduate degree, I am conducting a research project. The purpose of my project is to understand and describe the journey of one curriculum coordinator as she plans and implements professional development on Common Core State Standards through professional learning communities at one public charter school. I am asking you to participate because you are an educator involved in this type of work.

Activities and Time Commitment: If you participate in this project, I will meet with you for three interviews at the beginning, middle, and end of this study that will take place from August 2013 through December 2013, at a location and time convenient for you. The interviews will consist of eight to ten open-ended questions, and will take approximately 45 minutes each. The interview will include questions like, “What do you view as the role of a curriculum coordinator at your school?” “Are professional learning communities in place at your school, and, if so, what is working and could be improved about these processes?” and, “In what types of professional development have your teachers participated related to Common Core State Standards?” For interviews, only you and I will be present. I will audio-record the interviews so that I can later transcribe them and analyze the responses. You will be one of two people whom I will interview for this study. I will also review the curriculum coordinator’s reflective journal entries during the period of the study. I will also observe three PLCs at your school, observing each PLC once, and conduct pre and post focus group interviews with each of these three PLCs.

Benefits and Risks: There will be no direct benefit to you for participating in these interviews. I hope, however, that the results of this project will inform professional development practices in the areas of professional learning communities and Common Core State Standards to the benefit of students. I believe there is little risk to you in participating in this research project. If however, you become stressed or uncomfortable answering any of the interview questions or discussing topics with me during the interview, we can skip the question, or take a break, or stop the interview. At any time, you may withdraw from the project altogether.

Privacy and Confidentiality: During this research project, I will keep all data in a secure location. Only my University of Hawai‘i advisor and I will have access to the data, although legally authorized agencies, including the UH Human Studies Program, can review research records. After I transcribe the interviews, I will erase/destroy the audio-recordings. When I type and report the results of my research project, I will not use your
name or any other personally identifying information. Rather I will use pseudonyms and report my findings in a way that protects your privacy and confidentiality to the extent allowed by law.

**Voluntary Participation:** Your participation in this project is completely voluntary. You may stop participating at any time without any penalty or loss. Your participation or non-participation will not impact your rights to future services at the College of Education.

If you have any questions about this research project, please call me at (808) 234-4376 or email me at delongl@hawaii.edu. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research participant, please contact the UH Human Studies Program, by phone at (808) 956-5007, or uhirb@hawaii.edu.

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date the signature page, attached, and return it to:

Lisa DeLong, Principal Investigator at: (808) 234-4376

I have read and understand the information provided to me about participating in the research project, *Sustaining Professional Learning Communities that Focus on Student Learning*.

_____ Yes, I agree to be recorded during the interviews.

_____ No, I do not agree to be recorded during the interviews.

My signature below indicates that I agree to participate in this research project.

Printed name: _________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________

Date: _______________________________________________

You will be provided with a copy of this consent form for your records.
Appendix D

Questions for the Principal

1. Would you tell me about your background education and work experiences that you feel have prepared you to be an instructional leader?

2. What first steps did you take to put professional learning communities in place at Makana PCS? What do you view to be the necessary components for both supportive conditions and supportive relationships?

3. Currently, with your PLCs, what do you believe is working? What could be improved?

4. What do you see as next steps for your PLCs? What would they look like if everything were in place?

5. How do you involve your staff in making decisions? Can you describe your leadership team and how it operates?

6. Have you done any work around visioning and, if so, can you describe what you’ve done?

7. What kind of professional development has your staff participated in and have you done any work, specifically, around building collective responsibility for student learning?

8. When I observed the PLC, at the end of the meeting, you asked teachers to bring results from a common assessment, which falls under a component of PLCs called shared personal practices, where staff provide feedback to peers related to instructional practices, including looking at student work and giving feedback to lessons. Can you speak to your interest and progress in this area?
Appendix E

Questions for Curriculum Coach

1. Tell me about your background, how did you come into this position and what are your key responsibilities, as you see them?

2. What is the history of professional learning communities at your school?

3. What have you done so far this year to set up your PLCs? Are norms established for how PLCs will work together?

4. What do you see as the goals of your school’s PLCs? What is the most important work they should accomplish?

5. What type of training have your teachers had in this area of PLCs?

6. What about your own training in this area? What type of training have you received? Where do you get support for your work?

7. How are teachers using school-wide and student data in their work?

8. Are they using any protocols, such as a protocol for looking at student work? How is the staff collaboratively reviewing student work to share and improve instructional practices?

9. Are there any challenges you’ve had already? What have you done or are you doing to overcome them?

10. What role has your principal played in helping to establish PLCs at your school?

11. How is teacher leadership promoted and nurtured within the PLCs?

12. Are there any issues with relationships or trust amongst the PLCs? How did you develop this culture, or what are you doing to resolve any issues?

13. How are you carving out time for teachers to meet in PLCs?

14. In your mind, what would a successful PLC look like? What would a meeting look like?
Appendix F

Questions for Focus Group Session

1. Would you each introduce yourself and state your role at Makana Public Charter School?

2. What is your school vision at Makana Public Charter School?

3. I've had a chance to observe a couple of data team meetings at your school. I heard that you didn't always have these teams in place, however. What do you think were the key factors that helped get this work going? (structures, cultural conditions, role of school leaders.

4. In what types of shared teacher practices do teachers participate? For example, I've heard that teachers here follow similar pacing guides, moving at about the same rate through the curriculum in some subject areas. Have teachers had opportunities look at student work, visit one another's classrooms, develop common assessments?

5. Can you describe the decision making process at your school? How is a new curriculum adopted, for example?

6. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your data teams process?
References


