

**EFFECTIVENESS OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES FOR  
RELATED SERVICES PERSONNEL: NEBRASKA SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGIST  
PERCEPTIONS ON UTILIZING LEARNING COMMUNITIES**

by

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of  
the Requirement for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education

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Division of Educational Administration  
Superintendent Program  
in the Graduate School  
University of South Dakota  
May 2013

## **ABSTRACT**

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### **Effectiveness of Professional Learning Communities for Related Services Personnel: Nebraska School Psychologist Perceptions on Utilizing Learning Communities**

Dissertation directed by Dr. Mark Baron

Schools continue to change in many ways. Technology, diversity, Response to Intervention (RtI), 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and other initiatives warrant the need for continued professional development for all school staff. School psychologists play a key role in the school system and can bring significant contributions to the school team. School psychologists often have multiple schools to serve in rural and urban settings and, at times, have to serve schools in isolation away from other school psychologists. School psychologists need opportunities to engage in meaningful professional development and have the opportunity for collegiality and collaboration with other school psychologists. This study investigated the effectiveness of school psychology learning communities as a way to provide professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the education environment.

A qualitative case study design was utilized in this study. Data sources from interviews, observations, and documents chronicled the perceived impact of utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest.

The findings of the study uncovered that the learning community produced an increase in knowledge and skills for school psychologists. It also provided a forum to study and find consistency in services school psychologists provide to schools. Data also

showed that school psychologists felt that the goal setting process within the group served as a guide to identify continued professional develop needs. In addition, data revealed that school psychologists felt that collaboration within the learning community had an impact on student achievement and that the learning community increased job satisfaction of school psychologists.

This abstract of approximately 275 words is approved as to form and content. I recommend its publication.

Signed Mark Baron  
Professor in Charge

## DOCTORAL COMMITTEE

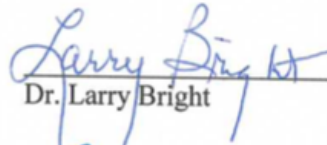
The members of the committee appointed to examine the dissertation of Ryan J. O'Grady find it satisfactory and recommend that it be approved.



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The doctoral journey has been an incredible experience. Throughout the experience, I have come to learn a great deal and have had the opportunity to meet many fantastic individuals. Throughout the entire journey, I have come to greatly appreciate the support and encouragement of faculty, colleagues, friends, and family.

I would like to express gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Mark Baron, and to my committee members: Dr. Fred Aderhold, Dr. Larry Bright, and Dr. Robin Dexter, who shared their expertise with me. Their efforts and continued support have assisted me in making this dissertation a reality. Dr. Dexter, thank you for your continual support, feedback, and encouragement. I truly enjoy the time where we are able to reflect not only on this project but also on education and life as a whole.

I would also like to thank my many colleagues that I have had the opportunity to work with throughout my career. I have had the great fortune to learn from and work with you and am proud to call many of you my friends. In addition, I would like to thank the team of school psychologists that I get the pleasure to work with on a daily basis. You guys are the best! I have learned so much from all of you!

I would also like to thank my parents, Candy O’Grady and Joe O’Grady, for believing in me and providing me with the love and support I needed to grow up to be a good man, husband, and father. I’m proud to be your son. In addition, I would like to extend a thanks and appreciation to my closest friends and family who love and believe in me.

Lastly, and most importantly, I would like to thank my wife Diana and my three children Kailey (8), Calin (6), and Mya (4). Diana, you are the love of my life and I

appreciate all that you have done to support me through this journey and other journeys we have been on. Life is fun with you and I wouldn't be the man I am now without you in my life. Kids, I love you more than you realize and I thank you for your encouragement and support. It has been fun to share this experience with you and I thank you for checking in on me to make sure I was doing my homework and not goofing around. I embarked on this adventure not only for myself but also for you three to see the importance of following your dreams and trying your best. I'm proud of you three and look forward to watching you grow. I love you all.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **Introduction**

The role of the school psychologist has changed dramatically over the past 30 years. No longer is the role of the school psychologist limited to assessment and identification of students with disabilities; school psychologists are called upon to be essential team members in identifying and developing strategies to meet the needs of all students. The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2010) stated, “School psychologists help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community for all students” (p. 1).

Schools continue to change. Some of the more significant changes include the adoption of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and revisions to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). Both hold schools accountable and provide guidance, policy, and procedures. School psychologists, being critical components of the school team, are looked upon to be leaders in the area of psychology and education (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008). School psychologists are trained in preparation programs to understand psychology, assessment, school systems, methods of effective teaching, mental health issues, child development, learning, behavior, and a variety of other skills. Preparation programs around the nation strive to cover the changing field of education (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; NASP, 2012; Ysseldyke et al., 2006; Zins & Murphy, 1996). While higher education prepares students to enter the field, it falls upon the school district and school psychologist to identify ways

to enhance and increase skills and knowledge, which provided the focus of this study (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; NASP, 2012; Ysseldyke et al., 2006; Zins & Murphy, 1996).

While the role of the school psychologist has changed dramatically, they are still required to assess and identify students with disabilities. It is a requirement by federal and state law that districts employ school psychologists or contract with educational support units for school psychology services to ensure Child Find laws are followed and assessment takes place (IDEA, 2004; Ysseldyke et al., 2006). This makes the role of the school psychologist, in many cases, extremely itinerant. School psychologists may serve multiple schools and school districts, thus creating a sense of isolation and lack of meaningful professional development. School psychologists are often thrust into professional development that has no direct relation to their roles. While it is important for the school psychologist to stay abreast of the current trends and curricula in schools, it is also important for school psychologists to keep informed in areas important for their own professional growth (Fowler & Harrison, 2001; Ysseldyke et al., 2006; Zins & Murphy, 1996).

In 1984, Ysseldyke, Reynolds, and Weinberg published *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice*. This document served as a framework to guide training and practice in school psychology. In 1997, Ysseldyke, Dawson, Lehr, Reschly, Reynolds, and Telzrow revisited the *Blueprint* and developed *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice II*. Both blueprints significantly impacted the training and practices in school psychology. According to Bill Pfohl (1997) in the second blueprint,

Since its publication in 1984, the original *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice* has driven much of the progress in training and practice of school psychology. The creation of the National School Psychology Certification System (1988), with its continuing professional development requirements, is further evidence of the impact the first *Blueprint* had upon the profession of school psychology. (p. 5)

As the educational system continued to change, guidance for school psychology preparation programs continued to change as well. Changes that continue to occur in the education system have resulted in yet another *Blueprint*. In 2006, Ysseldyke again assembled a task force to revisit the first two *Blueprints* and, extending from changes in the educational system, created *School Psychology: A Blueprint for Training and Practice III*. The development of three different *Blueprints* over the past 28 years has signified the changing roles of school psychologists over time.

The task force from the most recent *Blueprint* (2006) studied and evaluated the domains of training and practice, and based on historical, current, and future trends identified 10 domains to help guide preparation programs and professional development design:

1. Data-Driven Decision Making and Accountability
2. Interpersonal Communication, Collaboration, and Consultation
3. Effective Instruction and Development of Cognitive/Academic Skills
4. Socialization and Development of Life Competencies
5. Student Diversity in Development and Learning
6. School Structure, Organization, and Climate

7. Prevention, Wellness Promotion, and Crisis Intervention
8. Home/School/Community Collaboration
9. Research and Program Evaluation
10. Legal Ethical Practice and Professional Development

In utilizing the domains of training and practice as a guide for current and future practices in school psychology, preparation programs may be able to comprehensively cover all that is involved with the *Blueprint*. New school psychologists may come in to the educational system with a solid background in most of the domains of training and practice, but continued professional development in all those areas is critical for the success of new and veteran school psychologists (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008). In order to meet the professional development needs of school psychologists, school districts need to design or support continued professional development. While many school districts prefer to send school psychologists to conferences or workshops, *The Blueprint III* (2006) stated,

Best practice in professional development moves beyond exposure from workshops at professional conventions. For example, research has documented that fewer than 10% of participants in traditional professional development activities actually apply their new knowledge and skills in their practice.

Exploring ways to deliver continuing professional development so that school psychologists learn to apply new skills will be a challenge for the future. (p. 21)

The fact that fewer than 10% actually apply their new knowledge and skills in their practice, in addition to decreased funding in public schools, signifies the importance of school districts and school psychologists working together to identify the best means of

professional development to increase knowledge and skill. While many school administrators do not have a background in school psychology to develop meaningful professional development opportunities, it is increasingly important for school psychologists to take an active role and work with administrators in the identification of meaningful professional development needs (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Ysseldyke et al., 2006).

Learning communities are commonly referred to as Professional Learning Communities (PLCs). They typically involve teachers who work collaboratively to improve practice and enhance student learning (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001). While the PLC framework carries different terminology, structures, and perceptions for some, learning communities are defined as collaborative teams that focus their collective efforts on certain critical questions (DuFour, 2007). According to Blanton and Perez (2011), the PLCs “grew out of major reform efforts in the 1980s when effective schools and effectiveness of organizations shifted school improvement efforts to core concepts of school culture, collegiality, and collaboration” (p. 6). The main characteristics of a PLC according to Blanton and Perez (2011) are

1. Supportive and Shared Leadership
2. Open Dialogue/Collaboration
3. Shared Vision, Values, and Goals
4. Student Centered School Improvement
5. Supportive Environment
6. Ongoing Inquiry/Reflective Practice

These characteristics of a learning community have produced success in school reform. Research has shown that when teachers work in learning communities, they improve their classroom practices, thus increasing student achievement (Blanton & Perez, 2011). Again, while the learning community framework is usually geared toward teachers, the development of a learning community framework for school psychologists may be just as effective in order to meet the increasing demands of the changes in the roles of school psychologists. This study examined the framework as it is applied to a team of school psychologists working within a special education cooperative of seven school districts in the Midwest and determined the impact it has had on the professional practices through qualitative measures.

### **Purpose of Study**

This qualitative study investigated the effectiveness of school psychology learning communities as a way to provide professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the educational environment. The following grand tour question guided this study:

What is the perceived impact of utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest?

To address that question, the following sub-questions were answered:

1. Do school psychologists perceive that collaboration within the learning community contributes to an increase in knowledge and skills?
2. Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community allows school psychologists to develop consistency in services they provide to schools?

3. Do school psychologists perceive that the collaboration within the learning community affects student achievement?
4. Do school psychologist perceive that SMART (DuFour, 2010) goals guide and identify professional development needs?
5. Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community increases job satisfaction of school psychologists?
6. Do school psychologists perceive that learning communities are a form of meaningful professional development to enhance knowledge and skills of school psychologists?
7. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development?

### **Significance of the Study**

Schools continue to change in many ways. Technology, diversity, Response to Intervention (RtI), 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and other initiatives warrant the need for continued professional development for all school staff. School psychologists play a key role in the school system and can bring significant contributions to the school team. School psychologists often have multiple schools to serve in rural and urban settings and, at times, have to serve schools in isolation away from other school psychologists. School psychologists need opportunities to engage in meaningful professional development and have the opportunity for collegiality and collaboration with other school psychologists. The development of school psychology learning communities may be able to provide the



professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the educational environment.

This study provided information to school districts, educational cooperatives, school administrators, supervisors of school psychologists, school psychology preparation programs, and school psychologists regarding the use of the professional learning community model as a means of providing meaningful professional development for school psychologists. In addition, the model may be utilized for other related services groups such as Speech/Language Pathologists, Physical Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Assistive Technology Specialists, Inclusion Facilitators, Behavior Specialists, or other related services personnel.

### **Definition of Terms**

For the purpose of ensuring uniformity and understanding in this study, selected terms are defined in this section. Definitions without citations were developed by the researcher.

**Collaborative Teams:** A professional learning community is a collaborative team. A collaborative team is when members work interdependently to achieve common goals (DuFour, 2010).

**Consultation:** “Consultation is a collaborative problem-solving process in which two or more persons engage in efforts to benefit one or more persons (client) for whom they bear some level of responsibility, within a context of reciprocal interactions” (Curtis & Meyers, 1989, p. 36).

**Culture:** “Culture is defined as patterns of attitudes, living, norms, traditions, and values developed and influenced by parents and community” (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008, p. 73).

**National Association of School Psychologists (NASP):** The NASP is the professional organization that helps to guide practices in the field of school psychology.

**Professional Learning Community (PLC):** Professional learning communities are defined as collaborative teams that focus their collective efforts on critical questions (DuFour, 2007). The main characteristics of a PLC according to Blanton and Perez (2011) include (1) Supportive and Shared Leadership, (2) Open Dialogue/Collaboration, (3) Shared Vision, Values, and Goals, (4) Student Centered School Improvement, (5) Supportive Environment, and (6) Ongoing Inquiry/Reflective Practice.

**Response to Intervention (RtI):** The RtI model is a problem-solving process that focuses upon meeting the individual needs of students. RtI is designed to identify and address the needs of children in a timely manner with proven methods of intervention. In RtI, the problem-solving team identifies students that may be struggling in areas such as reading, math, writing, and behavior, and develop a plan to meet the needs of the student prior to a referral for special education evaluation and services. The school psychologist plays a key role in the team problem solving process (Canter, 2006; Merrell et al., 2006; NASP, 2006, 2012; Ysseldyke et al., 2006).

**School Psychologist:** According to NASP (2012), “School psychologists help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and

supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community for all students” (p. 1).

**SMART Goals:** SMART goals are a structure utilized in professional learning communities to guide work. SMART goals are (1) Strategic and Specific, (2) Measurable, (3) Attainable, (4) Results oriented, and (5) Time bound (DuFour, 2010).

### **Limitation/Delimitation of the Study**

The results of this study may be limited by the following conditions or factors:

1. The researcher’s position as the participants’ supervisor may have had an effect on the participants’ behavior and responses to interviews.
2. The data received by the researcher came from interviews, documents, and artifacts. While the interviews were conducted utilizing a script, probing questions were utilized that may have made some of the information from each interview group different, thus requiring the researcher to utilize constant judgment. Data were coded utilizing an online qualitative research program.
3. The school psychology professional learning community is unique and comparisons or generalizations must be made judiciously.

### **Organization of the Study**

This study is organized into five chapters, appendices, and reference list. Chapter 1 includes the introduction to the study, statement of the problem, research questions, significance of the study, definition of terms, and limitations/delimitations of the study. Chapter 2 is the review of related literature and research as it relates to the field of school psychology, professional development models, and professional learning communities. The methodology and procedures are highlighted and described in Chapter 3. Chapter 4

includes the results and analyses of the study. Lastly, Chapter 5 includes a summary of the study, conclusions, discussion, and recommendations for further research.

## CHAPTER 2

### Review of Related Literature

Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature and research associated with the roles of the school psychologist, professional development for school psychologists, and a review of professional learning communities. The chapter is divided into sections that include (a) introduction to the field of school psychology, (b) the role and function of the school psychologist, (c) developmental stages of the school psychologist, (d) professional development methods, (e) professional learning communities, and (f) a brief conclusion ends the chapter.

#### Introduction to the Field of School Psychology

School psychology was named one of the top 20 careers in 2009 by *U.S. News and World Report*, indicating that the field of school psychology continues to grow. While the field of psychology can be traced back to classical Greek influences such as Socrates (470-399 BC), Plato (428-348 BC), and Aristotle (384-322 BC), the field of school psychology is barely a century old. From the classical world of ancient Greece, the discipline of psychology formally emerged in Europe and America in the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century with Darwin (1809-1882), Gall (1758-1828), Wundt (1832-1920), and Freud (1856-1939) paving the way. With the influence of these pioneers, the American Psychological Association (APA) was established in 1891 and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, universities established psychology programs that awarded academic degrees in the field of psychology (Fagan & Wise, 1994; Merrell et al., 2006).

While there was significant work in the area of psychology, there are no specific dates as to when the field of school psychology was founded. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and

20<sup>th</sup> centuries, there were events that led to the beginning of school psychology. The development of the Binet-Simon IQ testing scales in 1905, individual assessment and classification, and education reforms led to the terms “school psychology” and “school psychologist.” In 1915, Arnold Gesell became the first person to be appointed to the position of “school psychologist” in the state of Connecticut. From this appointment, and with the emphasis in providing educational and mental health services to youth, the field of school psychology was coined (Fagan & Wise, 1994; Merrell et al., 2006).

The field of school psychology continued to grow throughout the 1900s. In 1930, pioneering school psychologist Gertrude Hildreth authored the first book on school psychology, *Psychological Service for School Problems*. In the book, Hildreth illustrated a typical day for a school psychologist and the day-in and day-out activities school psychologists were involved in. Merrell et al. (2006) stated that, “Hildreth’s view on school psychology service delivery was fairly broad. Although individual testing and diagnosis played a prominent role in her breakdown of a professional day, consulting with teachers, administrators, parents, and other individuals through conferences appeared to be the single activity that consumed the most time” (p. 30).

In the early 1950s, the APA created “Division 16,” which focused specifically on school psychology. Once this division was established, school psychology associations were developed at places around the nation though there was no link between national and local organizations. At this time, there was great divide and disparity in the field of school psychology from training to credentialing to practice (Fagan & Wise, 1994; Merrell et al., 2006).

School psychology really didn't take off until the mid- to late-1950s due to the end of World War II in 1945. When the troops returned home, the "baby boomers" were born (Merrell et al., 2006). In the mid- to late-1950s the numbers of children entering schools dramatically increased. Within those numbers were students with disabilities and those who struggled academically and/or behaviorally. The diverse needs of students prompted school districts, though no federal legislation required it, to problem solve and develop programs to meet the growing, diverse, student population. Part of the problem solving involved the hiring of school psychologists (Fagan & Wise, 1994; Merrell et al., 2006).

School reform continued to move forward with the passage of laws specifically pertaining to the education of individuals with disabilities. With new laws, came a new era of school psychology according to school psychology historian Thomas Fagan. According to Fagan and Wise (2000), the field can be broken up into two distinct eras. The first one was the hybrid years of 1890 to 1969 when school psychology was emerging and beginning to develop an identity. From 1970 to 2000 came the emergence of the thoroughbred years where school psychology had clearly established itself as a unique field with a "stable professional identity." The change from one era to another was directly related to the establishment of the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). In 1969, NASP held its first national convention in St. Louis. With the development of NASP came a break from the APA and Division 16 and their advocacy of the doctoral degree as a necessity for school psychologists. The NASP has advocated for the interests of master's and specialist-level school psychologist.

The most important law that changed the face of school psychology was the passage by the United States Congress of Public Law 94-142 in 1975. This act was originally referred to as the Education for All Handicapped Children. Prior to Public Law 94-142, states developed their own laws regarding the education of students with disabilities. Public Law 94-142 was important for school psychology across the nation because it federally mandated a free and appropriate public education for students with disabilities. With the federal mandates came consistency in eligibility assessments thus creating a need for school psychologists nationwide (Fagan & Wise, 1994; Merrell et al., 2006).

Public Law 94-142 preceded the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, 1997, and 2004, thus defining the roles of the school psychologist in various levels of identification of students with disabilities. While IDEA has driven much of what school psychology looks like today, there are additional components that continue to stretch the field of school psychology in various ways.

Demographic trends continue to change the landscape in school districts across the nation. Across the United States, it may be noticed that the United States is a multicultural nation. Currently, the United States is made up of many different individuals from a variety of demographic groups, thus requiring schools to change their daily operating procedures in order to serve the diverse student population. One large trend that has continued to change the way schools do business is the language barrier. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census (2002), 17.9% of the United States population speaks a language other than English, and 11% of individuals in the United States are foreign born. With these changes, it requires schools and school psychologists



to develop more, “culturally responsive practices in an increasingly diverse society” (Merrell et al., 2006, p. 44).

In addition to IDEA provisions and demographic trends, one of the greatest influences of school psychology practices today has been the development of the Response to Intervention (RtI) model (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006). The RtI model is a problem-solving process that focuses upon meeting the individual needs of students. RtI is designed to identify and address the needs of children in a timely manner with proven methods of intervention. In RtI, the problem-solving team identifies students that may be struggling in areas such as reading, math, writing, and behavior, and develops a plan to meet the needs of the student prior to a referral for special education evaluation and services. The school psychologist plays a key role in the team problem-solving process (Branstetter, 2012; Canter, 2006; Merrell et al., 2006; NASP, 2006, 2012; Ysseldyke et al., 2006).

Overall, the field of school psychology is still fairly new and continues to change. In 1969, according to Fagan and Wise (2000), school psychology moved from the hybrid years to the thoroughbred years. With continued changes in demographics, student needs, and legislation, the field of school psychology may move into another era with the understanding, according to Fagan and Wise (1994), that the “future depends largely on the profession being able to learn from, and improve upon, the ideologies and models of the past” (p. 59).

### **The Role and Function of the School Psychologist**

The role and function of the school psychologist can be different from district to district and state to state (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; NASP, 2012).

Some school districts are at different levels of implementation than others and some may not be as diverse (Branstetter, 2012; Fowler & Harrison, 2001; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006). For example, while RtI is an emerging practice in some school districts, some do not utilize the RtI model (Sullivan & Long, 2010). In addition, some school districts are just not confronted with language barriers. The role of the school psychologist may be difficult to explain to administrators, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders because of the different needs of school districts across the nation (Branstetter, 2012). For the purpose of this study, and explaining the role and function of the school psychologist, the definition provided by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) was used as they are the guiding association for school psychology preparation programs and practicing school psychologists. According to the NASP (2012), “School psychologists help children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community for all students” (p. 1). In addition, the NASP (2012) stated, “School psychologists work to find the best solution for each child and situation. They use many different strategies to address individual student needs, and to improve classroom and school climates and support systems” (p. 1).

The NASP (2012) reported that school psychologists can work with students to provide counseling, instruction, and mentoring for those struggling with social, emotional, and behavioral problems. They may also work with students in determining the best instructional strategies to help improve learning in addition to promoting

wellness and resilience by reinforcing communication and social skills, problem solving, anger management, self-regulation, self-determination, and optimism (NASP, 2012).

In addition, school psychologists may work with students and their families to identify and address learning and behavior problems that interfere with school success, evaluate eligibility for special education services, and support student social, emotional, and behavioral health needs (NASP, 2012). They may also help teach parenting skills, encourage home – school collaboration, and make referrals to help coordinate support services outside of the educational environment (NASP, 2012).

The NASP (2012) also stated that school psychologists can also work with teachers. School psychologists may help a teacher identify and resolve academic barriers to learning, design and implement progress monitoring and academic and behavioral interventions, support individualized and differentiated instruction, identify motivational factors to engage students in learning, and help to create a positive classroom environment (NASP, 2012).

School psychologists have been encouraged by the NASP (2012) to work with administrators to collect and analyze data related to school improvement, student outcomes, and accountability requirements. They can work with administrators to implement school-wide prevention programs, promote school policies and practices that ensure the students are safe by reducing school violence, bullying, and harassment, respond to crises, and design, implement, and gain support for comprehensive school mental health programming (NASP, 2012).

Lastly, the NASP (2012) stated that school psychologists may work with community providers to coordinate services to students and their families in and outside

of the educational environment in addition to helping students transition to and from school and other environments such as residential treatment or juvenile justice programs.

While the identified roles and functions of the school psychologist by the NASP have been comprehensive, there were three common themes that arose on a regular basis. The three activities include (1) assessment, (2) consultation, and (3) intervention (NASP, 2012).

Currently and historically, assessment has been identified as being an essential function of the school psychologist (Branstetter, 2012; Fagan & Wise, 1994; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006). With the emphasis in assessment from IDEA regulations came the perception that school psychologists are only psychometricians. Most school psychologists and preparation programs understand that they can contribute to the success of schools in a variety of other ways as well and continue to promote their worth to school staff (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; NASP, 2012). While, according to studies, assessment is often perceived as an undesirable activity, preparation programs and organizations such as the NASP emphasize that school psychologists need to develop a broader view of assessment. For example, Merrell et al. (2006) stated that, “school psychologists who engage in the problem-solving model of practice are continually using assessment in order to obtain the needed data to guide decision making at each stage of the problem-solving process” (p. 108). This frame of thinking guides the school psychologist to not look at assessment as an undesirable activity but to look at it as an opportunity to be a part of the problem-solving process in guiding effective practice and instruction (Branstetter, 2012; NASP, 2012; Ysseldyke et al., 2006).

Consultation is complex for some school psychologists. Consultation can really depend on the level of involvement in the school district. In some states, school psychologists may work for educational cooperatives and be assigned multiple buildings or school districts to serve. In some large districts, school psychologists may be assigned to multiple buildings within the district. These factors may hinder the involvement of school psychologists in the school environment to engage in consultation as it pertains to class-wide, small-group, or school-wide efforts (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006).

According to Branstetter (2012), Harvey & Struzziero (2008), and Merrell et al. (2006), the last major activity is intervention, which varies among school psychologists. The two types of intervention are indirect and direct. Indirect interventions involve school psychologists collaborating with teachers, parents, or administrators. In direct intervention, the school psychologist may provide services directly to the student. For example, a psychologist may develop a social skills program and work directly with the student. In addition, a school psychologist may be a part of developing prevention programs and interventions for students in the Response to Intervention process in addition to working with others on school-wide programs.

Overall, the role of the school psychologist varies from district to district. Research has shown that workloads are predominantly focused around assessment activities, but the research also has shown that many school psychologists prefer to have an expanded role as the NASP outlines (Bramlett et al., 2002; Reschly & Wilson, 1995). School psychologists would like to spend less time with traditional assessments and more time in consultation and intervention/prevention activities. In a 2002 survey of 400

school psychologists, Bramlett, Murphy, Johnson, Wallingsford, and Hall reported that school psychologists spent 46% of their time in assessment-related activities. The survey also indicated that they spent 16% of their time on consultation activities and another 22% of their time on intervention activities, defined as including interventions, counseling, and parent training. The other 16% was divided between conferencing (7%), supervision (3%), in-service activities (2%), research (1%), and other activities (3%). This survey result was very consistent in the findings to a 1995 Reschly and Wilson's survey that found that school psychologists spent 55% of their time in assessment activities, 21% of their time in direct interventions, 22% of their time in consultation activities, and 2% of their time in research and program evaluation activities. Another caveat of the Reschly and Wilson (1995) study was the finding that school psychologist preferred to have more time in intervention work and less time in assessment work. If the school psychologists were to break down their preferred time on activity, it would be to spend 32% of their time in assessment activities, 28% of their time in direct intervention activities, 33% of their time in consultative activities, and 7% of their time in research and program evaluation activities.

In similar studies (Hosp & Reschly, 2002), researchers found that overall, school psychologists were satisfied with their jobs but also showed that they were not fully satisfied with their actual work duties. In addition, research showed that school psychologists faced problems with how others perceived the field of school psychology and the role of school psychologists (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006). For instance, in one Midwest cooperative, a superintendent in one district may view the role of the school psychologist as a dynamic role as the NASP

outlines while another superintendent feels that the school psychologist is there to conduct testing and assessment, and nothing more. These contrasting views are prevalent and may cause frustration for some school psychologists.

In hindsight, some school psychologists may only perceive themselves as a person who conducts assessments. According to the NASP (2012), the scope of the school psychologist should be much wider. For those school psychologists who only perceive themselves as a person who just conducts assessments, it may be attributed to lack of training or professional development beyond their graduate program. Merrell et al. (2006) indicated that lack of professional growth or having a mindset that school psychologists are only psychometricians,

Hinder the growth of our profession. Training programs must ensure that they are adequately preparing future school psychologists to provide a broad array of service, and school psychologists must view themselves as more than “sorter” and “placers.” In our opinion, school psychologists must continue to advocate for the expansion of their roles. (pp. 106-107)

In the end, as Shapiro (2000) pointed out, school psychologists must, “move away from solving the little problems (assessing and intervening with one student at a time) to solving the big problems (addressing system wide problems such as illiteracy). For this to occur, school psychologist must expand their roles and move away from activities that are so tied to traditional, norm-referenced, individual assessment” (Merrell et al., 2006, p. 107). School psychologists, according to Reschly & Wilson (1995) and Hosp & Reschly (2002), indicated that they spend a majority of their time in assessment-related activity but truly want to move beyond that and spend less time in those activities and more time

in the consultation and intervention areas. To accomplish that, continued professional development for practitioners and the schools they serve may need to take place to ensure there is adequate balance in job roles and responsibilities for school psychologists (Branstetter, 2012; Fagan & Wise, 1994; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006; NASP, 2012; Yesseldyke et al., 2006).

### **Developmental Stages of School Psychologists**

Personal and professional experiences of school psychologists vary widely and may affect the level of supervision and professional development needed. As indicated earlier in this study, the field of school psychology is quite new (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006). Considering that the NASP held their first national convention in 1969 in St. Louis, that is only 43 years ago (Merrell et al., 2006). From that time alone, the thoroughbred years have provided the field ever-changing practices in schools that have challenged the field of school psychology to keep up. No longer is the school psychologist role focused just upon assessment procedures. School psychologists are looked upon to provide consultation and interventions on a school-wide level. With these challenges comes the awareness that school psychologists are at different levels or stages in their career cycle (Merrell et al., 2006; Stoltenberg, 2006). It is known that preparation programs have changed their delivery model when working with students. The gap between preparation programs of the past and preparation programs of the future emphasizes the importance of continuing professional development for school psychologists who may be at different stages in their career cycle (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006). Many types of research have focused on the career cycle for teachers. For instance, teachers may be considered novice,



apprentice, professional, expert, distinguished, or emeritus. This indicates that teachers may be on different levels of expertise. The same holds true for school psychologists and the importance of understanding their career cycle in order to provide them with needed support (Merrell et al., 2006; Stoltenberg, 2006).

According to Stoltenberg (2005), there are defined developmental stages of school psychologists with whom school psychologists and school administrators need to be aware. These stages include the novices (Level I), advanced beginners (Level II), competence (Level III), proficiency (Level IV), and experts (Level V).

In the novice stage, Stoltenberg (2005) described school psychologists as an individual that has had no previous experience in the field. They know bits of information and rely heavily on supervisors and veteran school psychologists as mentors to guide their understanding and practice. In meetings, it may be apparent that they have limited self-confidence and self-efficacy. Novices may not have the ability to see the big picture as it comes to addressing individualized student needs and the school environment.

In the advanced beginners stage, school psychologists may have grown to understand more, but still rely heavily on colleagues or supervisors for clarification or direction. They may be concerned with their overall self-confidence in meeting and may still get discouraged. At this stage, they should be able to work more independently and function in the developing stage. Typically, school psychologists are in this stage while completing an internship or while in their first year of two of employment (Stoltenberg, 2005).

Stoltenberg (2005) described school psychologists in the competence stage as an individual that is able to see more of the big picture as it relates to relationships and student awareness. This is typically achieved after two or three years of employment as a school psychologist. They have more self-confidence and feel they can contribute to the team. They feel more organized and are able to make links to concepts in schools. Basically, they are beginning to build their schemata. In the competence stage, they are beginning to identify their strengths and weaknesses, and know when to seek consultation. They are beginning to become a critical part of the team with different levels of expertise.

The proficiency stage (Stoltenberg, 2005) is typically reached after three to five years of experience. The main difference at this stage from the competence stage is the ability to be reflective and integrative into their practice. This stage, according to Sergiovanni and Starratt (2007), is where such reflection and integration usually requires ongoing supervision and participation in communities of learning. Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2006) stated,

Unfortunately, school personnel in most schools are not supported in ways to improve their thinking. The only alternative for [an educator] in a complex environment who cannot adjust to multiple demands and is not being helped to acquire the ability to think abstractly and autonomously is to simplify and deaden the work environment by establishing and maintaining routines and ignoring situational and individual differences. (p. 52)

At this level of proficiency, school psychologists need avenues to reflect not only on their own performance but with others as well. Having opportunities to participate in communities of learning will only enhance the school psychologist's skills.

Experts, according to Stoltenberg (2005), see the big picture in the schools and in the field of school psychology. They understand best practices within the field and can generalize it to a variety of situations. Experts are aware of the environment and understand how to work with others in a collaborative manner. The expert is comfortable with change in a rapidly changing education field. Experts are skilled at working with students in order to identify specific needs and then are able to articulate that information to a variety of people. Experts can bring in experiences from the past and apply it to current situations. In addition, experts seek opportunities to be involved in change and problem solving at the local, state, and national level. While experts still need support, they are accurate in self-assessment and practice the art of reflection. As far as collaboration, they seek ways and are eager to collaborate with others and thrive off of teamwork.

Stoltenberg (2005) captured the essence of the developmental stages of school psychologists. Like teachers, school psychologists come to school districts with a variety of backgrounds and experiences ranging from novice to expert. It is important for the school psychologist and supervisor to be aware of the developmental stage the school psychologist is at in order to develop a course of action that includes meaningful professional development. With the exponential changes in the educational system, it should be noted that school psychologists could move up and down the developmental stages. For instance, a school district may employ a school psychologist that graduated

from college years ago and has primarily lived their career under the premise that they serve school districts in the capacity of a psychometrician. With the changes in the educational system, that particular person may not have been kept up to date in initiatives such as RtI and technology. Harvey and Struzziero (2008) stated the developmental stages in these terms, “All school psychologists are beginners when they enter situations in which they have no previous experience, either in terms of the population with which they are working or with regard to the procedures and/or tools used. For example, the same school psychologist may be an experienced diagnostician yet a beginner in monitoring intervention effectiveness” (p. 41). With a solid understanding of the developmental stages of school psychologists comes the need for differentiated professional development (Harvey, 2008; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Rosenfield, 2000; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007; Shapiro & Lentz, 1995).

### **Professional Development Methods**

Understanding and developing meaningful professional development for school psychologists can be a daunting task for supervisors. Professional development, while challenging at times to plan, is essential given the changes associated with the field of education. Harvey and Struzziero (2008) stated,

After 33 years in the field of school psychology, 29 of them as a supervisor, Tessa changed her concept of her work. Previously, she had thought of the practice and supervision of school psychology as similar to building a house: a challenge in design, coordination, resource procurement, and management. More recently, Tessa realized that the house building metaphor implied that one could be “finished,” but that practice and supervision in school psychology is never

finished. There is always progress to be monitored, practices to refine, and new evidence to incorporate. Therefore, Tessa thought a more useful metaphor would be farming in New England. Due to sandy soil, a proliferation of rocks, and harsh climate, farming in New England is very hard work that never ends. If constant effort is not applied, the land quickly reverts back to blackberry briar patches and scrub pine. Farming also requires great skill in discerning the appropriate steps to take, knowledge regarding which plants to encourage and which to eliminate, and as much nurturing as one can muster. Like farming, practicing and supervising school psychology is both incredibly challenging and phenomenally rewarding. (p. 443)

It cannot be emphasized enough how young the field of school psychology is. Since the development of the first school psychology program, educational environments have continued to change at a rapid pace. With changes, come the need for continued mentoring and professional development in addition to continual changes in the delivery at school psychology preparation programs (Branstetter, 2012; Fowler & Harrison, 2001; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006, Ysseldyke et al., 2006).

Literature and research in the field of school psychology have resulted in many recommendations over the years regarding preparation and professional development, but there is little research conducted on actual models that have been utilized as it relates to school psychologists. There have been numerous studies regarding professional development as a whole for school districts, but limited amounts that focus on the needs of the school psychologist (Fowler & Harrison, 2001). While it is important for school psychologists to engage in professional development that the district provides in order to

understand curriculum, programs, formative assessment, and other topics, it is also important for school psychologists to have meaningful professional development for their growth. Samuel Dubin, in 1972, conducted research on the life of a school psychologist and coined the term “half-life,” meaning that the professional competence of a school psychologist lasts only five to 10 years due to the dramatic and continual changes in education. Hynd, Pielstick, and Schakel (1981) looked at Dubin’s work and the rapid changes that took place from Dubin’s initial work in 1972 to 1981 and estimated the half-life to be about three to five years. Both of these claims took place over 30 years ago. In looking at the educational field now and the exponential changes with technology, special education compliance, and other change initiatives, the half-life may be much shorter than the three to five or even the five to 10 years that the previous researchers claimed. Merrell et al. (2006) emphasized this by claiming that there will be “major changes or evolutions in the field of school psychology during the 21<sup>st</sup> century that will not occur in isolation or in a social vacuum” (p. 266). These major changes or evolutions will affect the lives of children, their families, and the delivery of school psychology services (Merrell et al., 2006).

It has been clear in articles relating to school psychologists and professional development that there are modes of training that are not as beneficial as others. For instance, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2006) indicated that the training approach of “train and hope,” with a one-time follow-up, is not effective in many cases. In regard to training models that include attending in-service training, reading books, and attending professional workshops and conferences, they too have been proven to be mostly ineffective because of the lack of generalization from the

ideas shared in those events (Kratochwill, 2007; Zins, 1996). To emphasize this point, even *The Blueprint III* (1997) stated that, “research has documented that fewer than 10% of participants in traditional professional development activities actually apply their new knowledge and skills in their practice” (p. 21). With researchers and educational leaders claiming that the models above are ineffective most of the time, then, what type of professional development is best for school psychologists given the dynamics of their role and the knowledge that some do have to work in isolation due to the vast number of school districts employing school psychologists?

According to the NASP *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (2010) in conjunction with the NASP *Standards for Graduate Preparation of School Psychologists* (2010), *Standards for the Credentialing of School Psychologists* (2010), and *Principles for Professional Ethics* (2010), there are identified national principles that guide such things as professional practice, credentialing, ethics in psychology practice, preparation, and professional development. According to NASP (2010), there are ten domains of general school psychology:

1. Data-Based Decision Making and Accountability
2. Consultation and Collaboration
3. Interventions and Instructional Support to Develop Academic Skills
4. Interventions and Mental Health Service to Develop Social and Life Skills
5. School-wide Practices to Promote Learning
6. Preventative and Responsive Services
7. Family-School Collaboration Services
8. Diversity in Development and Learning

## 9. Research and Program Evaluation

## 10. Legal, Ethical, and Professional Practice

The NASP (2010) explained that these standards “represent the official policy of NASP regarding the delivery of comprehensive school psychological services” (p. 2). In addition, the NASP (2010) indicated that the model “provides direction to school psychologists, students, and faculty in school psychology, administrators of school psychology services, and consumers of school psychological services regarding excellence in professional school psychology” (p. 2).

In evaluating the NASP (2010) domains of general school psychology from a school psychologist or even a supervisor standpoint, the list is quite exhaustive. The NASP (2010) did relieve some anxiety in stating, “Not all school psychologists or school systems will be able to meet every standard contained within this document (*Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services*). Nevertheless, it was anticipated that these guidelines would serve as a model for effective program development and professional practice on federal, state, and local levels” (p. 3). The model is very comprehensive and serves as resource for school psychological services, but it still lacks any research on the professional development models that can assist school districts in providing meaningful support and professional development for school psychologists where they may be the only one in the district or have multiple school psychologists in the district.

While the NASP does not cover specific models of professional development that are effective in meeting the standards, it did, in their document *Principles for*



*Professional Ethics* (2010), provide guidelines or suggestions for professional development and recognition systems:

Individual school psychologists and the school psychological services unit develop professional development plans annually. The school psychological services unit ensures that continuing professional development of its personnel is both adequate for and relevant to the service delivery priorities of the unit and that recognition systems exist to reflect the continuum of professional development activities embraced by its personnel.

- 6.1 All school psychologists within the unit actively participate in activities designed to continue, enhance, and upgrade their professional training and skills to help ensure quality service provision.
- 6.2 The school psychological services unit provides support (e.g., funding, time, supervision) to ensure that school psychologists have sufficient access to continuing professional development and supervision activities at a minimal level necessary to maintain the Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP).
- 6.3 School psychologists develop a formal professional development plan and update this plan annually. The goals, objectives, and activities of the plan are influenced by the following factors in order of priority: (1) the most pressing needs of the population and community served; (2) the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to implement initiatives sponsored by the unit; and (3) the individual interest areas of the school psychologists employed by the unit.
- 6.4 School psychologists seek and use appropriate types and levels of supervision as they acquire new knowledge, skills, and abilities through the professional development process.

- 6.5 School psychologists document the type, level, and intensity of their professional development activities. The school psychological services unit provides technology and personnel resources to assist in these activities.
- 6.6 School psychologists individually seek appropriate levels of advanced recognition to reflect on-going professional development.
- 6.7 School psychological services units provide levels of recognition within the unit that reflect the professional development of the school psychologists in the unit.

With a firm knowledge and understanding of the NASP recommendations and guidelines, there has been limited research and data as they pertain to effective professional development models geared directly toward school psychologist. It was noted which professional development opportunities and models were not as effective. There have though been some reports on promising professional development models for school psychologists and it revolves around collaboration (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006).

In the NASP report *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (2010), the term collaboration and collaborate were mentioned 38 times in the 12 page guiding document. This signifies that the NASP believed that collaboration is essential to the development of school psychologists. It is clearly understood, according to research, that the educational environment changes rapidly and thus school psychologists need to engage in professional development to keep current (Branstetter, 2012; Fagan & Wise, 1994; Fowler & Harrison, 2001; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006; Ysseldyke et al., 2006; Zins & Murphy, 1996). Extensive research in professional development for school psychologists has been a focus in numerous articles by Joseph Zins regarding the model of peer support groups. According

to Zins and Murphy (1996), “The peer support group (PSG), which is characterized by the sharing of expertise and knowledge, the provision of mutual support, and joint problem solving among professional colleagues, has been advanced as promising means of promoting professional growth and development” (p. 175). The peer support groups involve a collection of individuals who share a common interest, meet on occasion to collaborate, learn together, share expertise, and support one another. What makes this model more beneficial than other models of professional development is the fact that the others fail to address the needs of the school psychologists to engage in meaningful and collaborative conversations with peers. Other models also fail to provide an environment that promotes ongoing learning and moral support (Zins, 1996). Zins and a variety of higher education colleagues engaged in PSGs in 1987 as a way to combine their energies and talents for research. They found that, though only meeting a few times a year, that the support, sharing of expertise, and combining talents led to enhanced levels of individual approaches to school intervention and expanded their influence on the entire field as a whole (Zins et al., 1996).

Based on Zins’ work with colleagues, other individuals have examined the role of peer support groups and determined the advantages and disadvantages of utilizing the model for school psychologists. In reviewing a variety of literature, the advantages appear to far outweigh the disadvantages (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Miller et al., 2008; Zins et al., 1996).

Some of the advantages of forming a peer group that focuses on collaborative problem solving or practicing new skills include increased morale, networking, familiarity with resources, sharing expertise, sharing experiences from workshops or

conferences, improvement of skills, enhancing the professional's resiliency, preventing burnout, and building capacity (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Huebner, Gilligan, & Cobb, 2002; Zins & Murphy, 1996). Some of the disadvantages of utilizing the peer support group for school psychologists are the fact that school psychologists sometimes practice in isolation and have difficulty developing a group. In addition, time pressures and geographic distances may make scheduling meetings difficult (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008).

In 1996, Zins and Murphy surveyed 500 NASP members and of the 399 useable responses, 64% indicated that they were presently or previously in a peer support group. Of the 64%, slightly under 50% were currently involved in a PSG. The study did not define what the PSG looked like in each situation (e.g. how large the PSG was, how often they met, etc.). Of those that were involved or were previously involved, they appeared to have had favorable experiences. According to Zins and Murphy (1996),

PSG participants perceived the greatest benefits to be in the areas of improved skills and knowledge as well as in job enthusiasm. In addition, they associated the following elements with group success: having enthusiastic and committed participants; structured meetings (i.e., relevant, mutually selected topics, consistent meeting times); convenient times and places to meet; administrative support; members with common professional goals, interests, and commitment; and an atmosphere of mutual respect, openness, and trust. (p. 180)

With these outcomes, it is obvious that there are clear advantages to PSGs. Zins and Murphy (1996) did notice some limitations to the study and would be interested in further

study as it pertains to how frequently the groups met, their size, and whether they had a formal or informal structure.

Overall, it appears, through the literature review, that there are a variety of professional development models being practiced throughout the nation. In their publication, *Professional Development and Supervision of School Psychologists from Intern to Expert* (2008), which is a joint publication with Corwin Press and NASP, Harvey and Struzziero displayed a chart of 16 professional development methods. In the chart, the advantages and disadvantages of each method were displayed with little evidence as to the origins of those conclusions; but, nevertheless, the chart has been used by supervisors, school psychologists, and school districts. There has been limited research, however, that displays strong evidence of one method over another as a means of supporting sustainable professional development but it appears that most evidence points to the use of PSGs. Rebecca Branstetter, Ph.D., in her 2012 publication *The School Psychologist's Survival Guide*, gave advice to others in school psychology about how to manage the stress of the job:

There are many different forms of flocking that can be useful for self-care. What no one tells you about being a school psychologist is that it can actually be a fairly isolating experience. Even though you are around people all day, you are typically never around *your people* – other school psychologists. Other school psychologists are the ones who “get it” right away and have practical advice or comfort for you. You may even find you can “trade” assessment cases from time to time if you need to. Knowing that you have that support is priceless. (p. 199)

This statement alone in a recent publication of 2012 signified that professional development for school psychologists should not be taken lightly or overlooked. This claim provides the means to continue looking at PSGs or in other terms professional learning communities (PLC) as a preferred professional development model.

### **Professional Learning Communities**

Numerous studies indicate that happy individuals are successful across multiple life domains, including their professional lives, and that the happiness – success link exists not only because successful people are happy but also because the experience of positive emotions engenders success. (Miller et al., 2008, p. 682)

Research suggests that people are generally happier when they are surrounded by people who provide a strong and supportive social network. School psychologists are encouraged to develop close relationships with their colleagues and to make themselves highly visible and available among their coworkers. One of the aspects of the job that school psychologists report being most satisfied with are relationships with coworkers. (Miller et al., 2008, p. 682)

Peer support groups (PSGs) have been identified, through literature and research, as a model of professional development that is very encouraging and can be useful for school psychologists. The PSGs again have been characterized, according to Zins and Murphy (1996), “by the sharing of expertise and knowledge, the provision of mutual support, and joint problem solving among professional colleagues, has been advanced as promising means of promoting professional growth and development” (p. 175). The PSGs have been beneficial but the framework and procedures within the PSGs may be very loose. This is where the context and framework within professional learning

communities (PLCs) may come in to provide guidance for the PSGs. According to DuFour et al. (2010), PLCs are 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. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (p. 11). The PLCs basically take the concepts of a PSG and integrate it into the educational environment with a focus on learning in a collaborative culture where the individuals in the learning community are committed to each other and to the learning of each student with members having common goals and accountability for one another. There are six key elements of the PLC process.

The first key element of the PLC process is the focus on learning. According to DuFour et al. (2010), the base of PLC is driven by three essential questions: (1) What do we want each student to learn? (2) How will we know when each student has learned it? and (3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?.

Applying this scope of thinking to school psychology is fairly easy as school psychologists are focused on doing what is best for kids and by understanding the big picture as a collective, collaborative group. In PLCs, members work together to clarify exactly what can be done to help students, how to monitor, and how to respond when students continue to struggle. School psychologists are trained in a variety of domains that can affect student outcomes.

The next key element is the understanding that a PLC is a collaborative team where the members work interdependently to achieve common goals for which members are mutually accountable (DuFour et al., 2010). The PLC is driven by common vision,

purpose, and goals, and are directly linked to the purpose of learning for all. The collaborative team is the engine that drives the PLCs. Where peer support groups may be effective and collaborative, the team in the PLC reflects upon whether or not people within the group are focused on the right issues and how to hold each other mutually accountable. DuFour et al. (2010) stated, “In many schools, staff members are willing to collaborate on a variety of topics as long as the focus of the conversation stops at their classroom door. In a PLC, collaboration represents a systematic process in which teachers work together interdependently in order to impact their classroom practice in ways that will lead to better results for their students, for their team, and for their school” (p. 12).

In addition, the PLCs engage in collective inquiry to drive best practices. According to DuFour et al. (2010), the PLCs, “inquire about their current reality – including their present practices and the levels of achievement of their students. They attempt to arrive at consensus on vital questions by building shared knowledge rather than pooling opinions. They have an acute sense of curiosity and openness to new possibilities” (p. 12). By obtaining a level of collective inquiry in a PLC, members can develop new skills, build capacity, develop awareness, and have the potential to shift attitudes, beliefs, and habits thus leading to a transformation of school culture.

In a PLC, members are action-oriented meaning they move quickly to turn visions and goals into reality. They focus on the right work in a collaborative manner. Many groups can talk issues to death, but in the PLC members provide focus in a collaborative manner. Members in the PLC framework understand the concept of “learning by doing.” They commit themselves to reading, listening, planning, or thinking, and have a



commitment to working with others and acting upon vision and goals in a collective manner.

Another key element of a PLC is the commitment to continuous improvement. Members within a PLC understand that the educational environment is continually changing and instead of being reactive to changes, the PLC members focus on being proactive. The PLCs are not interested in the status quo. The PLCs are always looking for better ways to achieve goals and accomplish the purpose of the organization (DuFour et al., 2010).

The last key element is results orientation. According to DuFour et al. (2010), “Members of a PLC realize that all of their efforts must be assessed on the basis of results rather than intentions” (p. 13). This holds true for any action in the school system. The educational environment is a data-based decision making machine and the PLCs are not exempt to that practice. The PLCs need to assess their goals and actions. The purpose is to be results-oriented in order to enhance the educational environment from building capacity to enhancing student achievement. There should be clear focus on the goals established within the PLC and those goals should align with school and district goals and measured and evaluated on a frequent basis.

In the end, DuFour et al. (2010) summarized with three big ideas that drive the work of the PLC. The essence of the PLC process is captured in the following:

1. The purpose of our school is to ensure all students learn at high levels.
2. Helping all students learn requires a collaborative and collective effort.
3. To assess our effectiveness in helping all students learn we must focus on results – evidence of student learning – and use results to inform and improve

our professional practice and respond to students who need intervention or enrichment (p. 14).

## **Conclusion**

After looking through and synthesizing various forms of literature regarding school psychologists, professional development, and professional learning communities, multiple research questions emerged. While the research on school psychology, professional development, and professional learning communities is extensive, there appears to be minimal literature as it pertaining to effective means of professional development for school psychologists. Though the literature calls for the collaboration among school psychologists, there is limited research on how that is to be developed. Given the itinerant nature of the role of the school psychologist serving multiple buildings or school districts, more guidance may be needed for supervisors of school psychologists in order to promote professional growth through collaboration and meaningful professional development. Therefore, research that provides insights to school psychologists and supervisors of school psychologists about professional development for school psychologists utilizing the learning community framework (DuFour, 2010) should be a valuable addition to the knowledge base. This qualitative study investigated the effectiveness of school psychology learning communities as a way to provide professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the educational environment.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **Methodology**

Chapter 3 describes the design of the study. This chapter includes a discussion of how subjects were chosen and how the study was conducted. The data collection and methods of analysis are also explained in detail.

#### **Research Question**

This qualitative study investigated the effectiveness of school psychology learning communities as a way to provide professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the educational environment. The following grand tour question guided this study:

What is the perceived impact of utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest?

To address that question, the following sub-questions were answered:

1. Do school psychologists perceive that collaboration within the learning community contributes to an increase in knowledge and skills?
2. Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community allows school psychologists to develop consistency in services they provide to schools?
3. Do school psychologists perceive that the collaboration within the learning community affects student achievement?
4. Do school psychologists perceive that SMART (DuFour, 2010) goals guide and identify professional development needs?

5. Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community increases job satisfaction of school psychologists?
6. Do school psychologists perceive that learning communities are a form of meaningful professional development to enhance knowledge and skills of school psychologists?
7. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development?

### **Research Design Rationale**

A qualitative design was used for this study. The researcher described, decoded, translated, and made meaning of an experience as it relates to the professional learning community framework for school psychologists. According to Merriam (2009), “Basically, qualitative researchers are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (p. 13). Prior to this current research, there has been little previous research conducted on this topic and the qualitative research design will provide a rich description of what is being studied and leaves room for further research on a wider scale. Understanding the aspect in which the professional learning community framework is useful for meaningful professional development and growth for school psychologists is important for future studies.

### **Case Study Design**

There are different types of designs for qualitative research. The approaches include narrative research, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, and case

study (Merriam, 2009). For the purpose of this study, the case study design was utilized. “Qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive” (Merriam, 2009, p. 39). A case study is a bounded system where the researcher can hone in on a specific area. The researcher, for instance, could draw a circle and label it professional development for school psychologists. The researcher could then draw a heart in the middle of the circle and research a bounded area, which in the case of this study is the utilization of the professional learning community framework. The researcher, in this case has chosen the case study design due to an interest in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1994). In addition, the researcher wants to get as close to the subjects (school psychologists) of interest as possible with the opportunity to interview and observe access to factors such as thoughts, feelings, and desires. As this particular study was set within the educational setting, the use of the case study format was desirable according to strengths presented by Merriam (2009):

Because of its strengths, case study is a particularly appealing design for applied fields of study such as education, social work, administration, health, and so on. An applied field’s processes, problems, and programs can be examined to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps even improve practice. Case study has proven particularly useful for studying educational innovations, evaluating programs, and informing policy. (p. 51)

The selection of the case study format ties directly to the original research questions within the study. The research itself is to study and evaluate educational innovations in order to inform school administrators, supervisors of school psychologists, school psychologists, and potentially other related services supervisors or staff.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The professional role of the researcher was that of a Special Education Administrator. The researcher works directly with the facilitator of the school psychology learning community, provides that individual with support, and has served in that role since the implementation of the professional learning community foundation two years ago.

For this study, the researcher had access to documents that were useful in the study. Documents are “a wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study at hand” (Merriam, 2009, p. 139). These documents included SMART goal documents that the group had produced. In addition, the researcher had access to observation opportunities. “Where interviews are a primary source of data in qualitative research; so too are observations” (Merriam, 2009, p. 117). Observations could include a variety of elements including the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and the researchers own behavior (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1994).

The researcher assumed the role of facilitator for focus group interviews and individual interviews. Again, the individuals participating in focus group and individual interviews were aware of the purpose of the study prior to the interview. While it is understood by the researcher that the interviewer and respondent bring biases,

predispositions, attitudes, and physical characteristics that affect the interview, “a skilled interviewer accounts for these factors in order to evaluate the data being obtained.

Taking a stance that is nonjudgmental, sensitive, and respectful of the respondent is but a beginning point in the process” (Merriam, 2009, p. 109).

### **Participants**

The 16 school psychologists for this study came from a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest. The seven-district cooperative had a collective student population of 16,000 students. The largest district within the cooperative had 9,000 students. Out of the 16,000 students within the cooperative, there were nearly 1,300 identified individuals with disabilities. The cooperative processed nearly 3,200 Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and conducted nearly 1,400 Multidisciplinary Team Meetings (MDTs) annually. The cooperative served students Birth-21 in rural and urban settings. The population of the largest urban setting was 50,000.

The school psychologists employed within the cooperative covered a vast area. Each month during the school year, the school psychologists met in their learning community. A veteran school psychologist who had 19 years experience in education as a teacher and school psychologist facilitated the monthly learning community. The school psychologists had developed norms that they follow. During the meetings, they collaborated, worked on SMART Goals that were related to their professional development needs, shared case studies, and participated in a variety of other activities. In addition, each year, they studied a book together based on an identified need of professional growth. In addition to the monthly meetings, they met at times when district professional development was not applicable to their profession and growth.

For the focus group interviews, the 16 school psychologists serving school-age students were divided into two groups based on years of experience in order to keep the focus groups manageable in size. Most writers suggest a focus group size of six to 10 participants (Merriam, 2009). These focus groups contained eight school psychologists in each group.

Three out of 16 school psychologists were selected using purposeful sampling to participate in individual interviews. Purposeful sampling is the most common form of sampling for qualitative study (Chen, 1981). “Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). For this study the researcher selected three individuals based on observations and documents to help with discovery, understanding, and insight. Chen (1981) explained the premise being purposeful sampling:

The situation is analogous to one in which a number of expert consultants are called in on a difficult medical case. These consultants – also a purposive sample – are not called in to get an average opinion that would correspond to the average opinion of the entire medical profession. They are called in precisely because of their special experience and competence (p. 440).

In order to further proceed with the study, the researcher obtained Human Subjects approval from the University of South Dakota and gained permission from the school district that employs all of the school psychologists to request permission for the school psychologists to participate in the study.



## Instrumentation

The instrumentation for this study consisted of group interviews with 16 school psychologists who served school-age students and three individual interviews. The scripted interviews (Appendix A) were adapted from the work of Morrow (2010) and Oliver et al. (2003). Permission was obtained via email from Julie Morrow (2010) to utilize her scripted interview she used in her dissertation titled *Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning Communities as Opportunities for Promoting Professional Growth* (Appendix A).

In addition, the interview questions from Morrow (2010) were adapted for this study with additional focus from Oliver et al. (2003) assessment called The Professional Learning Communities Assessment (PLCA). This assessment was used to determine whether or not schools adhered to five identifying attributes of a professional learning community: (1) supportive and shared leadership, (2) shared values and vision, (3) supportive conditions, (4) collective learning and application, and (5) shared personal practice. While the PLCA reliability was tested using the Cronach's Coefficient Alpha that signified that the internal consistency had a coefficient span from .83 to .93, the PLCA had to be adapted as the school psychology PLC functions in different contexts than that of a traditional school PLC as identified by Richard DuFour. For the purpose of this research, the attributes that were included in the interviews were (1) collective learning and application, (2) shared personal practice, (3) supportive conditions – relationships, (4) supportive conditions – structure, and (5) overall impact. While only some components of the PLCA were considered in the development of the scripted interview, it is important to note that the authors of the PLCA granted permission for

future researchers to use the PLCA in their book titled, *Reculturing Schools as Professional Learning Communities* (2003, p. 74).

When determining to utilize interviews for this study, focus was placed upon the use of qualitative research interviews over quantitative structured interviews. Alan Bryman pointed out in his book *Social Research Methods, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition* (2012), there is a difference between the quantitative structured interview and qualitative research interviews. According to Bryman (2012), the differences include the following:

- “The approach tends to be much less structured in qualitative research. In quantitative research, the approach is structured to maximize the reliability and validity of measurement of key concepts. It is also more structured because the researcher has a clearly specified set of research questions that are to be investigated. The structured interview is designed to answer these questions. Instead, in qualitative research, there is an emphasis on greater generality in the formulation of initial research ideas and on interviewees’ own perspectives” (p. 470).
- “In qualitative interviewing, there is much greater interest in the interviewee’s point of view; in quantitative research, the interview reflects the researcher’s concerns. This contrast is a direct outcome of the previous one” (p. 470).
- “In qualitative interviewing, ‘rambling’ or going off at tangents is often encouraged—it gives insight into what the interviewee sees as relevant and important; in quantitative research, it is usually regarded as a nuisance and discouraged” (p. 470).

- “In qualitative interviewing, interviewers can depart significantly from any schedule or guide that is being used. They can ask new questions that follow up interviewees’ replies and can vary the order of questions and even the wording of questions. In quantitative research, none of these things should be done, because they will compromise the standardization of the interview process and hence the reliability and validity of measurement” (p. 470).
- “As a result, qualitative interviewing tends to be flexible, responding to the direction in which interviewees take the interview and perhaps adjusting the emphases in the research as a result of significant issues that emerge in the course of interviews. By contrast, structured interviews are typically inflexible, because of the need to standardize the way in which each interviewee is dealt with” (p. 470).
- “In qualitative interviewing, the researcher wants rich, detailed answers; in quantitative research the interview is supposed to generate answers that can be coded and processed quickly” (p. 470).
- “In qualitative interviewing, the interviewee may be interviewed on more than one and sometimes even several occasions. In quantitative research, unless the research is longitudinal in character, the person will be interviewed on one occasion only” (p. 470).

With these considerations in mind, the school psychologists were divided into two groups that were manageable to interview. For the purpose of this study, the groups were divided by years of service as a school psychologist. Each group included eight psychologists with one group including two school psychology interns who had

participated in the learning community for a full year. For the individual interviews, three out of 16 school psychologists were purposely selected (Merriam, 2009 & Chein, 1981) in order to provide some more clarity to the perceptions of the professional learning community for school psychologists in the seven-district special education cooperative. To ensure there was no bias in the interview process, the researcher hired a professional transcriptionist to document the interview in person or via video and/or audio recording.

### **Data Collection**

The data collected for the study included document analysis and participant observations. The main source of data came from the focus group interviews and individual interviews.

**Documents.** “Documents include just about anything in existence prior to the research at hand. Common documents include official records, letters, newspaper accounts, poems, and so on” (Merriam, 2009, p. 140). The researcher has access to documents produced by the school psychology PLC. These documents include meetings agendas, meeting notes, and documented SMART goals. There are limitations to utilizing documents such as documents being incomplete thus not having any continuity, documents not being produced for research purposes, and lack of authenticity and accuracy (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1994). Even with limitations, documents can be a good source of data for numerous reasons. Merriam (2009) explained that

- Documents are easily accessible, free, and contain information that would take an investigator enormous time and effort to gather otherwise (p. 155).

- Documents can be used in the same manner as data from interviews or observations. The data can furnish descriptive information, verify emerging hypotheses, advance new categories and hypotheses, offer historical understanding, track change and development, and so on (p. 155).
- Documentary material is stable. Unlike interviewing and observation, the presence of the investigator does not alter what is being studied. Document data are “objective” sources of data compared to other forms (p. 155).

**Observations.** The researcher was able to have access to observe the school psychology learning community. Observations are different from interviews in that observations take place in the setting where the phenomenon takes place (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1994). In addition, “Observational data represent a firsthand encounter with the phenomenon of interest rather than a secondhand account of the world obtained in an interview” (Merriam, 2009, p. 117). Observations could include a variety of elements including the physical setting, the participants, activities and interactions, conversations, subtle factors, and the researcher’s own behavior (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1994).

Observations for this particular study took place in the actual learning community or in the individual SMART goal groups that the school psychologists had formed. The school psychologists had developed SMART goals. From there, they worked on areas of interest to them and worked as a group to meet the goals they had established. These groups can meet at any time. The large group PLC took place on a monthly basis and during occasional professional development days. Observations contributed minimally due to other professional obligations by the researcher.

**Interviews.** Interviews were the primary source of data for the study. Data was available from focus group interviews and individual interviews. The focus group interviews consisted of two groups of eight with the researcher utilizing a script (Appendix A). After the focus group interviews, three individuals were purposely selected based on special experience and competence as determined by the researcher. Questions for the three individual interviews manifested out of codes within the focus group interviews. The individual interview was utilized to further discover, understand, and gain insight on the phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2009). Interviews, again, were the primary source of data for the study due to the limited opportunity to observe and with the realization that data from documents has some limitations. Patton (2002) explained,

We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe.... We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world that the meaning they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. (pp. 340-341)

With interviewing being a key component to this research, it is important to identify the structure being used to interview and gather the data derived from the interview. The interviews had components of being semistructured and unstructured/informal (Merriam, 2009). A structured interview according to Merriam (2009) contains the following

attributes: (1) wording of questions is predetermined, (2) order of questions is predetermined, (3) interview is oral form of a written survey, and (4) in qualitative studies, usually used to obtain data such as age, gender, etc. (p. 89). A semistructured interview according to Merriam (2009) contains the following attributes: (1) includes a mix of more and less structured interview questions, (2) all questions used flexibly, (3) usually specific data required from all respondents, (4) largest part of interview guided by list of questions or issues to be explored, and (5) no predetermined wording or order (p. 89). Lastly, an unstructured/informal interview according to Merriam (2009) contains the following attributes: (1) open-ended questions, (2) flexible, exploratory, (3) more like a conversation, (4) used when researcher does not know enough about phenomenon to ask relevant questions, (5) goal is learning from this interview to formulate questions for later interviews, and (6) used primarily in ethnography, participant observations, and case study.

The researcher developed a script for the focus group interviews, which made the interview more semistructured in one component but many of the questions were open-ended, thus prompting the interview to be more flexible and exploratory. In addition, the unstructured/informal format allowed the researcher to learn from the focus group interview to formulate questions for the three individual interviews. Prior to the focus group interview, the researcher conducted a pilot test of the interview questions with an outside interviewee pool. A pilot interview is essential for trying out questions but also gives the researcher practice in interviewing (Merriam, 2009).

The focus group interviews took place at a mutually agreed time and place and had a time limit of one hour to be respectful of the subject's time. The individual

interviews took place at a mutually agreed time and place. This interview had a time limit of one hour. A professional transcriptionist in person or via video and/or audio recording documented all interviews. Transcription of interviews provides the best database for analysis and allows the researcher to spend more time analyzing the data instead of transcribing (Merriam, 2009). Interviews were conducted in February 2013 with a professional transcriptionist documenting the interview in person or via video and/or audio recording.

### **Data Analysis**

The premise of this research study was to study the perceived impact of utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special cooperative in the Midwest. To focus data collection and data analysis, and to assist with the coding process, the program Dedoose was used. According to Dedoose (2012),

Dedoose was designed from the ground up – by researchers, for researchers – to meet the needs of today’s social scientists working in academia, marketing, and education – virtually anyone looking for innovative software to facilitate the search for answers to research questions via qualitative or quantitative and quantitative data. These data may be numbers, scale scores, demographics, stories, field notes, vignettes, interview or focus group transcripts, photos, and the list goes on, AND they may represent individuals, belief systems, settings, culture, relationships, and this list goes on too – clever research teams looking for rich, reliable valid, and comprehensive answers to their research questions.

(retrieved from [www.dedoose.com](http://www.dedoose.com) on December 2nd, 2012)



This program allowed the researcher to take the information and enter it into a data collection system to produce output in a variety of forms that identified trends and outcomes. The program also assisted the researcher in the management of the data. According to Merriam (2009), it is difficult to, “cleanly separate ‘data management’ from ‘data analysis’ in qualitative research. For example, code-and-retrieve is a commonly used approach. Coding involves labeling passages of text according to content, and retrieving is providing a means to collect similarly labeled passages” (p. 194). This is where Dedoose will play a significant role even if to make coding and retrieval less tedious (Merriam, 2009). Utilizing technology can shorten the management process while allowing the researcher more time to analyze the data, but should only be used to assist the researcher. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) pointed out that “assisted is the operative word here, because the computer program only helps as an organizing or categorizing tool, and does not do the analysis for the researcher” (p. 187).

As far as analyzing the data once gathered and put into Dedoose for management, there were certain steps that the researcher followed in order to pull the case study together (Merriam, 2009). Again, the first step was to review the data, including documents, interviews, and observation comments, and then to integrate them into the Dedoose management system. The data within Dedoose was sorted chronologically and then the system will allow the researcher to sort, categorize, and analyze the data. During analysis of the data with coding techniques, certain categories, themes, and patterns began to emerge. The categories were named by the researcher and connected to the research questions in the study. The identified categories were used to describe and interpret the data (Merriam, 2009). Once the researcher has thoroughly analyzed and

synthesized the data, the interpretation was based on the seven research sub-questions in the study. In further chapters, once the data was collected, the researcher presented and answered each research question based on a review of the data and major findings in the study.

In order to generalize results of this study, have trustworthiness, and be transferrable, the researcher paid respect to internal validity, reliability, and external validity. In order to shore up internal validity or credibility, which is “the correspondence between research and the real world” (Wolcott, 2003, p. 160), the researcher utilized triangulation. Denzin (1978) proposed four types of triangulation: (1) the use of multiple methods, (2) use of multiple sources of data, (3) use of multiple investigators, or (4) use of multiple theories to confirm emerging findings. This study was composed of data from interviews, observations, and document analysis. With these methods, the researcher was able to employ the concepts behind triangulation to enhance validity (Denzin, 1978; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002).

In addition, the second strategy that the researcher utilized was the concept of member checks (Merriam, 2009). “Also called respondent validation, the idea here is that you solicit feedback on your emerging findings from some of the people that you interviewed” (Merriam, 2009, p. 217). Maxwell (2005) stated “This is the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on, as well as being an important way of identifying your own biases and misunderstanding of what you observed” (p. 111). Another way for the researcher to ensure validity is to utilize

peer examination meaning having someone familiar with the topic being studied examine or review the data and provide feedback (Merriam, 2009).

“Reliability refers to the extent to which research findings can be replicated” (Merriam, 2009, p. 220). Strategies to enhance reliability are much the same as enhancing validity – they include triangulation, peer examination, investigator’s position, and the audit trail (Merriam, 2009). An important concept that will assist the researcher is to maintain an audit trail or “log” of events leading up to the end of the study.

Richards (2005) wrote that

Good qualitative research gets much of its claim to validity from the researcher’s ability to show convincingly how they got there, and how they built confidence that this was the best account possible. This is why qualitative research has a special need for project history, in the form of a diary or log of processes. (p. 143)

The audit trail will not only help the researcher but also the reader as in a qualitative study, an audit trail “describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decision were made throughout the inquiry” (Merriam, 2009, p. 223).

As far as having the ability to transfer or have external validity, the researcher provided descriptive data to make transferability possible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described transferability in which “the burden of proof lies less with the original investigator than with the person seeking to make an application elsewhere. The original inquirer cannot know the sites which transferability might be sought, but the appliers can and do” (p. 298). The researcher utilized descriptive data, rich, thick descriptions, and give careful attention to selecting the study sample (Merriam, 2009).

**Summary**

In summary, the researcher collected data through four sources: document analysis, observation, focus interviews, and individual interviews. The information received from the interviews was the main generator of data that helped to answer the seven research questions within this study. The data sources focused on professional learning communities and how they are applied to school psychologists working in a special education cooperative in the Midwest. Chapter 4 of the study reports the results of the data analysis.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **Findings**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of school psychology learning communities as a way to provide professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the educational environment. The following grand tour question guided this study:

What is the perceived impact of utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest?

To address that question, the following sub-questions were answered:

1. Do school psychologists perceive that collaboration within the learning community contribute to an increase in knowledge and skills?
2. Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community allows school psychologists to develop consistency in services they provide to schools?
3. Do school psychologists perceive that the collaboration within the learning community affects student achievement?
4. Do school psychologist perceive that SMART (DuFour, 2010) goals guide and identify professional development needs?
5. Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community increases job satisfaction of school psychologists?
6. Do school psychologists perceive that learning communities are a form of meaningful professional development to enhance knowledge and skills of school psychologists?

7. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development?

To adequately investigate the proposed questions, the following data collection procedures were used: (1) two focus group interviews, (2) three individual interviews, (3) documents, and (4) observations. Transcriptionists were hired to transcribe all interviews. In addition, the web-based program Dedoose was utilized to archive all the data. By utilizing Dedoose, the researcher was able to organize this material. Yin (2008) calls this organization of the qualitative data as the case study database. By forming a case study database, the researcher can locate specific data during intensive analysis (Merriam, 2009).

Merriam (2009) stated, “There is no standard format for reporting qualitative research. The contents of a qualitative study report depend on the audience’s interest as well as the investigator’s purpose in doing the research in the first place” (p. 245). The audience identified in this study may included school districts, educational cooperatives, school administrators, supervisors of school psychologists, school psychology preparation programs, and school psychologists regarding the use of the professional learning community model as a means of providing meaningful professional development for school psychologists. In Chapter 4, the researcher reports the findings with the audience in mind in order to “take the reader into the case situation and experience – a person’s life, a group’s life, or a program’s life” (Patton, 2002, p. 258).

Chapter 4 contains a synthesis of the documents, observations, and interviews based on the grand tour research question and the seven supporting questions in this

study. Each research question is presented and answered by a review of the major findings with sub-questions. A short introduction about the history of the school psychology PLC will be followed by a discussion regarding each sub question.

### **Introduction**

In June of 2009, I began a new adventure as a special education administrator for a seven-district special education cooperative. Prior to becoming an administrator, I was a special education teacher for a district with 50,000+ students and a special education teacher for a district with 2,775 students. As a special education teacher, I taught multiple subjects at the secondary level. With my new position, I had the opportunity to work with the seven school districts and supervise many programs and special education staff. One task I was charged with was to plan for and develop professional development for related services personnel. This was a very diverse group of around 80 individuals with the titles of School Psychologist, Speech/Language Pathologist, Physical Therapist, Occupational Therapist, Educational Consultant, Behavior Consultant, Transition Specialist, Teacher of the Visually Impaired, and Deaf Educator/Consultant. What made the task difficult was the fact that I had no special expertise in any of these areas. I was a generalist in special education instruction at the secondary level. For my first four years as a teacher, the best understanding I had of a school psychologist was someone who came into my classroom, worked with a student in the back for about an hour, and then sent a report through the mail one month later. To this day, I cannot remember that person's name. With this lack of experience, I was very clear during my first meeting to explain to the group who I was, what my background was, and the fact that I will never

pretend to know their jobs as well as them. By having that clarity at the beginning, I felt that they knew I wanted to work with them and learn from them.

The professional development prior to that time and for the first year of my position consisted of all related services personnel placed in a room one Friday a month. Trying to differentiate professional development for that group was extremely difficult and it was my least exciting task as a new administrator. It was overwhelming and those Fridays scared me to death. The professional development during that time did not relate to the majority of the individuals in the room. In addition to the large group, there were times for each discipline to meet as a group. For instance, the school psychologists went to a room and met for a brief time. A supervisor attended and would oversee each of those individual discipline-specific meetings. There were team leaders of each group but a majority of the agenda was supervisor-driven. As one individual from the interview stated when asked what the professional development was like prior to PLCs, that person reported,

I mean prior to PLCs, I don't remember any professional development specifically for us. We had meetings. We had meetings every month, but they were usually led by a supervisor and they were very just procedurally centered so – we talked about paperwork or procedures. (Individual Interview Participant 1)

Another participant felt the same way about the professional development prior to PLCs. They stated that,

Those meetings were kind of sit and get types of meetings. They would give us updates on what was going on in the district or maybe what's going on at the state or federal level but I never felt engaged. It wasn't always information that was



totally relevant as to which I think frustrated a lot of us. Okay, you are telling us this, how is that relevant to us? You know it was more relevant towards resource teachers or even ed consultants, but it was more just we don't really know what school psychs do so we're just going to give you the same information that we give to everybody else and hope that you can do something with it. I just felt like there wasn't a lot of connection to or meaning in the information that was shared with us. It was more procedural paperwork. (Individual Interview Participant 2)

When asked if any of the supervisors were school psychologists, each group reported that none of the supervisors were school psychologists. A few individuals in the focus and individual interviews claimed that those professional development days each month were called "Black Hole Fridays" by staff. One participant stated,

I mean previous – our previous meetings were painful. I mean basically, whoever was facilitating it, would just try to come up with things to fill the meeting time and people called it "Black Hole Friday" and – we would just sit there and it was painful, it was painful. (Focus Group Participant 1)

Focus Group Participant 11 felt that

In the beginning initially when I started working here I truly had a sense that things were very top down and there was just a lot of expectations that were placed on us and things put on our plate and it was – we were just kind of told, here is what you need to do. I wasn't really sure why and I just would have to kind of carry that out, so I felt kind of overwhelmed.

After learning more about my position the first year, the largest struggle that continued to haunt me was the professional development for the related services. It was,

in my observations, one of the most difficult days for the staff and that perception was solidified by the comments in the individual and focus group interviews.

The summer after my first year as an administrator, I brainstormed ways to make the professional development meaningful and differentiated. In my prior position in another school district, I was responsible for an alternative education program. The program was situated away from the high school in a different part of the community. The small home in the community consisted of a paraeducator, 10-15 students requiring an alternative setting, and myself as the lone certified staff member. Many times, I felt very isolated from other teachers and staff. Though I was very familiar with the high school, it was, at times, an isolating experience. What made the experience better was the formation of professional learning communities (PLCs) at the high school. These PLCs consisted of individuals who shared a common planning time. The composition included teachers from a variety of grade levels and content areas. Teacher leaders guided the PLCs on subjects predetermined by the administrative staff. While some of the topics were unrelated to my professional needs, the collaboration and opportunity to connect with other teachers at the high school was very helpful for my self-esteem, confidence, and overall job satisfaction. Having the opportunity to connect with other adults in education was important to my growth. In addition, I began to feel less isolated.

With the experience I had with a high school PLC, I began to study professional learning communities as a way to provide meaningful professional development for educators, including related services staff. The only information I knew about professional learning communities was the fact that they called a collection of individuals at my last job a PLC and that Richard DuFour's name was connected to professional

learning communities. I began researching work by DuFour and Robert Eaker (2004, 2010) and developed a concept for moving related services to a PLC format. According to DuFour (2010), PLCs are 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. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (p. 11). While there is focus on educators and grade level teams in buildings in the research, I felt I could apply many of the concepts to the development of PLCs. The structure was already in place with discipline specific groups but there was limited focus and according to the interviews, those Friday’s were very difficult for the staff.

At the beginning of my second year in the fall of 2010 and after approval from my supervisors, I presented a PowerPoint to the related services staff. I worked individually with the facilitators in each group on how to guide and facilitate the PLC. I was going to be a support to that person and emphasized the concepts of shared leadership to them. Together, the facilitators and I were able to meet often to discuss how to improve and progress with the PLC framework. While we met as a large group quarterly for an hour, the rest of the time on those days and one Friday a month were left to PLC work that are guided by norms (Appendix E), SMART Goals (Appendix F), and shared leadership. Shared leadership, as defined by one of the participants, “means there is just not one person in charge of the PLCs. There might be one person that facilitates the meetings, but everybody has a role to play, everybody has equal importance in the PLC and everybody contributes” (Individual Interview Participant 1).

The full implementation of PLCs for related services began at the beginning of the 2010/2011 school year. As we are nearing the end of the third year of implementation, the PLC framework, through my observations, have been successful in a variety of different areas. In order to capture data on the effectiveness of this movement, this study was created. While this research focuses on the school psychologist PLC, it should be noted that PLCs for other related services groups are still in existence today and follow the same framework. Again, the purpose of the study is to investigate the effectiveness of school psychology learning communities as a way to provide professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the education environment. This case study research serves as a significant communication device (Yin, 1994) and is written to provide information to an audience (Yin, 1994) that may include school districts, educational cooperatives, school administrators, supervisors of school psychologists, school psychology preparation programs, and school psychologists.

### **Knowledge and Skills**

In the NASP report *Model for Comprehensive and Integrated School Psychological Services* (2010), the terms collaboration and collaborate were mentioned 38 times in the 12 page guiding document. This signifies that the NASP believes that collaboration is essential to the development of school psychologists. Through document analysis, observations, and interviews, it is apparent that collaboration within the learning community contributes to an increase in knowledge and skills. After careful review of the documents and interviews, it is evident that SMART goals guide the work of the school psychologist in a collaborative manner. Some of the accomplishments

documented over the past three years as a result of collaboration on SMART goals include,

- Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) decision-making guidelines
- Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) template
- Three-year re-evaluation decision-making guidelines
- Formative Assessment – Conduct a correlational analysis of WJ-III, WIAT-III, SRI, NeSA, and AIMSWeb scores for students with SLD
- English Language Acquisition (ELA) Consideration: Develop tools for RtI teams to use when gathering information about second-language learners. This information can be used to help teams decide if a student's academic difficulties are due to a language difference or a learning disability/language impairment
- Research and develop ways to help support grade level PLCs in schools by reading *The Five Disciplines of PLC Leaders* by Timothy D. Kanold
- Identify and find ways to share mental health resources in the community
- Research best practices and make recommendations for consistency in goal setting when using AIMSWeb and DIBELS
- Developed an RtI summary template to use when writing MDT reports so that all of the student's RtI information is included
- Raise awareness about the role of the school psychologist and the importance of evidenced-based academic and mental health services to promote student learning and development

- Identify possible social/emotional screeners and assessments to use for early childhood
- Increase our awareness of effective instructional practices and find ways to share this information with teachers
- Increase our awareness of assessments and interventions to use with students who struggle with organization, motivation, and homework completion

In addition, the school psychology PLC has collaboratively engaged in book studies the past two years. Last year, they read and discussed, on a monthly basis *Transforming School Psychology in the RtI Era: A Guide for Administrators and School Psychologists* (Cook et al., 2010). This year, they have been reading *Assessing Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students: A Practical Guide* (Rhodes et al., 2005). Through document analysis, it appears that shared leadership is in effect for all of their PLC book studies with two new facilitators of the book study each month.

In reviewing and coding the interviews, school psychologists perceived that collaboration contributes to an increase in knowledge and skills. One participant stated when asked if PLCs helped with growth, “I feel like it honestly makes me a better school psychologist because I’m constantly learning new things so that I can bring back to my profession” (Focus Group Participant 16). Another participant stated,

I would say one thing is that it has given me the opportunity to stretch my own abilities and stretch my own skills based off of seeing what others are doing and being able to say, okay, somebody is able to do this in their schools. I can

challenge myself to grow and learn and do those things too, as a professional.

(Focus Group Participant 4)

Individual Interview Participant 1 felt that the PLCs have given all of the school psychologists the opportunity to grow their leadership skills because of the nature of the shared leadership component in the PLCs. From their observation, “I’ve seen everybody grow over the last three years and so that’s been really neat to watch” (Individual Interview Participant 1).

From an intern perspective, “As an intern it is nice to have the ability to not only learn from the two supervisors (veteran school psychologists) but also from the whole group of school psychs that have huge amounts of experience, various backgrounds, and various specialties. So, it’s been nice” (Focus Group Participant 10). When asked if being a part of the school psychology PLC made a difference for you as a professional, a veteran school psychologist stated,

Certainly, as the one who has been out of school the longest, it is helpful to me to be around some of these people whose training is fresher than mine to hear what they have to say because it helps me keep up. (Focus Group Participant 3)

Overall, from new interns to veteran school psychologists, it appears that there is consistent evidence that supports the perception that collaboration within the learning community contributes to an increase in knowledge and skills. Document analysis also supports the perceived notion as evidenced by completion of SMART goals and book studies in a collaborative forum.

## **Consistency in Services**

School psychologists perceived that the learning community helps develop consistency in services they provide to schools. Document analysis and coding revealed one item that was consistently added to each month's agenda and that was the "Open Psych Mic." Through analysis, it appears that this piece of the PLC is open to one and all to bring up cases or issues to problem solve as a group. Case studies during the "Open Psych Mic" included such items as identification of a fifth-grade student based on certain criteria and data, services for students aging out of school, social/emotional resources to use with a student, using Section 504, completing determination notices, and a variety of other topics. According to one participant,

I feel like having a time each month to share case studies has helped with consistency because you can hear how other people are making decisions, and I think, just in doing that, it helps us all be more consistent in the way we're making decisions. (Focus Group Participant 1)

All interviews conducted revealed a strong connection with the school psychology PLCs and consistency in practices. In the professional learning community alone, school psychologists are consistent with the norms, which have resulted in trust being established within the group. One school psychologist claimed,

I definitely believe that trust has been a huge part of making our group successful. I think that trust is probably the make it or break it thing that you have to have. If you don't build trust first, I really don't see how you can get anything accomplished. (Individual Interview Participant 2)



With trust, came the ability to collaborate and find consistency. Participants felt that consistency was developed through case studies, SMART goals, and book studies. Some individuals indicated that consistency was found in policy and procedures, eligibility decisions, triennial evaluations, assessment practices, writing reports that are parent friendly, writing reports that are standards based, conducting comprehensive evaluations, and verification statements. Focus Group Participant 8 of the focus group interview captured consistency in the following description:

In the past, we have felt like we have been kind of isolated, kind of like our own little islands in whichever building we happen to go to, and we would always have these peripheral discussions of what sorts of methods and procedures are we using for qualifications, for example, and what do we do here. There was never, I think, a clear-cut, consistent place or forum in which to weigh the pros and cons and kind of get a direction, I guess, as to how we felt we should proceed, whether it be at an elementary or secondary sort of setting, so I think it kind of balances that maintaining our own professional autonomy and our clinical judgment vs. having some direction holistically as an organization as to what procedures we're going to use. In short, I think it has been helpful.

### **Student Achievement**

Analysis revealed that school psychologists perceived that their work within the professional learning community has a connection with student achievement. They felt that the first year, they were really getting their feet wet with the professional learning community concept, trust building, and focusing on consistency of practices in evaluation responsibilities. As far as the last year and this year, one participant stated in regard to

student achievement, “that’s really what we wanted to start focusing on was moving what we were doing in the direction that would more directly affect student achievement. That definitely is our goal now” (Focus Group Participant 1).

School psychologists indicated that they are able to see student achievement being affected by the work that they do on growth rates, goal setting, progress monitoring, SMART goals, facilitating PLCs in their own buildings, sharing interventions and strategies that have a direct effect on students, having discussions on comprehensive evaluations and discussing formative assessment processes, analyzing local, state, and district assessments, and identifying mental health services for students and families. Through document analysis, the prior items that were brought up in the interview were documented as topics within the agenda and notes of the monthly PLC. They also felt that their book studies regarding RtI and a focus on English language learners directly impact overall student achievement. Focus Group Participant 16 captured the impact on student achievement by claiming,

Yeah, I definitely think it impacts student achievement because you know I feel like I’m constantly trying to become a better school psychologist by coming to these PLCs because I have learned so many different things. I mean, you know how we’re verifying students? How we are progress monitoring? It’s all going to impact the student.

Focus Group Participant 11 followed that claim with

I certainly feel that the things I have been able to learn from my colleagues or from exploration in our PLCs have helped to improve the quality of services that are happening in my building. And so I would like to believe then there is that

direct correlation between the quality of services that have improved and the student achievements. And I think that's happening not only for special education students but for any in the RtI process too. Because at this PLC, we have a lot of discussions and focus not in not only special education specific but like interventions and things that can be happening in their RtI process systematically and you know on an individual basis.

Overall, data analysis has shown that school psychologists perceive that the collaboration within the learning community affects student achievement. While the first year was a year of getting their feet wet with PLCs, the second and third years have resulted in a focus towards the overall goal of impacting student achievement.

### **SMART Goals**

SMART goals appear to be an important component to the professional leaning community. Many of the SMART goals from the analysis of data were presented in sub-question #1. School psychologists perceived that SMART goals narrow their discussions, knowledge, and goals. It was noted that they like SMART goals because there are accountability pieces built into it so they are accountable for each other in the PLC. One participant liked SMART goals because of the accountability component and stated, "It's not just making a New Year's resolution with no follow through. There's that accountability piece and the people follow through with them" (Focus Group Participant 6). In addition to accountability, school psychologists felt SMART goals were measurable so they can see what work has actually taken place. Individual Interview Participant 1 felt that SMART goals, served as a guide to identify professional development needs of school psychologists by stating

Yeah, definitely I think they do because again they – when we think about what we want to do for our SMART goals, you know, we are not just pulling it out of the air, its not somebody telling us this is what, you know, you need to work on, but its based on what we’re seeing actually going on out in the schools and in our roles and where we feel like maybe there is a gap or we feel like we are not doing something as well as we could or maybe we don’t know about something as much as we feel like we should know about it and so, that’s what our SMART goals are based on, so yeah, definitely I think so.

Focus Group Participant 4 summarized when asked if SMART goals serve, as a guide to identify professional development needs for school psychologists by claiming

Absolutely! I think, as professionals, we all have an awareness of areas that we want to kind of beef up on or things we want to become more aware of and have more background in, so in a sense, we are kind of guiding our own learning and structuring it too.

### **Job Satisfaction**

Through analysis of the five separate interviews, it appeared that school psychologists perceive that the learning community does increase job satisfaction of school psychologists. Many times, the term “island” was used. It was perceived that practicing school psychology could be an isolating experience with a feeling of being on an “island” alone. They indicated that their involvement within the professional learning community gave them a forum to know their colleagues that “speak the same language” on a personal and professional level thus having a direct effect on job satisfaction. One school psychologist felt as if they were able to “gather ‘round the campfire and share

work and other things with each other” (Focus Group Participant 2). On a personal level, data revealed that personal connections were important for their PLCs, thus resulting in job satisfaction. Document analysis revealed that team building activities, school psych of the month activities, and other relational activities were a recurring item in agendas. Through interviews, it was revealed that they felt more satisfied in their jobs because they got to know their colleagues better. Focus Group Participant 8 stated that their comfort level in the group was due to

Those personal connections that I think you have with one another, not that we’re all best friends and best buds and hang out outside of school, maybe some of us do, but we’re familiar, we know each other’s backgrounds or families, at least in some way so you have those connections there.

School psychologists mentioned that they feel more comfortable admitting that they did not know all the answers and were comfortable asking questions to others within the PLC. The data showed that trust was a key factor and they felt that taking the time to build trust made a significant difference. Individual Interview Participant 2 stated, “I trust the people I work with which then makes me happier at work and more satisfied with my job.”

Trust, professional, and personal relationships were key in job satisfaction in order to reduce the feeling of isolation. Participants revealed that the PLCs make you feel less isolated and if you feel isolated, then it is harder to feel satisfied. Focus Group Participant 7 stated

I think the isolation not only comes from being in different buildings but also our position of school psychologists because you’re not a teacher, you’re not an

administrator. You're out here, and nobody really knows sometimes what to do with you or how to best utilize what you have, and sometimes we're always having to be proactive in saying, "This is what we do, this is how we do it," and I really appreciate what's being brought into the professional learning communities.

Data also revealed that school psychologists participating in the PLC were more satisfied with their jobs due to the loose-tight relationship they now have with administrators and that they have some control over their own professional development. Individual Interview Participant 2 stated

We are given that loose-tight relationship, we are given a certain parameters that we have to work around, but then we are kind of set loose and we can decide how we are going to get there. Like giving us the focus of student achievement, but then we were allowed to decide how we are going to impact student achievement.

According to Timothy Kanold (2011) in the book *The Five Disciplines of PLC Leaders*, "The term loose-tight implies a combination of central leadership direction (tight) and participative decision making and individual freedom to make decision (loose)" (p. 41).

Document analysis revealed that school psychologist are becoming familiar with Timothy Kanold's book and is one of their SMART goals where they are working on ways to help facilitate grade level PLCs in the buildings they serve in order to have an effect on culture/climate and student achievement.

The loose-tight relationship with supervisors has been, according to data analysis across all five interview groups, a critical juncture in job satisfaction. One participant stated

I think prior to using the PLC model supervisors would kind of be in charge of our meetings and we were micromanaged somewhat and I think that it had the result of maybe decreasing our confidence a little bit because somebody might have a great idea, but then it would get shot down for whatever reason, and so, I think as a result we wouldn't take as many risks or we wouldn't have the desire to want to learn more or do things on our own because we felt like we couldn't. So, its just improved – just culture and climate overall. (Individual Interview Participant 1)

Across a variety of participants, it was noted that they really feel like the administrators now listen to their input through the PLC process in addition to having the feeling that the administrators now believe that they know what they are doing without having to be micromanaged. To them, that gave them more job satisfaction.

Key words that were associated with the feelings of job satisfaction in all the interviews included invigorating, recharge, powerful, pride, confidence, happier, satisfied, trust, comfortable, and connected. Observations of the interviews revealed that most appeared to be satisfied in their roles as school psychologists due to the formation of the PLCs. From interns to veteran school psychologists, data has shown a direct correlation with PLCs and job satisfaction. An intern, working side by side with other veteran school psychologists in the cooperative and in the final year of their EdS degree, gave the following insight on how PLCs impact job satisfaction:

I'm an intern so I haven't really been out there all by myself yet but when I've gone to conferences in the past and have talked with other school psychologists in other districts, one of their biggest complaints have been that they feel all alone

and that's a big reason for burn out for them because they just feel they're all by themselves and so I just know I really look forward to our PLCs because when there is something I'm not sure about or as a group, I just feel like it gives us a lot more support and I need that and it helps. (Focus Group Participant 9)

### **Meaningful Professional Development**

Throughout the data collection process and analysis of the interviews and documents, it can be assumed that school psychologists do perceive that learning communities are a form of meaningful professional development to enhance knowledge and skills. It was reported by multiple school psychologists in the interview process that the professional learning community format has helped them develop confidence, knowledge, and skills. The PLCs, according to Focus Group Participant 14, has helped them to think outside of the box through the connection and collaboration. When asked about growth due to the school psychology professional learning community, Individual Interview Participant 1 stated that the PLC was an opportunity to focus on professional development specific to them. They felt that it was good to attend professional development that the district provides for all staff but much of it is not geared to school psychologists and that prior to the PLC, there were no opportunities to enhance knowledge and skills specific to school psychologists. It was perceived that the PLCs gave them

The time for us to work on things that are specific to school psychology so that's been very beneficial. And I then think it's given all of us the opportunity to grow our leadership skills just because of the nature of the shared leadership aspect of PLCs. (Individual Interview Participant 1)



Focus Group Participant 12 felt that the professional learning community is beneficial because it is an opportunity to share information about different aspects of the job and an opportunity to problem solve the most efficient ways to do things. Though it was not thoroughly discussed if the PLC is superior to outside professional development such as state and national conferences, it was felt that the PLC allowed for the opportunity to learn things from those events and return back to the PLC and share the information with others because not everyone can attend or afford to attend the school psychologist seminar/conferences around the nation. It was perceived that conferences/seminars supplement the work within the professional learning community. Overall, data from multiple sources reveal that learning communities can be a form of meaningful professional development for school psychologists and can be a catalyst for enhancing knowledge and skills.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages**

This particular question is broken down into two components. One being advantages and the other being disadvantages. This synopsis will focus on one and then the other.

**Advantages.** School psychologists felt that there were many advantages of utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development. Throughout the entire interview process with the various groups, there is a clear advantage to utilizing the professional learning community model for school psychologists. All sub-questions prior to this question have been clear with the advantages on an individual level to group level. In addition, it has been clear that there have been many positives on personal and professional levels. Connectedness and the

opportunity to collaborate with others that speak their own language has been the ultimate advantage to utilizing the model. Through the document analysis, interviews, and observations, it appears that school psychologists in the cooperative have experience and expertise in a variety of areas and the shared leadership components built within the PLC has allowed school psychologists to become more confident in their abilities but also with the realization that they do not know everything and if they need help, they know where to turn. With recent events in the news regarding violence in schools and mental health issues, it is felt that the professional learning community can serve as a nice foundation to grow in new areas but also to know that they have others to stand by them. Individual Interview Participant 2, in response to a question regarding opportunities to grow within the PLC, claimed,

Definitely, I think. With the whole Sandy Hook shooting and all that stuff going on in the media about mental health in school, the first thing I did was freak out because I thought okay, I don't feel like I know enough about delivering mental health services to children in schools. And, if they are going to start expecting school psychologists to do this, I was going to be over my head basically. But, then after I stopped freaking out, I thought about our PLC and I thought well, that's going to be a perfect SMART goal for us to learn about mental health services and how to provide those to students. So, then I think my stress level immediately diminished because I knew I have a support team that would help me through the process of learning that and I guess I just assume that there has to be some of us in that group that knows something about mental health and providing

those services. And then, I guess I did not worry about it, because I knew that as a team we would figure it out together. (Individual Interview Participant 2)

Focus Group Participant 15 felt that the PLC format was great because it enabled them to collaborate with other school psychologists. They felt that in grad school, they had their cadre of school psychology students to collaborate with and felt that they sometimes forget about collaboration with other school psychologists once they exit grad school. They stated that much of the emphasis in grad school is that school psychologists should, “collaborate with all of your teachers, your SPED teachers, your general education teachers, ELA, and all of that” (Focus Group Participant 15). In addition,

It kind of makes sense to collaborate with your school psychs as well and I think that we forget about that a lot once we exit grad school. So, having that (School Psychologist PLC) built in really helps a lot and not having that really doesn’t make sense at all because you don’t stop learning when you exit grad school. You should always continue learning and it’s just kind of a built in way for us to do so it’s just one of those advantages of having that here compared to other places I’ve been. (Focus Group Participant 15)

Overall, it is evident that there are clear advantages to utilizing the professional learning community as a method for continued and meaningful professional development for school psychologists. Data have revealed that the PLC has driven increases in job satisfaction, consistency in services, opportunities to collaborate, increases in knowledge and skills, increase in confidence and leadership skills, and has had an impact on student achievement throughout the cooperative that has been guided by SMART Goals. As

Individual Interview Participant 1 concluded, “I can’t imagine going back to the way it used to be, you know, I think it would be a huge detriment to our organization.”

**Disadvantages.** While there are clear advantages to utilizing the PLC framework for continued and meaningful professional development for school psychologists, there may be some perceived disadvantages. Through data analysis, there appear to be limited disadvantages with the PLC framework in this Midwest cooperative. In fact, through the interviews, participants struggled to come up with any and when they did come up with a disadvantage, they could be countered with some proactive strategy.

One of the perceived disadvantages was related to the “group think” aspect of the group. Focus Group Participant 8 clarified the thoughts behind “group think” by stating

Anytime you have a group, you have that group mentality that we tend to automatically assume that how we’re doing things here, by golly, it’s the best, and year; we’re feeding off that feedback from one another. We still need to seek out those outside perspectives, which I think a lot of us do because most of us are actively involved in state and national organizations so we are bringing that outside perspective in.

Individual Interview Participant 3 thought that this disadvantage is easily countered because it seemed like at least one person in the group would feel they needed to play the “devil’s advocate” role to challenge the group. The interviewee felt that the “devil’s advocate” played a key role in the PLC, not that that person disagreed, but it challenged the group to think about different perspectives. Individual Interview 3 has observed over the past couple of years,

Someone that feels comfortable just kind of steps outside and plays devil's advocate. Not that he disagrees with it, but lets think about all scenarios and that seems like the trust within the group has allowed for maybe that one or two people in the PLC that kind of play that devil's advocate. Challenge the group to think beyond the "group think" mentality.

In addition, Individual Interview Participant 1 felt that the "group think" was challenged due to the system of checks and balances that are built in to the PLC and the SMART Goals. It is not a bottom line decision on products produced by the group. They always end up as some final product or recommendation that is approved or at least shared with others for feedback.

The only other perceived disadvantage to utilizing the PLC framework for professional development was the time commitment. Focus Group Participant 3 reported that it might take time away from writing reports. Focus Group Participant 11 claimed that it does take time to be invested in working together on initiatives. That participant countered the disadvantage by stating that even though it is a time commitment and you have to find time to work on school psychologist SMART goals, "When you get in here, you are with this group of people and you start discussing and exploring things and you really enjoy it so it makes it worthwhile" (Focus Group Participant 11). Individual Interview Participant 2 felt there were no disadvantages to utilizing the PLC and countered the time commitment by indicating that they felt that the time out of the buildings or time away from writing reports was time well spent. They stated,

I know somebody brought up time away from buildings, but I guess in my mind I felt that the time spent in those PLCs more than makes up for the time that we are

in our buildings. I think I just feel like we are learning so much in those two hours or whatever it is. That really would, I mean the two hours that we are out of our buildings, they probably don't miss us. It makes us better school psychologists than just sitting there writing reports.

In conclusion, it appeared that school psychologists perceived that there were many advantages of utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development. Through interviews, it was noted and observed by the researcher that there were very minimal disadvantages to utilizing this type of framework. The groups appeared, during each interview, to have difficulty coming up with disadvantages, but with any disadvantage they thought of, they were able to counter it such as in the case of who plays the "devil's advocate" to challenge the group. Overall, there were many advantages and few, if any disadvantages to utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development.

### **Overall Impact**

The data revealed that there is clear evidence that there are many advantages in utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest. Participants in the PLCs have indicated that there are many advantages and limited disadvantages. While there are some disadvantages, it appeared that the school psychologists were able to counter the disadvantages by being proactive within their group. Many of the individuals felt so strongly about the PLC that they could not imagine going back to the way it used to be or could not imagine working in another

place without this type of model in place. Focus Group Participant 12 reflected upon the PLC and concluded,

I think this is the greatest thing of working out here because I came from another large school district and they do a lot of great things there but I know that the school psychologists there felt very disconnected from the rest of the district and I think that there is – I mean it's hard enough as it is for us to keep things consistent from school to school but even there, there is an even bigger disconnect and I think having PLCs makes a huge difference with that.

Individual Interview Participant 1 shared Focus Group Participant 12's thought by stating

I can't imagine going back to the way it used to be, you know, I think it would be a huge detriment to our organization and I think, you know thinking about another advantage and job satisfaction, I would hope that is has made people want to stay here. I think over the past few years, we have hired a lot of quality school psychologists and I think that if we didn't have our PLCs, there might be a greater chance that they would not be satisfied and so, they might be more willing to look elsewhere. So, I think the retention of quality people has been a really good result of the PLCs as well.

Focus Group Participant 15 felt that their PLC has allowed them to be more progressive in the way they think and look at different situations. They had had prior experience in different districts and felt

From my experience, I don't think I could go somewhere else who doesn't have this structure because it is very disconnected and it feels like you have to go out

and do a lot of things on your own whereas here, it's a community and it's a group effort instead of an individual effort.

With such positive feelings upon utilizing the PLC framework for professional development for school psychologists, it is evident that they need to continue due to the buy-in that was evidenced through the interview process. Document analysis did reveal that the school psychology PLC has made an impact on the organization from consistency to developing products that affect student achievement. Overall, data show that school psychologists do perceive that utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest has made an impact on a variety of levels as indicated in the seven sub-questions of this study.



## CHAPTER 5

### Summary, Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

Chapter 5 presents the summary of the study. This is followed by conclusions, discussion, and recommendations for future practice and research.

#### Summary

Schools continue to change in many ways. Technology, diversity, Response to Intervention (RtI), 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and other initiatives warrant the need for continued professional development for all school staff. School psychologists play a key role in the school system and can bring significant contributions to the school team. School psychologists often have multiple schools to serve in rural and urban settings and, at times, have to serve schools in isolation away from other school psychologists. School psychologists need opportunities to engage in meaningful professional development and have the opportunity for collegiality and collaboration with other school psychologists. The development of school psychology learning communities may be able to provide the professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the educational environment.

**Purpose.** This study investigated the effectiveness of school psychology learning communities as a way to provide professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the educational environment in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest. The following grand tour question guided this study:

What is the perceived impact of utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest?

To address that question, the following sub-questions were answered:

1. Do school psychologists perceive that collaboration within the learning community contribute to an increase in knowledge and skills?
2. Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community allows school psychologists to develop consistency in services they provide to schools?
3. Do school psychologists perceive that the collaboration within the learning community affects student achievement?
4. Do school psychologist perceive that SMART (DuFour, 2010) goals guide and identify professional development needs?
5. Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community increases job satisfaction of school psychologists?
6. Do school psychologists perceive that learning communities are a form of meaningful professional development to enhance knowledge and skills of school psychologists?
7. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development?

A qualitative design was used for this study. The researcher described, decoded, translated, and made meaning of the professional learning community for school psychologists in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest. The

researcher was interested in understanding, “the meaning people have constructed, that is, how people make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (Merriam, 2009, p. 13).

**Review of Literature.** Research on school psychology, professional development, and professional learning communities is extensive, but there is minimal literature pertaining to effective means of professional development for school psychologists. Literature called for the need for school psychologists to collaborate but there is limited research on how that is to be developed.

The framework used in this study examined the field of school psychology, the role and function of the school psychologist, developmental stages of the school psychologist, professional development methods, and professional learning communities. The literature review allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the unique role the school psychologist serves in the school setting and to identify what the suggested professional development format school districts should provide for school psychologists. The literature review also allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the different professional development models that may be beneficial for school psychologists. Lastly, the literature review provided an in-depth look into the professional learning community model as a method of professional development that is provided to educational staff that focuses on collaborative relationships. A brief synopsis of each area of the literature review is provided below.

Literature indicated that the field of psychology has been in existence for hundreds of years. In contrast, the field of school psychology only dates back to 1915 when Arnold Gesell became the first person to be appointed to the position of “school

psychologist” in the state of Connecticut. From 1915, until today, the field of school psychology has continued to change dramatically. Laws such as Public Law 94-142 of 1975 in addition to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990, 1997, and 2004, have set the stage and driven much of what school psychology looks like today. Today, *U.S. News and World Report* considers the field of school psychology one of the top careers in the world according to a 2009 report.

According to the literature, the role and function of the school psychologist can be different from district to district and state to state (Branstetter, 2012; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; NASP, 2012). Though there are some differences, there are still many commonalities. The school psychologist, according to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), “Helps children and youth succeed academically, socially, behaviorally, and emotionally. They collaborate with educators, parents, and other professionals to create safe, healthy, and supportive learning environments that strengthen connections between home, school, and the community for all students” (p. 1). In addition, NASP (2012) states, “School psychologists work to find the best solution for each child and situation. They use many different strategies to address individual student needs, and to improve classroom and school climates and support systems” (p. 1).

The literature revealed that personal and professional experiences of school psychologists vary widely and may affect the level of supervision and professional development needed. In order to design and produce meaningful professional development, it is important to understand the career cycles of school psychologists (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Stoltenberg, 2005). With the changes in the educational system, keeping up with recent initiatives such as RtI, special education law, special

education policy and procedures, and technology can be difficult. Stoltenberg (2005) defined the developmental stages of school psychologists that include the novices (Level I), advanced beginners (Level II), competence (Level III), proficiency (Level IV), and experts (Level V).

The literature suggests that it is important for the school psychologist and supervisor to be aware of the developmental stage the school psychologist is at in order to develop a course of action that includes meaningful professional development. Harvey & Struzziero (2008) stated the developmental stages in these terms; “All school psychologists are beginners when they enter situations in which they have no previous experiences, either in terms of the population with which they are working or with regard to the procedures and/or tools used. For example, the same school psychologist may be an experienced diagnostician yet a beginner in monitoring intervention effectiveness” (p. 41). The literature claimed that with a solid understanding of the developmental stages of school psychologists comes the need for differentiated professional development (Harvey, 2008; Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Rosenfield, 2000; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007; Shapiro & Lentz, 1995).

Understanding and developing meaningful professional development for school psychologists can be a daunting task for supervisors. Professional development, while challenging at times to plan, is essential given the changes associated with the field of education. Literature and research in the field of school psychology have resulted in many recommendations over the years regarding preparation and professional development, but there is little research conducted on actual models that have been utilized as it relates to school psychologists. There have been numerous studies regarding

professional development as whole but limited amounts that focus on the needs of the school psychologist (Fowler & Harrison, 2001). While it is important for school psychologists to engage in professional development that the district provides in order to understand curriculum, programs, formative assessment, and other topics, it is also important for school psychologists to have meaningful professional development for their growth.

The literature suggested that many of the models have limited effectiveness. For instance, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (2006) indicated that the training approach of “train and hope,” with a one-time follow-up, was not effective in many cases. In regard to training models that included attending in-service training, reading books, and attending professional development workshops and conferences, they too have been proven to be mostly ineffective because of the lack of generalization from the ideas shared in those events (Kratochwill, 2007; Zins, 1996). To emphasize that point, writers of *The Blueprint III* (1997) stated that, “research has documented that fewer than 10% of participants in traditional professional development activities actually apply their new knowledge and skills in their practice” (p. 21). With researchers and educational leaders claiming that most models are ineffective most of the time, then, what type of professional development is best for school psychologists given the dynamics of their role and the knowledge that some do have to work in isolation due to the vast number of school districts employing school psychologists?

The literature suggested that models that revolve around collaboration are promising practices to meet the professional development needs of school psychologists (Harvey & Struzziero, 2008; Merrell et al., 2006). Extensive research in professional

development for school psychologists has been a focus of numerous articles by Joseph Zins regarding the model of peer support groups (PSGs). According to Zins and Murphy (1996), “The peer support group (PSG), which is characterized by the sharing of expertise and knowledge, the provision of mutual support, and joint problem solving among professional colleagues, has been advanced as promising means of promoting professional growth and development” (p. 175). The peer support groups involve a collection of individuals who share a common interest, meet on occasion to collaborate, learn together, share expertise, and support one another. What makes this model more beneficial than other models of professional development is the fact that the others fail to address the needs of the school psychologists to engage in meaningful and collaborative conversations with peers. Other models also fail to provide an environment that promotes ongoing learning and moral support (Zins, 1996). Literature suggests that collaboration is a key component and models such as PSGs may be beneficial to meeting the professional development needs of school psychologists.

The literature review revealed that numerous studies have promoted professional learning communities (PLCs) as a promising practice to meet the needs of educational staff. While PSGs have a focus on collaboration, PLCs are an, “ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquire and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve. Professional learning communities operate under the assumption that the key to improved learning for students is continuous job-embedded learning for educators” (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 11). The PLCs basically take the concepts of a PSG and integrate it into the educational environment with a focus on learning in a collaborative culture where the individuals in

the learning community are committed to each other and to the learning of each student with members having common goals and accountability for one another.

**Methodology.** Prior to this study, the researcher found that there had been little previous research conducted on this topic. The qualitative design for this study provided a rich description of what was being studied and left room for further research on a wider scale.

A case study design was utilized for this study because of the opportunity to examine, “an applied field’s processes, problems, and programs to bring about understanding that in turn can affect and perhaps even improve practice” (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). The researcher, in this case, chose the case study design due to an interest in insight, discovery, and interpretation rather than hypothesis testing (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 1994). The researcher was able to get close to the subjects of interest in order to have the opportunity to interview and observe factors such as thoughts, feelings, and desires. Close examination of those factors and the data were made possible because of the researcher’s role as a Special Education Administrator.

Data, to support the research, came from a variety of sources and included documents, observations, and interviews. Interviews were the primary source of data for the study. Data from interviews were received from two focus group interviews and three individual interviews. The interviews were utilized due to the limited opportunity to observe and the realization that data from documents has some limitations. The interviews provided resulted in valuable insight into the professional learning community for school psychologists in the seven-district special education cooperative. Patton



(2002) explained that, “the purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the person’s perspective” (p. 341).

### **Findings/Conclusions**

The findings revealed that school psychologists perceived that professional learning communities for school psychologists were a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest. Seven sub-questions were utilized to help draw that conclusion. This section will highlight some of the findings that led to that revelation and conclusion.

#### **Do school psychologists perceive that collaboration within the learning community contributes to an increase in knowledge and skills?**

School psychologists did perceive that collaboration within the learning community contributed to an increase in knowledge and skills. Many indicators within the data revealed that knowledge and skills were increased. Some of the indicators included data from SMART goals and involvement in book studies. One participant in the interview stated, when asked if PLCs helped with growth, “I feel like it honestly makes me a better school psychologist because I’m constantly learning new things so that I can bring it back to my profession” (Focus Group Participant 16). Another participant revealed that they felt like they were able to stretch their own abilities and skills by collaborating and seeing what others are doing. They stated, “I can challenge myself to grow and learn and do those things too, as a professional” (Focus Group Participant 4). Individual Interview Participant 1 felt that the PLCs gave all the school psychologists the opportunity to grow their leadership skills because of the nature of the shared leadership

component in the PLCs. From their observation, “I’ve seen everybody grow over the last three years so that’s been really neat to watch.”

Conclusions from the findings can be drawn that support the use of professional learning communities to increase knowledge and skills. The data from the study revealed that school psychologists participating in the PLC perceive the greatest benefits to be in the areas of improved skills and knowledge as well as in job satisfaction.

**Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community allows school psychologists to develop consistency in services they provide to schools?**

When asked about consistency of services, school psychologists did perceive that the learning community allowed them to develop consistency in services they provide to schools. All interviews conducted revealed a strong connection with the school psychology PLCs and consistency in practices. Participants felt that consistency was developed through case studies, SMART goals, and book studies. Some individuals indicated that consistency was found in policy and procedures, eligibility decisions, triennial evaluations, assessment practices, writing reports that are parent friendly, writing reports that are standards based, conducting comprehensive evaluations, and verification statements.

It can be concluded that having a forum to collaborate with others is helpful to all school psychologists, especially to remain consistent with new and improved practices. The participants in the interview portion of the study had anywhere from no experience (Interns) to an individual that had 41 years of experience. With the changes in the educational system, keeping up with recent initiatives such as RtI, special education law, special education policy and procedures, and technology can be difficult. In order to

obtain some consistency that they provide to schools, the different levels of experience can be beneficial and the PLC, according to the data can provide that experience, expertise, and opportunity for sharing.

**Do school psychologists perceive that the collaboration within the learning community affects student achievement?**

The findings revealed that there was evidence that supported that school psychologists do perceive that the collaboration within the PLC affects student achievement. School psychologists indicated that they are able to see student achievement being affected by the work that they do on growth rates, growth setting, progress monitoring, SMART goals, facilitating PLCs in their own buildings, sharing interventions and strategies that have a direct effect on students, having discussions on comprehensive evaluations and discussing formative assessment processes, analyzing local, state, and district assessments, and identifying mental health services for students and families.

From the findings, it can be concluded that school psychologists perceived that the collaboration within the PLC affected student achievement. It was evident that the collaboration within the school psychologist PLC improved learning for students through continuous job-embedded learning with others.

**Do school psychologists perceive that SMART (DuFour, 2010) goals guide and identify professional development needs?**

Data showed that school psychologists perceived that SMART goals do guide and identify professional development needs. It was perceived by school psychologists that SMART goals narrowed their discussions, knowledge, and goals. In addition, it was

found that school psychologists liked the SMART goals because there were accountability pieces built into it so they were accountable for each other in the PLC and the goals were not perceived as a, “New Year’s resolution with no follow through” (Focus Group Participant 6).

It can be concluded, based off the findings, that SMART goals do guide and identify professional development needs for school psychologists. A key element of a PLC is the commitment to continuous improvement. Members within a PLC understand that the educational environment is continually changing and instead of being reactive to changes, PLC members focus on being proactive. PLCs are not interested in the status quo. PLCs are always looking for better ways to achieve goals and accomplish the purpose of the organization (DuFour et al., 2010). With the use of SMART goals, professional development needs for the members of the PLC could be identified. In addition, with SMART goals as a guide, professional development needs can be results oriented in addition to being focused on goals that align with school and district goals and measured on a frequent basis. SMART goals allow meaningful and intentional professional development to take place while guided by school psychologists.

### **Do school psychologists perceive that the learning community increases job satisfaction of school psychologists?**

Findings revealed that professional and personal connections that the PLC brought to the school psychologists had an impact on job satisfaction. School psychologists felt more satisfied with their job and perceived that the learning community did increase that feeling. Many times throughout the interview process, the term “island” was used. It was perceived that practicing school psychology could be an isolating

experience with a feeling of being on an “island” alone. School psychologists felt that their involvement within the professional learning community gave them a forum to know their colleagues that “speak the same language” on a personal and professional level thus having a direct effect on job satisfaction.

It can be concluded, based off the findings, that the data displayed a strong connection between involvement in PLCs and job satisfaction. To sum up the relationship between PLCs and job satisfaction, Individual Interview Participant 2 proclaimed, “I trust the people I work with which then makes me happier at work and more satisfied with my job!”

**Do school psychologists perceive that learning communities are a form of meaningful professional development to enhance knowledge and skills of school psychologists?**

Analysis of the data revealed that school psychologists perceived that learning communities are a form of meaningful professional development to enhance knowledge and skills of school psychologists. It was stated that the learning communities have helped them develop their confidence and leadership abilities in addition to their knowledge and skills. The school psychologist’s felt that the learning community offered them a forum to share information about different aspects of the job and to problem solve the most efficient ways to do things. It was also felt that the PLC allowed them a place to learn things outside of the district and to return back to the PLC to share the information with others, as others may not be able to attend or afford to attend those events around the nation.

Findings support the conclusion that the PLCs could be a form of meaningful professional development for school psychologists. Data revealed that PLCs allow individuals to collaborate, learn together, share expertise and knowledge, support one another, and provide mutual support.

**What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development?**

The advantages of the PLC framework significantly outweigh the disadvantages according to the data. Through the interviews, participants struggled to come up with any disadvantages and when they did come up with a disadvantage, they were countered with a proactive strategy. One disadvantage that was pointed out was the “group think” mentality where the group may think that they have all the answers without seeking out outside perspectives. This disadvantage was countered because they felt that they had trust within their group that allowed for one or two people to play “devil’s advocate” to challenge the group. In addition, the disadvantage was countered due to the fact that most of the school psychologists were actively involved in state and national organizations in order to bring the outside perspective into the group. Another disadvantage that was identified was the time commitment it took to be a part of the PLC. Participants countered this disadvantage because they felt that the time they spent in the PLC was time well spent.

It can be concluded that the advantages far outweighed the disadvantages according to the data received from documents, observations, and interviews. Throughout the entire interview process with the various groups, there was a clear advantage to utilizing the professional learning community model for school

psychologists. All sub-questions have been clear with the advantages on an individual level to group level. Connectedness and the opportunity to collaborate with others that speak their own language has been the ultimate advantage to utilizing the model.

Analysis has revealed that experience and expertise has been built on a variety of levels in addition to increased levels of confidence and leadership skills.

**Grand Tour: What is the perceived impact of utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest?**

Overall, the grand tour question has been answered on a variety of different levels. There was clear evidence that there are many advantages in utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest. It is evident that the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. In fact, many of the individuals felt so strongly about the PLC that they could not imagine going back to the way it used to be or could not imagine working in another place without this type of model in place.

**Discussion**

Utilizing the professional learning community (PLC) framework could be a promising practice based on the findings in this study in addition to the research provided by Zins and Murphy (1996) on peer support groups (PSG), which share many commonalities to the PLC framework developed by DuFour (2010).

Professional learning communities typically involve teachers who work collaboratively to improve practice and enhance student learning (Grossman, Wineburg,

& Woolworth, 2001). While the PLC framework carries different terminology, structures, and perceptions for some, professional learning communities are defined as collaborative teams that focus their collective efforts on certain critical questions (DuFour, 2007). According to Blanton and Perez (2011), the PLCs “grew out of major reform efforts in the 1980s when effective schools and effectiveness of organizations shifted school improvement efforts to core concepts of school culture, collegiality, and collaboration” (p. 6). The main characteristics of a PLC according to Blanton and Perez (2011) are

1. Supportive and Shared Leadership
2. Open Dialogue/Collaboration
3. Shared Vision, Values, and Goals
4. Student Centered School Improvement
5. Supportive Environment
6. Ongoing Inquiry/Reflective Practice

These characteristics of a learning community have produced success in school reform. Research has shown that when teachers work in learning communities, they improve their classroom practices, thus increasing student achievement (Blanton & Perez, 2011). Again, while the learning community framework is usually geared toward teachers, the development of a learning community framework for school psychologists may be just as effective in order to meet the increasing demands of the changes in the roles of school psychologists.

The data received from this study have revealed that utilizing the professional learning community framework as a method of meaningful professional development is a



promising practice where the advantages far outweigh the disadvantages. The data showed a strong connection with an actual study in 1996 by Zins and Murphy. Zins and Murphy surveyed 500 NASP members and of the 399 useable responses, 64% indicated that they were presently or previously in a peer support group (PSG). Of the 64%, slightly under 50% were currently involved in a PSG. The study did not define what a PSG looked like in each situation (e.g. how large a PSG was, how often they met, etc.). Of those that were involved or were previously involved, they appeared to have a favorable experience. According to Zins and Murphy (1996),

PSG participants perceived the greatest benefits to be in the areas of improved skills and knowledge as well as in job enthusiasm. In addition, they associated the following elements with group success: having enthusiastic and committed participants; structured meetings (i.e., relevant, mutually selected topics, consistent meeting times); convenient times and places to meet; administrative support; members with common professional goals, interests, and commitment; and an atmosphere of mutual respect, openness, and trust. (p. 180)

Though these outcomes are with PSGs and with limited definitions of what the PSGs entailed, connections can be made with PSGs and the PLC researched for this study. Zins and Murphy (1996) indicated that they would be interested in further study as it pertains to how frequently the groups met, their size, and whether they had a formal or informal structure. This current study on a school psychologist PLC in a special education cooperative in the Midwest allows for that extension. This study explained how frequently the groups met, their size, and the structure of the meetings. Data

revealed many of the same advantages in the PLC as was found in Zin and Murphy's (1996) work.

Overall, it appears that research from the literature review and research from this study on a school psychologist PLC in the Midwest support the use of a collaborative forum that allows school psychologist to have ownership in identifying their own professional development needs as well as having a collaborative connection with other school psychologists to learn from and share information with.

### **Recommendations for Further Practice and Research**

While a single case study cannot provide a pervasive basis for the implementation of a professional learning community for school psychologists, it does have supporting implications for several perspective audiences such as school districts, educational cooperatives, school administrators, supervisors of school psychologists, school psychology preparation programs, and school psychologists.

It is recommended that those wishing to utilize the model for school psychologists or other groups, to have a clearly defined definition of what a PLC is. This study focused on a PLC concept that was based on shared leadership, norms, and SMART goals. School psychologists were given specific dates and times to meet at the beginning of the school year and received support from administrators as needed. In addition, the school psychologists were provided with loose-tight leadership with the freedom to guide their own SMART goals and professional development. One school psychologist should be designated as a facilitator that meets with a supervisor or administrator on occasion to discuss the direction of the PLC, needs, resources, or supports.

If proceeding, it should be noted that the professional learning community model does have many components of the peer support groups as mentioned in Zins and Murphy's (1996) work but the PLC has clearly defined characteristics as developed by leaders such as DuFour (2010) and Blanton and Perez (2011). Professional learning communities are defined as collaborative teams that focus their collective efforts on critical questions (DuFour, 2007). The main characteristics of a PLC according to Blanton and Perez (2011) include (1) Supportive and Shared Leadership, (2) Open Dialogue/ Collaboration, (3) Shared Vision, Values, and Goals, (4) Student Centered School Improvement, (5) Supportive Environment, and (6) Ongoing Inquiry/Reflective Practice. Any future case studies or attempts to develop a school psychologist PLC should be clear on what the learning community entails as they may be developed and defined in different ways as in the case of the PSG research conducted by Zins and Murphy (1996) where the PSG may have looked different in each situation as they got survey responses.

The composition of the PLC included all school psychologists and it was mandatory that they attend the PLC. Without having it mandatory, it was feared that some would not attend thus limiting the development of a collaborative and trusting culture within the PLC. School psychologists met one time per month for two and a half hours on a Friday. These dates and times were predetermined before the school year began and should be a practice for anyone trying to develop a PLC. By having the dates up front at the beginning of the year, it limits the excuse of not knowing when the PLC was. School psychologists can meet in addition to the mandatory time if they see fit.

Usually, the SMART goals guide when sub-groups meet in addition to the mandatory time set aside each month.

The data from this study proved that the school psychology PLC is a promising practice with limited disadvantages that were easily countered by the group members. One such disadvantage that should be addressed when beginning a PLC for school psychologists is the “group-think” mentality. The members within the PLC should address that component within the norm setting process. It will be helpful, as was the case with this study, to identify those who may play the devil’s advocate role in order to challenge the “group-think” mentality.

Further research of this topic is encouraged. The findings of this study indicate multiple opportunities for other possible research studies in regard to utilizing the professional learning community as a method of meaningful professional development for school psychologists. More case studies investigating school psychologists’ perceptions of PLCs in other areas of the nation would strengthen the validity and reliability of this study. Information upon what other PLCs may look like, how much time is spent in them, how many participate, and whether or not it is mandatory would be helpful in future research as well.

In addition, it was mentioned that the model could be used for other related services personnel such as Speech/Language Pathologists, Physical Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Assistive Technology Specialists, Inclusion Facilitators, and Behavior Specialists. There may be more opportunities for other possible research studies in regard to utilizing the professional learning community as a method of meaningful professional development for these groups as well.

Lastly, further research may be helpful not only in the qualitative manner but also in a quantitative manner. Obtaining information from a variety of measures as it relates to the sub-questions within this study may be helpful in determining if the school psychologist PLC results in, for example, increases in student achievement, job satisfaction, or a number of other factors.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the findings of this study, school psychologists perceive that there are many advantages of utilizing professional learning communities for school psychologists as a method of meaningful professional development in a seven-district special education cooperative in the Midwest.

This study has discussed the fact that schools continue to change in many ways. Technology, diversity, RtI, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, and other initiatives warrant the need for continued professional development for all school staff and school psychologists should be a part of the professional development plans. Those plans should be differentiated and provide meaningful experiences to help school psychologists grow. School psychologists play a key role in the school system and can bring significant contributions to the school team. School psychologists often have multiple schools to serve in rural and urban settings and, at times, have to serve schools in isolation away from other school psychologists. School psychologists need opportunities to engage in meaningful professional development and have the opportunity for collegiality and collaboration with other school psychologists. The development of school psychology learning communities may be able to provide the professional development, collegiality, and collaboration school psychologists need to contribute to the education environment. This

case study has revealed data associated with a learning community currently in existence and has revealed many advantages and benefits to a team of school psychologists serving a seven-district special education cooperative.

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**Appendix A**  
**Focus Group Script**



### **Focus Group Script**

To maintain consistency between the interview groups, this script will be used. The interview will be taped in addition to being transcribed by a professional transcriptionist.

**Ryan:** I would like to thank you for attending this interview session today. My name is Ryan O’Grady and I will serve as the moderator for today. I realize your time is valuable, and I appreciate you taking time to assist me with my dissertation research.

This interview is an informal method of sharing your thoughts and ideas in regards to the School Psychology Professional Learning Community.

**Ryan:** This is \_\_\_\_\_; she will serve as my proxy for the interview. To ensure your candid response and to avoid any bias, she will help me document the interviews. My role as moderator is to guide the discussion and ask questions. Please feel free to talk to each other. There are no wrong answers so please share you thoughts and ideas. Today’s conversation will be video taped and recorded. No names will be used in my research.

**Ryan:** I am going to ask some informal questions in order to get your perceptions about professional learning communities and professional development. The concepts of professional learning communities that we will discuss are based on five dimensions (Collective Learning and Application, Shared Personal Practice, Supportive Conditions – Relationships, Supportive Conditions – Structures, Overall Impact) and related attributes. I want to find out what you think about professional learning communities as an opportunity for professional development for school psychologists.

**Ryan:** Let’s take a few minutes and introduce yourselves so that I can be on a first name basis with you.

**Guidelines:**

Some things that will help our discussion go more smoothly are:

1. Only one person should speak at a time.
2. Please avoid side conversations.
3. Everyone needs to participate and no one should dominate the conversation.
4. The focus group will last no longer than 1 hour, many of you have cell phones, please avoid using your cell phones during this time.

**Guiding Questions for the Focus Group Discussion**

1. Talk about the opportunities that you have experienced as a result of being a part of school psychologist professional learning community. Have these experiences helped you to grow professionally?
2. What kind of experience and knowledge does the school psychology professional learning community bring to your work?
3. Has being a part of the school psychologist professional learning community made a difference for you as a professional? Why or why not?
4. Do you think that you would have experienced the same opportunities without the organization of the professional learning community for school psychologists? Why or why not?
5. Do you believe school psychologist PLCs allow school psychologists to develop consistency in the services they provide to students and schools? If so, given me some examples.
6. Do you believe participation in the school psychology PLC affects overall student achievement? Why or why not? If so, how?

7. Do SMART goals in the school psychology PLC serve as a guide to identify professional development needs of school psychologists?
8. Does participation in the school psychology PLC increase job satisfaction for school psychologists?
9. Have you grown as a professional since your involvement in the professional learning community for school psychologists? Why or why not? If yes, can you provide some examples that would support that would demonstrate that you have grown?
10. What are the perceived advantages and disadvantages to utilizing the learning community framework for continued and meaningful professional development

**Possible Probing Questions:**

1. Would you explain further?
2. Can you provide an example?
3. Please describe what you mean?
4. Can you clarify? I want to make sure that I understand.
5. On thing that I have heard several people mention is \_\_\_\_\_. I am curious as to what the rest of the group thinks about that.
6. Are there any other thoughts that have occurred to you?

**Survey is adapted from the work of:**

Oliver, D., Hipp, K., & Huffman, J. (2003). Professional learning community assessment. In J. Huffman & K. Hipp. *Reculturing schools as professional learning communities* (pp. 66-74). Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Education.

Morrow, J. (2010). *Teachers' perceptions of professional learning communities as opportunities for promoting professional growth* (Doctoral dissertation).

Retrieved from <http://www.usd.edu/library/>

## **Appendix B**

### **Permission from school district to conduct the study**

Dr. Robert Winter, Superintendent  
PO Box 4904  
Grand Island, Nebraska 68803

January 31, 2013

RE: Research Proposal

Dear Dr. Winter:

As a doctoral student at the University of South Dakota, and in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Education degree, I am writing to obtain permission from your school district to conduct a research study. The purpose of the study will be to investigate the impact of utilizing the learning community framework as a method of meaningful professional development for school psychologists in a seven-district special education cooperative.

The study will involve document analysis, observations, and interviews. In addition to my personal items, document analysis may include written communication and artifacts from the school psychology professional learning community (PLC). Observations may be conducted during times that the PLC meets in addition to the times that sub-teams of the PLC meet. Focus and individual interviews are intended to gather more information on the learning community framework as it applies to school psychologists. In addition, interviews will provide further understanding of the process. Participation by the school psychologists in this study is voluntary.

Please be assured that the information gathered will be held confidential and treated with the utmost professional discretion. There is no risk to the school district, the participants, or you. If you have any questions or concerns, please call the University of South Dakota Research Office at 605-677-6184.

Thank you for considering the request to conduct the research in the district. Should you have questions or concerns, please contact me. If you agree to allow the district to participate in the study, please sign the blank at the bottom of this letter and return to me. You may keep the second copy for your records.

Sincerely,

Ryan O'Grady, Doctoral Candidate

This study is conducted under the direction of and with the approval of the student's Doctoral Committee at the University of South Dakota

I have read the above and agree to have my school district participate in the study.

---

Dr. Robert Winter, Superintendent

## **Appendix C**

### **Permission to participate in the focus group interview**

February 11, 2013

Dear Staff Member:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of utilizing the learning community framework as a method of meaningful professional development for school psychologists in a seven-district special education cooperative. The study will involve document analysis, observations, and interviews.

We are inviting you to be in this study because you are a school psychologist or school psychologist intern in the Grand Island Public Schools school district.

If you agree, we would like you to participate in one of two focus group interviews involving up to eight participants per focus group with the interview lasting no more than one hour. The focus group interview will assist us in gaining a better understanding of various aspects of professional development and the learning community model as it relates to school psychologists. In addition, with varied perspectives, it will provide more clarity to the study. Some of the questions that will be asked within the interview include:

- Talk about the opportunities that you have experienced as a result of being a part of the school psychologist professional learning community. Have these experiences helped you to grow professionally?
- Do you believe school psychologist PLCs allow school psychologists to develop consistency in the services they provide to students and schools? If so, give me some examples.

We will keep the information you provide confidential, however federal regulatory agencies and the University of South Dakota Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research.

The focus group interviews will be taped and given to a professional transcriptionist to transcribe. The transcriptionist will assign a unique identifier to each person for transcription. If we write a report about this study, we will do so in such a way that you cannot be identified.

There are no known risks from being in this study, and you will not benefit personally. However, we hope that others may benefit in the future from what we learn as a result of this study.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to be in this study, or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits for which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints now or later, you may contact us at the number below. If you have any questions about your rights as a human subject, complaints, concerns or wish to talk to someone who is independent of the research, contact the Office for Human Subjects Protections at (605) 677-6184. Thank you for your time.

Dr. Mark Baron and Ryan O'Grady  
Division of Educational Administration, University of South Dakota  
414 East Clark Street  
Vermillion, South Dakota 57069  
(605) 677-5260



## **Appendix D**

### **Permission to participate in the individual interview**

February 11, 2013

Dear Staff Member:

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to investigate the impact of utilizing the learning community framework as a method of meaningful professional development for school psychologists in a seven-district special education cooperative. The study will involve document analysis, observations, and interviews.

We are inviting you to be in this study because you are a school psychologist in the Grand Island Public Schools school district.

If you agree, we would like you to participate in one of three individual interviews lasting no more than one hour. The individual interview will assist us in gaining a better understanding of various aspects of professional development and the learning community model as it relates to school psychologists. Questions for the individual interview will manifest from the focus group interview. Utilizing the individual interview will provide us with a more in-depth perspective beyond the larger focus group interview.

We will keep the information you provide confidential, however federal regulatory agencies and the University of South Dakota Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves research studies) may inspect and copy records pertaining to this research.

The individual interviews will be taped and given to a professional transcriptionist to transcribe. The transcriptionist will assign a unique identifier to each person for transcription. If we write a report about this study, we will do so in such a way that you cannot be identified.

There are no known risks from being in this study, and you will not benefit personally. However, we hope that others may benefit in the future from what we learn as a result of this study.

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you decide not to be in this study, or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits for which you are otherwise entitled.

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints now or later, you may contact us at the number below. If you have any questions about your rights as a human subject, complaints, concerns or wish to talk to someone who is independent of the research, contact the Office for Human Subjects Protections at (605) 677-6184. Thank you for your time.

Dr. Mark Baron and Ryan O'Grady  
Division of Educational Administration, University of South Dakota  
414 East Clark Street  
Vermillion, South Dakota 57069  
(605) 677-5260

## **Appendix E**

### **2012/2013 School Psychologist PLC Norms**

## School Psychologist PLC Norms 2012-2013

We will make our PLC meetings a priority by coming prepared to meetings, not scheduling other meetings, and notifying someone if we are going to be absent.

We will utilize appropriate listening skills during the meeting by limiting side conversations, not interrupting, using electronics/technology appropriately, and respecting the viewpoints of all members.

We will keep our discussions and comments confidential.

We will share our thoughts, opinions and frustrations during the meeting and not outside of the meeting.

We will email agenda items to the PLC facilitator by the Wednesday prior to our PLC meeting.

We will incorporate team-building activities into our meetings.

## **Appendix F**

### **Example of a School Psychologist SMART Goal Worksheet**

