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Professional Learning Communities As A Framework For School Counselor Collaboration And Data Use: An Action Research Study

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PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES AS A FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL COUNSELOR COLLABORATION AND DATA USE: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY

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Adam R. Southall

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Dedication

I dedicate this accomplishment to my wife, Kateri, and our daughter, Anna. Thank you, Kateri, for the love, support, encouragement, laughter, and proofreading you provided during this experience. I would not have taken these steps without your support, and most definitely would not have finished without it. Thank you for the sacrifices that you made to support my education and our family. I will forever be grateful.

Anna, you arrived halfway through this endeavor. Your genuine interest in exploring the world continues to remind me to do my own exploration. As you discovered the world, you also discovered my computer keyboard and provided this important feedback, onhnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnf/122 Thank you for reminding me that the world is big, happy, and full of joy. Tripod!

To my parents, thank you. Mom and Dad, you laid the groundwork for this accomplishment. Thank you for always pushing me, believing in me, and for demonstrating a lifetime of dedicated service to community.

To Brian, thank you for demonstrating that even in the toughest of times, we pick our head up and we keep moving forward.

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Thank you to the guys from 895G for over 2 decades of laughs, whiffleball, and keeping me grounded. "Let it rain, let it rain, let it rain…"

I have had the good fortune to work with incredible students over the years who have provided me with tremendous inspiration. Their fortitude, perseverance, determination, and talents helped to inspire these pages. It is not without the inspiration of Wyatt, Taylor, Mario, Dustin, Matt, Nestor, Devin, Reagan, Miguelina, Natalya, Penelope, and so many other former students, that this accomplishment does not happen. Thank you for helping me to see how the struggles play out to build character and accomplishment in life. Thank you to Madison for serving as my accountability partner.

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Abstract

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA) calls on school counselors to take part in collaborative work experiences using data to address problems of practice. School counselors experience professional isolation leading to underperformance (Elliot et al., 2004; Stone-Johnson, 2015). School structures that lack collaborative experiences for school counselors leads to isolation (Bardhoshi et al., 2014). The purpose of this action research study was to assess the influence of a professional learning community (PLC) on the perceptions of school counselors to perform the elements of a PLC, their use of data to solve problems of practice, and their perceptions of benefits and challenges to collaboration within a PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). This qualitative study sought to understand the experiences of 6 high school counselors in one suburban school district as they took part in one cycle of a multicycle action research PLC to address school engagement. Qualitative data sources included semi-structured interviews, PLC transcripts, and one focus group. Data were analyzed using a constant comparative approach. Findings indicate: (a) school counselors perceived themselves as capable of positively contributing to the elements of PLCs, (b) PLCs positively influenced school counselors' data use to make decisions, and (c) school counselors perceived both benefits and challenges to PLC implementation. Results of this study can be used to understand the influence of PLCs on school counselor practices as they move from isolated practice toward comprehensive school counseling practice.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background

Literature points to an underperformance by high school counselors to provide comprehensive school counseling services because school counselors operate in professional isolation and with a lack of data-driven decision making (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). This isolation has many origins including historical developments in school counseling, changes in school-accountability laws, large caseloads of students with a wide diversity of needs, job ambiguity, a lack of professional development, and poorly defined professional evaluations (Dahir et al., 2009; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012; Hatch, 2014; O'Conner, 2002; Remley & Herlihy, 2010; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). The results of this isolation are gaps in services to students. These gaps are made worse by a lack of data-based decision making and by a reliance on school counselors' individual actions to address students' needs without systemic analysis or a wholistic approach to solving counseling-related problems (Hatch, 2014).

Experiences of isolation are shared across the wider community of educators nationwide. A Met Life Survey of American Teachers (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 2011) found that 75% of secondary teachers believed having opportunities to collaborate with other teachers would positively impact high-school-student outcomes; yet teachers reported working less than 3 hours per week in collaborative contexts. This mismatch between ideal practice and real-world responses points to a lack of

collaboration across education that continues to lead toward underachievement in educator and student outcomes (Bayar, 2020; Calabrese, 2015; Conley & Cooper, 2013; Leyba, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Weddle et al., 2019). Educators who reported feeling isolated in their work also reported feelings of job burnout, lowered self-efficacy, and increased job turnover (Stone-Johnson, 2015).

The American School Counselor Association (ASCA), the preeminent professional organization for professional school counseling, advocates for school counselors to "provide students with a comprehensive school counseling program that ensures equitable academic, career, and social/emotional development opportunities for all students" (ASCA, 2019, p. 17). ASCA (2019) goes on to say that school counselors involved in comprehensive school counseling programs should use data to determine which interventions will be employed, how they will be employed, and how they will be assessed in the pursuit of closing "information, attainment, achievement, and opportunity gaps" (p. 18). Despite these expectations, many school counselors continue to perform their role in isolation and without data-supported practices (Akos et al., 2019; Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Dollarhide & Lemberger, 2006; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009; Moyer, 2011). To improve the quality of education and to increase opportunities available to all students, school counselors must take part in intentional, collaborative experiences that promote evidence-based practices (Adelman & Taylor, 2002; Curry & Devoss, 2009; DuFour et al., 2010; Lambert, 2002; Marzano, 2003).

School Counselor National Model

School counselors work to provide comprehensive school counseling programming in support of students' socioemotional, academic, and career planning

needs (ASCA, 2019). Following a century of development, ASCA created the National Model as a framework for comprehensive school counseling. Introduced in 2003 and updated most recently in 2019, the National Model was created to remedy the variance in school counseling practice:

> The history of school counseling has been fraught with many twists and turns, leaving a trail littered with artifacts of each change of direction. As a result, the role of school counselors and school counseling had not been clearly understood among school staff, administrators, parents and even among school counselors themselves. Consequently, school counseling differed enormously from state to state, district to district, and even school to school. As a result, the effectiveness of school counseling also was inconsistent. (ASCA, 2019, p. ix)

ASCA calls on school counselors to take part in the National Model, a set of research-based guidelines for school counselor mindsets, behaviors, and beliefs (ASCA, 2019; Fye et al., 2020). The National Model (ASCA, 2019) is comprised of four themes: leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. These themes weave across four components: foundation, management, delivery, and accountability. The National Model delineates school counselor competencies and ethical standards as well as provides a comprehensive approach to delivering school counseling services in support of students' academic, socioemotional, and career planning.

Although the National Model remains the preeminent model for school counseling practice, not all school counselors adhere to its standards. For some counselors, the choice to pursue the National Model is not a part of their professional aspirations (Akos et al., 2019). For other counselors, the opportunity to follow the

National Model is shaped by administrative oversight (Leuwerke et al., 2009). In a survey of 337 school administrators, Leuwerke et al. (2009) found over half had limited or no knowledge of the ASCA National Model or school-counselor best practices. These results have been mirrored in other studies (Bardoshi & Duncan, 2009; Dodson, 2009; T. Fitch et al., 2001). Bardoshi and Duncan (2009) added that, of the 538 administrators surveyed in their study 83% rated consultative, collaborative, and teaming activities for school counselors as important to the creation of a school counseling program.

Successful implementation of the National Model requires collaboration and data-informed decision making. School counselors provide comprehensive school counseling programs that ensure equitable academic, career, and socioemotional development opportunities for all students using collaborative processes (ASCA, 2019). It goes on to state that school counselors utilize data to make informed decisions about interventions and to assess intervention impact. Therefore, to effectively engage in the National Model, school counselors need to use collaborative processes to make data-informed decisions. And yet, the chasm between the reality and this model is wide.

Action steps must be taken to fully realize the promise of the National Model. Overcoming school counselor isolation is a crucial step. Recognizing the roots of school counselor isolation points us to a need for more collaborative experiences. Those experiences must capitalize on opportunities for school counselors to practice making data-informed decisions so they can use better data management procedures in their work. These two precursors set the stage for a shift towards comprehensive school counseling laid out in the National Model.

Benefits of School Counselor Collaboration

School counselors who collaborate with peers through comprehensive school counseling programs to make data-informed decisions are more effective in reducing achievement gaps and promoting student achievement than school counselors who work in isolation (ASCA, 2019; Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Burkard et al., 2012b; DuFour et al., 2010; Griffen & Hallett, 2017; Gunduz, 2012; Hatch, 2014; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Lambie, 2007; Stone-Johnson, 2015). Positive outcomes of collaborative school counseling have been noted across time (ASCA, 2019; Eckerson & Smith, 1966). Lapan et al. (2001a) found school counseling programs that provided comprehensive services through collaborative efforts were more effective in promoting better student-teacher relationships, higher grades, students' reporting higher degrees of satisfaction with their educational experience, students' reporting stronger feelings of school safety, and fewer problems related to interpersonal and physical situations at their school.

Collaborative relationships enhance school counselor self-efficacy, a belief that a school counselor can provide interventions that result in positive outcomes (Bodenhorn & Skaggs, 2005; Brown et al., 2004). Increases in self-efficacy result in school counselors persisting in their work despite challenges and difficult contexts (Bandura, 1977).

ASCA (2019) calls for school counselors to take part in collaborative professional learning opportunities as part of its National Model. The American Counseling Association (2014) also calls for counselors to take part in collaborative learning experiences. Collaboration is recognized by researchers and national organizations alike

for its positive influence on school counselors' practices and reduction of school counselors' feelings of isolation.

Benefits of School Counselor Data Use

School counselors who use data-driven decision-making processes are more effective school counselors (Dimmitt et al., 2007; Earl & Katz, 2002; Johnson, 2002; Mullen & Lambie, 2016). Astramovitch (2016) highlighted the positive impact of data use in assessing school counseling program outcomes. In a survey of 241 school counselors, Astramovitch found that school counselors who used data management felt more confident assessing program outcomes and refining intervention strategies than school counseling peers with less data management skills. Better assessment of outcomes leads to better creation of future interventions, which in turn can lead to better school outcomes overall. Burkard et al. (2012b) found that schools whose school counselors employed comprehensive school counseling procedures based on data-management processes had better student retention, higher graduation rates, less truancy, and less suspensions than schools whose school counselors did not employ data-management practices.

The use of data-management processes to make decisions in school counseling is a crucial aspect of effective school counseling. The ASCA (2019) National Model calls for school counselors to utilize data as a foundation of a comprehensive school counseling program. Similarly, the American Counseling Association (2014) calls for the use of data to make informed decisions in counseling processes as part of its Code of Ethics. Using data to identify, intervene, and assess interventions promotes better

practices while shedding ineffective activities. In its ethical standards, ASCA (2019) states that school counselors should:

> A.3.c. Review school and student data to assess needs including, but not limited to, data on disparities that may exist related to gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and/or other relevant classifications.
>
> A.3.d. Use data to determine needed interventions, which are then delivered to help close the information, attainment, achievement, and opportunity gaps.
>
> A.3.e. Collect participation, mindsets, behaviors, and outcome data and analyze the data to determine the progress and effectiveness of the school counseling program.
>
> A.3.f. Use data-collection tools adhering to confidentiality standards. (p. 17)

School counselors use data monitoring to evaluate the need for intervention, the type of intervention to employ, and the effectiveness of that intervention (ASCA, 2019).

Professional Learning Communities for School Counselors

Professional learning communities (PLCs) have demonstrated promise in promoting collaborative experiences and data-management practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Donohoo, 2018). Long a fixture of teachers' professional work life, PLCs have seen less development among school counselors (Burkard et al., 2012; DuFour et al., 2002; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008; Remley & Herlihey, 2010). Despite the lack of development, publications found that school counselors involved in a PLC are more likely to implement new practices (Griffen & Hallett, 2017), practice skills needed to address a wide array of students' needs (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2008), and harness data-

management skills in support of students' needs (Hatch, 2014). PLCs hold potential for addressing the needs of school counselors.

Statement of the Problem

School counselors experience job isolation from a lack of collaborative efforts among school counselors (Elliot et al., 2004; Stone-Johnson, 2015). Bardhoshi et al. (2014) found school structures that lacked support networks for school counselors to collaborate in shared responsibilities led to increases in school counselor isolation. The source of this isolation comes in many forms, but it all leads to diminished results from school counselors, which in turn leads to diminished student achievement (Bardhoshi & Um, 2021; Hatch, 2014).

For schools, the problem carries a multitude of negative impacts. School counselors who report feelings of isolation are more likely to underperform in their responsibilities, develop feelings of ineffectiveness, and leave the profession leading to poor student achievement, decreased educator effectiveness, and gaps in needed service (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Lee et al., 2007). Professional practice done in isolation results in decreased school counselor effectiveness, decreased student achievement, and reduced effectiveness of schools to educate students. Left unaddressed, this isolation will erode achievement. Schools must provide structures and practices that promote collaborative efforts of school counselors if they are to provide a comprehensive school counseling program that meets students' needs.

A primary step in the implementation of National Model is the use of data in collaborative efforts by school counselors to address gaps in achievement. Accomplishing the entire National Model is a considerable shift in school counseling

practice (Wilkerson et al., 2013). A potential first step towards fulfilling the National Model involves promoting an environment of school counselor collaboration and data use (Fye et al., 2017).

PLCs help to support school counselors' collaborative experiences with data. PLCs offer a format of collaboration among working professionals to work towards addressing school goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). School counselors can gain from participating in a PLC, which leads to data-driven decision making and reduced feelings of isolation (Lambie, 2007). The benefits of PLCs have been displayed (Opfer & Peder, 2011; Vangrieken et al., 2015); however, these benefits have not been realized by PLCs for all school counselors (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Remley & Herlihy, 2010). Practicing school counselors continue to miss out.

Evidence of the Problem

Evidence of school counselor isolation and a lack of data-driven decision making was present in the District, a suburban school system in a Mid-Atlantic state. Within the District, high school counselors served in many roles across three comprehensive high schools and one charter high school. School counselors provided individual counseling, small group counseling, and whole class lessons through a variety of planned and responsive, direct and indirect interventions in accordance with District goals. Additionally, school counselors often served as a connector between students' academic and family life by communicating with parents and guardians about students' progress, coordinating outside mental health therapies with school obligations, and responding to family requests for student supports. Based on building needs and administrative direction, school counselors were also responsible for unrelated roles, such as lunch, hall,

testing, and classroom monitor and substitute teacher. No two school counselors shared the same duties or provided the same services, which leads to isolation among counselors and inequitable services for students.

District school counselors were assigned a caseload of students in grades nine through twelve based on students' last names. They served the academic, socioemotional, and career planning needs of each student. While lower than the national average school counselor caseload of 408 students per counselor during the 2021-2022 school year, the most recent year available, school counselors in the District reported many similar concerns for how they served their students (American School Counselor Association, 2022). Caseloads in the District varied in size from 210 to 250 students depending on other assigned duties. Identification of students' need for intervention relied on school counselors' ability to identify concerning developments, such as failing grades, poor attendance, or discipline problems, on a student-by-student basis. This reliance on school counselors' awareness for individual students' conditions put school counselors in a constantly reactive position. It prohibited school counselors from being proactive reducing interventions to one-off services that varied from student to student without awareness of intervention effectiveness. School counselors responded to students' needs, using limited resources that could have been better utilized through holistic solutions delivered through collaborative, systematic, data-driven approaches.

Limited school counseling data monitoring occurred in the District. A lack of data-informed decision making combined with the wide array of services delivered by school counselors resulted in disparate services across students. This lack of systemic thinking often perpetuated inequitable outcomes. By not addressing root causes, school

counselors continually fought repeated fires without thoughtful response and analysis. Additionally, the impact on students remained unknown because intervention analysis did not exist.

Similar to school counselors across the country, District school counselors reported a strain on time and energy to provide systematic services to all students (A. Wright, personal communication, August 2021; C. Brock, personal communication, October 2021; I. Johnson, personal communication, August 2021). This strain occurred as school counselors were directed to respond to students' needs in a non-systematic way. Invoking the symbolism of putting out fires, one counselor described District school counselors as the "ultimate fire fighter" (C Brock, personal communication, October 2021). A lack of systematic approaches to discerning students' needs, interventions employed, and assessment of impact resulted in school counselors going from student fire to student fire with little recognition of what was working and what was not. A lack of data use also resulted in high school counselors unable to demonstrate their influence on achievement (M Nelson, personal communication, September 2021). Operating without knowledge of their impact further limited school counselors' decision-making capabilities and constrained results.

The use of data was further constrained within the District as school counselors were not linked across schools to find systematic methods for addressing common problems. Limited collaboration existed between school counselors in the District (I. Johnson, personal communication, October 2021). This led to differential outcomes between schools. One high school worked to implement the National Model in 2018 while the other high schools chose not to, which further contributed to uneven results

across the District. The decision to pursue or not pursue the National Model was made by school counselors at each school. Without consolidated leadership, school outcomes remained variable and subject to underachievement. No data documenting District school counselors' habits, interventions, or outcomes existed. Collaborations between counselors were limited to county-level program meetings that did not use data. School counselor efforts both within counseling offices and across the District remained siloed.

In my role as a high school counselor in the District, I witnessed the influence of isolated school counseling practice. School counselors were tasked with meeting a wide array of diverse needs, interests, and goals in service of over 4,000 high school students. District policy required a weekly department meeting; however, collective planning of counseling interventions using data analysis and assessment were not regular aspects of meetings (A. Wright, personal communication, August 2021; I. Johnson, personal communication, August 2021). The District continued to experience gaps in student achievement.

Probable Causes of the Problem

The District continued to produce disparate school counseling services built on practices that were not data informed and that lacked collaboration. All school counselors were expected to take part in weekly department meetings with counselors at their school. Department meetings were planning meetings for upcoming events (e.g., college planning night, graduation) and informational sessions, but rarely utilized student data in decision making or engaged counselors in collective inquiry (A. Wright, personal communication, October 2021; I. Johnson, personal communication October 2021). This

ongoing lack of collaboration and disuse of data to make school counseling decisions existed for years.

School counseling leadership was stymied by poor job definition and rotating leadership for more than a decade. Following the 2008 recession, school counseling leadership positions were dissolved in a money-saving decision. Over the next 10 years, counseling oversight was positioned under various District leaders with no school counseling background. Efforts to bring about comprehensive school counseling services were limited to school or individual counselor discretion. Starting in 2017, the District took steps to reduce counselors' isolation by requiring all school counselors to take part in bi-annual, division-wide department meetings. Like school-level department meetings, the use of data to make comprehensive school counseling decisions was not used at division-level meetings. Collaborations were stifled as agendas encouraged school counselors to interact only with counselors from their school in preparation for school-based events. School counseling leadership supported the production of school counseling events and experiences, such as class registration, college planning nights, and parent informational experiences, but little effort was directed towards understanding students' needs based on data. A heavy reliance on traditional school counseling events was a focus for division-level meetings.

Collaboration and data-use remained a distant goal. Overcoming these challenges laid the groundwork for the successful implementation of the National Model at all District schools.

Context of the Action Research Problem

The context for this study was the District, a suburban school system in a Mid-Atlantic state consisting of 25 schools.

Information Related to the Organization

The District consisted of 15 elementary schools, five middle schools, three high schools, one virtual school, and one charter school. Approximately 2,500 staff and faculty members were employed by the District. The District served a population of approximately 13,500 students. 61.4% were Caucasian, 14.9% were Hispanic/Latin American, 11.3% were Black/African American, 6.5% were multiracial, 5.6% were Asian American, and less than 1% were Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. During the 2020-2021 school year (the most recent data available), 31.4% of students took part in the free/reduced-price lunch program based on family economic need, 10.1% of students were served by the English Language Learners Program, and 12.4% of students were served through an Individualized Education Plan. Annual per pupil spending was $13,609. The District mission statement says:

> Working together as a team, we will end the predictive value of race, class, gender, and special capacities for our children's success through high quality teaching and learning for all. We seek to build relationships with families and communities to ensure that every student succeeds. We will know every student.

Housed under the mission of the District was the school counselor mission statement, which states:

> Our mission as school counselors is to provide a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program that will assist all students in acquiring the skills,

> knowledge, and attitudes needed to become effective students, responsible citizens, productive workers, and lifelong learners. The school counseling program supports the school's academic mission by promoting and enhancing the learning process for all students through an integration of academic, career and personal/social development. The program's ultimate goal is for all students to graduate with the competencies necessary to make self-directed, realistic, and responsible decisions and to be successful contributors to society.

District school counselors are expected to adhere to the ASCA ethical standards as well as the Virginia School Counseling Standards for professional practice.

Information Related to the Stakeholders

The District employed a total of 39 school counselors with 22 of them serving as high school counselors. All District school counselors possessed a minimum of a master's degree and were licensed in pupil personnel services in the Commonwealth of Virginia. School counselors were tasked with providing services to meet the needs of students' academic, socioemotional, and career planning endeavors as defined by ASCA (2019).

School counseling oversight was provided by a myriad of supervisors depending on the counseling services rendered. All academic school counseling services, regardless of student grade level, fell under the direction of the Director of Secondary Education. The District's Lead Coach for Mental Health oversaw socioemotional counseling services. Career planning services were overseen by the District's Lead Coach for Career and Technical Education. Professional development opportunities for all school counselors, regardless of counseling domain or grade level, were overseen by the Lead

Coach for Mental Health. Each comprehensive high school housed a school counseling director who directly reported to building level administrators. Building level administrators performed all job evaluations of high school counselors using the same performance evaluation protocols for both teachers and school counselors.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework guiding this action research study included the elements of PLCs as described by DuFour and Eaker (1998). Built on the use of collaborative inquiry to address a common problem of practice, PLCs offered school counselors an opportunity to develop collaborative practices and data-management practices. The structure of a PLC provided a cyclical approach to address of a problem of practice. As members addressed issues, they developed plans for reaching PLC goals, implemented plans, and assessed the impact of those actions. Each cycle of PLC work provided a starting point for the next iteration of PLC analysis, allowing members to build on gained knowledge to eliminate problems of practice in an ever-refining manner. This study assessed the influence of collaborative PLC work on school counselors' feelings of isolation and data-driven decision making.

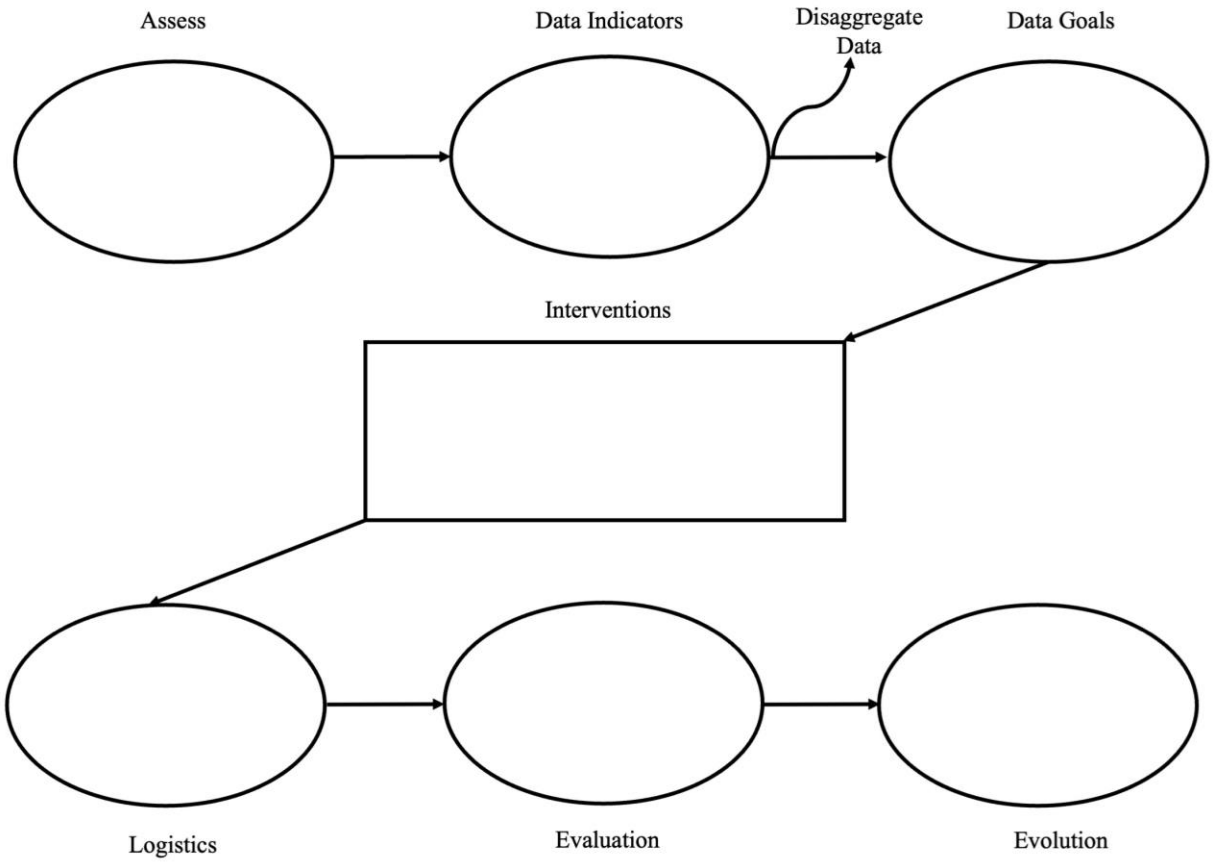
Similar to the development of collaborative work, the use of data to inform school counseling decision making offered an area of growth toward the implementation of a comprehensive school counseling program in the District. The Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model (Dimmit et al., 2007) provided a structured approach to identifying current conditions, gathering data, disaggregating the data to determine PLC goals, creation and delivery of interventions through assessment of intervention logistics, and then assessment of intervention impact (Figure 1). The Evidence-Based School

Counseling Logic Model fit into the framework of a PLC by assisting in the identification of students' needs. The logic model served as the protocol for evaluating student data.

Prior to the start of this study, the first cycle of action research established a PLC for high school counselors with the purpose of addressing school engagement. This required developing an understanding of the PLC structure and function, including goals, normative procedures, and member roles within meetings. Additionally, in the first cycle, school counselors developed an understanding of the data-management process provided by the Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model.

Figure 1

Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model



Note. Reprinted with permission from Zyromski, B., & Mariani, M. (2016) *Facilitating evidence-based data-driven school counseling: A manual for practice*. Corwin.

PLCs

PLCs have become an essential component to positively change educator practice and promote students' achievement. They were first introduced by DuFour and Eaker in 1998 to promote both self-efficacy and collective efficacy in the pursuit of better academic practices through iterative cycles of investigation PLCs serve as an ongoing action research study among members. PLC members reflect on practices and results to assess best courses of action by answering four key questions (DuFour et al., 2010):

- What is it we expect all students to learn?
- How will we know when they have learned it?
- How will we respond to students who do not learn it?
- How will we respond to students who have learned it?

The multidimensional qualities of school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019) required school counselors to address DuFour and Eaker's original questions differently. Instead of learning curriculum, addressing school engagement called on school counselors to look for traits and behaviors that demonstrated school engagement. The four key questions become:

- What is it we expect all engaged students to demonstrate?
- How will we know when students are engaged?
- How will we respond to students who are not engaged?
- How will we respond to students who are engaged?

Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model (Dimmitt et al., 2007) served as the protocol structuring the data use within each cycle. Through a process of collective inquiry, members investigated and attempted new practices in their work based on identified students' needs. Bad practices were eliminated, and better practices were discovered and implemented.

Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model in PLCs

Dimmitt et al.'s (2007) Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model built on available data to develop in an ever-evolving school counseling practice. School counselors started with an assessment of existing outcomes. Determination of outcomes led to identification of data indicators. Through analysis of what an engaged student

demonstrated, school counselors were able to answer DuFour et al.'s (2010) first question. Some data were present, while other data was needed to be gathered.

Recognizing that global data does not drill down to root causes, school counselors needed to disaggregate data to determine student-level concerns. School counselors set goals based on disaggregated data and what was expected of an engaged student, answering DuFour et al.'s (2010) second question. Goals must be specific, based on the expected intervention impact, and provide a timeline for assessment.

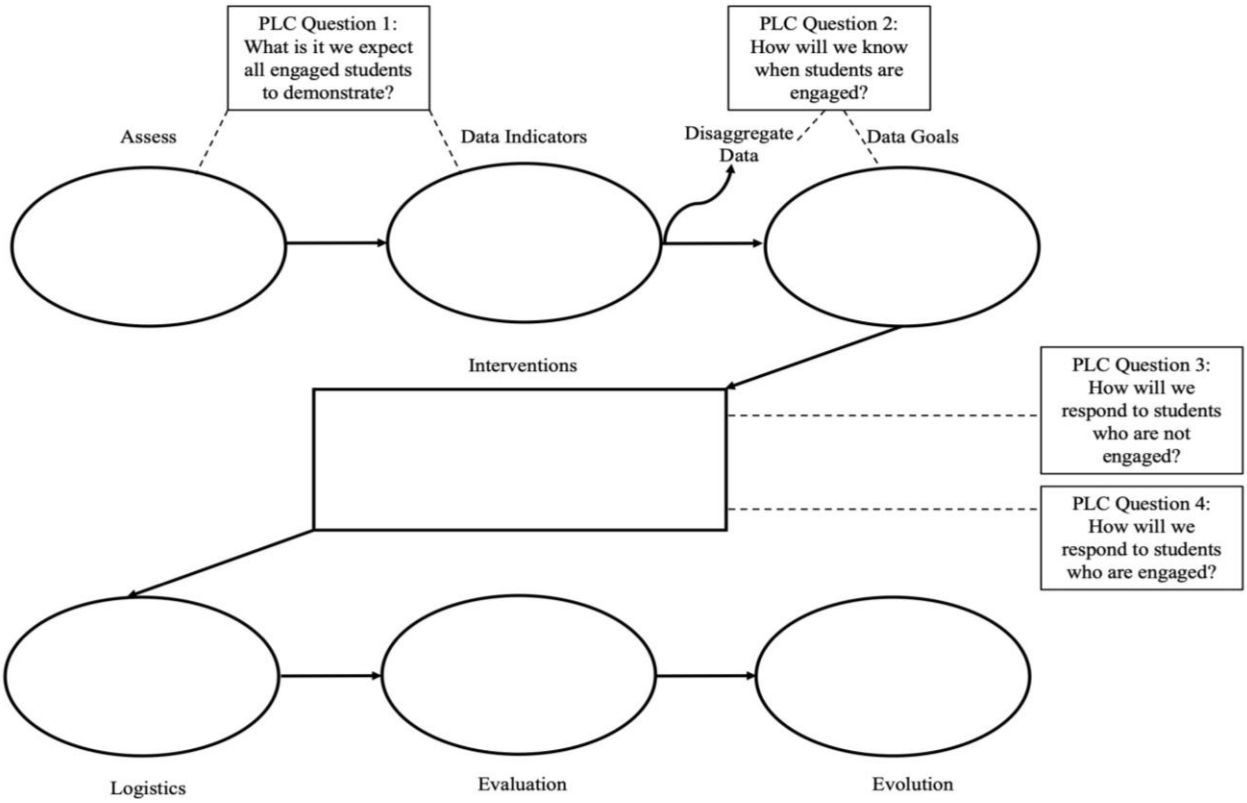
School counselors' actions to support students who do and who do not demonstrate school engagement were addressed by the intervention step of the logic model. In this way, DuFour et al.'s (2010) third and fourth questions were answered. Once goals were created, school counselors employed interventions.

Intervention implementation required logistical planning to ensure all students in need were successfully addressed. Outcome assessment occurred once interventions were implemented. Evidence of goal attainment led to evolved counseling practice. Failure to reach goals required a return to the assessment phase of the model in a cyclical manner.

Figure 2 illustrates this relationship between PLCs and the Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model.

Figure 2

The Relationship Between PLCs and the Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model



Note. The Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model is reprinted with permission from Zyromski, B., & Mariani, M. (2016) *Facilitating evidence-based data-driven school counseling: A manual for practice*. Corwin. PLC questions were modified from DuFour et al.'s (2010) original questions to reflect school engagement.

Action Research Questions

This action research study (Mertler, 2020) sought to understand the influence of a PLC on the practices of a select group of high school counselors in one suburban school district in a mid-Atlantic state. Specifically, it addressed the influence of PLCs on school counselors' collaboration to solve problems of practice and their use of data-driven decision making. This study sought to answer the following research questions:

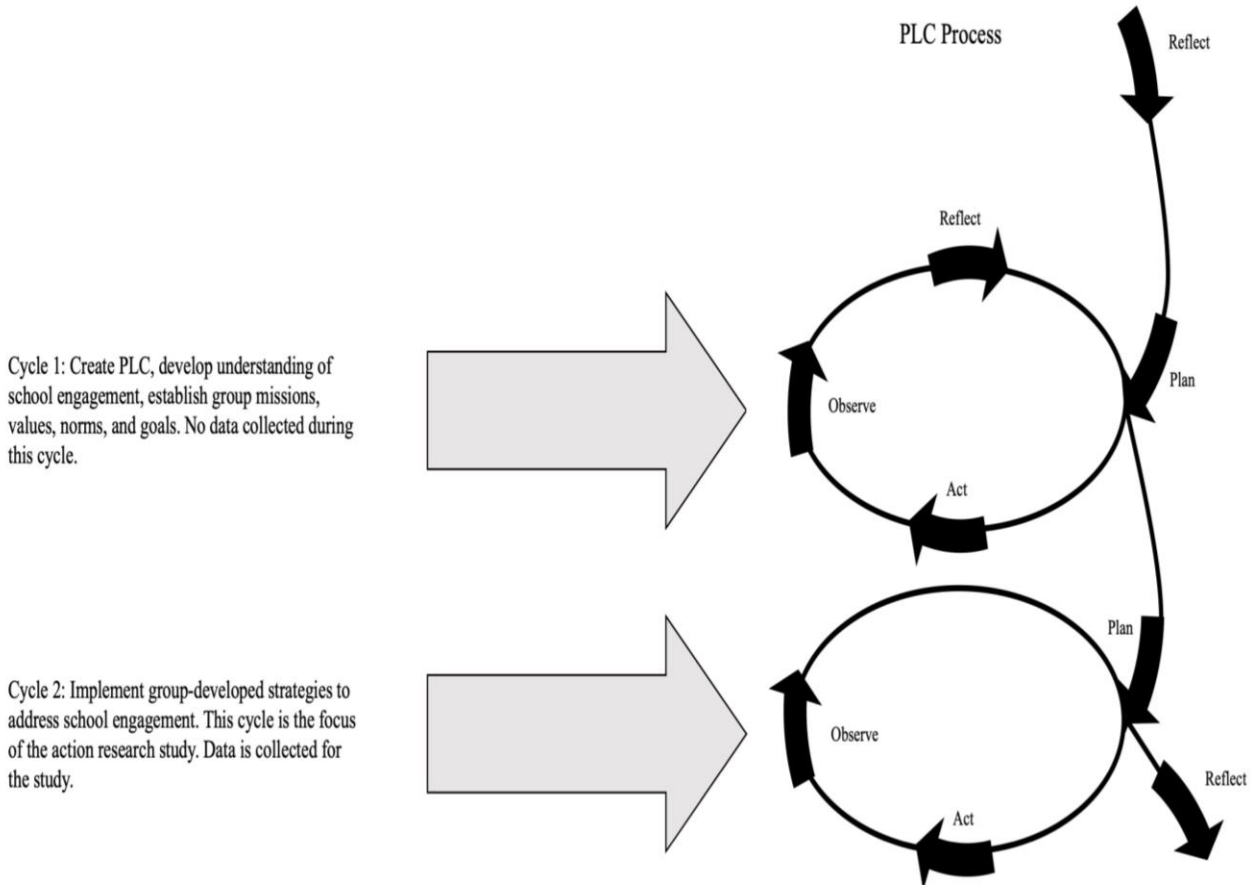
1. After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors perceive their abilities in the elements of the PLC model related to collaboration, collective inquiry, self-evaluation, and maintaining a results-orientation to solve problems of practice?
2. After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors describe their approach to results-oriented practice through the use of data to make decisions?
3. After participating in a professional learning community, what do high school counselors perceive to be the benefits and challenges to working in a PLC?

Action Research Model

I used Mertler's (2020) Process of Action Research. Each cycle of action research included stages of planning, acting, developing, and reflecting on school counselor practice. Cycles were iterative, building upon the work of previous cycles to address a problem of practice with finer detail as cycles progressed. The action research process of a PLC provided a framework within which the influence of collaborative inquiry and data management in school counselor practice was assessed. This study took place during the second cycle of an already in-progress PLC to address school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019). Figure 3 represents the cycles of action research in relationship with the PLC process.

Figure 3

Cycles of Action Research



Description of Intervention

Participating high school counselors took part in a multi-cycle PLC beginning in November 2021 to address school engagement. Cycle 1 of the PLC focused on PLC formation. Members determined their group mission, values, and beliefs and established participant norms and expectations. Because PLC work was new to school counselors in the District, a review of the foundation of PLCs was provided. School counselors developed knowledge of school engagement through discussions of selected readings, group activities, and dialogue. No data were collected during Cycle 1. Cycle 2 of the

action research was the focus of this study. PLC members engaged in collaborative work on the problem of practice: addressing school engagement using data-management practices. Data were collected during Cycle 2 to answer research questions.

During Cycle 2 of this action research study, school counselors employed interventions to address declines in school engagement among current high school students. PLC meetings offered opportunities to reflect on current practices, to practice new interventions, and to formatively evaluate progress towards the PLC goals. Data monitoring, disaggregation, and analysis were key to PLC endeavors promoting data-driven decision making.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this action research study, the following definitions of terms were used:

- *Professional learning community* (*PLC)* is defined as "an ongoing process in which educators work collaboratively in recurring cycles of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DuFour et al., 2010, p. 10).
- *School engagement* is defined as "students' directed and sustained participation in school as well as the observable and unobservable qualities of student interactions with learning activities and social companions" (Wang et al., 2019, p. 592). School engagement is made up of four dimensions: behavioral, cognitive, affective, and social engagement (Wang et al., 2019).
- *The National Model* is a framework by ASCA to promote best practices for working professional school counselors. First published in 2003 and updated most

recently in 2019, the National Model is the preeminent publication on school counselor professional practice. The National Model is built on four pillars of defining, delivering, managing, and assessing school counselor practices.

- *A comprehensive school counseling program* is defined as a professional school counseling program that uses data to make decisions about counseling service needs, to deliver interventions, and to assess intervention impact through intentional and transparent data analysis procedures (Hatch, 2014).
- *Collaboration* is the act of intellectually working together to solve problems of practice through common efforts and interactions (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).
- *Collective inquiry* is defined as a group of people addressing a problem, developing a shared meaning for that problem, jointly planning a response to that problem, delivering on that plan through coordinated actions, and assessing the outcomes of those plans (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).
- *Self-evaluation* is defined as the act of using current data to assess individual influence on and contribution to outcomes.
- *Results-orientation* is defined as maintaining a focus on outcomes when making decisions.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

School Counselor Isolation

School counselors have long performed in a professional environment of isolation (Wasson & Strowig, 1965). Causes of isolation have stemmed from historical developments in the profession. School counselors were pushed into isolated roles viewed as separate from the school's mission of educating students. Changes in the educational landscape brought on by the Accountability Movement, a period of rapid changes in legal standards to remedy achievement gaps in schools, led to further isolation because teachers viewed class time as pivotal to achievement outcomes. This led to reduced time for school counselors to work with students and colleagues. Adding to these problems, the Accountability Movement ushered in a new wave of school bureaucracy that often fell on school counselors' shoulders further separating them from peers. Across these developments, an undercurrent of job ambiguity and poor professional evaluation measures continue to isolate school counselors into positions with little collaboration.

Historical Isolation

Dating back to its earliest roots in the 1900s, school counseling had a notable problem with job isolation. The primary goal of school counseling was to find and develop talent among adolescents so the best and brightest students could be groomed into a productive life of work (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). The role of the school counselor was usually fulfilled by teachers who were assigned to take on counseling

responsibilities. On the purpose of school counselors, Myers (1923) wrote, “A centralized, unified program of vocational guidance for the entire school of a city is essential to the most effective work" (p. 139).

Early models of school counseling consisted of very little job structure. Teachers were assigned additional duties on top of their teaching load to direct students into productive work environments. These additional duties were often undefined and poorly structured so that early school counselors looked more like assistants to the principal than supports to students’ needs (Myers, 1923). Myers highlighted the problem:

> Another tendency dangerous to the cause of vocational guidance is the tendency to load the vocational counselor with so many duties foreign to the office that little real counseling can be done. The principal, and often the counselor himself, has a very indefinite idea of the proper duties of this new office. The counselor's time is more free from definite assignments with groups or classes of pupils than is that of the ordinary teacher. If well chosen he has administrative ability. It is perfectly natural, therefore, for the principal to assign one administrative duty after another to the counselor until he becomes practically assistant principal, with little time for the real work of a counselor. (p. 141)

The problem of isolation stemming from unstructured, school-counseling positions continued for decades. J. A. Fitch (1936) wrote:

> There is always danger that the counselor may come to be regarded as a handyman on whom may be unloaded any sort of task that no one else has time to do. Thus we often find counselors performing the function of visiting teacher, director of lunch room, substitute teacher, counselor of problem pupils, etc. They

> may be called upon to act in all sorts of roles from that of chairman of the committee on social activities to that of assistant principal. (p. 762)

From its origins, school counseling has always been at risk of disregard and reallocation of duties by school administrators in search of task completion.

Professional education programs in school counseling started to come about in the 1930s as school counselors were increasingly called upon to respond to various emotional needs of students in addition to vocational guidance (Gysbers & Henderson, 2001). Pre professional programs popped up around the country leading to an increase in school counselors. School counselors worked alongside other pupil personnel, including school nurses, school physicians, and attendance officers, to support students' emotional needs while guiding them into productive careers.

The National Defense Education Act (1958) was a federal legislation aimed in part at guiding the best and brightest students into career fields that would enable America to maintain a competitive advantage against Cold War opponents. This led to an explosion of new hirings in school counseling across the United States. The expansion of vocational guidance programs resulted in previous school counselor responsibilities, such as serving students' socioemotional needs, shifting to teachers because school counselors took on more roles with career development. The shift away from serving socioemotional needs coincided with an increase in the bureaucracy of American schools that occurred mid-century, resulting in school counselors and teachers diverging in their professional work (Cicourel & Kitsuse, 1963). Gysbers and Henderson (2001) note that as the emphasis on vocational guidance increased, an emphasis on other counseling services decreased. This left school counselors often filling ancillary roles in schools, such as

class enrollments and testing coordination. Their work was relegated to administrative and clerical duties instead of supporting students. The ongoing separation of school counselors and teachers that started after the National Defense Education Act of 1958 resulted in a structural alienation between the two professions (Stone-Johnson, 2015).

While working parallel with each other, both groups continue to operate out of similar bureaucratic responsibilities established during the middle of the twentieth century. Teachers remain in charge of curriculum delivery while school counselors manage the academic guidance, career development, and socioemotional needs of students.

Large Caseloads

While schools were likely to have a school counselor on staff, managing large caseloads became a hallmark of school counseling practice in addition to clerical work (Gysbers, 2001). Ratios of students to school counselors were high, resulting in school counselors delivering few personalized services, and more often, generalized treatment of student needs regardless of context.

A 2018 report by the National Association of College Admissions Counselors found the trend of large caseloads continues to this day (P. Patel & Clinedinst, 2018). ASCA advocates for a ratio of 250 students to every school counselor. As of 2018, only three states met that standard. The average national ratio was 470 students per school counselor (P. Patel & Clinedinst, 2018). Large caseloads require constant attention and allow for little collaboration time among professionals.

Marginalization of Socioemotional Learning and Career Development

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), and the subsequent federal and state legislations that have made up the Accountability Movement over the past two decades, have resulted in increasingly isolated practices of school counselors. As curricula changed and schools' focus became results produced by teachers, the role of school counselors to serve students' needs often fell to marginal experiences. Brown et al. (2004) noted in their research of school counselors' experiences following the passage of NCLB that counselors reported less time spent in direct support of students, fewer interactions with teachers, and greater misunderstandings of school counselors' role in the educational process. Dollarhide and Lemburger (2006) found similar consequences of accountability measures in their survey of 206 school counselors. Over a third of those surveyed noted the increase in testing responsibilities, the decrease in collaboration with teachers, and the decrease in time available to work with students because of increased time spent on academic subjects.

More recent research has found that the increase in non-counseling duties and the subsequent reduction in time spent in direct service to students has led to school counselor isolation and burnout (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Moyer, 2011). As schools moved towards accountability measures that evaluated student progress in core subjects, other aspects of the educational process, such as socioemotional learning and career development, were marginalized (Stone-Johnson, 2015).

Hatch (2014) pointed out that much of the services school counselors provide cannot be tied directly to achievement results, but rather exist in support of student achievement. Hatch acknowledged that accountability measures often overlook

achievement-related data, or the related data points that foster overall achievement, which can result in devaluation and isolation of school counselors.

Job Ambiguity

A major contributor to school counselors' isolation results from role ambiguity in school (T. Fitch et al., 2001; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). Inconsistent practices across districts, and even within schools, leave school counselors with similar job titles and in similar contexts performing dissimilar roles within their daily work life (Shoffner & Williamson, 2000; Sutton & Fall, 1995; Zalaquett, 2005). This leads to school counselors filling roles that are not appropriate to school counseling practice (ASCA, 2019).

The variance in school counselor job expectations continues to be a problem and contributes to isolation (Borders, 2002; Constantine & Gainor, 2001; Mullis & Edwards, 2001). Falls and Nichter (2007) interviewed school counselors about their job duties and supports. They found that high demand for services in support of a large student caseload and low support from school administrators resulted in elevated levels of school counselor isolation and burnout. Holman and Grubbs (2018) surveyed 174 public school counselors in Texas. They found that demand for increases of school counselor services, particularly non counseling duties, resulted in higher levels of exhaustion, increased feelings of incompetence, negative experiences at work, and increases in personal life problems. However, Holman and Grubbs also identified protective factors: School counselors who reported supportive, professional, peer relationships and who received supervisory supports experienced fewer negative outcomes due to increased job responsibilities.

School Counselor Misevaluation

Evaluation procedures created for teachers, but used for school counselors, results in counselors filling roles that are neither full teacher, nor full school counselor in scope. In their survey of 324 administrators, Geesa et al. (2019) found that administrators' perspectives on the role of school counselors drove the evaluation process. When administrators viewed the school counselor role with ambiguity, evaluations contributed to isolation as counselors moved away from prescribed practice.

Morris and Slaten (2014) found that school counselors who were poorly evaluated using incorrect criteria were more likely to experience career burnout, underperform on necessary school counselor responsibilities, divert energy to inappropriate duties, or leave the field of school counseling. The researchers note a major contribution to the misevaluation of school counselors stems from the lack of counselor-evaluation protocols and a lack of training for school administrators in the evaluation of school counselors.

Stronge and Tucker (2013) highlighted the importance of administrators receiving training in proper techniques for evaluating school counselors. Noting the unique work skills needed for effective school counseling, the researchers demonstrated the need for proper evaluation tools of school counselors. Without role-specific evaluation tools, the evaluation loses utility, causes breakdowns in the necessary roles of school counselors, and can lead to school counselor isolation.

Ill-prepared and misapplied evaluation measures result in school counselors performing tasks and fulfilling responsibilities that they otherwise may not understand or care to perform. Stone-Johnson (2015) chronicled the influence of teacher isolation due to variable job expectations. Stone-Johnson noted that teachers who experienced ongoing

changes to curriculum were at risk of disengagement and isolation from other educators resulting in alienation. The research described alienation as a feeling of having to deliver services expected by authorities, but not necessarily in the best interests of students. School counselors are at risk of similar alienation, disengagement, and isolation due to job evaluations developed for teachers, but utilized for school counselors.

School counselor isolation has many roots. Historical developments in the field of school counseling as well as the larger educational process have left counselors often standing on the outside of collaborative environments. Large caseloads continue to present challenges to school counselors, spreading thin both services to students and counselors' energy to meet the needs of wide and diverse student bodies. The variability of services provided by school counselors results in ambiguous job descriptions that vary from school to school depending on student-body needs and administrative expectations. Further complicating the situation are misaligned evaluation procedures that hold school counselors accountable for job responsibilities that are not appropriate. As a result, school counselors experience isolation. This requires remedy.

Providing collaborative opportunities allows school counselors to capitalize on collective strengths of a group so that appropriate practices are distributed across the profession. Collaboration takes counselors one step closer to fulfilling the National Model (ASCA, 2019). The other critical component is data use to make data-informed decisions.

School Counselor Data Use

The use of data to make counseling decisions has been encouraged since the 1970s (Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). The 1990s saw a renewed call for comprehensive

school counseling programs to use research-based practices that generate achievement and accountability. Effective data monitoring is a key feature of comprehensive school counseling programs (ASCA, 2019; Dimmitt et al., 2007; Earl & Katz, 2002). Johnson (2002) demonstrated that the effective use of data monitoring led to improved outcomes in implementing effective programs to combat low achievement. Hatch (2014) pointed to the need for data to demonstrate impact on student achievement, program evaluation, determining action plans, implementing curriculum, and scaling interventions to meet larger groups. The positive impact of data usage in school counseling practice is so highly regarded that numerous studies have pushed for its use in daily, school counseling practice; however, it remains an inconsistent practice among school counselors (Brady et al., 2014; Carey et al., 2012; Dimmit et al., 2007; Earl & Katz, 2002; Hatch, 2014; Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009; Miller, 2016; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008; Sowell et al., 2020; Zyromski et al., 2018).

School Counselor Attitudes Toward Data Use

School counselors' attitudes toward data use present a challenge that must be overcome to fulfill the National Model. In their study of ASCA members, Young and Kaffenberger (2011) found that data-management practices stemmed from four attitudes among school counselors. The first attitude held that data-management processes helped school counselors meet students' diverse needs. The second attitude toward data monitoring was that it assisted counselors in evaluating and improving programming. The third attitude was a press towards professional advocacy of appropriate professional responsibilities while shedding inappropriate duties. The fourth attitude pertained to the

maintenance of accountability systems used by the National Model. In each group, data management provided a positive input to comprehensive school counseling programs.

While helpful in understanding the potential data-usage decisions, an assumption is made in Young and Kaffenberger's (2011) research, namely that ASCA members are representative of all school counselors. Aspirations to follow the National Model, or even acquire membership, are not uniformly shared across all school counselors (Akos et al., 2019). While ASCA has laid out a road map for counselors to follow, adherence to the National Model is not universal. Only 67% of active school counselors hold ASCA membership according to a 2020 ASCA State of the Profession Report. Overcoming attitudes about the utility of data management in the pursuit of comprehensive school counseling programming is a worthy endeavor, but it must reach beyond ASCA membership to succeed.

School Counselors' Lack of Data Training

School counselors' use of data is limited by a lack of professional training (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009; Lachat & Smith, 2004; Zyromski et al., 2018). Data-management skills vary within schools and departments. Additionally, mixed agendas caused by ambiguous job responsibilities across departments and counselors lead to fragmentation of data management systems. While some counselors may be focused on one intervention, other counselors may be targeting another concern. Overcoming these limits to data usage through unified training activities is key to improving school counselor service.

Despite the need, a lack of data-management training has been noted in pre professional school counselor education programs, and in professional development

opportunities delivered to practicing counselors (Zyromski et al., 2018). S. Patel et al. (2013) suggest that the lack of data-management skills taught in graduate programs and professional development stems from counseling educators' and professional developers lack of understanding in how to teach these programs. Astramovitch (2016) found variable levels of confidence in data analysis resulting in similarly variable rates of usage. Where confidence was high, such as in comprehensive school counseling programs that aspire to the National Model, data-management usage was high. Where confidence was low, likely from a lack of training or inconsistent usage, data usage was low.

Even when professional-development opportunities were provided, school counselors did not use data to inform decision making consistently unless they were simultaneously involved in comprehensive school counseling (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009). Poynton (2009) noted where professional development trainings were present, the continued use of data management was not maintained by counselors without structured support. Counselors cited time demands and lack of training as the greatest obstacles to data management and use. The regular use of data management practices has long suffered because of lack of time and training.

Data-Use Shortcomings

Despite the positive evidence for the implementation of data-management use as part of comprehensive school counseling programs, research reveals that school counselors who do use data, often fall short of the ideals outlined by the National Model (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009; Scarborough & Culbreth, 2008). Historically, data use has been limited to demonstrations of contact or to numerate actions taken by a school counselor, leaving out impact and outcomes of those actions (Holcomb-McCoy et al.,

2009). Comprehensive school counseling requires data to not only numerate actions taken, but the impact of those actions, outcomes, and changes in achievement of students, programs, or schools (ASCA, 2019).

Most apparent is the lack of data-informed decisions about program implementation and practice (Hatch, 2014). Strear et al. (2018) highlighted this deficit in their qualitative study of 19 school counselors. Results of their work showed data use, both generation of data, and ongoing tracking of data, is a substantial deficit for practicing school counselors. Miller's (2016) survey of 416 school counselors concluded a lack of time, available data team, and data culture were to blame for school counselors' not using data to make informed decisions in the pursuit of comprehensive services. Of the counselors who reported using data regularly, their reasons for doing so included easy access to data, previous development of data management skills, and a recognition of the importance of data to both school counselors and the greater school community.

The use of data to support comprehensive school counseling programming remains a goal across the profession. While the National Model (ASCA, 2019) calls for school counselors to use data as part of its ethical standards for school counseling, varying attitudes about data use and a lack of training opportunities still prevent full implementation. Even when school counselors use data, many report only using it to demonstrate actions taken, missing out on a bigger, more wholistic view of the impact data can have on a comprehensive school counseling program. Consistent opportunities for school counselors to train in data use and to infuse it in their regular work are important developments that need to be made available to all school counselors.

PLCs

Experiences of isolation are not unique to school counselors. Researchers have found that a sense of isolation and a lack of collegial interactions occur in teachers (Conley & Cooper, 2013; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Weddle et al., 2019); school administrators (Bayar, 2020; Calabrese, 2015); and other educational specialists (Leyba, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2021). PLCs offer a solution by promoting collaborative inquiry to examine problems of practice (Carpenter, 2018; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Owen, 2015; Prenger & Handelzalts, 2017). Literature documents the effectiveness of PLCs to improve school outcomes among educators (Bayar, 2020; Calabrese, 2015; Conley & Cooper, 2013; Leyba, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Weddle et al., 2019). To create these outcomes, DuFour et al. (2010) stated intentional collaboration among educators is necessary to promote the use of evidence-based practices and data-informed decision making. This sustained collaboration and intentional data use leads to sustained student achievement in schools (Bryan, 2005; DuFour et al., 2010).

PLC History

The history of PLCs starts decades before the actual first PLC was coined by Richard DuFour in the late 1990s. Starting in the 1960s with the research of Lortie (1969) and moving into the 1980s with the work of Warren Little (1982), the notion of collaboration among teachers to promote students' achievement gained momentum. Warren Little found that collaboration was a key function of successful professional development. She noted that collaboration helped to promote focus, meaningfulness, and accountability during meetings. Rosenholtz (1985) recognized the importance of collaboration through a study of elementary schools, noting the most effective schools

used teacher collaborations to focus on school improvement. DuFour brought the potential of collaboration to implementation in his introduction of PLCs at his school in Illinois. First published by Dufour and Eaker (1998), PLCs have become synonymous with teacher professional development.

Effective PLCs

An effective PLC includes stakeholders who act in a collaborative and collective manner to address an agreed upon set of goals through action-oriented practices to produce measurable results (Dufour et al., 2010). DuFour et al. (2010) proposed that PLCs serve the primary purpose of answering four main questions:

- What do we want students to learn?
- How will we know when they have learned it?
- What will we do with students who demonstrate that they have learned it?
- What will we do with students who have not demonstrated that they learned it?

Two resounding features of effective PLC work are the building of individual and collective efficacy through collaborations and the intentional use of data to enhance student monitoring, planning and, delivering interventions, and assessing intervention progress (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). The attributes of effective PLCs are (a) a shared focus on learning, (b) collaboration, (c) collective inquiry, (d) self-evaluation, (e)results-oriented emphasis, and (f) record keeping. These features meet the needs of school counselors seeking to narrow the gap between the current realities and ideals of the National Model.

Focus on Learning. PLCs maintain a focus on learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Members work collectively to determine what each student should gain from learning experiences. Although the focus lies on student learning, a major component of effective PLC work is for educators involved in the PLC to also learn new skills. Opportunities to grow in practice, to share in struggle, and to develop mastery of work are necessary for effective learning among PLC members (Dufour et al., 2010).

While learning experiences may look different in counseling, research calls for school counselors to learn from each other and evaluate the effectiveness of their practices (ASCA, 2019). School counselors should also maintain ongoing development in their professional practice by staying current on literature, consulting and collaborating with other educators, receiving appropriate supervision for counseling duties, and maintaining a focus on current achievement and potential areas of growth (ASCA, 2019).

Collaboration. A collaborative environment is necessary for effective PLC work (DuFour et al., 2010). PLC members share a responsibility towards other members to be both supportive and engaged in accomplishing the collective goals of the PLC. PLC members provide support to one another as they employ PLC-generated strategies and interventions in their daily work. PLC meetings provide opportunities for PLC members to practice new skills in a safe environment and to discuss challenges, successes, and decisions made while implementing group-generated strategies.

This meets counselors' need to interact with one another in the process of sharing and comparing intervention strategies for working with a diverse array of students. ASCA (2019) adds that school counselors should share effective strategies that support

student achievement with other counselors to spread best practices as well as collaborate with other school staff to promote student achievement.

Collective Inquiry. Effective PLCs share a drive for collective inquiry into best practices using research-based methods of intervention. PLC members build a shared knowledge of effective practices through research and implementation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Opportunities for reflection and critique at meetings provide PLC members a chance to assess their current contributions to outcomes and to evaluate new methods of intervention (Dufour et al., 2010).

The National Model also promotes collective inquiry. A key feature of that process is evaluation of current practices and their effectiveness (ASCA, 2019). School counselors should believe "effective school counseling is a collaborative process" (ASCA, 2019, p. 6) that uses shared strategies to support student achievement. ASCA goes on to say that school counselors "partner with others to advocate for student achievement, educational equity, and opportunities" (p. 12). These partnerships provide the building blocks for collective action that solves problems in schools.

Self-Evaluation. The drive for self-evaluation is a critical aspect of an effective PLC as it creates an environment for continuous improvement (Dufour et al., 2010). Group members gather evidence of current student outcomes and PLC-member practices. Strategies are developed to build on strengths and to improve on weaknesses of current practices. PLC members implement those new strategies in their daily practice. Analysis is done to determine the effectiveness of new practices in working towards collectively determined goals. PLC members refine strategies through an iterative process of action research. Interventions are attempted, results are assessed, and interventions further

refined based on research and PLC evaluation. New knowledge is applied with each step, offering members opportunities to build on successes in a cyclical process (Dufour et al., 2010).

Similarly, the National Model calls school counselors to self-assess their "mindsets and behaviors" (ASCA, 2019, p. 5) to improve on current practices and close gaps in achievement. School counselors use available data to create goals and "explain concepts related to program results and accountability within a comprehensive school counseling program" (p. 13) ASCA encourages counselors to reflect on how the ASCA mindsets and behaviors for student success were "intentionally and carefully selected, serve as the foundation for instruction, appraisal, advisement, and counseling, and are reviewed or revised each year" (p. 28). The work of school counselors should also be driven by self-evaluation.

Results-Oriented. The goal of an effective PLC is to create results. PLC members generate goals that align with school and district goals. PLC work is driven by the group's movement towards accomplishing goals. A key feature of goal development is determining evidence that progress is being made and timetables for evaluating that progress. Generating long-term goals is important to overall group direction. Using pre-determined evidence to evaluate short-term progress allows the PLC to evaluate its effectiveness and offers another opportunity for self-critique across long time spans (Dufour et al., 2010).

The National Model calls on school counselors to "use achievement, attendance, and discipline data to create student outcome goals aligned with school improvement" (ASCA, 2019, p. 13). School counselors are directed to "develop annual student

outcomes goals based on student data" (ASCA, 2019, p. 13) that support school improvement using current and past data. Identification of achievement gaps among students becomes fuel for goal development as school counselors support district and school planning.

Record Keeping. An effective PLC will generate a record of collaborations, deliberations, and data sets across the group's existence making effective record keeping an important PLC feature. Early records, highlighting current practices and their outcomes, set the starting block for the group's work. Documents are created as PLC members develop goals, research interventions, and develop strategies for reaching those goals. Opportunities for critique and reflection on current practices, short- and long-term goal development, attempts at new strategies, and obstacles to success are all part of the PLC record. These documents provide a road map for the progress made by a PLC, including decision-making processes, new intervention practice, progress monitoring across the group's existence, and insight into group members' feelings about PLC work (Dufour et al., 2010).

The National Model calls for similar record keeping. School counselors are expected to be able to "communicate research and methods of interventions that relate to outcomes and action research" (ASCA, 2019, p. 13). Communication with stakeholders is a significant aspect of school counseling work. It helps school counselors account for decision making and advocacy for appropriate role definition. While this aspect of the model will not be addressed in this study, this will be an area to be explored during subsequent action research cycles.

Challenges of PLCs

Professional learning is a complex event requiring various dynamics align to promote educator learning (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Vescio et al., 2008). Challenges to any professional learning, including PLCs, can be found within these various dynamics. PLCs rely on an expectation that educators will transfer what they learned through PLC experiences to regular work practices to reach PLC goals (Vescio et al., 2008). The ability to transfer those skills requires school-level supports to overcome obstacles in the transfer process. Vangrieken et al. (2015) found the necessary supports to overcome these challenges arise from structural, material, and cultural aspects of a school environment.

Structural supports include the relationships and roles of educators involved in PLC implementation and reflect the different interests at play in any system. With these varying interests comes the potential for conflict between old and new practices, changes made, and potential outcomes produced through PLC activities. Conflicts between established practice and experimentation may result in misalignment between educators or within an educational setting. Workplace relationships may hinder the dialogue necessary for effective learning (Hoekstra et al., 2009). Additionally, relationships between the role of an educator within a larger system and the school community itself may present challenges. Changing practices may result in varying results. Acceptance of those varying results may not be shared across peer educators or vertically with school administrators. Effective PLC implementation requires commitment from all parties to achieve effective results (Vangrieken et al., 2015). Gaining commitment from all parties remains a challenge to professional learning experiences, including PLC implementation (Billet, 2002). ASCA's (2019) ethical guidelines call on school counselors to address

their interests, motivations, and beliefs as part of a self-evaluation process to address problematic behaviors.

Material supports include resources such as time, physical space, and learning materials. In a resource-finite environment like schools, finding these resources presents challenges to PLC implementation. For many professionals, the time and energy dedicated to PLC implementation also present ongoing challenges (Billett, 2002; Hatch, 2014). ASCA (2019) calls on school counselors to dedicate time and energy in active professional learning experiences, such as PLCs, in order to learn about and implement new practices; however, those practices and the material supports may not exist for school counselors currently.

Cultural supports include the ideas, values, and beliefs of schools. In their qualitative study of teachers, Schaap et al. (2019) found a perceived lack of alignment between work expectations and PLC work leading to tension among PLC members. That tension resulted in reduced impact of the PLC. A major component of effective PLC implementation is the support of school administrators in the creation of PLC experiences for all educators, including non-teacher educators, such as school counselors (Griffen & Hallett, 2017). Despite the need for PLC experiences, a gap remains in the availability of PLCs for all educators indicating a lack of value placed in PLC experiences by school administrators.

Disadvantages of PLCs

Implementing any program in the resource-finite environment of schools can lead to disadvantages. PLC implementation requires a commitment of resources (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). In addition to the time, space, and learning materials needed, PLCs require

trained leaders capable of facilitating an effective PLC in order to reach success (Young et al., 2013). Without effective leadership, PLCs can lead to reinforcement of ineffective practices if not addressed appropriately. However, often an assumption is made in PLC implementation that effective leadership already exists among PLC members. Similar to other resources, schools might not have leadership resources to maintain effective PLC function and structure resulting in less optimal results (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

As PLCs identify problematic behaviors, educators are expected to evolve in conjunction with PLC goals (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Recognizing that not all educators share the same motivations, talents, or expertise, it might be a concern that weaker educators may be carried or hidden by overall PLC progress (Schaap et al., 2019). PLCs may shield educators who are unwilling or unable to evolve as changes are demanded, thus resulting in further gaps in achievement and a widening gap between effective and ineffective practice. A lack of leadership and an expanding achievement gap can lead to another disadvantage of over identifying gaps, but under addressing educators' inputs.

Gap gazing refers to the actions of educators to identify gaps in achievement, while being unable or unwilling to address the antecedents to those gaps, resulting in ongoing assessment but little progress (Fisher et al., 2019). Spillane et al. (2002) noted that educators may not actually understand what they are responding to when assessing data, leading to a misidentification of problems. Powell and Colyvas (2008) go on to add that educators are more likely to respond to plausible interpretations of data rather than accurate interpretations. Biased analysis may lead to continued problematic behaviors as gaps in achievement are attributed to issues beyond educators' actions resulting in continued problematic behaviors by educators (Roegman et al., 2018). DuFour and Eaker

(1998) state that PLCs require self-evaluation to be effective. If improper evaluation results in misattribution of the sources of achievement gaps, then problematic behaviors may become more entrenched as a result of PLCs.

PLC as a First Step

PLCs offer a first step toward implementing the National Model (ASCA, 2019). At present, the gap between the National Model framework and current practice is wide. School counselors work in isolation and their decision making is not data-informed.

School counselors require opportunities for collaboration to stem the experiences of isolated practice. PLCs meet that call by providing collaborative experiences in which school counselors reflect on past and current practices while setting goals in alignment with school improvement. Opportunities for collective inquiry further enhance the development of comprehensive school counseling practices because individual strengths are leveraged for collective improvement of all counselors.

Data management is of key importance to the effective implementation of both PLCs and the National Model. School counselors' current lack of data use leaves an area of growth for the profession. PLCs could help school counselors identify achievement gaps in current outcomes. These gaps can become the focal point of PLCs as school counselors work collectively to improve data-management skills. To set PLC goals, school counselors would need to identify interventions that target achievement gaps, implement the interventions, and asses their impact through systematic data analysis. PLC experiences can establish the necessary groundwork for a comprehensive school counseling program aligned with the National Model.

PLCs for School Counselors

Despite the vast resources dedicated to teacher PLCs, the research into school counselor PLCs has been limited (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) critiqued the opportunities available to school counselors, noting that PLC work must be created and sustained for school counselors to have ongoing professional development. Calls continue to be heard from across educational research for PLCs in school counseling (Burkard et al., 2012a, 2012b; DuFour et al., 2010; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008); yet school counselors have largely been ignored by the movement (Remley & Herlihy, 2010).

Researchers have attempted to understand the potential of PLCs for school counselors' work. Griffen and Hallett (2017) found that school counselors were more likely to implement new practices in their work when they participated in a PLC. Penuel et al. (2012) added school counselors' previous practices may be problematic and opportunities to redress those practices may be few based on limited, local, professional development opportunities. PLCs offer counselors an opportunity to collaborate with other counselors on a consistent basis, providing ongoing feedback and opportunity for self-reflection (Dufour et al., 2010).

While ASCA does not advocate for PLCs specifically, the organization does call for the six features of effective PLCs to be features of professional school counseling practice. Previous calls for collaboration and consultation among school counselors have been an undercurrent in school counseling literature, and yet, it remains a missing component (ASCA, 2019; Eckerson & Smith, 1966). School counselors are directed to use data to make informed decisions in delivering a comprehensive school counseling

program; however, data use remains limited across practicing counselors. This gap between the reality of current school counseling practices and the potential reward of the National Model continues to constrain school counseling results. PLCs offer benefits, such as collaboration and data-management improvements, that are not otherwise provided currently to school counselors (Hatch, 2014). Crossing the divide between what is required of school counselors to fulfill the National Model and what is happening currently requires investigation into PLC experiences and how they can activate collaboration and data use.

School Counselor Collaboration. Collaboration among school counselors helps to reduce feelings of isolation and to promote better school counseling practices, such as data-management skills (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Gunduz, 2012; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Lambie, 2007; Stone-Johnson, 2015). Collaboration promotes a sense of collegiality, allowing professionals to process individual struggles in group contexts, particularly in helping settings, such as counseling and mental health (Allen, 2013). It also helps to spread effective practices across groups who previously worked in similar roles, but performed tasks in isolation (Joyce, 2004). Skills needed for effective practice, but previously limited by training and experience are promoted through collaborative practices (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Research has gone into effective methods of promoting collaboration among educators (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2010; Hatch, 2014). PLCs offer a proven method for promoting collaboration and skill building (Carpenter, 2018; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Owen, 2015; Prenger & Handelzalts, 2017).

PLC Data for School Counselors

An important undercurrent to PLC work is the ongoing creation, management, and analysis of data through collaboration and collective inquiry (Hatch, 2014). School counselors use data to identify which students need intervention, what interventions to implement, how to implement those interventions, and the effectiveness of those interventions (ASCA, 2019). Poynton (2009) noted that successful data use required professionals to continually work to improve data-management skills. As school counselors learn how to collect, assess, and analyze data, they grow in their professional practice. However, school counselor data use ranges from nonexistent to sporadic and unfocused. PLC data use could provide practice and accountability to school counselors for making data-informed decisions.

The four types of data available and useful in school counselor decision making are (a) achievement data, (b) achievement-related data, (c) outcome-related data, and (d) contextual data. These types of data are critical to implementing a PLC and they are currently accessible to school counselors.

Achievement Data. Achievement data can be used to describe a school's success (Hatch, 2014). These data indicate overall achievement at defined time intervals. Examples include standardized test scores, final grades, graduation rates, grade point average, dropout rates, and class pass rates. Analysis of achievement data can reveal outcome patterns that school counselors can address (Zyromski & Mariani, 2016); however, it is difficult to find a direct correlation between school counselor interventions and specific-student achievement (Hatch, 2014). While certain variables influenced by counselors will influence achievement data, the ability to draw a causal link between

counselor activities and changes in achievement data is difficult. Achievement data can be used to indicate a need for school counselor intervention. For example, a high dropout rate may indicate a decline in school engagement among adolescents, a problem for which school counselors are positioned to address and which affects achievement data (Fredricks et al., 2004).

Achievement-Related Data. Achievement-related data refers to data that research has identified as impacting students' achievement, such as attending school, doing schoolwork, and engaging in learning experiences (Hatch, 2014). Research shows school counselors' influence on achievement-related data, such as attendance (Moeder-Chandler, 2018); student behavior (Malecki & Elliot, 2002); school-work completion (Akioka & Gilmore, 2013); and class enrollment (Smith & Niemi, 2001). Not all students require the same interventions and different kinds of data can document this varied need (ASCA, 2019).

Efforts to track school counseling data related to achievement can be grouped into two additional categories: participation data and mindsets and behaviors data.

Participation Data. Participation data speaks to who is engaging with school counselors' interventions or school events (ASCA, 2019). Using data to target those students who need intervention as well as which students participated in an intervention after being identified are key uses of school counseling data management. Participation data can be collected through school counselors' notes, attendance records to counseling interventions (e.g., small group counseling), or through students' self-report.

Mindsets and Behavior Data. Mindsets and behavior data speak to students' attitudes and beliefs prior to and because of engaging with school counselor interventions

(ASCA, 2019). These can be assessed before, during, or after an intervention is employed through students' self-report, survey, school counselors' notes, or faculty report. Behavior data refers to students' behaviors that are influenced by counselor intervention (ASCA, 2019). This could include conforming to school rules, but might also look beyond school rules to other prosocial student behaviors, such as engaging with peers, developing relationships, participating in extracurricular activities, or engaging with learning experiences (ASCA, 2019). Data on behaviors can be collected through school reports, faculty observations, student self-report, survey, or school counselors' notes. Mindsets and behaviors data can be collected at specific intervals or on an ongoing basis depending on the nature of the desired results and interventions employed.

Outcome-Related Data. Outcome-related data indicates the direct impact of school counselor interventions. While appearing similar, outcome-related data is not the same as achievement data. Outcome-related data shares a relationship with participation data, mindset data, and behavioral data in that it reflects a causal relationship between a desired set of student action outcomes and school counselors' intervention (ASCA, 2019). Hatch (2014) labels this competency-related data because it provides information about the specific competency school counselors influenced through interventions. It is specific data from only the students targeted by a specific school counselor intervention. Outcome-related data can be collected through student self-report, survey, faculty report, school counselor observation, and school records. ASCA (2019) encourages school counselors to use outcome-related data as evidence of their effects on student achievement.

Contextual Data. School counselors gather supplemental information to contextualize problems so that interventions can be created with better precision (ASCA, 2019). While contextual data may not be officially solicited, it can be an invaluable asset when developing an understanding of issues and determining appropriate interventions. Methods for collecting contextual information include needs assessments, student self-reports, school counselors' notes, stakeholder surveys, school records, or faculty observation. ASCA (2019) urges caution when collecting contextual data because it can lead to overgeneralizations and bias. School counselors must be alert to myopic responses when addressing broad issues. Issues that occur in marginally small populations may not show up in broad school reports. Similarly, problems may be overrepresented in samples that are too narrow or homogenous in nature. Data collection processes must be assessed for representation across student needs.

Summary

ASCA provides a framework for ideal counseling practice through the National Model. Unfortunately, not all school counselors operate with research-based, best practices. Some of the causes for this gap between ideal and daily practice stem from school counselors experiencing isolation in the workplace. Additionally, consistent use of data management to identify, address, and assess students' needs remains a goal that many school counselors have not reached. Both phenomena lead to an underperformance of school counselors and result in school counselors not fulfilling the promise of the National Model.

First steps towards meeting ASCA's call are to create and sustain development opportunities for school counselors to collaborate with other professionals around data-

use practices. These experiences hold much promise for the school counseling profession. PLCs have been shown to promote both collaborative practices and data management among other professionals yet remain underutilized in school counseling. PLCs offer a solution to solving counselor isolation and data use as school counselors move towards better professional practice.

Questions remain about school counselors' experiences in PLCs: How do school counselors develop collaborative relationships in the PLC process? Do school counselors enjoy the same benefits of reduced isolation through PLC work that other educational professionals have received? PLCs' demand for ongoing data use offers us another area for growth in the literature: What types of data do school counselors utilize in PLCs? How is the data-management process for school counselors' PLCs different from that of other educators' PLCs? Do the differences influence the PLC experience for school counselors in constructive ways that promote comprehensive school counseling? Utilizing PLCs to promote both collaboration and data use offer us next steps in the fulfillment of the National Model's promise of comprehensive school counseling.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

This qualitative action research study was conducted among a voluntary group of high school counselors participating in a professional learning community (PLC). Using action research, this study sought to answer questions about the influence of a PLC on the collaborative work and data-management practices of school counselors. Qualitative data served as sources of analysis. Data sources included semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and PLC transcripts. Data sources underwent a constant comparative analysis using coding to determine themes in pursuit of conclusions to action research questions.

Rationale for Choosing Action Research

Action research has garnered attention from educators as a method for analyzing current practices in search of finding better solutions to problems of practice (Mertler, 2020). Offering a process of systematic inquiry, action research "focuses specifically on the unique characteristics of the population with whom a practice is employed" (Mertler, 2020, p. 6). This study provided school counselors an opportunity to engage in the collaborative experience of a PLC. The PLC structure promoted the use of data-management skills in a process of systematic inquiry (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Both collaboration and data-driven practices are necessary early steps for school counselors to take as they work towards a comprehensive school counseling program as prescribed by the National Model (ASCA, 2019). Action research focuses on the unique characteristics of a population--in this study high school counselors in one suburban school district--and

provides solutions to problems of practice--school counselors' isolated practices and a lack of data-driven decision making in counseling services (Mertler, 2020).

The goal of this study was to determine how a PLC influenced school counselor collaborative practices in pursuit. The PLC was established to reduce job isolation caused by school counselors working singularly to address students' counseling needs. A reduction in isolation leads to better service delivery, better student achievement, less counselor burnout, and better collaborative use of resources among school counselors (Fye et al., 2020; Mullen, 2021). Strengthening school counselors' data-management skills promotes school and student achievement (ASCA, 2019; Dimmitt et al., 2007; Earl & Katz, 2002; Gysbers & Henderson, 2012). PLCs provide a framework for both endeavors, allowing for school counselors to move towards comprehensive school counseling practice aligned with National Model. The cyclical nature of a PLC aligns with the cyclical nature of action research. As counselors experienced the PLC, data were collected about school-counselor collaboration and data management, setting the stage for future developments in comprehensive school counseling.

Description of Action Research Intervention

District school counselors practiced in isolation with limited data management to make counseling decisions. An opportunity existed in PLCs to eliminate isolation and to promote more collaborative use of data among school counselors. Simultaneously PLCs also encouraged professional learning among school counselors' by sharing best practices. Although PLCs were a practice among teachers in the District, school counselors had not participated in this kind of collaboration. PLCs provide school

counselors with an opportunity to reflect on practices, develop new interventions, and utilize data-driven decision making in a collaborative environment.

Participating school counselors took part in action research cycles of a PLC. The total number of cycles were determined by the group as work progressed. The first cycle was dedicated to creation of the PLC, understanding the role and function of PLC members, and determining goals for the group. No data was collected during the first cycle. During Cycle 2 school counselors employed features of PLC work to make data-informed decisions. Data were collected from Cycle 2 to answer the action research questions. Data sources included semi-structured interviews, PLC meetings, and a focus group.

Cycle 1

PLC experiences were new to school counselors in the District. Because of its newness, the formation of a PLC involved participants learning about the PLC process, function, and form (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). These early PLC meetings informed participants' knowledge of the PLC process by establishing bonds of trust and relationships among members (Dufour & Eaker, 1998). Members got to know one another through dialogue and PLC activities. Participants engaged in formative discussions about PLC mission, practices, norms, and participant roles (DuFour et al., 2010). Participants were introduced to the Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model (Dimmitt et al., 2007) and provided examples of it in action to facilitate data-driven, decision-making procedures. School counselors learned about recent research in school engagement, its dimensions, and the myriad of indicators of school engagement available to school counselors. No participant data were collected in Cycle 1.

Cycle 2

Cycle 2 provided participating school counselors with an opportunity to engage in collaborative inquiry around school engagement practices as well as the use of data to inform those practices. In line with the Evidence-Based School Counseling Logic Model (Dimmitt et al., 2007), participants assessed school-engagement needs among students on their caseload. Indicators of school engagement were determined through participants' collaborative efforts. Data disaggregation was necessary to inform PLC efforts, leading the group to determine goals. Interventions for addressing school engagement were researched. Opportunities to practice new interventions and school counseling techniques were set up for PLC members at meetings. Additionally, data tracking methods were discussed to determine efficient practices for documenting school counselor interventions. Once interventions were employed, PLC members evaluated results to decide next steps in the PLC process.

Each PLC meeting during Cycle 2 offered participants an opportunity to reflect on their efforts to intervene in addressing school engagement. Data-tracking methods, intervention outcomes, and discussions about intervention attempts provided evidence for iterative cycles of research leading to more refined practices and better identification and response to declines in school engagement. Data was collected during Cycle 2 of the PLC to address the action research questions.

Role of the Researcher

My role in this study was that of a researcher as participant. I was one of the members of the PLC as well as facilitator of PLC meetings. As a facilitator, I coordinated PLC meetings, setting up our meeting space and communicating with group members in

advance of meetings. As a member of the PLC, I participated in PLC activities, collecting data on my own school counseling efforts, and contributing to PLC discussions. As a researcher, I was the sole data collector implementing analysis and interpretation to answer research questions.

There was the potential for my own bias in this study. As a school counselor in the District for the past 14 years, I experienced the impacts of job isolation and a lack of data-driven decision making. PLCs have had a positive influence on other educational departments in the District. I am encouraged by the results garnered in other disciplines to reduce the feelings of isolation and to promote data-driven decision making. The movement toward fulfilling the National Model requires these developments. My position as a researcher as participant has the potential to create bias in my findings because I hope that our work results in improved comprehensive school counseling. I worked to maintain objectivity in my findings as I facilitated and participated in the group.

Reflexive Journal

I maintained a weekly reflexive journal of my impressions, feelings, thoughts, and decisions about the work of the PLC. See Appendix A for a sample reflexive journal entry. This ongoing recounting of my experiences across the life of the PLC provided a potential map for assessing and limiting my own bias and prevent its influence on conclusions.

Additional strategies used to mitigate bias are discussed in this chapter under ethical considerations.

Participants

All 22 high school counselors in the District were invited to participate in this study. Invitations to participate were emailed to each school counselor during the first quarter of the 2021-2022 school year. An additional short presentation inviting participants to the study was made at each high school in the District during their regularly-scheduled-weekly department meetings. No conditions were made in seeking participants.

Effort to protect the anonymity of participants was made throughout this study. All participants were provided informed consent at the start of the study. Each participant was given an alias for which their comments and contributions were attributed. Participation in this study was voluntary. Participants could decide to leave the study at any time without penalty or punishment.

Study participants were employed at two high schools in the District. Both School 1 and School 2 are comprehensive public high schools serving students in Grades 9-12. See Table 1 for school demographic information.

Table 1

School Demographics

School	Total enrollment	Non-Latino White students	African American students	Latino students	Free/reduced -price lunch enrollment	Students receiving special services
	n	%	%	%	%	%
1	1220	61	12.4	15.9	35.2	14.5
2	1144	87.2	1.6	5	12.3	11.5

Following invitations, seven school counselors chose to take part in the study. One counselor chose to discontinue participation during Cycle 1 of the study. See Table 2 for participant information.

Table 2

Participant Information

Participant	School	Race	Gender	Years in education	Years in current position
A	2	Non-Latino White	Female	20	16
B	1	Non-Latino White	Female	15	15
C	1	Latino	Male	1	1
D	2	Non-Latino White	Female	4	3
E	2	Non-Latino White	Female	6	4
F	1	Non-Latino White	Female	8	2

Note. Years in education refers to the number of years the participant has worked as a professional educator with any position. Years in current position refers to the number of school years the participant has worked within their current role as a high school counselor at their school. The current school year counted as 1 year of experience.

Participants supported a caseload of 220-240 high school students in Grades 9-12 based on students' last name. All participants were full-time employees of the District, hold a minimum of a Masters' Degree in counseling education, and are licensed by the Commonwealth of Virginia in pupil personnel services.

Data Sources

This study used three data sources in seeking answers to the action research questions. Semi-structured interviews, PLC focus group, and PLC meeting transcripts provided an array of information to triangulate conclusions. The range of data sources helped to ensure reliability and validity of the study's results, offering opportunities to triangulate results with better precision. Data sources reflected a sustained engagement with participants across the study. Sources provided a rich, thick description of

participants' experiences and comments. All comments were true and accurate with opportunities for members to correct inaccuracies through regular member checks. All data collected across the life of this study were securely maintained in a secure digital file. See Appendix B for a copy of informed consent.

Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews offered an opportunity to collect participants' perspectives and experiences through the participants' own words (Mertler, 2020). Each participant took part in two semi-structured, one-on-one interviews. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes long, audio recorded, and took place at the location of the participant's choosing. The first semi-structured interview took place at the start of PLC Cycle 2. The second interview took place at the conclusion of Cycle 2.

A protocol of semi-structured questions was asked of each participant. See Table 3 for semi-structured interview questions. The same question stems were asked at each interview. The nature of semi-structured interviews allowed follow-up questions to participants' responses (Mertler, 2020). Follow-up questions offered flexibility in data collection and potential expansion of participants' answers as data emerged.

The semi-structured interview questions were field tested in advance by a panel of three practicing school counselors who are not participating in this study but have experience working in the District. Each member of the panel had a minimum of 10 years of professional school counseling experience and was a current high school counselor. Additionally, the questions were field tested with a former school administrator with experience in school counseling oversight. Questions were field tested for clarity,

relationship to research questions, and potential for expanding knowledge about the school counselor experience. See Table 3 for a list of semi-structured questions.

Table 3

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi-structured interview question	Action research question alignment
1. How would you describe your collaborations as a school counselor with other stakeholders: School counselors? Teachers? Administrators? Parents? Community?	1
2. How have collaborative experiences influenced your work as a school counselor?	1
3. What influences your collaborations with other educators?	1
4. Describe any changes to your practice related to collaboration as a result of participating in a PLC. Collaboration with school counselors. Collaboration with other educators.	1
5. In what ways did you contribute to the collaborative process in the PLC?	1
6. Describe any changes to your practice related to collective inquiry as a result of participating in a PLC.	1
7. Describe any changes to your practice related to self-evaluation as a result of participating in a PLC.	1
8. Describe your use of data as a result of participating in a PLC.	2
9. What types of data do you utilize in your work?	2
10. What influences your data use in school counseling?	2
11. Has your use of data changed as a result of your participating in a PLC?	2
12. What types of learning experiences have you had with data-driven decision making?	2
13. How would you describe the experience of participating in a PLC for school counseling?	3
14. Is there anything else you would like to add related to the topic of PLCs?	3

PLC Focus Group

One focus group was held with all participants during the final PLC meeting of Cycle 2. The focus group provided an opportunity to expand knowledge on practices and perceptions among participants while allowing members to feed off and respond to each other's answers. Dialogue among members provided data not gathered by individual interviews. Members were able to hear the met and unmet needs of other participants, providing opportunities for reflection on their own experiences and allowing participants to consider and discuss ideas that may have otherwise gone unnoticed. The focus group allowed for discussion among members (Mertler, 2020).

Like semi-structured interviews, the focus group was presented with a set of planned, semi-structured questions for which all members were given an opportunity to answer through open dialogue. Follow-up and probing questions were asked depending on emerging data. The nature of the focus group dialogue resulted in group members asking questions of each other. The focus group protocol was field tested in the same manner as the semi-structured interview protocol. See Table 4 for a list of focus group questions.

Table 4

PLC Focus Group Protocol

Focus group question	Action research question alignment
1. How do you describe the experience of participating in a PLC aligned with the work of school counselors?	1
2. How do you describe the experience of collective inquiry among school counselors in a PLC?	1
3. How would you describe the benefit of working towards a shared goal as a school counselor?	1
4. How would you describe the influence of PLC's results-orientation on your work as a school counselor?	1
5. How would you describe the collaboration in the PLC?	1
6. How would you describe the benefit of professional self-evaluation?	3
7. How would you describe the benefit of using data for decision making as a school counselor?	2
8. How would you describe the data-management process in a PLC?	2
9. What types of data were most influential in the PLC process?	2
10. How would you describe the influence of a PLC on your data use as a school counselor?	2
11. What are the benefits to participating in a PLC?	3
12. What are the challenges to participating in a PLC?	3
13. Is there anything else you would like to add related to the topic of PLCs?	1, 2, 3

PLC Meeting Transcripts

PLC meetings occurred weekly throughout the study in accordance with the school calendar. PLC meetings took place in person and occurred immediately before the contractual school day to accommodate participation across schools and allow for travel time. Meetings were approximately one hour long. All PLC meetings in Cycle 2 were audio recorded and transcribed. Meeting agendas were planned in accordance with PLC

process and goals and shared with participants prior to meetings for feedback and member preparation. See Appendix C for PLC meeting agenda.

PLC recordings provided data of ongoing conversations and deliberations that shed light on the influence of the PLC on school counselors' use of data and collaborative work. Opportunities for reflection, both as a PLC group and as individuals, illuminated counselors' experiences.

Data Collection

Data collection took place during Cycle 2 of the PLC. In Cycle 2 participants employed PLC-generated strategies to address school engagement among current students. As PLC members engaged in the work of the PLC, they generated data to answer questions about school counselor collaboration, data-driven decision making, and intervention planning, delivery, and assessment to address school engagement.

Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews took place twice during this study, once at the start of Cycle 2 and once following the conclusion of Cycle 2. All semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Participants answered all questions and follow-up questions were asked based on participants' answers. All semi-structured interviews were transcribed within one week of the interview using Otter.ai, a secure, cloud-based transcription service. Once transcripts were completed, participants were able to member-check the transcript for accuracy. All recordings and transcripts were securely maintained to ensure participant confidentiality.

PLC Focus Group

A focus group took place at the conclusion of Cycle 2 of this action research study. The focus group was held during the regularly scheduled PLC meeting time at the conclusion of Cycle 2 utilizing the same meeting forum as other PLC meetings. The focus group was audio recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai. Opportunities for member checking were made available to participants to ensure accuracy. All transcripts were maintained on a secure digital server.

PLC Meeting Transcripts

Study participants took part in a weekly PLC meeting. All PLC meetings during Cycle 2 were audio recorded and transcribed within one week using Otter.ai. Transcripts were made available for member checks. Facilitating an ongoing PLC required the use of previous and ongoing PLC activities to plan and facilitate future meetings. Additionally, the influence of each PLC meeting to plan for the following meeting required transparency in facilitation. Because the group relied on collective inquiry among members to collect and analyze data, opportunities to contribute to PLC planning were made available to PLC members. PLC meeting transcripts were maintained on a secure digital server.

Data Analysis

This study relied on a body of qualitative data to inform conclusions to action research questions. All data sources underwent a constant comparative process upon which new data were compared to existing data cyclically (Mertler, 2020). Results from ongoing comparisons, including frequency and intensity of comments and expressions, led to themes and central ideas being distilled from data sources. This resulted in a

refinement of ideas about the experiences of school counselors as they engaged in the PLC.

All data sources were coded using thematic coding (Saldaña, 2016). A priori codes were determined using existing literature on PLCs, school counselor collaborations, and school counselor data management. As data was coded, themes became visible through both frequency of use and intensity of expression in the data. New data were compared to existing data in a cyclical process. See Table 5 for a list of a priori codes. Emerging themes were coded as the data revealed itself.

Table 5

A Priori Codes

Action research question	A priori code	Relevant research
1	PLC collaboration Counselor learning Collective inquiry Self-evaluation Results orientation	DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2010
2	Data-driven decision making PLC record keeping Achievement data Achievement-related data Participation data-mindsets Participation data-behaviors Contextual data Data indicators Data disaggregation Logistics Assessment Data-Disaggregation Data goals	ASCA, 2019; Hatch, 2014; Zyromski & Mariani, 2016
3	PLC Benefits PLC Challenges	Billett, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fisher et al., 2019; Griffin & Hallett, 2017; Hatch, 2014; Hoekstra et al., 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Roegman et al., 2018; Schaap et al., 2019; Spillane et al., 2002; Vangrieken et al., 2015; Vescio et al., 2008; Young et al., 2013

Table 6 represents the specifications for the alignment of research questions, data sources, and data analysis methods.

Table 6

Action Research Questions, Data Sources, and Data Analysis

Action research question	Data sources	Data analysis
1. After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors perceive their abilities in the elements of the PLC model related to collaboration, collective inquiry, self-evaluation, and maintaining a results-orientation to solve problems of practice?	Semi-structured interviews, PLC-based focus group, PLC meetings	Inductive qualitative analysis, a priori and emergent thematic coding
2. After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors describe their use of data to make decisions?	Semi-structured interviews, PLC-based focus group, PLC meetings	Inductive qualitative analysis, a priori and emergent thematic coding
3. After participating in a professional learning community, what do high school counselors perceive to be the benefits and challenges to working collaboratively?	Semi-structured interviews, PLC focus group, PLC meetings	Inductive qualitative analysis, a priori and emergent thematic coding

Timeline

See Table 7 for a timeline of each phase of the study. I sought to provide conclusions to research questions during the summer of 2022.

Table 7

Study Timeline

Study Phase	Dates	Activities	Data sources
Prior to Cycle 1	August – December 2021	College of William and Mary proposal approved IRB approval, Invited potential participants, and determined sample participants	None
Cycle 1	November – December 2021	Formed PLC including discussion of PLC functions, goals, norms, and participant expectations, provided informed consent to all participants, studied school engagement research, indicators of engagement, and engagement data available to school counselors	None
Prior to Cycle 2	January 2022	Participant semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interview transcript
Cycle 2	January – February 2022	Participants used collaborative inquiry and data-driven decision making to identify students exhibiting declines in school engagement, develop interventions to address school engagement, and track school counseling progress towards PLC goals	Semi-structured interview transcript with each participant, and PLC meetings
Conclusion of Cycle 2	February 2022	Participant semi-structured interviews	Semi-structured interview transcript
Conclusion of Cycle 2	February 2022	PLC Focus Group	PLC focus group transcript
Following Cycle 2	February – August 2022	Data analysis. Future cycles of action research were determined at the conclusion of Cycle 2, but data collection and analysis did not carry into future cycles of action research	None

Delimitations, Limitations, Assumptions

Delimitations, limitations, and assumptions existed in this study.

Delimitations

The sample of participating school counselors was limited to a small number of participants in order to maintain the rich detail needed in qualitative data analysis within action research. Participants came from just one school system leading to further delimits. The use of qualitative data risked bias influencing the study's conclusions. Ongoing efforts to constrain potential bias included using field testing of all interview and focus group questions, providing member checks of all data sources, and continual triangulation of results to ensure accurate conclusions.

Limitations

Aspects of this study presented limits to its conclusions. COVID-19 and its ensuing challenges on education, students, the District, and the District community created limits. At the start of this study, students had returned to school for daily in-person attendance following 18 months of virtual school experiences. Recognizing that school closures and COVID-19 are not limited to just students, participating school counselors were also returning to in-person work and brought its own limits as participants grappled with the challenges of a return to school. Taking part in the PLC required additional work hours for school counselors beyond the regular school day, resulting in a convenience sample of high school counselors willing to take part in extra work responsibilities. Another limit is the reliance on qualitative data sources. The value of this study's conclusions is dependent on the rich quality of data collection and analysis to ensure that this study is transferable to similar contexts.

Assumptions

There were assumptions at the outset of this study. A major assumption existed in the belief that high school counselors in the District desired a move towards comprehensive school counseling. Aspirations to adhere to the National Model (ASCA, 2019) were not uniform across all school counselors. In order to fulfill the National Model, school counselors had to take part in collaborative practices and utilize data-driven decision making. Both are new practices in the District. An assumption was made that participants would take part in both activities as a member of the PLC. Participation was voluntary and choosing to focus attention on this topic was a choice that participants made at the outset. The reliance on qualitative data sources meant an assumption was made that participants would be honest in their responses. Qualitative data relies on the assumption that school counselors will maintain participation in all parts of this study, offering honest comments and truthful recounting of their work (Creswell & Creswell, 2007).

Ethical Considerations

This study required considerations for addressing potential ethical concerns. I maintained confidentiality of all data sources and analysis by maintaining all data in a secure location in accordance with The College of William and Mary's policies for data maintenance. I worked to ensure confidentiality of participants by providing aliases for all participants.

This study required a considerable commitment from participants. No compensation was offered to participants. School counselors have many job responsibilities and taking part in this study added to that list. Efforts were made to

provide counselors with a meaningful experience that involved thoughtful planning and delivery of the PLC experience.

Permission to perform the study from the Institutional Review Board at the College of William and Mary and from the District was sought in December 2022. Study participants were presented with copies of permissions and informed consent prior to the start of the study.

Efforts to maintain objectivity were paramount. All protocols used in this study were field tested by a panel of working professional school counselors with a minimum of 10 years of professional experience in school counseling. I provided opportunities for member checking of all data sources to ensure fidelity of comments and feelings. I maintained field notes of PLC activities and a weekly reflexive journal of my interpretations, feelings, decisions, and impressions throughout the study. These journals provided a feedback opportunity to assess my interpretations of PLC developments as the study progressed.

Implications for Policy, Planning, and Leadership

The results of this study have implications for policy, planning, and leadership of school counselors. Current practices fall short of the National Model (ASCA, 2019). School counselors operate in isolation and lack the data-management skills to successfully meet the demands of the National Model. This results in inefficient work and underperformance by school counselors. It also risks school counselor burnout and job turnover. Providing a collaborative experience that results in better outcomes for students and school counselors may lead to a demand for more opportunities among school

counselors to collaborate to address other problems of practice. Providing these opportunities could result in potential expansion of PLC practices across the District.

Recognition that school counselors address school engagement within a wider context of students' experiences may lead to more data-driven decision making among District school counseling leadership. A positive change in the use of data-driven decision making would push the District towards better alignment with the National Model. Endeavors to pursue the National Model require significant changes in the District. This study sought to understand how a PLC influenced school counselors' collaboration and data use, two preliminary steps in the move towards comprehensive school counseling.

Addressing students' needs through collaboration and data-management aligns with the District's mission to provide a rigorous and relevant educational experience through the building of relationships with every student. Increasing the opportunities for school counselors to collaborate in a data-driven manner to address students' needs improves the District's achievement, improves school counseling practice, and sets the stage for future development towards comprehensive school counseling.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this qualitative action research study was to examine the influence of a professional learning community (PLC) on the professional isolation experienced by high school counselors in one suburban school district. Additional questions addressed participants' description of their approach to data-based, decision-making processes as they performed their jobs in conjunction with a PLC and the benefits and challenges of PLC implementation perceived by high school counselors. Participating school counselors took part in a weekly PLC to address school engagement among current high school students. PLC experiences consisted of two cycles of action research to develop school counselors' knowledge of school engagement, and to identify and intervene with students at-risk of declining school engagement through the class registration process. Data were collected from Cycle 2 of action research. Chapter 3 described the methodology of this study in which semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, a focus group, and transcripts of weekly PLC meetings were coded and analyzed to answer the research questions:

1. After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors perceive their abilities in the elements of the PLC model related to collaboration, collective inquiry, self-evaluation, and maintaining a results-orientation to solve problems of practice?

2. After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors describe their approach to results-oriented practice using data to make decisions?

3. After participating in a professional learning community, what do high school counselors perceive to be the benefits and challenges to working in a PLC?

Findings in this chapter will include quantitative data on participants' engagement in the PLC, school counselors' perceptions of their abilities to perform elements of a PLC, participants' descriptions of their data-based decision making, and the perceived benefits and challenges of PLC implementation among high school counselors.

PLC Participation

Participant attendance was strong at PLC meetings. Five participants of the PLC attended every meeting during Cycle 2. All participants completed Cycle 2 of action research. See Table 8 for meeting attendance information.

Table 8

PLC Attendance in Cycle 2

Meeting	Participant attendance	
	n	%
1	6	85
2	7	100
3	5	71
4	7	100
5	6	85
6	7	100

Action Research Question 1

After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors perceive their abilities in the elements of the PLC model related to

collaboration, collective inquiry, self-evaluation, and maintaining a results-orientation to solve problems of practice?

Participants perceived experiences of collaboration, collective inquiry, self-evaluation, and results-orientation as a function of the PLC experience that aligned with DuFour and Eaker's (1998) framework.

Collaboration

Collaboration refers to the collective actions of a group to work together to solve a problem (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Members take on challenges, and through the interactive process of the PLC, they solve problems of practice in alignment with PLC goals. DuFour and Eaker highlight the learning process that occurs because of PLC participants' collaborative experiences.

The PLC experience embodied collaboration among the seven PLC members. Weekly meetings brought participants together to discuss ongoing progress towards PLC goals. Opportunities to analyze progress were presented weekly with each participant self-reporting efforts and results. Obstacles and strategies were shared among participants. Weekly exercises offered participants' opportunities to reflect on work as both individuals and as a group. Because participants came from two different schools, the opportunity to share among schools was evident in the exchanging of resources.

Positive Perception of Collaboration. All six participants reported positive feelings about the PLC collaborative experience. Descriptions included "really enjoyed it," "appreciated the experience," "it's been really nice," "it was interesting," "helpful," "meaningful conversation," "useful," and "reassuring." All participants perceived the collaborative experience of PLCs to be a worthy endeavor for school counselors.

- "Do it. If you want to grow and to check your understanding of things, you need to be collaborating."
- "Totally worth it. As a professional experience, you owe it to your kids to try to learn from other counselors, to give yourself that opportunity to grow."

Collaboration Led to Learning. All six participants perceived collaboration to lead to learning among PLC members.

- "It has allowed me to see how my fellow school counselors do things, how they go about collaborating, and I got to get pointers on what works, what hasn't worked."
- "Even after doing this job for years, it's nice to see ways to change. I mean I learned from this."
- "I think purposeful collaboration is super important to make sure that we're doing the best for our students because we get pulled in so many different ways. For me, being new to the job, it's hard to know which way to do something, but being able to work with others, have that accountability, and knowing that all of your decisions are focused helping each other is big."
- "I just felt like a sponge, you know, soaking up a lot of information and experiences from everybody."
- "Just hearing what they've tried, and being able to kind of build off of that has been definitely helpful."
- "It was interesting hearing about the slight tweaks that we did for our own practice, that were made, and being able to learn from each other."

Increased Collaboration in Other Professional Responsibilities. Four participants perceived collaboration with PLC members from a different school contributed to a positive experience. Descriptions included "useful," "glad to see their process," and "enjoyed learning how they do their stuff."

- "I think the part of what I appreciated the most was getting the perspective of another high school."
- "One of the main advantages was it being cross-county and being able to collaborate and share ideas."

Collective Inquiry

Collective inquiry speaks to the shared movement of a group to question the status quo, seek new methods of performance, and reflect on the results of those new methods in an ongoing cycle of improvement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). In conjunction with PLC goals, participants sought new methods of identifying students, managing data, and developing interventions to support students with declining school engagement. Participants worked together weekly in these endeavors, sharing in the successes and struggles. Each PLC meeting provided evidence of a collective commitment to work towards PLC goals, allowing participants to share their experiences and build a knowledge base that all participants could pull from.

Participant Contribution to Collective Inquiry. All six participants perceived themselves as contributing to the collective inquiry process.

- "It is the idea that two brains working on a problem are better than one, seven brains are better than two. And we had all seven brains involved."

- "We were all moving together in a direction that we chose, and that we were developing a path to reach a milestone."
- "It was interesting hearing how, having one goal, the paths to get there, the slight tweaks that we did for our own practice, and being able to learn from each other while still having the same goal in mind."

New Experience. All six participants perceived collective inquiry to be a new experience in their work. When asked about collective inquiry during their first semi-structured interview, all six counselors described not knowing what collective inquiry meant to their work.

- "Can you tell me what that means?"
- "Can you explain collective inquiry?"

Benefit of Collective Inquiry. Five counselors' perception of collective inquiry shifted from one of vagueness to one of appreciation and praise. Descriptions of collective inquiry such as "helpful," "powerful," "supportive," "comforting," and a "way to take steps together" indicated a positive perception of the experience.

Meaningful Experience was a Benefit. Four members used the word "meaningful" when asked about the collective inquiry experience.

- "I would have doubts, like am I doing this thing a certain way, and then others would share that they're doing in a certain way, and we have things in common. So that is an okay way to do things, to go about stuff and so it brought a sense of ok, I can do it this way. And so, I'm not like 100% doing it the wrong way. It just kind of cleared some doubt there. But that really helps like to have that commonality and realize the questions that others have or

questions that I have to you know, counseling stuff to share with the group, this is good, this is normal. It's meaningful."

- "I think it was again, I mean, just a meaningful, supportive collaborative environment and people heard and listened and bounced ideas off and problem solved and contributed to the overall goal together."

Counselor-Driven Inquiry is Meaningful. Four participants perceived the meaningfulness of collective inquiry to come from inquiring with other school counselors, instead of non-school counselors, working to change school counseling practice.

- "I can see the importance of this and working with people who do the job, taking steps together as opposed to the outside teaching coach working with a counselor."
- "My back goes up when non-counselors tell me how to do my job. I think the significance of this has been that it was doing it as counselors together."

Influence on Accountability. Four participants perceived collective inquiry to influence their feelings of accountability to the PLC.

- "I appreciate the accountability piece to each other. I felt accountable because I saw that on my calendar each week, and it was a reminder that we were all in this, all working towards the goals as a group."
- "It was the right balance between accountability and support. The PLC has given us the space to be counselors, and not just do this thing."

Self-Evaluation

DuFour and Eaker (1998) call for PLC members to reflect on their current practice, to challenge the status quo, and to strive for continued improvement through an ongoing process of experimentation and self-evaluation. PLC members must be willing to try new practices. Maintaining that action orientation requires self-evaluation to ensure that experimentation is moving the group towards its goals. This evaluation process requires reflection from members and a willingness to be vulnerable about both process and outcomes.

Self-Evaluation is Beneficial to PLC Progress. All six participants perceived weekly PLC self-reflections to be beneficial to their overall progress. Descriptions included "it's helpful," "useful," and "good to think about."

- "I really like weekly thinking about what we're doing and how we're getting to our goal because I can't even tell you what my goal was for our TPA [Teacher Performance Assessment] paperwork. I have no idea what I put down. So, it was nice to keep me accountable and working towards a goal."
- "I think that the presence of an outside accountability partner causes you to reflect more on your process. So, knowing that each week. And that's not self-evaluation, right, but it prompts self-evaluation. And a lot that you just reflect on by yourself, that isn't something that's going to be shared anywhere normally. So, the group prompted that evaluation, and the sharing part."

Led to Changes in Self-Evaluation Process. Four out of six participants noted that their self-evaluation procedures from past years were different this year because of the PLC.

- “I think in the past I've been a lot harder on myself about getting registration done right away. Normally, I’m wondering how am I going to get everything done? But at this moment, I'm having a lot better conversations with kids than I usually do. And so, my own self-evaluation is like, well, I may not meet the deadline, but I think, for my own counseling practice, what I'm doing is a lot better.”
- “This helped me, not just how did I feel that it went, but be able to step back and a little more objectively look at a different measure, not just my own questioning.”
- “It shifted from just yes, check, I got this student done to did I get that question in front of them. What happened with the conversation after that? Is there a necessary follow up? Have I followed up yet? That’s data too and it's more data about me than them.”

Self-Evaluations of Others Were Beneficial. Three participants perceived self-reflections from other participants to benefit their perspective on their own work. Benefits included providing participants with confidence and encouragement to perform job responsibilities.

- “Talking to others in the job, hearing their evaluations, you know it helped me to find confidence that I could work through it.”
- “We agreed early on to report our progress, what worked, didn’t work, and sharing that agreement meant we owed it to each other to try to think about our progress. I think it led to accountability, and maybe motivation for working on this.”

Results-Orientation

DuFour and Eaker (1998) noted that a results-orientation was an essential element of an effective PLC. It is not enough to meet, talk, and change how things are done if purposeful improvement is not the goal. PLC efforts must be part of an ongoing process of seeking better outcomes to problems of practice. PLC meetings offered participants a regular weekly check in about the progress they were making as individuals and as a group.

Positive Influence on Work. All six participants found the PLC's results orientation to be a positive influence on their work.

- "My conversations are better. My meetings with my disengaged kids are better, longer, more meaningful and I'm learning more about them."
- "I'm learning about their passions. Things we have never talked about. It's been helpful."
- "I feel more than the pressure to get the meetings done, to make sure I talked to those kids in meaningful ways is different. I'm not trying to just get done. I'm trying to make sure I get to know my kids better, to get them into something that makes school a place they want to be."

Autonomy Helped Maintain Results Orientation. All six members perceived the PLC promoted autonomy of participants to choose data-selection and data-tracking methods based on participant preferences.

- "I'm glad we were able to keep our processes. You know, so many changes are forced, required, and it's not always helpful. I like that we got to discuss it but that we, you know, kept our processes the same."

Summary

Participants' comments, actions, and reflections provided evidence for their perceptions of their abilities to perform the elements of a PLC in alignment with DuFour and Eaker's (1998) framework for PLCs. Participants had positive perceptions of their ability to collaborate noting its positive influence on their work. This led to participants' belief that collaboration was a worthy endeavor to promote in future professional development experiences. Participants perceived themselves as learners gaining knowledge from collaborations. Participants believed their abilities to collaborate with one another improved because of PLC experiences, leading to more collaborations outside of PLC experiences.

Participants perceived the experience of collective inquiry to be beneficial to their practice. Participants felt that despite it being a new experience, they contributed positively to the collective inquiry process which led to benefits for both their own practice and the practice of others. Participants believed that collective inquiry influenced their own motivation to stay accountable to the PLC group, leading to stronger results.

Participants' perception of stronger results came from a positive feeling about the self-evaluation process initiated by the PLC experience. Participants' perception of self-evaluation was that it was beneficial to overall practice. Participants felt the PLC guided them to change their individual, self-evaluation processes in positive ways.

Participants' perception of their ability to be results-oriented reflected positive feelings by participants. All participants believed they were able to remain results-oriented despite challenges. The commitment to staying results-oriented was influenced by participants' belief that they had autonomy to make decisions in their work to identify

and track their progress. Participants perceived themselves as able to maintain a results-orientation while making individual decisions within their daily work.

Overall, participants found the elements of DuFour and Eaker's (1998) PLC framework to be a positive influence on their work. Participants' belief that they could recreate these elements in future PLC experiences underscores a perception that participants perceive themselves as able to perform the elements of a PLC in an effective manner. Table 9 illustrates evidence used in findings for Action Research Question 1.

Table 9

Action Research Question 1 Findings: Participant Perceptions of Abilities to Perform Elements of a PLC

PLC element	Perception	Participants
		n = 6
Collaboration		
	Positive perception	6
	Collaboration led to learning	6
	Led to increased collaboration in other professional responsibilities	4
Collective inquiry		
	Participants contributed to collective inquiry	6
	New experience	6
	Benefit of collective inquiry	6
	Meaningfulness experience	4
	Counselor-driven inquiry is meaningful	4
	Influence on accountability	4
Self-evaluation		
	Self-evaluation is beneficial to PLC process	6
	Led to changes in self-evaluation process	4
	Self-evaluations from others were beneficial	3
Results-orientation		
	Positive influence on work	6
	Autonomy helped maintain results-orientation	6

Note. PLC refers to professional learning community (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

Action Research Question 2

After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors describe their approach to results-oriented practice using data to make decisions?

Participants provided descriptions of their data use to identify students in need of intervention, to develop appropriate interventions, and to track PLC goal progress. The

choice of which data to use reflected participants' familiarity with and ease of access to data. Participants self-selected which types of data they would use when working toward the PLC goals of addressing school engagement. Keeping in alignment with the multidimensional aspects of school engagement, participants identified data indicators that they felt were the best indicators of disengagement among their assigned students. ASCA (2019) identified several types of data in its National Model, including achievement data, achievement-related data, and mindsets and behaviors data. Additionally, Hatch (2014) highlighted the importance of contextual data to understanding students' experiences. Participants discussed different data types as part of Cycle 1 of action research. Once indicators were identified, participants used self-created data-tracking methods to record their progress toward PLC goals.

Data Indicators

All participants used data that were familiar and available to them at the start of the study. No participant sought new data sources on students. Access to data included District, data-management systems, and participants' personal knowledge of students. Five participants used more than one data source to identify students. Participants described past approaches to data use and the time required to cultivate and understand new data sources as factors in their selection of data indicators.

- "This did not feel like the time to try to change my approach."
- "I didn't have time to do a survey or look through more, deeper into PowerSchool data."

Primary Data Source. Participants chose data sources that they felt were meaningful evidence of school engagement. Four participants chose achievement data,

specifically current or past grades, as a primary indicator of cognitive engagement. Of the four participants who used achievement data, three utilized current grades and one utilized grades from past school years.

- "I went with what I know, with what I'm going to be asked about by principals and parents."
- "My list is based on my gap group students, kids who have previously failed a class or who don't have many credits."

One participant used achievement-related data, specifically current school attendance, to indicate behavioral engagement.

- "What I've been doing for the students that I've tried to meet with first are students that are either not coming to school, or not attending class when they come to school. Of course, the thing that makes it difficult is the students who aren't coming to school are the ones that I really want to meet with and of course I can't find them."

One participant used contextual data, specifically current SAT registration, as an initial indicator of behavioral engagement.

- "I looked through the registration list that she sent out, and if you were not on that list, I looked at your grades to see if, how the kid was doing, and if the kid was not on the list and grades were not going well, I put them on my list."

Secondary Data Source. Five out of six participants used more than one source of data to identify students. Three of those five participants used contextual data, specifically participants' personal knowledge of students, combined with their primary data indicator to identify students. All three participants who used contextual data as a

secondary data source worked at the same school and highlighted personal knowledge of students as a meaningful feature in their decision making.

- "I think that the students that I'm really targeting are the ones that are already on my radar because of these crises that I'm looped in on from those crisis conversations and trying to reestablish a relationship academically with them so that they don't feel like every time they walk into my office, we're going to dive into whatever is happening at home. Not that that's not important, but you know certainly making sure that I'm covering all my bases."

Two participants used achievement-related data, specifically school attendance, as a secondary data source to identify students. Both participants worked at the same school and referenced a weekly attendance meeting with school administrators as influential in their decision making.

- "We have those weekly meetings, where you know we talk about attendance, and who is here, or who isn't staying all day. I get a lot of follow up from those meetings and that helps, you know, to use with grades."

All six participants described their method of student identification as an accurate process for determining at-risk students. Five out of six participants stated they would use the same data indicators in future identification of school engagement. One participant who used past grades as an indicator of cognitive engagement stated that current grades and attendance might be a better reflection of current engagement.

Data Tracking

Once participants identified students, they tracked their progress towards PLC goal completion individually. Participants were asked to maintain data-tracking methods

across the entire PLC cycle. All six participants reported weekly progress at PLC meetings, including challenges and successes with data-tracking processes.

- "I maintain a spreadsheet every year of my caseload with all kinds of different information on there. And I typically just have one column, or maybe two columns about registration. I'll add another column, you know if there's something I need to check on for that kid, but this year, I've created another column basically kind of same thing that y'all are talking about, with engagement."
- "At the beginning, or towards the beginning of the year, I made a spreadsheet because I have many, many spreadsheets where I put in all of my students in the best blocks to pull them from for like mass meetings. I'm using primarily that spreadsheet in terms of tracking who and when I'm seeing students."

Reluctance to Use Unifying Tracking Method. Four participants expressed reluctance to use one uniform method of data tracking. They described their reluctance due to the time needed for changes to new practices and a desire to maintain already in-place practices.

- "I have a system. I feel confident in my system. I really don't want to make this harder."
- "This doesn't feel like the right school year to change what is working for me, especially during registration."

Data Tracking Method. Participants tracked their progress using individual methods of choice. No two participants shared the same data-tracking method. Four out

of six participants used a self-created Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to track data in the counseling process.

- “I've been taking notes. I have an Excel spreadsheet that they're colored red if they're at the top of my list and I just marked through when I'm done, but I'm making notes on like their interests, their passions, like what's bringing them to school, so that I can follow back up.”

Two participants used handwritten notes to track counseling progress. Both participants noted a lack of uniformity in data collected, monitored, and tracked.

- “I'm just checking them off the list I'm tracking. I go ahead and just make notes to myself in a certain space on the paper and I'm going to go back overall, after I meet with those folks and cycle back.”

Summary

Participants described their approach to results-oriented practice using data to make decisions. They described using data that was both familiar and accessible throughout the study. No participants tried to generate new data sources or to investigate the utility of other data sources after initial decisions were made to identify students. All participants used at least one type of data discussed during Cycle 1 of action research. Achievement data or achievement-related data was used as the primary or secondary data source for decision making by every participant, which reflected a heavy significance on participants’ approach to the PLC’s results-orientation. Once participants had identified students, they used self-created, data-tracking methods to assess their progress. Similar to data indicators, once the study began, no changes were made to data-tracking methods by participants. Data tracking methods reflected past methods of data tracking by

participants prior to the PLC experience. See Table 10 for an illustration of data that influenced the findings of Action Research Question 2.

Table 10

Action Research Question 2 Findings: Participant Descriptions of Data Use to Make Decisions

Description	Theme	Participants
		n = 6
Data indicators		
	Use of familiar primary data source	6
	Use of accessible primary data source	6
	Achievement data as primary data source	4
	Achievement-related data as primary data source	1
	Contextual data as primary data source	1
	Use of secondary data source	5
	Achievement-related data as secondary source	2
	Contextual data as secondary source	3
Data tracking		
	Weekly reporting of progress	6
	Reluctance to use unifying tracking method	4
Data tracking method		
	Participant-created digital spreadsheet	4
	Participant-created hand-written notes system	2

Note. Only five participants utilized a secondary data source reflecting an *n* of 5 for both achievement-related data as secondary source and contextual data as secondary source.

Action Research Question 3

After participating in a professional learning community, what do high school counselors perceive to be the benefits and challenges to working in a PLC?

School counselors perceive PLCs to provide benefits to school counselors' work experiences; however, limited resources and school-based job responsibilities present perceived challenges to PLC implementation among school counselors. DuFour and Eaker (1998) pointed to several benefits of PLC work including increased collaborations among educators, improvements in educational services, and improvement in collective efforts to solve problems. DuFour and Eaker (1998) also noted that resources are required to promote PLC experiences, and in an environment where they are finite, reallocation of resources can result in other systemic challenges. DuFour and Eaker's PLC framework results in similar perceptions among high school counselors. Perceived benefits and challenges emerged in the data across the study. As new data emerged, new opportunities to analyze existing data helped to triangulate findings among data sources.

Benefits

Perceived benefits were noted by PLC participants, including that the PLC served as a source of learning for counselors, led to improved counseling service for students, and validated participants' professional experiences. These benefits align with DuFour and Eaker's (1998) proposal that PLC work could be a catalyst to professional learning and development of new services that challenged the status quo. ASCA (2019) noted the importance of school counselors' collective efforts saying that counselors who work together are more likely to promote positive achievement and improve student outcomes.

Source of Learning. Participants perceived the PLC to be a source of learning that was not currently available in other aspects of their job. Participants' comments provided evidence of the perception of learning among PLC members. PLC meeting

transcripts supplied real-time evidence of learning as members shared resources, ideas, and strategies.

Learning New Information. All six participants identified learning new information through PLC participation. Statements made during early interviews highlighted counselors' increasing knowledge base from Cycle 1 of action research. No data were collected during Cycle 1, but participants referenced its benefits during their first semi-structured interview.

- "The way the first couple of meetings, the first cycle, how it went, it built up our knowledge to address this."
- "I just appreciated the way we got to learn about it before we had to use it. I think that doesn't happen very often."
- "I appreciated making it more of my own. It didn't have to be the same, but we could learn from other ideas before we had to do it,"

Finding New Approaches to Professional Learning. Four out of six participants noted the PLC encouraged them to approach professional learning differently. Past learning experiences were described by participants as feeling "immediate" and "needed to be used right away, even if I didn't learn." Participants described feeling empowered to try new methods and reflected on novel approaches to learning that past professional learning experiences had not elicited.

- "I think I was trying to fly solo, in a sense, but using that information from each other and seeing how others are doing it, you're going to be looking at information that maybe you don't know."

- "I need to ask questions in order to grow, and for me to ask an open-ended question. Instead of answering a question, maybe ask a question, and that for me, that's a shift that I made through the PLC."

Influence on Data Use. Four out of six participants spoke about the positive influence the PLC had on their data use to make decisions. Participants reported limited and inconsistent use of data to make decisions prior to the study. During the study four participants reported the PLC positively influenced their data use by making data use more explicit in the decision-making process. Descriptions of PLC's influence on data use included "it positions decisions in a context framed by data," "good data practice" and "a positive way to learn to make data decisions." Participants noted a past lack of consistent data use resulted in inconsistent outcomes, and PLC encouragement to use data to make decisions promoted a feeling of uniformity in decision-making not previously perceived.

- "I appreciate data, but I'm not great about tracking it on my own. And I feel like this process has taught me to be a little more explicit about it."
- "I think being more intentional and using that data rather than just like okay, all these kids are in study hall first block. I'm gonna meet with all of them. So that has changed, using data ahead of time to make decisions."

A Need for Learning. Four participants felt the learning they gained from PLC participation was a necessary component of professional development. Participants highlighted learning from each other as a catalyst for trying new counseling practices.

- "I feel like we get complacent in our processes. We get comfortable with what we do and how we do it and the world changes around us. So, like we should also work on changing."

Better Service. Action is helpful if it results in a refinement of processes that produce better service. A participant called action without results "throwing darts with your eyes closed." DuFour and Eaker (1998) described it as "groping in the dark" (p. 29). The perception that counselors were providing better service to students because of PLC participation was expressed by all six participants.

Getting to Know Students Better. All six participants described getting to know students better so that they could "plug them into something" that students found meaningful to promote engagement.

- "I don't think I would have been consistently entering into that conversation with so many students if I hadn't had the experience of the PLC to kind of think about school engagement in the way we talked about using it."

Developing New Practices. Five participants perceived their services to students to be improved because of PLC participation. Areas of improvement included better use of data to make decisions and better use of resources.

- "I found myself just kind of rethinking my approach, using data, but also slowing down and engaging in a deeper conversation than I think I would have normally."
- "I had an approach to some students, that was not getting to their motivations. I started preparing my paperwork in advance, like [another participant]

mentioned, and it helped me be better prepared for the conversation than when I just let the student go on about stuff."

Validation. Five members of the PLC expressed a feeling of validation because of participating in the PLC. Validation in a professional setting serves to affirm that the actions and experiences of a person are appropriate to the work conditions experienced by the individual helping to reduce feelings of isolation (Duncan et al., 2014). Validation came through the process of discussing work experiences during PLC meetings, allowing participants to see work similarities and differences. Four members of the PLC used the word "validated" to describe PLC experiences in their direct comments.

- "I will admit that it made me a little nervous at first when you asked us to self-rate. I was like, 'Oh crap, am I gonna look like I'm doing a really crappy job?' Because I think a lot of us are our own worst critics. But I think it was really again, I keep using this word, was really validating for me to see that we were, you know, certainly we weren't all answering the exact same way, but I think we were all in a similar place."

Four PLC members described feeling validated by PLC experiences that affirmed their experiences as school counselors.

- "It was just nice to have a place to be, to talk through what's working and what isn't and to feel okay about saying you know, this is something I'm noticing, this is something I need to work on, and realizing that other people are in the same boat."
- "I have a lot to learn, and this helped me see that I'm not 100% doing it the wrong way."

- "It's nice to sit around with people that I feel comfortable talking with, to hear about their experience and for me to talk about mine. It makes it easier to know how your work is similar to other counselors. It makes it less difficult."

Challenges

Participants' comments demonstrated their perceptions of the challenges facing PLC implementation. All six participants noted limited time, aligning with DuFour and Eaker's (1998) belief that finite resources in an educational environment result in challenges to PLC implementation. DuFour and Eaker (1998) point to alignment of school mission and PLC goals as another challenge to implementation, noting misalignment results in divergent missions between PLC members and overall school endeavors.

Time. All six counselors perceived time constraints to be a challenge to PLC implementation. Comments such as "timing," "making it here on time," and "it's early for me," demonstrated the challenge presented to members to attend the PLC meetings. Finding consensus on a meeting time proved difficult as meetings were set prior to school contract hours. Participants found the timing difficult as it ran into the contracted start of the school day. Finding consensus on other available times to meet was difficult as schedules were not aligned between participants or across schools in the District.

- "It's just tough to start your day late. People are already waiting for you when you get there."

Four participants noted that time was protected for teachers in the District to meet in PLCs, but not for school counselors. This lack of protected time resulted in a perception that PLCs were not appropriate for school counselors.

- "I just assumed that PLCs were a teacher thing really. I mean, they are supposed to meet in them, and they have a whole period dedicated to them for every teacher, but counselors have other meetings, other stuff we have to go to that are not PLCs."

School Needs Drive Pace of Work. Changes in participants' practices led to another time challenge as they were pushed to finish regular responsibilities faster despite experimenting with new practices. PLC participants chose to address disengaged students through the class registration process. This led to experimentation among participants as they tried new strategies for meeting with identified students and developing relationship-building dialogue that was not present in previous meetings. All six participants found new paths to finishing registration, but those paths conflicted with the pace of completion expected by building-level administration. Four counselors perceived misalignment between building-level expectations and PLC goal attainment that resulted in timing challenges. All participants felt an urgency from school administrators to finish faster than PLC goals allowed, resulting in hasty meetings with students.

- "It's hard to prioritize another thing on your schedule. Especially when people who are not members of the PLC might have opposite feelings about you participating in it, at least in terms of you not being available to do the things that you might be doing otherwise."
- "Administration is supportive of us, but they still expect us to finish by the deadline regardless of PLC work."

All participants reported a desire to fulfill PLC goals indicating a perceived benefit of PLC participation despite challenges to implementation.

School-System Expectations Present Challenges to PLC Goals. School system expectations for other job responsibilities beyond registration presented challenges to PLC goals. School counselors in the District serve the academic, socioemotional, and career planning needs of a wide array of students, placing a premium on school counselors' energy. The variance of each school's needs resulted in variable work experiences between participants that hampered collective inquiry into addressing school engagement and stymied participants' experimentation. The PLC chose class registration as its vehicle to reach PLC goals but experimenting with registration meant potential impact on school processes. PLC goals aligned with District mission statements to provide students with meaningful learning experiences through relationships, but it conflicted with building-level needs for faster outcomes of registration processes. Building-level administrators directed participants to prioritize students with too few classes, regardless of students' demonstrated school engagement. This led to five participants perceiving a conflict between PLC goals and school needs.

- "I was told, in the context of we need to be done soon, that I should be prioritizing students who don't have any requests at all in the system which seems to be a lot of my ninth graders. And they're not necessarily disengaged. So, I feel like I'm getting two different messages of what I should be prioritizing."

Challenges of New Practices. Meeting normal job requirements while working to develop new practices is difficult (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Four participants identified challenges with keeping up with work expectations during registration prior to the creation of the PLC. Descriptions included "exhausting" and "difficult to keep up."

- "I just feel so stuck in my office because it's like a revolving door of kids coming by, parents calling, email blowing up. So, it's like most of the time I'm just in my little box."

All six participants noted the PLC challenged them to complete their job expectations and keep up with PLC goals. All six participants noted challenges of new practices did not outweigh benefits of PLC participation.

- "I think even though we have all seen the value in this, it's hard to prioritize another thing like the PLC on your schedule."

Summary

PLC members perceived both benefits and challenges to PLC implementation among high school counselors. This was in alignment with DuFour and Eaker's (1998) findings. The opportunity to learn from one another was an influence on participants' positive feelings about the PLC. Learning new practices and methods afforded counselors a starting point for experimentation leading to better counseling service. The PLC experience brought validation to the overall experience of being a school counselor in the District. Opportunities to compare stories, acknowledge successes and struggles, and to build relationships with other high school counselors validated participants' experiences leading to positive feelings. Participants commented that they appreciated this feature and looked forward to building on these experiences.

The PLC was not without challenge. Time commitment was a serious challenge to PLC implementation. The job of a school counselor requires continuous action to support a vast array of student and school needs. Dedicating the time needed for PLC goals made other job responsibilities tougher to complete for participants. While support for

addressing school engagement is present in the District, other work responsibilities demand attention from participants leading to conflicting responsibilities and reduced experimentation. Table 11 illustrates benefits and challenges perceived by participants.

Table 11

Action Research Question 3 Findings: Participants' Perceived Benefits and Challenges

Participant perception	Theme	Sub-theme	Participants
			n = 6
Benefits			
	Source of learning		6
		Learning new information	6
		Finding new approaches to professional learning	4
		Influence on data use	4
		A need for learning	4
	Better service		6
		Getting to know students better	6
		Developing new practices	5
	Validation		5
Challenges			
	Time		6
		Time constraints	6
		School needs drive pace of work	4
	School system expectations present challenges to PLC goals		5
	Challenges of new practices		6

CHAPTER 5

RECOMMENDATIONS

School counselors experience professional isolation resulting from a lack of collaboration and leading to an underperformance in serving students (Bridgeland & Bruce, 2011). The results of this isolation are worsened by a lack of data-driven, decision making among school counselors (Hatch, 2014; Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009). To strengthen the effectiveness of school counseling, ASCA (2019) established the National Model as a framework for school counselors' professional work. The National Model calls on school counselors to take part in comprehensive school counseling services. Comprehensive school counseling services provide systematic supports to students through collaborative school counselor efforts based on the regular use of data to make programmatic decisions. Students who attend schools with comprehensive school counseling services have increased achievement and positive student-teacher relationships (Young & Kaffenberger, 2011). Comprehensive school counseling has also been shown to share a relationship with several positive educational outcomes related to grades, attendance, graduation, and behavioral concerns (Sink et al., 2008). Despite its positive influence on achievement, comprehensive school counseling is not universal.

As of 2019, only 1,200 schools in the United States earned recognition from ASCA for their comprehensive school counseling services. Schools that receive this recognition are designated as Recognized ASCA Model Program (RAMP) status schools. ASCA (2019) established RAMP as the assessment tool used to evaluate school

counseling service performance. Schools may aspire to comprehensive school counseling service without achieving RAMP designation; however, no studies have determined the extent to which those aspiring schools exist. The gap between the standards set forth by the National Model and the current reality of professional school counselors requires significant change to fulfill the promise of the National Model and the potential of school counselors (ASCA, 2019; Hatch, 2014). Promoting collaborative experiences that use data-driven, decision-making offers initial steps toward fulfillment of these goals.

Professional learning communities (PLC) have been found to be an effective intervention to support teachers' collaborative efforts (Carpenter, 2018; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Owen, 2015; Prenger & Handelzalts, 2017). Despite the positive impact on teachers, school counselors have seen limited developments in the use of PLCs (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009). The purpose of this study was to understand how participation in a PLC influenced high school counselors' perceptions of their ability to contribute to the elements of a PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Additional questions addressed participants' use of data to make decisions and the perceived benefits and challenges of PLC implementation in a school counseling context. Data sources included semi-structured interviews, PLC transcripts, and a focus group discussion.

Synopsis of Action Research Findings

This chapter begins with a synopsis of each action research question followed by recommendations and future research opportunities.

Action Research Question 1 Synopsis

After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors perceive their abilities in the elements of the PLC model related to

collaboration, collective inquiry, self-evaluation, and maintaining a results-orientation to solve problems of practice?

DuFour and Eaker (1998) noted the essential elements of a PLC include (a) collaboration, (b) collective inquiry, (c) self-evaluation, and (d) results-orientation.

Collaboration. Collaboration is the act of intellectually working together to solve problems of practice through common efforts and interactions (DuFour et al., 2010; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Collaboration is a key element of PLC work, setting the stage as PLC members work together to solve problems previously experienced in isolation (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; DuFour et al., 2010). Hallams et al. (2015) found collaboration among educators to be a critical component of efforts to improve achievement. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2010) noted the importance of collaboration as it builds trust among professionals, which leads to sharing ideas, practices, and processes in an efficient manner.

Current District policy calls for the promotion of collaborative experiences among teachers. Teachers receive ongoing support for collaboration through District-supported PLC experiences. School counselors continue to miss out on organized collaborative work. Current school counselor collaborations are left to individual discretion and lack systematic District supports. Griffen and Hallett (2017) found that, like teachers, school counselors receive benefits from collaborative work, such as empowerment to adapt ideas to local contexts, reduced isolation, knowledge sharing among professionals, and development of a support system.

Participants' comments indicate positive perceptions of their ability to collaborate with one another. As professionals who previously worked in isolation, participants

experienced positive outcomes as a result of working together to solve problems of practice (Joyce, 2004). Participants perceived that this collaborative experience contributed to their learning, leading to perceived better service to students (Allen, 2013). Opportunities to learn from one another was a promising outcome in the creation of this collaborative experience (Griffen & Hallet, 2017).

Participants perceived their collaborations increased because of taking part in the PLC. Members sought each other out for other collaborative experiences beyond the work of the PLC, establishing a supportive network of professionals. Researchers found similar phenomena among school counselors who take part in collaborative experiences (Bardhoshi et al., 2014; Gunduz, 2012; Griffen & Hallet, 2017; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Lambie, 2007; Stone-Johnson, 2015).

Collective Inquiry. Educators who collaborate are positioned to collectively inquire into solutions for problems they previously experienced in isolation (DuFour and Eaker, 1998). Groups of people working together to solve problems provide more potential for solutions than when individuals work in isolation.

Study participants held positive perceptions of their ability to take part in and contribute to the collective inquiry experience. Participants described the new experience of collective inquiry as meaningful and providing benefits, including learning from one another, and promoting the PLC's work. PLC participants were beginning to experience a community of professionals who are "relentless in questioning the status quo, seeking new methods, testing those methods, and then reflecting on the results" (DuFour & Eaker, 1998, p. 25).

Participants noted that their experience with collective inquiry influenced their feelings of accountability to the group. Weekly, progress self-reports to the PLC led to a perception of a united movement that helped participants feel accountable for their work. Outside of the PLC, participants noted that they were rarely asked to engage in programmatic progress reports. When these did occur, updates were used to numerate school counselor activities performed in isolation. The progress reports lacked consistency in timing, substance, measures of progress, and impact of actions. ASCA (2019) calls on school counselors to be accountable to results, reflect on practices, and work in collaboration with other professionals to address problematic behaviors. Participants' perceptions of the PLC experience confirmed the PLC met this call. Outside the PLC, efforts to engage in collective inquiry remained at the discretion of individual school counselors, lacking a systematic approach.

Self-Evaluation. Self-evaluation is the act of assessing one's own current practices and contributions to outcomes. It is a key element of DuFour and Eaker's (1998) framework. Members self-evaluate outcomes and their contributions to outcomes. Similarly, ASCA (2019) calls on school counselors to self-evaluate their mindsets and behaviors to determine how best to serve students and to address variable outcomes.

Similar to other educators, school counselors gain insights into enhanced practices when they have time to make meaning of new knowledge and reflect on current practices (Darling-Hammond et al. 2005). An essential aspect of self-evaluation is for educators to open their practice to scrutiny by other educators (Horn & Little, 2010). Doing so creates the potential for the expansion of perspectives weighing in on effective and ineffective behaviors.

Study participants perceived their experiences of self-evaluation contributed positively to their PLC experience. They noted that their own self-evaluations and the contributions of other members' self-evaluations promoted the PLC's success. Additionally, regular self-evaluations helped participants assess their own practices more frequently. More frequent assessment led to more timely responses to problematic behaviors. This established the groundwork for positive changes in counseling service, such as on-time supports for students and tailored responses to students' needs (Stronge & Tucker, 2013). Study participants reported altering their own self-evaluations in accordance with PLC goals and that those changes were perceived as beneficial to their overall experience.

Weekly self-reports structured feedback opportunities for participants. Horn and Little (2010) noted the importance of protocols for feedback in building trust and dialogue among members. As a facilitator, I observed an increase in participants' interest to present self-evaluations at weekly meetings. Early opportunities to present self-evaluations were met with relative avoidance and hesitation, but as PLC meetings proceeded, participants opened their practice to more scrutiny, reflecting the bonds formed among participants. Study participants reported feeling encouraged by other members' self-evaluations and found their own self-evaluations benefited from predictable, weekly presentation routines. Discussions grounded in regular practice helped to identify areas of need in school counseling services (Herbal-Eisenman & Phillips, 2008). Study participants provided weekly accounts of their work along with perceived struggles and benefits of those actions as part of their self-reflections.

This was a change from regular practice for school counselors in the District. District school counselors are only required to self-evaluate as part of yearly professional evaluations per District policy. Professional evaluations occur summarily at the end of each school year. Evaluation criteria, which are based on teacher standards in alignment with District expectations, result in misevaluations contributing to reduced utility for school counselors. Stronge and Tucker (2013) noted that misalignment of school counseling evaluation criteria leads to underperformance of school counselors and ongoing professional isolation.

Results-Orientation. Ongoing self-reflections contributed to a building sense of accomplishment among study participants as we met PLC goals. Participants perceived the PLC to benefit from a results-orientation, ensuring that all of our actions were geared towards results. Participants noted the results-orientation helped the group to stay action oriented, leading to goal accomplishment despite challenges. DuFour and Eaker (1998) noted the importance of an action-orientation to PLC success, writing that a PLC must be based on its "results, not its intentions" (p 29). The ASCA National Model (2019) calls on school counselors to be results-oriented in their work. Hatch (2014) termed this action stance "intentional guidance" as school counselors "guide, lead, direct, or provide purposeful interventions for students in need" (p 37).

Currently, District school counselors are expected to provide a wide array of services to a diverse student body in support of the District mission, but they lack a results-orientation in their work. School counselors contribute to school outcomes through regular completion of work tasks but drawing direct links between their daily practice and the larger school mission proved difficult for study participants. Current

practices are absent of systematic planning, data use, or proper evaluation, often reflecting historical practices done on a yearly basis in accordance with school counseling calendars. Without systematic planning, the services required to fulfill the diversity of needs often reflect inconsistencies in service leading to achievement gaps. A lack of data use further compounds those inconsistencies as counselors move from problem to problem without assessing the overall impact of their actions (Hatch, 2014). Misevaluation leads to school counselors never assessing their contributions to outcomes (Stronge & Tucker, 2013). Problematic behaviors, bias, and gaps in achievement persist as school counselors lack a consistent results-orientation across their counseling practices.

In this action research study, the initial PLC goal was to change school counselors' behaviors as they addressed students at risk for school disengagement through the class registration process. This goal offered opportunities to change school counseling practice through job-embedded professional development. Penuel et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of on-going, job-embedded professional development because it promotes active contextual learning among participants.

The present study found participants enjoyed employing new knowledge as they served students. We were able to sustain a weekly conversation about addressing our past behaviors and learning new actions, which lead to ongoing changes in school counselors' behaviors. Darling-Hammond et al. (2015) found that teachers learn best when they are afforded opportunities to construct new knowledge and given time to reflect on practice. The present study indicates that school counselors gain from similar experiences.

The current study relied solely on one cycle of action research, stretching just two months of a school year, which constricts participants' ability to see results in the long-term. Participants felt that we accomplished our PLC goal of changing our behaviors. Participants provided positive comments and a desire for continued PLC activities at the conclusion of Cycle 2. I shared in that enthusiasm. All participants requested additional cycles of action research through the PLC process.

An unexpected positive perception shared by participants was the sense of autonomy created by the results-orientation of the PLC. Participants reported enjoying autonomy to make decisions in their daily work, to employ new knowledge, and to report those decisions and the resulting outcomes while also engaging as part of a collective movement toward PLC goals. Participants reported that they enjoyed working individually, using the collective resources of the group to address problems encountered individually. Weekly PLC meetings offered opportunities to discuss experiences and problem solve as a collective, building on foundations of trust and support among members. Vaughn and Coleman (2004) found similar enthusiasm for experimentation with new activities. In their study, teachers enjoyed reporting decisions made and outcomes gained by those decisions as part of a task-focused feedback loop built into professional development opportunities. Recognizing that school counseling is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor, study participants made decisions about counseling services offered to students that reflected both the needs of students and participants' needs for experimentation with their new knowledge. Participants fulfilled the goals of the PLC, but the choices made along the path of fulfillment reflected the autonomy of participants to make professional decisions about their work.

The positive perceptions of the elements of a PLC among study participants indicate a potential solution to reducing isolation and promoting data-informed practices among school counselors (Burkard et al., 2012a, 2012b; DuFour et al., 2010; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008). Research has been dedicated to the effectiveness of PLCs for teachers (Bayar, 2020; Calabrese, 2015; Conley & Cooper, 2013; Leyba, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Weddle et al., 2019). These benefits have not been extended to school counselors (Burkard et al., 2012a; DuFour et al., 2010; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008). Movement toward the National Model (ASCA, 2019) requires collaborative experiences built on data use. PLCs fulfills this need.

Action Research Question 2 Synopsis

After participating in a professional learning community, how do high school counselors describe their approach to results-oriented practice using data to make decisions?

School counselors are called on to make data-informed decisions (ASCA, 2019). The National Model's professional ethical standards direct school counselors to "develop and implement action plans aligned with program goals and student data" (ASCA, 2019, p. 7). Effective school counseling practice is built on a bulwark of effective data use to make school counseling decisions (ASCA, 2019; Dimmitt et al., 2007; Earl & Katz, 2002; Hatch, 2014). Current District policy does not require school counselors to use data in the decision-making process of planning, managing, delivering, or assessing school counseling services. While teachers are held to elevated expectations for data use in creating, delivering, and assessing curriculum, school counselors remain marginalized in

data-use expectations. Fulfillment of data-driven decision making remains individualized among District school counselors to the detriment of school counseling programming.

Data Indicators. Prior to the study, all participants reported individual use of data to make decisions; however, irregularities in practice between participants demonstrated a need for regular, consistent, and intentional data use (Astramovitch, 2005). Irregularities included types of data used, frequency and purpose of data use, data-tracking method, and process of assessment (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009). Data use reflected participants' comfort with data and data sources. Participants stated recognition of the importance of data for decision making; however, different perspectives existed as to why it was important (Young & Kaffenberger, 2011). Poynton (2009) found where previous data training occurred, consistent use of data to make decisions reflected an ongoing, school support structure to make decisions. Participants noted formal District trainings and informal trainings shared between school counselors had influenced their comfort with data sources. When supportive structures existed, data use continued, whereas a lack of supportive structure resulted in a lack of data use (Poynton, 2009). Similarly, study participants noted inconsistent expectations from District and school leaders for data use in their work which was reflected in similarly inconsistent data use in their daily practice prior to the study (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009).

During the study, participants agreed to use data for ongoing PLC activities. Cycle 1 of action research, for which no data was collected, built a shared understanding of available data, data sources, and research regarding data. During Cycle 2, all participants agreed to use data in the identification of students for intervention. Autonomy was given to participants to choose which data types were used resulting in a

lack of uniformity in data identifiers. Regular, weekly self-evaluations at PLC meetings provided participants with opportunities to elaborate on their data use to make decisions. Additionally, semi-structured interview and focus group questions focused on data use among participants.

All participants relied on data that was readily available and familiar to them through existing school data-management systems. No participant sought new data sources. Participants' choice of data indicators reflected participants' comfort with each data source and participants' belief that the data source was a significant indicator of students' need for counseling service (Young & Kaffenberger, 2011).

Data Tracking. Participants used individual data-tracking methods during the PLC, reflecting a desire for autonomy in data-use methods. While all participants practiced some type of data-tracking process prior to the study, participants were reluctant to alter current practices to reflect a uniform system of data-tracking across PLC members. Participants agreed to track their data with more frequency and consistency. Participants cited a lack of time and energy to adjust current data-tracking methods. Hatch (2014), Holcomb-McCoy et al., (2009), and Scarborough and Culbreth (2008) found similarly low commitments to uniform, data-tracking methods in their studies. Both Strear et al. (2018) and Miller (2016) found a lack of time to be a primary cause of school counselors' lack of data use. Other reasons for a lack of data use included a lack of administrative support and school structures that prohibit data tracking processes. The lack of uniformity across participants made it difficult to compare participants' experiences at weekly meetings, likely using up valuable time during meetings and demonstrating the pitfalls of inconsistent data use both in PLCs and beyond.

Study participants noted an appreciation for using data to make informed decisions across the PLC. Weekly updates allowed participants to stay active in their assessment of their individual impact while maintaining a forward movement in support of the PLC goal, despite a lack of uniformity in data source and tracking method. DuFour and Eaker (1998) note the importance of self-evaluation as a formative element in a successful PLC. Participants cited the PLC as influential to ongoing data use during the study. Participants engaged in data analysis strategies previously unused by individual participants, more frequent data analysis, and more consistent use of data to drive decisions. Study participants' comments, actions, and perceptions of data use demonstrate the potential for development of a data-informed school counseling practice through PLCs.

Action Research Question 3 Synopsis

After participating in a professional learning community, what do high school counselors perceive to be the benefits and challenges to working in a PLC?

PLCs have seen tremendous usage across many countries contributing to teacher learning, competence, and practice (Hairon et al., 2017). While the influence of PLCs to positively change practice has been demonstrated, drawing a causal connection between PLCs and student achievement via empirical studies remains difficult (Vescio et al., 2008). Therefore, schools must be alert to both challenges and benefits of PLC implementation to fully weigh the merits of initiating a school counselor PLC program. Any program implemented in schools must be measured to ensure costs do not outweigh benefits.

The District does not currently employ PLCs for school counselors. The experience of joining a PLC was novel to study participants. Their comments contributed to understanding the perceived benefits and challenges to PLC implementation with school counselors. Additionally, self-reported struggles during weekly PLC conversations added depth to analysis, allowing for regular challenges to be presented and discussed as a function of PLC meetings (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Conversely, accomplishments of study participants and their recognition of PLC benefits point to the potential for PLCs to address professional isolation, promote data use, and move school counselors toward alignment with the ASCA National Model (2019).

Perceived Benefits. Participants described the benefits of participating in a PLC in three ways: learning new professional practices, delivering better service to students, and a validation of professional experiences.

Source of Learning. Participants felt the PLC provided them with information and an opportunity to develop their professional skills in a collaborative environment. Similar findings have been found among teachers participating in a PLC experience (Bayar, 2020; Calabrese, 2015; Conley & Cooper, 2013; Leyba, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Weddle et al., 2019). With limited opportunities for school counselors to participate in PLCs, participants' insights provide an initial understanding of how school counselors take part in professional learning through PLCs, an area of need in research (Remley & Herlihey, 2010).

District school counselors continue to experience limited professional development opportunities driven by school counselors. Most District-provided professional development opportunities exist for teachers, and school counselors are

asked to attend topics of interest within District, professional-development events. The District uses PLCs for ongoing teacher collaboration and data analysis for professional development, but current expectations do not require school counselors to take part in PLCs.

Study participants noted a perception that PLCs were exclusively a teacher activity. At the conclusion of Cycle 2, study participants expressed a desire for more PLC experiences. Study participants perceived a benefit of their PLC experience to be the ongoing professional learning about school counseling that occurred as a result of the PLC. This reflects DuFour and Eaker's (1998) original framework of a PLC, which established the vision for professional learning among PLC members as an ongoing collaboration among active professionals to address identified problems of practice.

Better Service. Hatch (2014) pointed to a need for learning opportunities among professional school counselors that would result in improvements in data use and management skills. Young and Kaffenberger (2011) saw the need for growth in data use among school counselors and found that current usage depended on school counselors' attitudes towards data. Study participants perceived the PLC to positively influence their attitude towards data use, moving them from infrequent and irregular usage to more frequent, consistent, and intentional usage. These new practices helped participants deliver better service to students by building positive relationships, efficiently identifying students, and working to stem the influence of negative events on students' high school experiences. Participants felt confident that their services to students were improving as a result of making data-informed decisions. Johnson (2002) found that school counselors who used effective data use were more effective counselors.

Validation. Professionally, participants perceived the collaborative environment of the PLC to validate their own experiences. Duncan et al. (2014) noted the importance of validation to the experience of professional school counselors in combatting feelings of isolation and burnout. They assessed the needs of rural school counselors, who were at risk of isolation either by location or by availability of support personnel. Findings indicated that isolated school counselors benefited from professional supports that validated work experiences and reduced feelings of isolation. Similarly, District school counselors had experienced challenges to the services they provided to students. Those challenges started to invalidate their feelings of accomplishment and capabilities over time.

Study participants reported developing positive perceptions of the interactions they shared with each other. Early PLC conversations indicated apprehension among participants to share knowledge and experience with one another. Weekly PLC conversations led to increased trust and bonds among members. Tschannen-Moran and Tschannen-Moran (2010) noted the importance of building trust among collaborative partners to provide critical feedback necessary for reflection and improvement. Experiences shared among study participants helped to normalize struggles and provided participants opportunities to compare experiences with common problems. DuFour and Eaker (1998) wrote that PLCs provide "clarity of purpose, the monitoring of results, and the celebration of progress that can restore the sense of achievement that people must feel in order to sustain their motivation" (p. 280). Effective PLCs validate professional experience, helping to restore school counselors' sense of achievement necessary to ward off the feelings of isolation.

Perceived Challenges. PLCs are not without their perceived challenges. Any program created in a resource-finite environment must be evaluated for potential disadvantages. Resources, such as time, energy, and personnel, all present challenges to PLC implementation. Other disadvantages reveal themselves through literature analysis and my own reflections as a PLC facilitator.

Time. Participants perceived a lack of time to be a major impediment to PLC implementation. PLC participants served two high schools in one District 17 miles apart. An obstacle from the start of this study was finding a suitable time for participants to meet. Chapman (2014) noted the potential for expanded growth when PLCs connect multiple schools. Despite the potential for shared resources and an expansion of inquiry, organizational, geographical, and professional boundaries existed to stymie PLC implementation across schools. In this study, participants struggled to align schedules across and within schools resulting in PLC meetings occurring prior to contract hours. No consensus on available times to meet could be reached during the regular school day as participants' daily schedules and responsibilities varied. Participants perceived time to be an essential resource to engage in a PLC experience because it was not allotted by school structures.

District directive includes an expectation for all teachers to take part in PLCs during school contract hours as part of protected, planning periods. No such directive exists for school counselors. Complaints about inadequate time during the workday to collaborate have been a noted issue in school counseling (Borders, 2002; ASCA, 2019). Study participants' voluntary agreement to early morning meetings demonstrated their

interest in the PLC, but a primary challenge to PLC implementation was a lack of supportive structures to ensure access during contract hours.

School-System Expectations Present Challenges to PLC Goals. Similar to time, study participants noted a lack of structure to support the effort needed to fulfill PLC goals. PLC goals were established in alignment with the District mission to “build relationships with families and communities to ensure that every student succeeds. We will know every student." The District school counseling mission goes further stating:

> Our mission as school counselors is to provide a comprehensive, developmental school counseling program that will assist all students in acquiring the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to become effective students, responsible citizens, productive workers, and lifelong learners. The school counseling program supports the school's academic mission by promoting and enhancing the learning process for all students through an integration of academic, career and personal/social development.

With both missions in mind, study participants established a PLC goal: Identify students at risk of school disengagement and prioritize them in the class registration process. Additional questions, not previously addressed in registration meetings, were posed to students to determine their motivations. Based on student responses, school counselors connected students with educational and non-educational opportunities previously untapped by students.

The class registration process is a yearly event that encompasses a great deal of District school counselor time and energy. Changing the process to identify students in need required a shift in thinking, identifying, scheduling, and prioritizing of students.

Weekly PLC meetings provided participants with opportunities to discuss their struggles. A regular concern expressed by participants was a lack of support by schools to fulfill the PLC goals. Schools prioritized speedy registration fulfillment, regardless of students' needs, because the registration process contributed to other school programs. Study participants reported a misalignment between PLC goals and school leadership directives even though PLC goals aligned with the stated school counselor and District missions. Misalignment led to participants' feelings of frustration and conflict between desires to fulfill PLC goals and daily job demands.

A component of effective PLC implementation is the support of school administrators in the creation of PLC experiences for all educators (Griffen & Hallett, 2017; Schaap et al, 2017). Holman and Grubbs (2018) found school structures that were not supportive of collaborative experiences such as PLCs, hampered collaboration, leading to increases in isolation and the continuance of problematic practices. Study participants reported feeling pressure to resort to old habits not based on collaboration, data analysis, or best service to students to fulfill the registration process and the schools' priorities.

PLC Facilitator. A PLC facilitator is necessary to implement a successful PLC group however knowledge of the profession in which the PLC is implemented requires additional training beyond PLC leadership (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Recognizing that this was my first attempt at leading a PLC, I struggled with facilitating the groups' progress at times. I used reflexive journaling to track my thoughts, feelings, and impressions as the study took place, noting my own struggles. See Appendix A for a sample reflexive journal. There were times in which I did not know how to facilitate the group's progress,

requiring additional research on my part. Time needed for additional research could have stymied the group's progress in comparison with a more experienced PLC facilitator. It is possible that better facilitation led by a trained PLC leader who was also familiar with school counseling work might have resulted in a more efficient and effective experience. Schools interested in PLC implementation must ensure appropriate leadership is prepared to facilitate the dialogue necessary to address problematic behaviors in a supportive manner while promoting the professional growth of school counselors (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Leadership must be equipped with both the knowledge of PLC facilitation and school counseling practice, to effectively implement PLCs for school counselors. Professional school counseling and teaching are unique professions and require different skills. Placement of a teacher facilitator in a school counseling PLC risks misalignment and negative results. Without trained leaders, school counselors risk taking part in PLCs that engrain, rather than address, problematic behaviors because old habits may go unchecked (Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

As part of its ethical standards in the ASCA (2019) National Model, ASCA calls on school counselors to be leaders in the profession. Development of school counseling leaders requires time and support from school leaders as well as energy from aspiring school counselors. Advocacy may be beneficial to school counselors seeking trained facilitators who can develop the skills of professional school counselors.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Like teachers, school counselors experience professional isolation that affects their work performance. Isolated practice results in problematic behaviors going unaddressed. The isolation is compounded by a lack of data-driven decision making,

leaving school counselors without programmatic service knowledge and the impact of those services results in achievement gaps. ASCA (2019) calls on school counselors to deliver programs that are:

> comprehensive in scope, results-oriented in design, and developmental in nature. The transition from service to program necessitates that school counselors become leaders to manage the program. To do this, school counselors can no longer work in isolation. (p. x)

The gap between current practice and the realization of the ASCA (2019) National Model can be closed through collaboration and data-use in school counseling. PLCs have demonstrated the ability to positively influence both outcomes yet remain untapped for school counselors. Questions remain about the influence school counselor PLCs have on student achievement. It is not within this study to know if PLC's influence on school counselors' behavior leads to greater achievement for all students. In the current study, participants perceived benefits of learning new skills, delivering better service, and feeling validated in their work to outweigh challenges of PLC participation. Future cycles of action research will assess the influence on achievement stemming from these changes in school counselor behavior. In the near term, this action research study has revealed fertile ground for promoting collaboration and data use among school counselors through PLCs, leading to the following recommendations. See Table 12 for a summary of recommendations.

Table 12

Recommendations

Finding	Related recommendation	Supporting literature
Participants perceived both benefits and challenges to a PLC experience. Despite challenges, participants perceived the overall experience to be positive when resources such as time, a trained facilitator, and opportunities to practice skills are provided. Participants perceived learning new school counseling knowledge that could be applied to daily practice.	Collaborative experiences, such as PLCs, for school counselors should be job-oriented, contextually situated professional development experiences.	Griffen & Hallett, 2017; Huijboom et al., 2019; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Savitz-Romer, 2019; Stone-Johnson, 2015
Participants positively perceived their abilities to collaborate, collectively inquire, self-evaluate, and remain results oriented. Participants perceived benefits to PLCs that outweighed challenges.	School leaders should create opportunities for school counselors to collaborate with other school counselors in the creation, delivery, management, and assessment of school counseling programming in support of comprehensive school counseling.	Bayar, 2020; Calabrese, 2015; Carpenter, 2018; Conley & Cooper, 2013; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Holman & Grubbs, 2018; Griffen & Hallett, 2017; Leyba, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Owen, 2015; Penuel et al., 2012; Prenger & Handelzalts, 2017; Weddle et al., 2019
Participants perceived a lack of time and structure to support school counselor PLC implementation.	School leaders should protect time resources necessary for school counselor collaborations during school contract hours.	Coenen et al., 2021; Haiyan & Allan, 2021; Hatch, 2014; Penuel & Gallagher, 2009

Table 12 (continued)

Finding	Related recommendation	Supporting literature
Participants perceived PLC experiences to be for teachers only. Participants perceived a lack of school leaders trained in both school counseling practice and PLC facilitation	School leaders should provide trained facilitators to lead PLC experiences for school counselors who have expertise in both PLC framework and school counseling practice.	Haiyan and Allan, 2021; Savitz-Romer, 2019
Participants identified the use of data to make decisions as beneficial to school counseling practice. Participants were willing to utilize data to make decisions; however, participants preferred autonomy to choose data indicators and tracking methods used in decision making. Participants perceived their services were improved because of data use.	School leaders should promote a data-driven culture among school counselors in concert with a movement towards comprehensive school counseling.	ASCA, 2019; Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009; Stronge & Tucker, 2013; Young et al., 2013
Participants maintained reluctance to utilize uniform sets of data indicators and tracking methods. Participants perceived the data-training, professional development opportunities to be of interest but limited in availability. Participants perceived future, data-driven professional development opportunities to be of interest.	School counselors should embrace a data-driven culture in concert with a movement toward comprehensive school counseling.	Akos et al., 2009; Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009; Michel et al., 2017; Poynton, 2009; Poynton & Carry, 2006; Reeves et al., 2005; Savitz-Romer et al., 2018; Young & Kaffenberger, 2011

Recommendation 1

Collaborative experiences, such as PLCs, for school counselors should be job-oriented, contextually situated professional development experiences. Professional development is more effective when activities are integrated into the contextual work environment (Huijboom et al., 2020). A persistent problem in school counseling

professional development is the limited availability of job-embedded professional development (Griffen & Hallett, 2017; Savitz-Romer, 2019). Stone-Johnson (2015) found that isolation experienced by school counselors seeking professional development resulted in ongoing professional isolation and limited professional growth.

This study's participants perceived professional development to be a disappointing experience in the District. Participants reported attending professional developments geared toward teachers or one-off school counseling events addressing a singular topic unrelated to daily work life. Participants expressed being left out of District professional development plans resulting in feelings of marginalization. Conversely, the conclusion of Cycle 2, participants expressed an interest in ongoing PLC experiences and feelings of encouragement for other school counselors to take part in PLCs when available.

PLCs have been implemented across schools nationwide as a component of local teacher professional development. Enthusiasm for PLCs in education has focused on the influence it has on daily, educator work life to promote best practices (Opfer & Pedder, 2011). PLCs empower educators to address current practices and develop strategies that address local needs while a lack of access can allow bad practices to go unchecked and reinforce achievement gaps. Expanding PLCs to include school counselors is one viable way to create job-embedded, contextually situated professional development for school counselors. Continuing to fail to provide such opportunities may further isolate school counselors.

Recommendation 2

School leaders should create opportunities for school counselors to collaborate with other school counselors in the creation, delivery, management, and assessment of school counseling programming and in support of comprehensive school counseling. ASCA (2019) calls on school counselors to engage in collaborative experiences to address systemic problems. Fostering teacher collaborations has been shown to promote best practice among teachers (Bayar, 2020; Calabrese, 2015; Conley & Cooper, 2013; Leyba, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2021; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Weddle et al., 2019). School counselors gain similar advantages from collaborations (Griffen & Hallett, 2017; Penuel et al., 2012). Collaborative opportunities, such as PLCs, offer qualities of an effective collaboration framework (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

This action research study found that school counselors held positive perceptions of their abilities to contribute to the elements of a PLC (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Participants' positive perceptions indicates an opportunity. As collaborative school structures become more prominent, school counselors should engage in more collaborative processes leading to less professional isolation (Holman & Grubbs, 2018). Structures for teacher collaboration through PLCs already exist in many schools (Carpenter, 2018; Owen, 2015; Prenger & Handelzalts, 2017). Using the available PLC framework and professional scaffolds to promote school counselor collaboration builds on established knowledge and resources (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). School leaders should address school counselors' lack of collaboration by using the existing structures of PLCs to bridge the gap between isolated and collaborative practice.

Creating opportunities for school counselor collaboration requires analysis of how school counselors currently use time at work. School counselors' workday may already be accounted for by other activities. ASCA (2019) encourages school counselors to perform time analysis assessments periodically to ensure that energy and time usage are appropriate for school counselor responsibilities.

Recommendation 3

School leaders should protect time resources necessary for school counselor collaborations during school contract hours. The protection of time is important to ongoing PLC structure (Haiyan & Allan, 2021). Protecting school counselors' time for PLC engagement reinforces schools' commitment to PLCs as the professional development program for all educators, not just teachers.

Study participants perceived a lack of time supported by school structures as prohibitive to their ability to collaborate. A lack of protected time led to participants taking part in PLC experiences prior to contract hours. Opportunities to collaborate as a group could not be found during contract hours resulting in participants agreeing to meet for extended school hours. Citing the protection of teachers' time for PLC experiences, study participants perceived PLCs were only valued for teachers. Coenen et al. (2021) found that protected time was a key feature of PLC implementation. Additionally, educators need time to learn about and implement new practices (Haiyan & Allan, 2021; Penuel & Gallagher, 2009). School leaders must assure protection of time for school counselors to identify, plan, and evaluate school counseling program needs and school counselors' contributions to the program.

ASCA urges school counselors to perform a time analysis as part of regular comprehensive school counseling program analysis. Analysis of yearly calendars helps to ensure progress towards school counseling goals across the school year while day-to-day activities can be assessed through micro-level analysis. Hatch (2014) urges school counselors to use a daily time analysis at least twice yearly to ensure appropriate use of school hours. By prompting and responding to this time analysis, school leaders can communicate the importance of protected time for school counselor PLCs and receive feedback that informs programming decisions. When school leaders protect time for school counselors' collaboration through PLCs, they communicate the value of and commitment to PLCs as professional development for all educators.

Recommendation 4

School leaders should provide trained facilitators to lead PLC experiences for school counselors who have expertise in both the PLC framework and school counseling practice. Savitz-Romer (2019) highlighted the importance of available leadership capable of fostering school counselor growth through knowledge of school systems and the school counseling job requirements. Without leaders who are familiar with school counseling practice, collaborations of any kind lack professional substance to make experiences relevant to school counseling practice. Haiyan and Allan (2021) found that school leaders who assess, recognize, and promote best practices among teachers were more likely to facilitate a school of collaboration than school leaders who lacked those skills. Providing similar leadership to school counselors moves professional practice toward better performance.

The current study highlighted a need for trained facilitators who understand school counseling practice. Participants perceived the District to lack school counseling leaders capable of leading school counselor professional development experiences. At the start of the study, participants were unsure how PLCs were different from other District meetings typically led by non-school counselors. The lack of District leaders with school counseling experience or expertise compounded with the lack of trained, school counselor PLC facilitators promotes a belief that school leaders are not committed to meaningful, professional development experiences for school counselors.

The role of the school counselor is different from that of teachers, resulting in a need for differentiated professional development. Establishing school counseling leaders who can promote best practices through collaborative experience, such as PLCs, leads to the promotion of school counseling best practices.

Recommendation 5

School leaders should promote a data-driven culture among school counselors in concert with a movement toward comprehensive school counseling. Past uses of data, which were often used to numerate counseling activities, are inadequate (Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009). ASCA (2019) calls on school counselors to become accountable professionals who collect data, use accountability strategies, and share outcomes with the broader school community (Young et al., 2013). To transition to this comprehensive school counseling model, schools must be adept in the identification, management, and analysis of data relevant to school counseling practice. This transition does not happen quickly. It requires professional development participation, time to practice data-driven

decision making, and opportunities to assess current and future school counseling data endeavors.

In this study, participants expressed an interest in data-driven decision making; however, they also expressed hesitation to alter already present data-use habits without practice. Past professional development opportunities had not provided practice time for new knowledge implementation. Weekly PLC meetings presented opportunities to practice and discuss data-usage skills leading to participants' willingness to experiment with new data skills as the PLC progressed. A first step was developing participants' understanding of data sources and data management processes. PLCs offer this opportunity in a contextual manner that can be applied to school counseling practice. Familiarity and comfort with data use drives much of school counselors' data use habits as exhibited by participants (Astramovich, 2015). Opportunities to develop these skills are important as it allows school counselors time to practice contextually relevant data use skills. In the absence of supportive opportunities to develop data use skills, school counselors are likely to fall back to old habits or remain hesitant to use new knowledge (Astramovich, 2015).

The transition from little or no data use to a data-driven school counseling program also requires alignment among the division, school, and counseling department's mission, systemic priorities, and professional development goals. In this study, participants felt that the misalignment between school priorities and PLC goals hindered their progress to use data effectively. The school's priorities were out of sync with the counseling mission, which created unnecessary obstacles and negative pressure to

abandon the data-driven collaborative work. School leaders should offer structural and cultural support for data-driven practices aligned with the school's mission.

Embracing a data-driven school counseling program could have other tangential benefits that combat school counselors' feelings of isolation. School counseling professional evaluations that use misaligned evaluation criteria, originally created for teachers, cause marginalization of school counselors (Stronge & Tucker, 2013). Schools that use appropriate school counseling data as the bedrock of comprehensive school counseling programming are better prepared to use that same data in the professional evaluation process. Better professional evaluations assist school counselors in professional growth leading to stronger school counseling results overall. The National Model's ethical standards call on school counselors to advocate for appropriate evaluations using relevant data. By placing data-driven decision making at the forefront of school counseling, school leaders can make data use an expectation for school counseling programs and school counselor evaluations.

Recommendation 6

School counselors should embrace a data-driven culture in concert with a movement toward comprehensive school counseling. School counselors must make an effort to learn about and apply data-use skills consistently and effectively in their practice. Past habits of reluctance to use data, limited data use, or data use to strictly numerate activities, are inadequate (Akos et al., 2009; Holcomb-McCoy et al., 2009). It is not enough for school counselors to simply exist in the data-rich environment of schools; they must actively use it to make decisions.

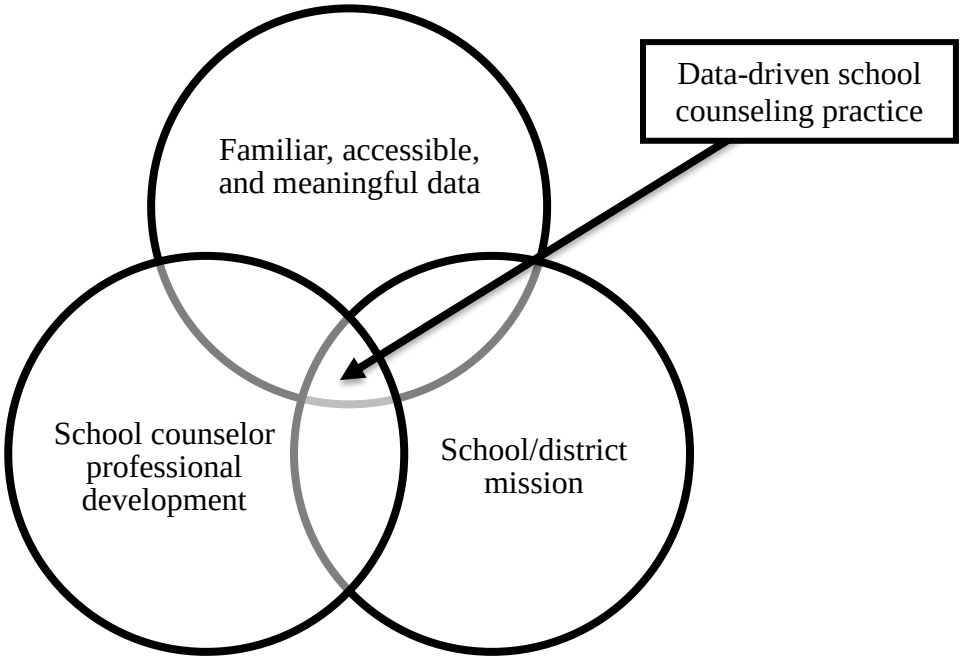
Young and Kaffenberger (2011) found variable attitudes towards data use predicted the daily usage of data by school counselors. Holcomb-McCoy et al. (2009) noted variable usage of data resulted in gaps in achievement related to school counseling programming. Efforts to reform school counselor data use through ongoing professional development have seen progress in the past two decades (Poynton, 2009; Poynton & Carry, 2006; Savitz-Romer et al., 2018). Similarly, preprofessional school counseling programs now offer coursework on data analysis to promote data-driven practices (Michel et al., 2017).

Changing professional practice is a difficult task (Reeves et al., 2005). Newly created professional development opportunities for school counselors to learn about and apply data-management skills must become a staple of school counseling professional development practice alongside that of counseling theories and approaches (Poynton, 2009). Noting the difficult nature of changing work behaviors among professionals, Holcomb-McCoy et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of school counselor openness towards changes in data usage. An openness to change indicated a positive belief in the outcomes for making changes. Despite study participants reporting an openness to data-usage professional development, only one participant reported taking part in professional development opportunities related to data usage. However, when embedded in their daily work through PLCs, study participants demonstrated a willingness to engage with and learn about data use skills with regularity. Participants chose to use data to make decisions when the data was accessible, familiar, and comfortable, aligned with the collective goals of the PLC, and aligned with the Division and counseling department's

mission. Figure 4 illustrates the relationship between these three influences on school counselor data use.

Figure 4

Observed Relationship Between Data, Professional Development, and School/District Mission



School counselors' data-driven decision making exists at the intersection of all three influences. Missing the mark of any influence results in less impactful school counseling practice. If there is too much focus solely on school mission without consideration for familiarity, accessibility, and meaningfulness of data, schools risk missing out on school counselors' input to achievement, resulting in an increased need for professional development. Too much focus on familiarity, accessibility, and meaningfulness of data to school counselors without professional development or alignment with school mission risks school counselors becoming irrelevant and unhelpful to the educational process. Too much focus on professional development without

consideration for familiarity, accessibility, and meaningfulness of data or school mission risks wasted development resources.

Ideal practice weaves school mission, school counselor professional development, and familiar, accessible, and meaningful data together. Aligning professional development and data with the school mission compels action by school counselors to work in support of school goals. This school-mission-driven work encompasses the contributions of school counselors, avoiding isolation. For school counselors to see their importance in the mission, data must be employed that is accessible, familiar, and meaningful to school counselors. Fulfillment of these qualities contributes to school counselors' buy in to the action, understanding of students' experiences, and the ability to see their effort as worthwhile. School counseling professional development is the vehicle by which data that was previously inaccessible, unfamiliar, and meaningless becomes accessible, familiar, and meaningful to school counselors. Professional development enhances school counselors' knowledge to see their contribution to school mission using data to make decisions. Schools position school counselors to deliver comprehensive school counseling services, reducing professional isolation, and promote data use when school counselors work at the intersection of all three influences.

An openness to change in data-driven school counseling practice stems from a belief that the consequences of changes in data usage warrant benefits not otherwise found in current practice. Schools are awash in data and current trends demand accountability for teachers and other educators. Despite this, school counselors have seen some immunity to data-usage expectations in the District. Participants report limited influence from school administrators to use data to drive school counseling practice. As a

result, data usage continues to reflect individual decisions. Holcomb-McCoy et al. (2009) found that counselor self-efficacy, a belief that a person can accomplish a specific goal despite difficult circumstances, influenced school counselor data usage, as much or more so than school expectations. In this study, participants growing confidence with data led to increased use across the study. Participants noted a feeling of accountability to one another to learn about and try new practices reinforcing the use of data in daily work. Opportunities to increase self-efficacy include participation in collaborative work activities such as PLCs. Despite noting a growing confidence, participants continued to use data sources they were already familiar with to make decisions. The data were used in novel ways to identify students in need of intervention. Building familiarity with new data sources could result in enhanced usage among school counselors, further promoting regular data use in comprehensive school counseling. School counselors must embrace collaborative PLC experiences to learn about, practice, and use data-driven school counseling practice. More collaborative practice with data will bring about more self-efficacy with data usage, leading to better practice.

Future Research

Professional isolation and a lack of data use among school counselors were observed at the outset of this study. These two problems have contributed to an underperformance by school counselors that is hampering student achievement in schools. Opportunities exist to remedy this problem through the ASCA (2019) National Model but the chasm between current practice and the realities of the National Model remain wide. Initial steps toward closing that gap involve promoting collaboration among

school counselors and the utilization of data to make informed decisions in the planning, managing, delivery, and assessment of school counseling practice.

Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) called for the creation of collaborative experiences for school counselors. Findings from other studies indicated that school counselors can benefit from collaborative experiences steeped in data use; yet school counselors continue to be hampered by a lack of collaborative practice and data use (Burkard et al., 2012a, 2012b; DuFour et al., 2010; Hatch & Chen-Hayes, 2008; Remley & Herlihey, 2010). This is not a new occurrence (Eckerson & Smith, 1966). Teachers have shared in that professional isolation. To remedy teachers' experience, schools ushered in a wave of professional development opportunities through the introduction of PLCs (Conley & Cooper, 2013; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Nguyen & Ng, 2020; Weddle et al., 2019). Across the world, educators and researchers have noted the value of promoting teacher efficacy, knowledge, and best practices through PLC experiences (Griffen & Hallett, 2017). School counselors continue to miss out on PLC experiences resulting in questions about how PLCs can help to bridge the gap between current practice and comprehensive school counseling (Remley & Herlihey, 2010).

The purpose of this study was to understand the influence PLC experiences had on school counselors' perceptions of their abilities to take part in the elements of a PLC and to understand how school counselors described their data use to address problems of practice. This study found that PLCs for school counselors hold the potential to close this gap by engaging participants in collaboration and data use, which are key components of comprehensive school counseling.

Multiple Cycles of Action Research

Future research should examine multiple cycles of action research in a PLC. An important attribute of action research is the ongoing nature of professional development as participants work in a cyclical manner to address problems with greater refinement. Future cycles of action research develop on the backs of previous cycles in an iterative process (Mertler, 2020). This study relied on data from one cycle of action research. Findings from this study are limited by a short, study period. It would be valuable to engage in additional cycles of action research to determine what, if any, additional influence PLCs have on school counselors' perceptions of the elements of a PLC over time. Additionally, the arc of school engagement among students is much longer than this study can address. Longer engagement would also allow school counselors to examine their impact on school engagement and student achievement as a result of PLC involvement.

Required PLC Participation

Future research should examine the perspectives and interactions when PLC participation is required. This study's PLC composition was made up of a convenience sample of six volunteer school counselors who were willing to engage in collaborative activities and to use data as part of their decision making. Fifteen other high school counselors in the District declined the invitation to join the PLC. Therefore, possible confirmation or in-group bias limits the findings' usefulness beyond the initial context. The small sample may also limit generalizability to other contexts. Expanding the study to include other high school counselors would provide additional evidence for analysis (Penuel et al., 2012).

PLC Leadership

A requirement for PLC implementation is the presence of a trained facilitator to lead PLC experiences. For a school counselor PLC, this facilitator should also have experience and expertise in school counseling. My experiences in this study were invaluable to my understanding of PLCs. Much like taking part in DuFour and Eaker's (1998) PLC framework, facilitating a PLC requires self-evaluation. I learned lessons during this study that will help me be a better facilitator in future PLC endeavors as well as a better school counselor. ASCA (2019) calls for school counselors to be leaders for the profession. Leadership positions in school counseling PLCs offer an avenue to advocate for best practice while supporting the development of individual counselors through collective efforts. Future research should examine the evolving nature of PLC leadership.

Division-Wide PLCs

An opportunity for expanding professional growth exists in the examination of PLCs and data use across grade bands. This study included high school counselors from two schools in one school district. Studies should be expanded to include school counselors who work in different levels of education and across whole school divisions. The experience of elementary school counselors, who may be the sole school counselor in a school, would provide varied perspectives from high school counselors who are assigned to a counseling department.

Cross-Professional PLCs for Pupil Personnel Services

School Counselors are just one component of a system of pupil personnel supports in schools. Future research should consider collaborations with other professional disciplines in related fields. School social workers, nurses, and psychologists are often singularly assigned to a building, yet share some responsibilities with school counselors. Isolation and a lack of data use have been documented in these groups as well (Clopton & Knesting, 2006; Cogan, 2021; Diaz, 2013). Promoting collaboration among these professionals could broaden the collaborative experience for all as well as enhance current, data-driven, decision-making practices through a broader knowledge base.

Influence of Technology on PLCs

This study occurred at a challenging time in history during the COVID-19 Pandemic, leading schools to evaluate new technologies to maintain continuity of school interactions among faculty, students, and community members. Certainly, the closure of schools and the onset of virtual education influenced feelings of professional isolation shared across education. School counselors were not immune to that. Schools forced to switch to online learning may have opened a door to professional collaborations that were previously underutilized. With the expansion of online education came a need for more telecommunications among educators. The expansion of available resources offered an avenue for collaborations with school counselors previous isolated by geographical distance (Duncan et al., 2014). Understanding the role of these technologies in promoting collaboration and data use may unlock other methods of professional development as well as other ways to unite populations in collaboration.

Beyond PLCs

Professional collaborations are not limited to PLCs. The current study focused on the influence of PLCs on school counselors because that is the current framework for ongoing professional development within the District. Belief in the effectiveness of PLCs as well as knowledge about structural scaffolds to support PLCs already exist within the District, serving as a foundation for PLC expansion to include school counselors. In addition, PLC expansion offers a proximal step towards comprehensive school counseling. Just as the District mission calls on PLCs to be the ongoing, professional development foundation, ASCA calls on school counselors to take part in data-driven, collaborative experiences to develop professional skills. ASCA does not call on PLCs specifically, but the elements of an effective PLC: collaboration, collective inquiry, self-reflection, and results orientation, are all contributors to the ASCA (2019) National Model process.

In the 2 decades since DuFour and Eaker's (1998) PLC framework was created, other frameworks for team collaboration have been researched. Additionally, team collaboration is not the only way to engage with peers. There are other ways to collaborate. Future research into other collaborative frameworks may reveal effective results leading to new avenues of professional collaboration among school counselors.

The First Step Toward the National Model

Comprehensive school counseling is the pinnacle of professional school counseling upon which all school counselors and school leaders should be striving to reach (ASCA, 2019). Built on a century of research, the National Model shines as the highest quality example of comprehensive school counseling practice and has been linked

to positive influences on educational outcomes (Carey et al., 2012; Lapan et al., 2001b; Lapan, 2012; Sink et al., 2008; Young & Kaffenberger, 2011). All school counselors should collaborate with school stakeholders to promote comprehensive school counseling practice that meets the standards set by ASCA.

Current District initiatives encourage movement towards National Model practices; however, school structures to promote this change have not been used. Study participants reported an interest in comprehensive school counseling practices and a perception that comprehensive school counseling is an effective influence on school outcomes and achievement. When reflecting on the lack of comprehensive school counseling programming in the District, study participants perceived a lack of time, structure, and school support to negatively influence their decision to provide comprehensive services. This aligns with Dixon Rayle's (2006) finding that ambiguous school counselor job expectations, varying from school to school, have negatively impacted school counselors' ability to provide comprehensive services. These expectations are locally established, resulting in schools serving as their own hinderance towards the implementation of comprehensive school counseling.

The National Model calls on school counselors to take part in collaborative experiences. This study demonstrated a lack of time and structures designated for collaborative school counseling experiences. Creating collaborative opportunities for school counselors is essential to warding off isolated practices. Maintaining those collaborations requires both time and leadership, two key resources in PLC implementation. Collaborations must be on going, job oriented, and contextually based. Professional growth takes time. Development happens as professionals are able to

transfer new knowledge gained from collaborations into daily practice. New knowledge that is contextually situated is more likely to be used than unrelatable or marginal knowledge that is difficult to align with practice.

Collaboration alone is inadequate; school counselors must use data to develop comprehensive school counseling practice. ASCA (2019) calls on school counselors to use data to manage, plan, deliver and assess school counseling practice. Opportunities to learn about and develop data-driven skills will become available as schools evolve. School counselors must take those opportunities to gain new knowledge and make it a part of their regular practice. School leaders and school counselors who embrace collaboration and data usage in their effort to implement comprehensive school counseling stand ready to benefit from both. Conversely, a rejection of collaborative experiences and data use look to further isolate and relegate school counseling practice in the educational process.

Conclusion

School counselors serve a wide array of needs in support of students' academic, socioemotional, and career development. Meeting those needs requires a systematic approach to ensure that every student is getting the services that they require to reach their full potential. School counseling practices resulting in isolation and disuse of data are a hinderance to effectively and equitably providing those services. Research into school counseling best practices directed the profession toward the promise of comprehensive school counseling, crystalized by the National Model.

The transition to the National Model requires attention from school leaders and counselors. Effort to rid the school counseling profession of isolated practices is

paramount. Collaborative work provides the environment for school counselors to address problems of practice with the collective strengths of many school counselors working in concert with one another. Collaboration, by itself, is not enough. School counselors must harness the potential of data-driven, school counseling practice to fully realize the positive impact of school counseling. The National Model's professional ethics standards call on school counselors to collaborate with fellow educators, using data to serve every student well.

Rising to this occasion requires consideration of new professional development frameworks for school counseling practice. PLCs have seen limited use among school counselors. The influence of PLCs is an area of exploration ripe for development in school counseling professional practice.

This study found that PLCs contribute to the collaborative work of school counselors. Study participants perceived positive experiences with the elements of a PLC leading to the belief that PLC implementation can solve the problem of isolated practice. In addition, PLCs offer a framework for practicing and promoting data-driven decision making. School counselors, previously hesitant to use data, were encouraged by the PLC experience. What started as reluctance, became a strength of the PLC experience as participants incorporated new knowledge gained from the PLC into their daily work.

Findings of this study indicate that PLCs are a mechanism for solving both isolation and a lack of data-driven school counseling. Recommendations to create, promote, and protect collaborative experiences, such as PLCs, must become fixtures of school counseling leadership. As PLCs become more prominent, so too will the opportunities to collaboratively practice the use of data to drive school counseling

decision making. Knowledge gained in collaborative PLCs can be transferred to daily practice, setting up the necessary supports for ongoing, data-driven school counseling professional development. School counselors must embrace data use. Opportunities to learn about data must be married with regular practice and aligned with division and counseling missions.

PLC implementation comes with challenges, such as limited time and the need for trained facilitators confident in both school counseling practice and PLC framework. Solutions to these challenges are within reach of school leaders and should not be a hinderance to PLC implementation. Recognizing the potential of school counselors to serve all students with equitable, effective, and efficient school counseling programs is the hallmark of the National Model. Implementing PLCs for school counselors will help to bridge the divide between where school counselors stand now and the promise of comprehensive school counseling.

APPENDIX A

Reflexive Journal Example

January 24, 2022

PLC went smoothly today. We ran over a few minutes, so people were late getting back to work. Everyone attended today. The pink/green post-its activity went well. [Participant] expressed nervousness about admitting she was behind. I think that gave us a chance to talk openly about the timing struggle. Lots of emotions about time right now. [School 2] counselors are feeling pressure that we are not feeling to finish. They have just 2 weeks left, and we have 7 weeks to finish. Big difference in the expectations of work pace between the schools is probably why a cross school PLC would be difficult to operate on a long-term basis. Reflects lots of differences between our schools I imagine. The frustration from the arbitrary deadlines set by central office is prominent. People speculated as to why some things must be done fast and others with no speed at all for registration. Agreement that it leads to less data use was obvious.
My review of norms has become a joke of sorts. [Participant] asked if we are going to review them every time and I said yes, to maintain structure. I see how it becomes repetitive and maybe even silly to repeat it each time but trying to stay true to framework.

[Participant] noted that she's getting positive responses from kids for the questions. Most people agreed with her. Feelings of "knowing your kids" was expressed.
[Participant] comments about weather and its impact on school counseling is interesting. Like when farmers used to talk about not getting to do stuff because of rain or whatever. We can't meet with kids if school is closed for snow. Teachers can continue to send work home and kids continue to complete work already assigned but school counseling stops unless we can get in touch with a kid.
[Participant's] admission about stress level was jarring. "Most stressful year" is a big description coming off last year when it was entirely virtual. Need to explore that feeling moving forward to determine if PLC is contributing or solving that concern.

I think my plans went well today. The post-it note activity was well received and prompted conversation. People's conversation about their physical set up to do registration was interesting. I think that probably demonstrates a lot of how our relationships are currently set up with kids based on how we positioned parents on zoom, kid in office (or zoom), and us with our paperwork. The strategies we use are interesting. Conversation about how kids become priorities was some dark school counselor humor. Idea of telling a kid you'll have to fail a couple classes to get moved up to the kids complaining they haven't had their meeting yet because they're doing well and engaged. Disengaged kids who probably avoid us are getting pushed to the front and kids who normally would be up front are upset about our attention on others who are not engaged. Our focus is normally on the engaged kids and now we are focused on the disengaged kids and engaged kids are bothered by the lack of attention.
Plan for next week is review individual progress, pace and how it changes conversation. Identify patterns in student answers to motivation questions.

APPENDIX B

Participant Informed Consent Form

I, _____, agree to participate in a research study regarding my experiences in a professional learning community. The purpose of this study is to inform school counseling stakeholders who may make decisions about program implementation and to gain school counselors' perspectives on the experiences of taking part in a professional learning community and its influence on school counselor isolation and data-driven decision making.

As a participant, I understand that my participation in the study is purposeful and voluntary. All high school counselors in [school District name] have the opportunity to voluntarily participate in this study and its components. Components of this study include professional learning community meetings, semi-structured interviews, and a focus group meeting.

I understand that the interviewer has been trained in the research of human subjects, my responses will be confidential, and that my name will not be associated with any results of this study. Data will be collected through professional learning community transcripts, semi-structured interviews, and a professional learning community focus group meeting. I understand that data will be collected using an audio recording device and then transcribed for analysis. Information from all data sources will be safeguarded so my identity will never be disclosed. My true identity will not be associated with the research findings.

I understand that there is no known risk or discomfort directly involved with this research and that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation at any time. I agree that should I choose to withdraw my consent and discontinue participation in the study that I will notify the researcher listed below, in writing. A decision not to participate in the study or to withdraw from the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher, the College of William and Mary generally or the School of Education, specifically.

If I have any questions or problems that may arise as a result of my participation in the study, I understand that I should contact the researcher, Adam Southall, Dr. Margaret Constantino, dissertation chair, or Dr. Tom Ward, chair of EDIRC.

My signature below signifies that I am at least 18 years of age, that I have received a copy of this consent form, and that I consent to participate in this research study.

_____	_____
Signature of Participant	Date
_____	_____
Signature of Researcher	Date

THIS PROJECT WAS FOUND TO COMPLY WITH APPROPRIATE ETHICAL STANDARDS AND WAS EXEMPTED FROM THE NEED FOR FORMAL REVIEW BY THE COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY PROTECTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS COMMITTEE on December 17, 2021 and expires on December 17, 2022.

APPENDIX C

PLC Meeting Agendas

Cycle	Meeting	Objectives	Agenda
1	1	Establish PLC Review of PLC form and function Build rapport among PLC members	Review foundational documents on PLC Set group norms
	2	Develop understanding of school engagement, evidence-based school counselor logic model, and relevant data indicators	Review literature of school engagement (Fredricks et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2019) Determine current available data and data still to be gathered for assessment (Dimmitt et al., 2007) Assess PLC data template for data comparison to determine available and missing data in anticipation of PLC members collecting missing data before next PLC meeting
	3	Review collected data to assess accurate data view of students Set mission, vision, and beliefs of PLC group	Combine data into PLC-created template using data indicators (Dimmitt et al., 2007) Establish PLC mission, vision, and beliefs (DuFour & Eaker, 1998)
		PLC member semi-structured interview	One-on-one, semi-structured interviews with PLC participants
2	4	Create PLC goals using disaggregated data	Disaggregate data to understand student demonstration of school engagement, which students need intervention (Dimmitt et al., 2007), and which students demonstrate school engagement Develop response to both groups Set PLC goals for Cycle 2 of action research (DuFour & Eaker, 1998) PLC members plan logistics of interventions to be employed during Cycle 2 (Dimmitt et al., 2007)
	5	PLC member discussion of school engagement interventions	PLC members discuss efforts to address school engagement Identify strategies and obstacles to intervention delivery

			Update data set for refinement of identification of student needs and progress toward goals
	6	PLC member discussion of school engagement interventions	PLC members discuss efforts to address school engagement Identify strategies and obstacles to intervention delivery Update data set for refinement of identification of student needs and progress toward goals
	7	PLC member discussion of school engagement interventions	PLC members discuss efforts to address school engagement Identify strategies and obstacles to intervention delivery Update data set for refinement of identification of student needs and progress toward goals
	8	PLC member discussion of school engagement interventions	PLC members discuss efforts to address student school engagement Identify strategies and obstacles to intervention delivery Update data set where appropriate Develop evolved steps towards refining identification and intervention Plan for next cycle of action research as needed
	9	PLC focus group	PLC focus group discussion
		PLC member semi-structured interview	One-on-one, semi-structured interviews with PLC participants
3	10	PLC member discussion of school engagement interventions Re-align PLC goals with current student engagement based on data indicators	Use refined knowledge from Cycle 2 to identify students in need of intervention Assess previous PLC goals as needed (Dimmitt et al., 2007; DuFour & Eaker, 1998)

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