DISSERTATION


IN THE ROUND: SUPPORTING TEACHERS' AUTHENTIC PROFESSIONAL LEARNING


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ABSTRACT


IN THE ROUND: SUPPORTING TEACHERS' AUTHENTIC PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

This is a study of teachers' authentic professional learning at a public school in Poudre School District in northern Colorado. At Polaris Expeditionary Learning School, teachers and administrators have developed a form of school-based instructional rounds referred to herein as PLC rounds (professional learning community rounds). In PLC rounds, Polaris teachers visit their colleagues' classrooms in teams to observe and interact with the host teacher and students. Afterwards, observing teachers reflect on their observations and interactions and engage in professional dialogue about how the experience might inform their practice. These dialogues become part of a larger conversation across all rounds teams in service of school improvement.

Despite increased interest in school-based instructional rounds as a professional learning approach, a theory-research gap persists. This study draws upon teachers' lived experiences by encouraging them to reflect on their participation in PLC rounds. Through interviews and analysis, a theoretical framework is constructed to explain this dynamic phenomenon.

The study distinguishes the PLC rounds approach from other forms of instructional rounds, outlines its key components, articulates teachers' professional learning experiences, explores this learning in relation to the strengthening of the professional learning community, and identifies practices that support and hinder their professional learning. In addition, it contributes insights for local practice at Polaris, considerations for interested schools and/or school districts, and recommendations for future research.

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I am also grateful for the support of the loved ones in my life.  Mom, Dad, and Cindy, this dissertation journey would not have been completed without your help.  I have learned so much from each of you and love you very much.  You mean so much to me – thank you for being there for me all this time.  Katie, I am so grateful for your careful reading of this work, your encouragement, and your being there for me at my dissertation defense.  It meant a lot to me to take the last steps of this adventure with your support.  Bindi, you are a sweet puppy and a great friend.  You have been very patient with me, and I promise that we will have more time for long walks together.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

**Chapter 1**

*Rounds breaks isolation among teachers, it builds relational trust, and it is a practice we all know in our core is going to lead to change within our school.*

- A teacher at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School

A teacher's tool belt is unique to each practitioner, content area, and context. It is crafted through ongoing interactions with students as a teacher learns over time what works and what does not in certain situations with certain kids for certain learning purposes. Clarifying, anticipating, adjusting, encouraging, celebrating – a teacher moves deftly along, learning while simultaneously guiding the learning of others. A teacher's instructional repertoire is therefore forged from a history of social interactions with others. For such a socially derived practice, it is ironic that the majority of a teacher's learning takes place in isolation from other teachers. Each teacher is master of their own little world, traveling in relative seclusion along the trajectory of school improvement. But what happens when teachers visit the little worlds down the hall or across campus? What do they gain from studying these somewhat alien landscapes, climates, and life forms? How does their visit inform not only their own world, but the harmony of the system itself?

This is a study of teachers learning from and with their peers. It is focused on their experiences within school-based instructional rounds, a sparsely understood method for inviting collaborative learning. This study constructs a theoretical framework for explaining teachers' professional learning through peer observations and dialogues that in turn informs their practice. It is guided by the supposition that school-based instructional rounds can provide a nexus of experiences, interactions, and reflections that foster meaningful learning experiences for teachers

in a professional learning community (PLC).  This supposition is based on my experience as a

facilitator, participant, and researcher of rounds at the school where I teach full-time.  Four years

of implementing and engaging in rounds have wrought compelling ways of engaging in

collaborative practice with my colleagues in service of school improvement.  Because research

and theory regarding school-based instructional rounds is limited, my colleagues and I have

constructed our own method for engaging teachers in professional learning.  The ensuing

theoretical framework is grounded in these local practices and experiences, and it intends to

improve understanding, support teachers' learning, and lessen the existing theory-research gap in

the literature.

**Overview of Instructional Rounds and its Evolution**

Instructional rounds is a method for achieving school improvement.  Much like doctors'

rounds in the medical field, instructional rounds involves teams of administrators working as a

network to visit different schools to get a systemwide sense of the learning taking place in

classrooms (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Roegman & Riehl, 2012).  This process aims

to help administrators address and resolve educational problems of practice at the system level.

In 2001, Richard Elmore developed a superintendents' network in Connecticut to pilot

the instructional rounds model as a school improvement strategy; new networks patterned from

the Connecticut model soon emerged in New Jersey, Ohio, and Massachussetts (City et al., 2009;

Roegman & Riehl, 2012; Wlodarczyk Hickey, 2011).  City et al. (2009) were drawn to the

medical model because of its power to engage professionals in social practices that generate

collective knowledge.  They acknowledged their intent was not to have educators act more like

doctors; for them, instructional rounds provides experiential engagement with and discourse

about teaching and learning, thereby advancing practical improvement and shared norms (2009).

City and her colleagues (2009) explained that instructional rounds were intended to improve teaching and learning through adherence to norms of non-evaluative, low inference descriptions of what is observed in classrooms, analytic dialogue seeking patterns related to problems of practice, and solutions driven by school and district leaders. The focus of these instructional rounds is deliberately centered on the instructional core. In instructional rounds, the instructional core is conceptualized as the interplay between teachers and students as they interact with content (City et al., 2009; Elmore, 2004). City et al. (2009) framed the construct of the instructional core as a lens for describing what is directly observed in classrooms. They dedicated their attention to the central role of the instructional core in guiding school improvement; in their model, problems of practice at the instructional level are assumed to be indicative of problems that must be addressed at the system level. Such engagement in instructional rounds, like participation in medical rounds, is perceived as a social practice that fosters professional learning in service of collective improvement (City et al., 2009; Wlodarczyk Hickey, 2011).

In instructional rounds as outlined by City et al. (2009), members of a rounds network visit a host school. The host school's leaders articulate a perceived problem of practice they believe is hindering the school's improvement. Rounds participants then visit classrooms of teachers who volunteer to be observed for a short duration (10 – 20 minutes). During this time, observers record descriptive notes framed by the problem of practice. These observers adhere to a norm of noting observable student and teacher interactions in non-evaluative, highly descriptive language. After visiting several classrooms, the instructional rounds team reconvenes to discuss and analyze their observations (2009).

The instructional core is used as the unit of analysis during post-observation debrief sessions (City et al., 2009). These sessions often adhere to a Describe-Analyze-Predict format to help participants move from observed description of the instructional core to analysis by interpreting emerging themes and patterns across classrooms related to the host school's perceived problem of practice. Participants then speculate what students will be able to do as a result of what was observed. By postulating from these observations, administrators engage in a pedagogy that seeks to promote their understanding of instruction at the classroom level in service of their work at the system level (Roegman & Riehl, 2012). This understanding is articulated through participants' development of theories of action; these theories are intended to make administrators' thinking about teaching and learning explicit for comparison with their actions at the system level (City et al., 2009). Drawing from the organizational learning work of Argyris and Schön (1974), City et al. (2009) describe theories of action as causal, open-ended statements that are intended to be refined over time as educators continuously engage in observation and dialogue about the instructional core. According to City et al. (2009), these malleable descriptions of how the instructional core works help administrators link their perceptions with their actions. Lastly, participants consider the observations, emerging patterns, predictions, and theories of action in light of stated problems of practice to explore next steps. These next steps are intended to empower school leaders as they reflect on the relationship between multiple classroom observations and the conditions that support effective teaching and learning across educational systems (City et al., 2009; Roegman & Riehl, 2012).

By collectively focusing on the instructional core, taking notes of observations through low inference descriptions, analyzing these observations, making informed speculations, crafting theories of action, and collectively determining next steps, City et al. (2009) conceptualized the

instructional rounds model as a viable strategy for addressing and resolving pervasive problems of practice at the system level.

Since the publication of *Instructional Rounds in Education* (2009), instructional rounds have proliferated in American and Australian schools as a strategy for improving educational outcomes for students by building administrators' and teachers' capacity for identifying and articulating effective practices (Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011; Roegman & Riehl, 2012; Wlodarczyk Hickey, 2011).  As instructional rounds gains interest as a school improvement strategy, it has evolved in practice in emergent ways.  For example, instructional rounds may be structured as:

- a network of administrators across districts,

- a network of educators across schools,

- a cohort of preservice teachers engaging in practice with experienced mentors through a university partnership, or

- a PLC seeking to drive improvement in a single school.

Connotations of what is meant by instructional rounds continue to emerge (Roberts, 2012; Roegman and Riehl, 2012).  This multiplicity of meaning suggests the need for research to operationalize different approaches to instructional rounds as school improvement strategies. Conceptual clarity and distinction between these approaches to instructional rounds is warranted because each approach assumes different accommodations and considerations.  As Chapter 4 will demonstrate, each approach is a situated, social practice for a specific group of participant stakeholders.

As principals take part in district-led instructional rounds across schools, they often wonder how rounds would work with their own teachers (Roberts, 2012).  Engaging teachers in

school-based forms of instructional rounds means the driver of school improvement shifts from the system level to the local level (City, 2011; Marzano et al., 2011; Roberts, 2012). Through their ongoing participation, teachers and school leaders are finding school-based rounds to be a powerful approach to improvement by strengthening instructional practice and professional community at the local level.

The intervisitation and school-based approaches to instructional rounds hold potential for school improvement. But as a teacher, my research interest is bound with my professional practice at the school level; this inquiry journey is therefore guided by the learning needs of our PLC and ongoing efforts to enrich students' educational experience. Through our four years of implementation and reflection, my colleagues and I have found school-based rounds – or, as they are referred to in this study, PLC rounds – to imply special consideration regarding teacher culture. Reconfiguring traditions of teacher isolation and classroom autonomy with norms of trust, collegiality, and collaboration has powerful implications for a school's teacher culture – a distinction that is less necessary in the other instructional rounds approaches. However, this distinction is absent in the theory and research on instructional rounds.

**Overview of the Theory-Research Gap**

Despite the proliferation of instructional rounds (City, 2011; Fink & Markholt, 2011; Marzano et al., 2011; Roberts, 2012; Roegman & Riehl, 2012; Wlodarczyk Hickey, 2011), a theory-research gap in the literature has persisted (Roegman & Riehl, 2012; Wlodarczyk Hickey, 2011). During this study, available research on PLC rounds was even more sparse. References to PLC rounds tend to reveal little more than promising practice perspectives. In-depth analysis and theory development of the dynamic nature of school-based rounds and the implications for a PLC are notably absent. Chapter 2 demonstrates that while a handful of school-based rounds

models are outlined in the literature (City, 2011; Colorado Legacy Foundation, 2011; Hamilton, 2013; Marzano et al., 2011; Roberts, 2012), a dearth of theory and research regarding the lived experiences of teachers engaging in PLC rounds has prevailed.

**Bridging Practice and Theory through Research**

One way to lessen a theory gap in applied disciplines is to use disciplined inquiry to build theory inductively from practice (Lynham, 2002). To do so necessitates clarification of practice and its relationship with improvement (praxis). In the context of this study, practice, research, and theory are situated within the field of education and are enacted with improvement in mind.

Gadotti (1996) held that educators invested in school improvement are in perpetual dialogue with the present and future, where improved "practice is the horizon" (p. 7). In this sense, practitioners who seek improvement are engaged in an ongoing effort to clarify and realize an envisioned promise. I find this to be a helpful perspective for understanding the relationship between practice and theory. While practice in this sense implies the enactment of knowledge, praxis suggests action informed by an ideal.

According to Smith (2011), praxis possesses an action orientation toward human flourishing – an ideal of practice committed to perceived truth and collective well-being. As practitioners envision their respective horizons, they change the means by which they hope to realize their intended ends. In changing how they go about reaching this horizon, the horizon itself changes. This suggests praxis to be an ongoing interplay between thoughts, actions, ends, and means (Smith, 2011). Figure 1 depicts this dynamic interaction.

Theory informs praxis in important ways. Gioia and Pitre (1990) defined theory as "any coherent description or explanation of observed or experienced phenomena" (p. 587). A good theory has a practical nature in how it describes "the meaning, nature, and challenges of a

7

**Situated Knowing**

Thoughts

Ends ———————— Means
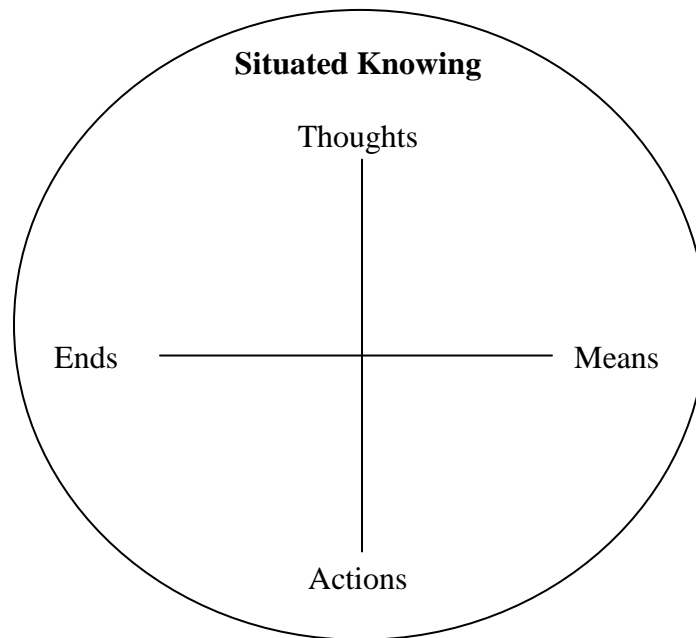
Actions

*Figure 1.* Interacting components of praxis. Practitioners draw upon existing knowledge as they engage with situations in a given context. The interplay of thoughts, actions, ends, and means is an ongoing, creative effort intended to realize improvement. Informed by Smith, 2011.

phenomenon, often experienced but unexplained in the world in which we live, so that we may use that knowledge and understanding to act in more informed and effective ways" (p. 222). In the constructivist paradigm, theory is predominantly drawn from situated experiences, socially mediated through co-constructed interpretations of phenonema (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011). In this sense, theory is closely linked with practice in the way it explicitly informs the endeavor of improved practice through research (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011). It is this interpretation of theory – a disciplined, descriptive, co-constructed explanation of experienced phenomena that guides improved practice (praxis) in a given context in service of human flourishing – that informs this study.

**Profile of the Research Site**

Polaris Expeditionary Learning School is a 6$^{th}$-12$^{th}$ grade public school consisting of approximately 275 students. The school is part of Poudre School District in northern Colorado. Because of its partnership with Expeditionary Learning (EL), Polaris is considered one of Poudre School District's specialized programs; other specialized programs in Poudre School District include the International Baccalaureate (IB) program and Core Knowledge. EL is a national school improvement network serving over 150 United States schools (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2011). A description of the history and pedagogy of EL can be found in Appendix A.

Polaris' approach to EL is evident in its mission to "develop 21$^{st}$ century learners through rigorous academic coursework, high quality adventure experiences, character development, and leadership opportunities" (Polaris Expeditionary Learning School, n.d.). This mission is pursued through a variety of complementary strategies such as active pedagogy, thematic curricula, standards-based grading, portfolios and exhibitions of learning, and field-based experiences that take place in the local community, in the wilderness, and in foreign countries. Polaris Expeditionary Learning School's administrators and instructional staff collaborate to bring EL's core practices and design principles to life in the school.

In 2010, Polaris merged with an elementary EL school, the Lab School for Creative Learning. Together, these schools provide a K-12 EL option for Poudre School District students. The two schools work with an EL school designer, and professional development is tailored to accommodate the different needs of the elementary and secondary programs. Acknowledging these different needs as both schools work toward programmatic coherence, this study's

population is defined as Polaris Expeditionary Learning School teachers of grades 6 – 12 and the schools' administrators.

Polaris and Lab's administration is comprised of a principal who has been in this position since 2007 and an assistant principal who took this position when it was created at the beginning of the 2012 – 2013 school year. The Polaris instructional staff is composed of 16 full-time teachers, two counselors, and one integrated services provider for students with individualized education plans.

From 2009 – 2013, Polaris has demonstrated notable gains across content areas and grade levels on traditional measures of achievement such as the ACT, the Measure of Academic Progress (MAP), graduation rates, the Colorado Student Assessment Program, and the Transitional Colorado Student Assessment Program – all while continuing to create innovative student-centered learning experiences, instructional strategies, assessment practices, and professional learning structures that resonate with the EL model and the existing school culture. One of these structures is PLC rounds.

**Findings from Previous Inquiry on PLC Rounds at Polaris**

At Polaris Expeditionary Learning School, our approach to school-based rounds has been informed by ongoing collaboration between Polaris teachers and administrators. These educators have spent a great deal of time assisting in the planning, implementing, and refining of instructional rounds since we piloted our approach in fall of 2009. Our method for engaging in PLC rounds will be further clarified in Chapter 4.

At Polaris, I have initiated two previous research efforts that inform our praxis: a narrative and a World Café protocol. In-depth research informed the development of a narrative of PLC rounds at Polaris. Secondary data such as relevant documents and surveys of teachers

were compared with in-depth interviews with two Polaris teachers and the principal.  The findings were organized in narrative form and interspersed with member-checked quotes from participants.  The next section summarizes the findings from the narrative.

During the first three years of implementation, we gained a new understanding of the process of rounds.  These observations found that:

- There was little research available to guide the process.  Feeling like there was no map to follow, teachers and the principal collaborated to innovate upon the model and shape it to fit the context and culture of Polaris.

- Rounds at Polaris are unlike an intervisitation network, distinguished by ongoing relationships and the role-alike status of teachers as hosts and observers.

- There is a serendipitous quality to observations. The nature of observations are unpredictable and therefore invite participants to actively make meaning.

- Rounds among teachers is a largely affirmative process.

- Teachers' ownership of rounds is critical to sustaining the process.

- Collective adherence to norms helps sustain trust among colleagues.

- As experience with the process increased, teachers become more interested in deviating from the Describe-Analyze-Predict model during the debrief, preferring to spend more time discussing evidence of effective practice.

- There is no end point to rounds.  It is an ongoing learning journey for Polaris educators.

The research also found that participation in rounds at Polaris resulted in specific benefits.  These benefits included increased and/or enhanced:

- comfort with being observed,

- relational trust,

- awareness and reflection on practice,

- instructional repertoires,

- modeling of being a learner for students,

- sense of collective purpose and vision, and

- transparency and open dialogue about instructional practice and professional learning.

However, interviews with teachers also revealed several challenges with participating in rounds. These challenges involved logistical as well as structural hurdles:

- Due to time constraints and teaching workload, rounds can feel like a burden.

- As job-embedded learning, rounds requires either acquiring a substitute teacher to cover classes or giving up one's planning period.

- Open observations were felt to be too broad with too much to focus on. A unifying framework for narrowing the focus and guiding interpretation was needed.

- Following a scripted debrief protocol often resulted in running out of time.

- Running out of time and losing opportunity to discuss implications for practice made some teachers feel like rounds experiences could end up being a waste of time.

The findings related to understanding the process, benefits, and challenges were instrumental in informing praxis at Polaris. Polaris teachers and the principal held positive perceptions of participating in school-based rounds. Rounds had contributed to teacher learning as well as strengthened the PLC. However, the challenges inherent in the rounds process would need to be addressed if this enthusiasm was to be sustained. The narrative concluded with the following perplexing question: How do we create a meaningful system for professional learning that continues to reduce isolation and share effective practices across classrooms – one that is embraced by every teacher?

One of the first steps was to adopt an instructional framework through which observations could be interpreted.  Following up on a suggestion from Poudre School District's director of curriculum and instruction, Polaris teachers and the principal adopted the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning, developed by the Center for Educational Leadership (CEL), to frame their observations.  This research-based framework was unanimously favored by Polaris teachers because the emphasis on active pedagogy and positive school culture resonated with EL model; in addition, its inquiry-based, open-ended format was favored over another comprehensive approach that uses a checklist approach for identifying and describing instructional practice.  For reference, the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning framework (CEL, 2012) can be found in Appendix B.

The findings also indicated a need to enhance some aspects of teachers' experience within rounds.  The constraining or contrived feel of the debrief protocol did little to appease teachers' increased interest in engaging in dialogue about their practice.  Reflecting on this challenge, a committee of teachers developed the showcase protocol in the third year of implementation to meet this need.  In a showcase, teachers volunteer to informally present an instructional practice they perceive to be effective to their colleagues and administrators.  Rather than convening for the typical after school staff meeting, teachers rotate through presenting teachers' classrooms, spending about 15 minutes in each room talking about the showcased practice.  The 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning are referenced during these discussions, but teachers are free to inquire about other strategies employed by the host teacher.  For example, as a teacher hosts a showcase on differentiation strategies, her colleagues notice how she helps students track their learning progress on a large poster.  They ask her questions, and an impromptu dialogue about creating systems that foster student ownership of learning ensues.  In

addition to learning about the differentiation strategy, participating teachers walk away with a new technique for engaging students in academic self-monitoring strategies. Initial feedback from these first few showcase experiences was very positive; teachers also began to discuss ways showcase could be connected to their rounds. While showcase is beyond the focus on this study on PLC rounds, it will be revisited briefly in Chapter 5.

A central finding of the narrative was the need for teachers' voice in shaping the process of rounds to sustain meaningful engagement. It is, after all, intended to belong to them. We needed a way to collaborate as a staff to collectively reflect on the rounds experience. With the Polaris principal's permission, I scheduled a 2.5 hour time block during a teacher collaboration day to facilitate a professional learning session with the instructional staff. Having witnessed the power of professional dialogue during previous rounds debriefs as well as other professional learning work sessions, I designed the collaboration day to maximize teacher interaction and co-construction of knowledge.

The World Café protocol (Fouché & Light, 2011; Prewitt, 2011) was used to engage stakeholders in imaginative, relational processes that generated local knowledge about PLC rounds; because this approach can complement subsequent qualitative research (Fouché & Light, 2011), it was used as a wellspring for the present study. The protocol involves participants engaging in rotations of dialogue at different tables in a way that fosters practical insights that can promote cohesion and innovation. Stakeholders come to a World Café possessing shared experience with a topic of interest; through semi-structured dialogue, they engage in a collective exploration of possibility and innovation while making tacit knowledge explicit (Prewitt, 2011).

We began our World Café by taking 15 minutes to read the narrative and annotate the text for strengths, obstacles, and questions related to PLC rounds. This reading helped create a

common ground for participants with varying levels of experience with rounds.  After review

and discussion, my colleagues volunteered their appreciation and support for the narrative's

format, history of PLC rounds, and findings.  No recommendations for revision were suggested.

We then moved into the first dialogue rotation of the World Café.  As Figure 2 shows,

butcher paper adorned the tables, and participants were invited to record ideas, doodle, or

graphically illustrate and connect ideas as they explored a variety of conversational prompts

related to their annotations from the narrative.



*Figure 2.*  The World Café on PLC rounds at Polaris.  After reading the narrative (pictured), Polaris teachers shared their own experiences in rounds, discussed the benefits and obstacles to their participation, and captured their thinking on paper.

Because a World Café can feel contrived to participants when tightly scripted,

participants were encouraged to take the dialogue where they felt it needed to go (Prewitt, 2011);

inclusion of all participants' voices was encouraged as well (Fouché & Light, 2011). The prompts were directed toward participants' perspectives of PLC rounds: its description, positive outcomes and experiences, questions, and obstacles to making the experience professionally meaningful. During the discussions, I maintained the role of facilitator: clarifying instructions and guidelines, listening to conversations, observing inclusion of participant voice, and managing time while consciously limiting my own contributions to the dialogues taking place.

Another principle of a World Café involves the cross-pollination of groups before the next prompt is presented. This takes place by having some table members stay behind during rotations; these participants welcome new members and help connect previous dialogue with new prompts for exploration (Fouché & Light, 2011). Doing so creates dense relationships around topics of discussion, integrates emerging patterns of meaning into reconfigured groups, and sparks new dialogue.

As the World Café unfolds, discussion prompts progress from description to analysis. Much like the rounds process, this guides participants toward the construction of intersubjective meaning while remaining inclusive of individual contributions (Fouché & Light, 2011). As a dialogue-based protocol, this process intends to support co-construction of knowledge rather than the development of action plans. As meaning is co-constructed, relationships can be strengthened, collective discoveries can be made, and mutual learning can distributed among members of the stakeholder group (Fouché & Light, 2011).

At the end of the World Café, several teachers and the principal volunteered to help me analyze the data that was captured on the butcher paper. We worked in pairs with sets of data from each rotation, engaging in dialogue about our interpretations, creating categories based on

these interpretations, and organizing the data into these categories.  As themes were identified,

the dialogue shifted to our findings, which included the following observations:

- Choice honors teachers' time and professional interests.

- Teacher-driven dialogue fosters emergent thinking and ownership.

- The rounds model is focused on strengths rather than deficiencies.

- The rounds model at Polaris is becoming dynamic, flexible, and responsive to
  changing needs.

Findings from the World Café related to the benefits of participation in rounds were

consonant with those from the narrative.  However, new benefits included increased and/or

enhanced:

- critical thinking about student and teacher learning,

- sense of professionalism,

- awareness of the collective progress being made toward school improvement, and

- awareness of rounds as a way to inculcate teachers who are new to the school or
  to EL into norms of instructional and collaborative practice.

Participating stakeholders also identified obstacles to rounds that persisted.  Time and

workload continued to be a burden and was viewed as a natural obstacle to job-embedded

learning.  A polarizing issue emerging from dialogue during the World Café involved the role of

feedback in rounds.  Several teachers desired a way for observers to follow up with rounds hosts

and share their feedback.  While these participants saw feedback as a natural loop in the rounds

process, other teachers expressed concern that this practice opened the door to evaluative

statements.  A multiplicity of preferences on this and other issues suggested that Polaris teachers

have diverse professional learning needs and styles.  As a World Café is not intended to

culminate in actionable steps (Fouché & Light, 2011), the issue of feedback in rounds remained unresolved.

Analysis of data from the World Café suggested the importance of the value participants place on their experiences in rounds. While a positive view of PLC rounds persists among Polaris teachers and administrators, issues of contrived dialogue and wasted time highlighted the need for rounds experiences to outweigh the burden implicit in the process. As we analyzed the data, we discussed the challenge of meeting the diverse learning needs of every teacher during rounds. It seemed we were not quite ready to answer the question of how to design meaningful professional learning that is embraced by every teacher. Some of our colleagues posited that "You can't please everyone". Others felt like the conflicting perspectives were not unlike the demand for differentiation in the classroom. Because teachers' experiences in rounds influence interpretations of its effectiveness, a central finding of the World Café was the need for designing rounds to be responsive to individual professional learning, suggesting the need for a more flexible rounds framework. This flexibility involved the observation experience as well as the debrief – structuring these sessions in a way that guides dialogue while remaining open-ended to foster authentic meaning-making for each participant. Coupling this demand with the different needs and learning styles of teachers make the provision of meaningful rounds experiences a formidable challenge.

**Nature of the Research**

The present study seeks to better understand teachers' meaningful experiences in PLC rounds in service of a theoretical framework that informs ongoing praxis. At Polaris, we have collaboratively designed, analyzed, and refined PLC rounds to improve instructional practice, educator collegiality, and student learning; PLC rounds is assumed to be a jointly constructed

process that works in this context.  Present research therefore warrants a methodology that respects, enhances, and advances co-constructed understanding of local phenomena.

In constructivist grounded theory, researchers follow experience- and expertise-based intuitions to investigate phenomena and co-construct understanding with participants.  This methodology is an appropriate choice for inquiry into dynamic interactions or insufficiently studied social phenomena (Charmaz, 2008b; Hallberg, 2006; Shah & Corley, 2006).  Grounded theorists in the constructivist tradition acknowledge their presence and influence on data and interpretation, negotiate a shared understanding of lived experience with participants, and craft an explanation of these co-constructions in the form of theory.

As practitioners with several years experience with PLC rounds, Polaris teachers and administrators are information-rich.  We are deeply embedded in the working relationships of our PLC, our lived experiences as educators, collaborators, and learners, and our participation in PLC rounds.  This study relies on in-depth interviews to access participants' interpretations of meaningful rounds experiences through thick description.  Analysis of these insights will inductively seed a theoretical framework oriented toward praxis.

**Purpose and Rationale of the Study**

PLC rounds at Polaris were originally implemented by following *Instructional Rounds* (City et al., 2009) closely.  As we have participated in and analyzed our experiences in rounds, we have grafted the essential principles of instructional rounds with the contextual nuances and needs of our own school culture and stakeholders.  PLC rounds have been periodically adjusted to accommodate these needs over time.  As we have experienced and refined PLC rounds, our understanding of the method and the idiosyncrasies of professional learning have changed.  This evolution brings up interesting questions related to what participants feel to be beneficial to their

19

learning and school improvement, what feels contrived or constraining, and how the practice of rounds can be reconfigured to respond to new insights and change at the local level. In considering these questions and reflecting on this evolution, it is helpful to think of PLC rounds as having emergent qualities – dynamic, nonlinear, and open-ended characteristics that shape the process and subsequent experiences over time. Allowing for PLC rounds to be conceptualized as emergent acknowledges both a temporal quality as well as an adaptive response to progress and uncertainty (Charmaz, 2008b). And by accepting PLC rounds as emergent, we therefore accept our understanding of professional learning within rounds, as well as our journey to the horizon of practice, as perpetually incomplete.

The purpose of this study is to support teachers' authentic professional learning by exploring participating educators' experiences and perceptions of PLC rounds at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School. The use of constructivist grounded theory intends to build a theoretical framework drawn from teachers' interpretations of authentic and contrived experiences within PLC rounds at Polaris.

If PLC rounds are intended to be a social practice for teachers, their interpretations of these experiences can provide important insights for supporting their continued professional learning in authentic, professionally meaningful ways. Strategies for improving and thereby sustaining the social practice of PLC rounds are problematized by our fledgling understanding and the theory-research gap in the literature. Therefore, the rationale for this study is three-fold: gaining perspective of Polaris educators' authentic learning experiences within PLC rounds, informing praxis, and complementing the literature base.

**Research Questions**

The dynamic nature of PLC rounds invites inquiry into participants' lived experiences. Their interpretations of PLC rounds shed light on the phenomenon of rounds participation as learners, colleagues, and practitioners. These interpretations also inform ways to support and sustain their ongoing professional learning. Because the life of a teacher is a demanding one, because rounds are a complex, job-embedded social practice that take time and dedication to develop, and because teachers have diverse professional learning needs, gaining insights into teachers' interpretations of meaningful rounds experiences are of great import in sustaining PLC rounds at Polaris. This study is therefore guided by the following central questions:

1. Based on participants' individual and shared experiences, what do they perceive to be the most valuable components of PLC rounds?

2. Based on their individual and shared experiences, how do teachers perceive their participation as a) contributing to their professional learning, and b) sustaining school improvement as a professional learning community?

3. What do teachers' experiences in PLC rounds tell us about authentic professional learning, if anything?

While these central questions frame the study, constructivist grounded theory asks researchers to be open to new insights, questions, and directions (Charmaz, 2003). Questions will surely be added or refined as the research progresses.

**Significance of Study for Particular Audiences**

The primary audience of this study includes the participating teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders of Polaris Expeditionary Learning School. The research aims to co-

construct an understanding of how PLC rounds may promote teachers' authentic professional learning in service of continuous school improvement.

Other educators may find this study fosters insights regarding PLC rounds that are absent from the existing literature. While this study is highly contextualized, interested educators may find relevant information regarding the implementation of PLC rounds within their respective schools or districts. This study relies on thick description to provide a more comprehensive perspective of PLC rounds than what exists in the literature. The research may therefore provide guidance to other educators who seek to develop or refine their own school-based versions of instructional rounds in service of authentic professional learning and the cultivation of PLCs.

This study holds significance for researchers interested in authentic professional learning within schools. Situated analysis of teachers' professional learning is necessary to tap into the lived experiences of participants (Riveros, Newton, & Burgess, 2011; Webster-Wright, 2010). Riveros et al. (2011) emphasized the need for understanding improvement in context as a path to broader discourse regarding school improvement. Webster-Wright (2010) asserted how the lived experiences of educators can bring a wealth of insight into the ongoing work of clarifying effective professional learning. While the conditions supporting PLCs enjoy broad consensus, the particulars of reconfiguring norms in schools to sustain authentic collaboration are elusive (Talbert, 2010). This study aims to lessen the theory-research gap regarding a PLC approach to instructional rounds.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented an overview of instructional rounds, its evolution at Polaris into PLC rounds, and the existing theory-research gap. I have reviewed preliminary findings from previous cycles of inquiry conducted at Polaris. Based on this research, I have indicated

the emergent properties of PLC rounds and how this assumption informs sustained professional

learning for teachers.  And I have drawn the conclusion that this study can contribute to theory

development regarding authentic professional learning within PLC rounds, a process that can

build understanding, inform praxis, and lessen the research gap.  The following chapters build on

this introduction in pursuit of co-constructed knowledge regarding teachers' professional

learning and how it is best served within PLC rounds.

**Chapter 2: Review of the Literature**

*It's a huge paradigm shift in education – going from closing the door, thinking 'Leave me alone', to 'I need to be open in my practice, open to changing and improving'.*

- A teacher at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School

The history of school reform in the US is riddled with top-down approaches. The tides of the Progressive, Effective Schools, Excellence, Restructuring, and Standards-based Movements in American education have had an enduring influence on legislation and policy while imparting little impact on the instructional core at the classroom level (Cuban, 1998; 2008; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Elmore, 2004; Hunt, 2008). Strategies for education reform have tended to rely on extrinsic motivators such as incentives and mandates while realizing little progress (Cuban, 2008; Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2011). But what does the literature say about school improvement from the bottom-up? And how does this literature inform an understanding of PLC rounds?

**School Improvement and the Primacy of the Local Level**

Top-down school reform is rooted in antiquated scientific management theory rather than contemporary beliefs about motivation (Ravitch, 2010). Dignity, purpose, and the implicit trust to make practical and moral decisions based on craft wisdom and experience tend to yield more commitment, creativity, and beneficial outcomes than extrinsic motivators and administrative fiat (Fullan, 2011; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Levin, 2010). But it is not surprising to see this type of policy action; it is logistically easier (and politically more beneficial) to put blueprints for accountability-based change on paper than to engage in the complex work of real improvement (Fullan, 2011; Levin, 2010; Ravitch, 2010). Fullan (2011) argued quite forcefully that "leading with accountability is not the best way to get accountability" (p. 8). Fullan (2011) and Ravitch

(2010) are in agreement that accountability, teacher effectiveness, and rigorous standards are important parts of the improvement equation; the problem is their overwhelming preeminence in current school improvement strategy. Trying to improve American education with external accountability and inducements is to miss the most crucial drivers of improvement: shared commitment and intrinsically motivated engagement at the local level.

Change is achieved best within the school building, not at the policy level (Elmore, 2004; Fullan & Miles, 1992). As Elmore (2004) put it, "Innovations that require large changes in the core of educational practice seldom penetrate more than a small fraction of U.S. schools and classrooms, and seldom last for very long when they do" (p. 8). He held that school reform in the United States rarely influenced the instructional core in any meaningful way and contended that "teachers are more likely to learn from direct observation of practice and trial and error in their own classrooms than they are from abstract descriptions of new teaching" (p. 38). Hargreaves (1994) found that "flexible concepts of teaching excellence…are grounded in and arise from collective wisdom in the community" (p. 61). Professional relationships, flourishing along natural patterns of authentic engagement rather than extrinsically mandated collaboration, nurture exchanges of powerful practices (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992). Key drivers for school improvement therefore involve a tight focus on the interaction of instruction, learning, and assessment supported by the intentional building of teachers' professional capacity (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2011). With authentic collaboration, lateral rather than external accountability drives improvement from the local level up. Thus the primacy of the local level suggests the power of approaching school improvement through teacher collaboration.

**From Teacher Isolation to Collaboration**

Teacher isolation has been a pervasive barrier to school improvement (Little, 1990; Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1989). Isolation has shielded teachers from potential criticism by peers, administrators, and the public-at-large while preserving their autonomy. Lortie (1975) found a deeply entrenched norm of teachers learning their craft through solitary trial and error rather than tapping into a shared body of knowledge. He advocated for the reduction of isolation and professional stagnation by creating opportunities for teachers to interact and collaborate with greater frequency. Noting a lack of collective practical knowledge among educators, Lortie even went as far to suggest how "teachers might learn something from physicians" (1975, p. 232).

When teachers do attempt to reduce isolation, Little (1990) discerned a progressively engaging continuum of interaction. Some teachers drew upon colleagues' insights through perfunctory exchanges in school hallways or the teachers' lounge. In arranged sharing opportunities, teachers sometimes exhibited hoarding strategies out of fear of losing status as an expert among peers and/or in the eyes of administrators. When coerced into practical exchange, teacher cultures could devolve into competitiveness and suspicion. Yet Little also observed teacher cultures exhibiting what she described as "felt interdependencies" (1990, p. 520). Through joint work, these teacher cultures exhibited strong collaboration and collegial ties. In these schools, teachers were motivated to work together for the common good, their practice became more public, and micropolitics were allowed to be aired in a way that helped shift conflict and dissonance into new learning. She noted how teachers' professional learning as a shared phenomenon is strongest when it is nested within "a prevailing norm of analysis, evaluation, and experimentation" (1982, p. 339). She found ongoing professional development was most potent when peer educators "engage in frequent, continuous, and increasingly concrete

and precise talk about teaching practice" and "build up a shared language adequate to the complexity of teaching" (1982, p. 331).

Rosenholtz's (1989) focus on learning-enriched schools found meaningful collaboration in pursuit of clear, collective goals increased teachers' confidence and ability to negotiate the complexities of teaching and learning. She observed that when ongoing opportunities for learning were supported by school leaders and members of the professional culture, teachers reported greater efficacy in practice and achieving professional growth. Through meaningful collaboration, teachers became more adept at sharing practical knowledge that contributed to an expanding instructional repertoire. When this collaboration was coupled with shared decision-making, teachers were empowered to take ownership of the collective goals, learning, and progress resulting from their efforts. She noted how, taken together, these experiences increased teachers' efforts to approach new challenges with optimism, experimentation, and a willingness to learn (1989).

Each of these landmark studies form a foundation for how analysis of teaching practice, norms of collegial discussion, and collaborative professional learning help make school improvement possible.

**Teachers' Professional Learning**

The legacy of Lortie (1975), Little (1982; 1990), and Rosenholtz (1989) continues to inform scholarship and practice regarding teachers' professional learning. Emerging from this work, PLCs have become a familiar construct through which teachers' professional learning is understood, articulated, and supported.

School improvement literature since the 1990s suggests remarkable consensus on the indispensable role of PLCs in promoting shared goals, trust, increased teacher effectiveness, and

other positive attributes found to enhance student learning (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Elmore, 2004; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Hord, 1997; Hord & Hirsh, 2008; Little, 1993; Louis, 2006; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996; McLaughlin & Mitra, 2003; Newmann & Wehlage, 1995; Rosenholtz, 1989; Stoll, Bolam, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006). Although definitions abound, these authors have found common ground. PLCs are comprised of educators who:

- work continuously in a group or groups that may shift over time,

- view educator learning as key to improving student learning and teaching performance,

- relentlessly focus on students' intellectual learning, growth, and attainment through the practical dimensions of teaching,

- rely on the primacy of the common good, guided by shared vision, positive regard, and mutual accountability,

- use reflection and analysis of observations, data and results, or intuitions to resolve problems of practice,

- share leadership and decision-making to foster capacity building, and

- engage in joint work which is supported through the modification or creation of organizational structures, physical space, and/or additional resources.

However, PLCs are certainly not a silver bullet for school improvement. School improvement is closely tied to the strength of a given learning community (Vescio, Ross, & Evans, 2008) because teacher learning is made more complex by the cultures, organizations, and political climates it is nested within (Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Timperley, 2008). Nehring and Fitzsimons (2011) argued that strong PLCs are elusive because PLCs are antithetical to schools' traditional narrative of isolated teacher cultures, stop-gap solutions, and lack of shared vision or

responsibility for student learning; citing a lack of literature regarding the process of creating

PLCs, they pointed to the essential task of carefully reconfiguring a school culture over the long-

term to counter the deep-seated culture of professional privacy. Such reconfiguring involves

persistent, urgent organizational learning that remains consonant with the tenets of PLCs. For

Nehring and Fitzsimons, explicit, schoolwide strategies for engaging in reflective learning aid

schools with tools for inquiry, shared visioning, and collective responsibility for improved

teaching and student learning (2011).

Hargreaves and Fullan (1992) were cautious to make simplistic notions of collegiality

within the complex reality of a school culture. They noted how teachers' work has become

increasingly complicated and demands for time have intensified. This reality puts pressure on a

school's capacity for improvement. Add to this existing normative culture of teachers in a given

building, and the prospects for fostering meaningful collaboration are jeopardized. They pointed

to contrived collegiality as a common form of collective work in schools. Contrived collegiality

is administratively mandated and designed – taking place during teachers' scheduled preparation

time or in imposed work sessions. However, contrived collegiality of this sort can be a starting

point for more authentic collaboration (1992). A decade later (2012), these authors suggested

that school leaders may need to organize opportunities for collaboration to take place. The savvy

school leader creates space for trust-building, inquiry, meaningful work on practice, and

dialogue.

Such collaboration fosters teacher reflection, self-directed learning, and responsiveness to

changing needs and conditions (Hargreaves, 2000). For Clement and Vandenberghe (2000), this

illustrates the complementary nature of autonomy within a PLC. Interaction, inspiration, and

independence are bound together in a given professional culture, and in turn can inform school

improvement. A teacher needs time to experiment, innovate, and reflect upon instructional practices within the space of his or her own classroom. This professional agency is an act of constructing understanding through embedded practice (Riveros et al., 2011). Through ongoing collaboration toward shared goals, autonomy to enact and refine interpretations of felt interdependencies, and empowerment to make decisions related to individual and collective learning needs, teachers engage in professional learning in socially situated ways that promote professional agency and enhanced instructional repertoires.

The dynamic relationship between individual teacher learning and the PLC contrasts with the rhetoric of top-down accountability and reform that has dominated educational policy and practice for decades. However, bureaucratic authority is an occupational, if not societal, reality for teachers and administrators. Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) described bureaucratic authority as having a hierarchical orientation with a strong tendency for top-down flows of influence. This is an external accountability model that implicitly suggests administrators as having superior expertise regarding all aspects of education. It aligns well with a deficit perspective of professional development where teachers' performance can be improved by directing training toward narrowly described standards or benchmarks (1998).

There is a fortuitous alignment between bureaucratic authority and the technical rationality model (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998). Technical rationality advances a post-positivist perspective of teaching practice by highlighting practices deemed effective by researchers; this view posits that knowledge about good teaching is primarily informed by research adhering to rigorous procedures rather than practical wisdom (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998). The more administrators are removed from teaching roles within the instructional core, the less precise their instructional expertise (City et al., 2009; Fink & Markholt, 2011); it is therefore easy to

understand the allure of research-based practices as a complement to bureaucratic authority. In these cases, the gold standard of science is used to reinforce administrators' control of educational practice.

Talbert (2010) saw the bureaucratic and technical rationality forms of authority as synonymous. She noted the danger of these approaches in efforts to cultivate a PLC. Over-reliance on hierarchical instructional roles such as lead teachers or coaches demonstrates ignorance of informal networks of collaboration and peer learning. Achievement scores, monitoring of participation in mandated collaboration, checklists of implemented practices, and benchmarks driven by narrow targets tend to thwart meaningful and sustained school improvement. Under the umbrella of expectation, prescription, and sanction, teachers may exhibit compliant or resistant behaviors (2010).

A source of authority that is antithetical to bureaucratic and technical rationality forms of authority is that of the professional (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998). Professional authority is rooted in teachers' practical experiences and craft wisdom. This authority is therefore situated in practice, embedded in the professional concerns of teachers who make judgments regarding the emerging needs of his or her learners. The cultivation of an instructional repertoire supports the assumption that no one best way exists to remedy problems of practice or foster ongoing improvement. In a professional authority perspective, professional wisdom places technical rationality forms of knowledge in a subordinate role that may enlighten practice rather than prescribe it. Professional socialization with colleagues enhances practice as well as the authority to make local decisions. In this sense, professional authority advances authentic professional experiences on an individual and collective level, leveraging a professional culture's tendency toward moral authority (1998).

31

Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) drew from Little's (1990) concept of felt interdependencies in a collaborative culture in their concept of moral authority. Moral authority is cultivated from professional authority as norms of professional practice, and shared commitments foster teacher-directed improvement. Lateral accountability links professionals to one another through dense relationships, norms of collegiality, and felt interdependencies that are locally derived and sustained (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998). Moral authority therefore describes the shared purpose of the improvement ideal and a sense of collective praxis found in strong PLCs. For clarity, references to professional authority within a PLC in this study assumes the presence of moral authority.

Sergiovanni and Starratt (1998) view each source of authority as part of the practical and political reality of schools. While professional and moral authority have the power to reconfigure norms of collegiality and foster sustained improvement, they tend to rely on bureaucratic authority to establish and support structures that enable learning in a professional community (1998; Talbert, 2010). As schools experience change through internal improvement efforts and external pressures, tension arises between the needs of bureaucratic and professional forms of authority (Talbert, 2010). School leaders can support professional authority while responding to external demands by negotiating this tension through policies and structures that are consonant with professional learning and shared decision-making.

**Literature Related to School-based Rounds**

Wlodarczyk Hickey (2011) identified a gap in the available research on instructional rounds; however, her review was in service of the intervisitation model advocated by City et al. (2009) rather than school-based rounds. She conducted a quantitative study on instructional rounds as an innovation through administrators' and teacher leaders' perspectives. While finding

instructional rounds to be favorable as a systematic strategy for improving instruction, the participants in her study also identified the model as complex, cumbersome, and time-consuming. She suggested the need for school-based research on instructional rounds to identify obstacles to implementation; she also recommended qualitative studies of educators' lived experiences as they participate in rounds (2011).

Hamilton (2013) studied a peer-to-peer observation model that resonates with the PLC approach to instructional rounds. Citing a lack of research on teachers' lived experiences in embedded forms of professional development, Hamilton interviewed teachers at a high school in the Midwest (2013). In contrast with PLC rounds as practiced at Polaris, observing teachers rarely took notes during visits to peer classrooms, and participants did not participate in debrief sessions or other organized forms of professional dialogue (2013).

Hamilton (2013) found that participating teachers valued the power to choose peer classrooms for observation. This autonomy to direct one's own professional learning was a positive influence on teachers' perceptions of the model. Peer observation also increased teachers' awareness of their peers' instructional expertise, increasing a sense of collective esteem and capacity regarding practice. Participants also valued observations as springboards for new instructional practice. They reported getting new ideas from their colleagues by observing instruction in a natural setting, seeing how their peers guided lessons and student engagement in real time. By reflecting on observations, participating teachers sometimes walked away from peer observations with actionable changes to their practices as well as more subtle changes such as increased positive regard for colleagues' instructional abilities. However, Hamilton (2013) also found this model to be incomplete, noting the lack of dialogue as a serious detriment to the collective improvement of the school's instructional repertoire. Without dialogue, teachers'

reflections can be uncritical of instructional strategies and their effectiveness; a lack of peer dialogue also fails to construct increasingly sophisticated conceptions of teaching and learning, hindering the growth and sustainability of a PLC (2013).

After the publication of *Instructional Rounds in Education* (and well into Polaris' piloting of PLC rounds), City (2011) presented a school-based version of rounds. Her version closely mirrored the instructional rounds model put forth by her and her colleagues in 2009. She identified shared practice, teacher reflection, professional learning, lateral accountability, and continuous improvement as goals of school-based rounds. She also provided a basic overview of the instructional rounds model. City went on to suggest cross-role teaming within the school, such as across content areas or grade levels; she encouraged using highly effective teachers as models for peers during rounds observations; she also recommended adherence to protocols to guide observations and dialogue and facilitate trust (2011). However, City also warned readers of the challenges of a school-based version of rounds, noting the complexity of the model, organizational constraints such as scheduling observations and classroom coverage, and the need for long-term commitment to reconfiguring existing norms into those that promote this form of collegial learning (2011).

Roberts (2012) also outlined a process of involving teachers in school-based rounds. Acknowledging how rounds infringe upon existing norms of privacy in schools, he highlighted the role of optional participation. School leaders can seek teachers who are interested in observing or hosting rounds. They can also design practice sessions using video study to help participating teachers learn the norms of rounds observations and debrief. He also recognized organizational barriers such as common plan time and scheduling a debrief session. Roberts (2012) acknowledged the need for flexibility in transferring instructional rounds into a school

culture, allowing for adaptive protocols and processes; however, he maintained the importance of adhering to non-evaluative, low inference descriptions and statements that strengthen a rounds team's ability to create a common language about instructional practice. Lastly, he noticed how ongoing engagement in rounds prompted participants to think more critically about supports for collegiality, norms of power, and the shape and frequency of professional learning. His insights suggest how instructional rounds, as a new way of interacting with and about educational practice, have a dynamic nature that can enhance organizational learning over time (2012).

In *Effective Supervision*, Marzano et al. (2011) presented a version of PLC rounds under the umbrella of their instructional improvement framework. Like City (2011) and Roberts (2012), they named similar improvement outcomes, suggestions for implementation, and considerations for bypassing organizational constraints. Yet their conception of instructional rounds is linked to a suite of best practices for improving instruction. Their protocol outlined an explicit instructional framework for structuring peer observations and guiding teacher learning. By presenting an extensive framework of explicit best practices, *Effective Supervision* has the feel of technical rationality, where scientific research by external experts supplants knowledge generation at the local level (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998).

The Colorado Legacy Foundation (2011) published a brief on one elementary school in the Cherry Creek School District (CO) using the *Effective Supervision* (Marzano et al., 2011) observation protocol to engage teachers in school-based rounds. Educators at Cherry Hills Village Elementary School used Marzano et al.'s (2011) instructional framework as a reference for peer observations and support for creating a common language around instruction. Teachers reported the value of picking up on instructional strategies used by their peers to improve their own practice. The Colorado Legacy Foundation's report (2011) mentioned the logistical hurdles

of scheduling observations during the school day, the initial anxiety of teachers being observed by peers, and the importance of creating a worthwhile experience for participants. These challenges, the use of an instructional framework to guide observations and dialogue, and the exchange of practices among teachers are synonymous with the experiences of Polaris teachers. However, the report does not provide thick description of teachers' experiences, in-depth analysis, or theory that informs praxis (2011).

The available literature related to school-based rounds suggests an emerging understanding of school-based rounds – one that relies on learning in a community through peer observation and dialogue. Yet this literature does not thoroughly explicate these concepts in a way that contributes to a deeper understanding of the processes taking place during PLC rounds and how they relate to teachers' professional learning.

**Literature Related to Teachers' Professional Learning in a PLC**

Due to their contextual and social nature, PLCs and the teacher learning they embody are strengthened by a situated learning perspective (Borko, 2004; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Riveros et al., 2011). This perspective views teachers' professional learning as primarily situated in their daily work within a given school (Desimone, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011; Putnam & Borko, 2000; Webster-Wright, 2009; 2010). Situated learning therefore provides an appropriate framework for a study of teachers' professional learning in a PLC because it clarifies knowledge as emerging from embedded engagement with professional practice and competent others in a given context.

Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of situated learning establishes practical knowledge as primarily informed by relational exchanges in local contexts. They found that learning may take place through interactions with others – participating together in the same context in the

fulfillment of shared conceptions of practice. They posited situated learning as engagement of the whole person that fosters a community of social practice where knowledge is open-ended, mastery is constituted in relationships rather than individuals, and information is distributed. Situated learning theory assumes participation to be a powerful means for drawing newer participants (for example, new teachers) into the technical and cultural fold of an organization. Dialogue in a community of practice involves being able to talk about practical know-how as well as stories related to practice. For newcomers, dialogue involves gaining practical insights, learning how to talk about practice in a language that is consonant with others' understanding, and adopting shared norms for engaging in collegial and/or collaborative endeavors (1991). In the situated learning perspective, teachers' professional learning is situated in the context of schools, is socially constructed, and is spread throughout the organization (Putnam & Borko, 2000).

While PLCs as a construct may demonstrate convergence across the literature, the individual teacher's path to learning is elusive. Teachers may describe professional learning experiences from informal interactions, structured professional development or coursework, experimentation or reflection on instructional practice, personal experiences, or interactions between any or all of these influences; this multiplicity of pathways suggest teacher learning to follow nonlinear, idiosyncratic trajectories (Borko, 2004; Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002; Clement & Vandenberghe, 2000; Desimone, 2011; Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhuis, 2007). While we are still learning its intricacies (Borko, 2004; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002; Opfer & Pedder, 2011), the literature on teachers' professional learning suggests it is grounded in active engagement with ongoing cycles of interaction with peers, meaningful

37

examples, and practice (Wei, Darling-Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009; Desimone, 2011; Opfer & Pedder, 2011).

Ann Webster-Wright developed the construct of authentic professional learning as a way to understand the professional's active role regarding participation and meaning-making as they construct their own professional learning path. Webster-Wright (2010) proposed professional learning as derived from individual idiosyncrasies rather than a facilitator's intended outcomes. Instead of positioning professionals as passive recipients in the continuum of professional learning, her research built off the situated perspective by providing an agentic view of professionals; in her view, the individual professional discerns the value of learning experiences and actively directs and engages with their own learning. Authentic professional learning experiences are therefore wrought from a dynamic interplay between the individual and their given professional context (2010). Practical meaning is perpetually negotiated between experience, social interactions, opportunities for (or constraints of) learning, and conceptions of professional expectations. Learning may take place in informal conversations, upon reflection, in everyday practice, in compulsory trainings, or any other possible configuration in the professional context (Borko, 2004; Desimone, 2011; Riveros et al., 2011). Or, as Webster-Wright (2010) suggested, it may not! For professional learning to be authentic means the practitioner identifies their lived experience as consonant with their conception of valuable learning experiences (Webster-Wright, 2010).

From Webster-Wright's (2010) perspective, professional learning cannot be premeditated or controlled by others. Such an assertion defies the prevailing rhetoric of accountability and deficit mindsets that shape many attempts to foster professional development. Authentic professional learning is not about delivery or outcomes – it is about supporting meaningful,

38

multi-faceted constructions rooted in lived experiences of everyday practice. For teachers, this means ongoing, professional learning grounded in practices that encourage the use of individual and social experiences to construct meaning and convey this meaning through dialogue, action, and/or material creation (Putnam & Borko, 2000; Postholm, 2012). For facilitators of professional learning, this means clearing pathways for professionals to make this meaning for themselves with others (Webster-Wright, 2010). For authentic professional learning to take place, trust must be cultivated between colleagues and school leaders.

Trust is a crucial quality of PLCs (Borko, 2004; Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Hord, 1997; Louis, 2006; 2008; Stoll et al., 2006). Bryk and Schneider (2002) described relational trust as being derived from relationships that operate in synchronous obligation and action; reciprocal respect, integrity, professional competence, and regard for others are embedded in dynamic interplay in PLCs that exhibit trust. In the journey of school improvement, trust can mitigate the fear and uncertainty individuals experience as they negotiate change and awareness of learning needs. Trust also fosters the assumption of good intentions that validates decision-making and tempers professional disagreement regarding practical concerns. Lastly, relational trust gives life to shared purpose and moral authority in PLCs, promoting meaningful collective action (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Trust possesses a temporal quality in that it is infused in a community over time. In a sense, trust is a primarily historical quality. Considering how the practice of instructional rounds is disruptive to the traditional narrative of teacher privacy (City et al., 2009; Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2010; Roberts, 2012), norms play an important role in establishing the familiarity of practice – the dependability of mutual engagement. City et al. (2009) describe lateral accountability as group adherence to established norms. This practice helps stabilize the

tendency to resort to evaluative statements or inferences as educators engage in instructional rounds. Because trust is historical, practices or behaviors that compromise respect, integrity, or regard endanger present and future feelings of trust.

One way to enculturate norms in a PLC is through peer observations (City, 2011; Hirsch, 2011; Sandt, 2012). Observation of peers is one strategy for engaging in professional dialogue and cultivating shared constructions of effective instructional practice, both of which are key ingredients of PLCs and teachers' professional learning. Yet peer observation has multiple connotations that cloud its meaning. Peer observation in K-12 schools tends to be described as an observation strategy, a mentoring approach, or a vehicle for coaching (Hirsch, 2011). Originally viewing the observed teacher as the learner receiving feedback, Showers and Joyce (1996) gravitated toward a model that identifies the observer as the primary learner. They proposed peer coaching as a collegial partnership rather than the hierarchical arrangement assumed in coaching and mentoring. They also recommended omitting feedback in peer coaching cycles, finding the quality of collaboration to be compromised when teachers make evaluative comments about each others' instructional practice (1996). Strong peer coaching partnerships rely on three expectations: equal status, reciprocal professional learning, and reflection on instructional practice (Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008).

As teachers' professional learning is situated and social, dialogue between colleagues is also a core component. Crafton and Kaiser (2011) viewed dialogue as central to teachers' knowledge construction. They suggested that mutual engagement, collective sharing of professional repertoire, and joint work toward a collective vision support meaningful dialogue. Meaningful professional learning takes place when dialogue is grounded in concerns of teaching and learning; this perspective assumes dialogue to be unscripted. In other words, shared inquiry

among teachers, rooted in relational trust, allows for teacher-directed knowledge construction that progresses along natural patterns of inquiry and professional need (Crafton & Kaiser, 2011).

Penlington (2008) posited that the complexus of emotions, values, and existing knowledge of an individual teacher influences practice, yet this complexus is fundamentally dialogic when an individual sense of experiences is made with others. A dialogue implies mediation between the self and the other – interplay between the individual, a dialogic partner, and the community in which practice is situated. Over time, conversation with others can inform reflective, internal dialogue. Open dialogue with the other, situated in a culture of trust, acceptance, and professional regard, embodies a consciousness of practice – one that pervades, enhances, and transforms a PLC (2008).

One strategy for encouraging open dialogue is the use of directly observable information (Argyris & Schön, 1974; City et al., 2009). By avoiding inferences and evaluative judgments that confound feedback with emotional clutter, interpersonal defenses are dropped, allowing groups to tackle problems of practice. This norm of sticking to observables to validate information can foster a safe environment in which organizational learning can thrive. Over time, a transition to these more collaborative governing norms sparks a recursive cycle of increased trust, experimentation, feelings of mutual success, and increased performance (Argyris & Schön, 1974; City et al., 2009). These norms of describing observables instead of evaluative statements, focusing on practice rather than individuals, and engaging in ongoing inquiry are core principles of the instructional rounds model.

Penlington (2008) argued for free debate within professional dialogue. Rather than inculcating the status quo, teacher dialogue in a trusting environment invites openness to critical conversation – one that balances dissonance and divergence with a willingness to listen rather

than collapsing into practical polemics.  Professional authority necessitates teachers' invitation to freely question and disagree, where the goal is to push practice, not each other (2008).  City et al. (2009) succinctly described the notion of free debate in instructional rounds as "going beyond the 'Land of Nice'" (p. 76).  Participants are encouraged to counteract a prevailing culture of uncritical praise by using protocols, staying in the descriptive voice, and separating the person from the practice.  By doing so, instructional rounds participants learn to professionalize dialogue.

School leaders must ensure professional dialogue is supported by structures and norms that are respectful of practitioners while taking an analytic stance on practice (Borko, 2004; City et al., 2009).  Achinstein (2002) found that as educators learn to engage as a professional community, conflict can emerge; new ways of interacting, participating, and enacting practice will naturally involve contention.  Healthy engagement with conflict and differing perspectives are vital to relationships that comprise a PLC.  This reflective dialogue may focus on problems of practice that range from the institutional to the individual (Stoll, et al., 2006).  It is the balance between trust, norms, dialogue, and respectful regard that allow constructive conflict to exist as a generative property of school improvement rather than a destructive one (Achinstein, 2002; Kelchtermans, 2006).  The inclusion of free debate in professional dialogue engenders a transition from summary descriptions and groupthink to critical analysis of teaching and learning (Penlington, 2008) as well as professional learning structures (Roberts, 2012).  In this way, dialogue contributes to the emergent qualities of PLC rounds.  Professional dialogue in teacher cultures also highlights the primary distinction between PLC rounds and other approaches.  The historical nature of trust in communities, the need for professional dialogue that fosters critical thinking about the instructional core, and the cultivation of professional authority suggest the

careful reconfiguring of existing norms in schools exploring PLC rounds (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011; Talbert, 2010).

A situated learning perspective – one that incorporates social actors engaged in practice and learning through trusting, dialogic relationships and meaningful examples – implies the presence of organizational learning. As individuals learn, so do the organizations within which they practice. Argyris and Schön used the ongoing interplay between practice and unexpected outcomes as a foundation for describing organizational learning (Argyris, 1976; Argyris & Schön, 1974). They discerned theories-in-use (what we do) from theories-of-action (what we say we do). The discrepancy between the two is defined as error. Individuals and organizations respond to these errors by making adjustments to guide future actions. These actions continue to be based on their existing beliefs about how the world works. This process is described as single-loop learning (Argyris, 1976; City et al., 2009). Single-loop learning is rooted in the ideal of control as a recalibrating mechanism, as well as a defensive mechanism that can conserve some semblance of the internal values of the organization by ignoring, covering up, or avoiding responsibility for unresolved problems (Argyris, 1990). Paradoxically, these habits of resolution and control can limit performance and hinder interrelationships, persisting until theories-in-action are re-examined at a deeper level (Argyris, 1976).

Double-loop learning incorporates reflection into this process by challenging assumptions and current practice, thereby creating new thinking that generates new ways of acting (Argyris, 1990; Argyris & Schön, 1974; City et al., 2009). When forums are conducive to collegial deliberation and open to debate, they help organizations avoid defensive routines and foster inquiry and learning, rendering more effective organizations (Argyris, 1976, 1990; Argyris & Schön, 1974). Argyris and Schön describe this shift as moving from a Model I organization to a

43

Model II organization (1974). Model I organizations are oriented toward control and maintenance of the status quo, defining goals, and maximizing winning over losing; participants tend to withhold disruptive or negative perceptions by limiting dialogue and information, speaking in generalities, and perpetuating assumptions. In Model II organizations, participants have access to direct, observable information, are free to make informed choices based on this information and the collective goals of the organization, and are intrinsically motivated by the responsibility for and commitment to their choices. Such an approach suggests respect for individuality, creativity, and risk-taking in devising new actions rather than maintaining traditional or conservative procedures. A Model II organization therefore implies trust in participants as they learn to openly examine problems of practice and engage in experimentation and reflection to resolve them. It also implies careful attention to reconfiguring norms of interaction that reduce defensiveness, emphasize the focus on professional practice rather than individuals, and invoke internal commitment and trust (1974).

According to the literature, there are relationships among teachers' professional learning and the PLC in which it is situated. While an agentic view suggests authentic professional learning is self-directed and follows nonlinear, idiosyncratic paths, such learning is embedded in social relationships, norms, spaces for learning (for example, through observation and dialogue) and actions. The culture and collaborative practices of an organization can therefore cultivate learning experiences on an individual as well as collective level, sustaining the quality of teachers' professional learning as well as the PLC.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented teachers' professional learning in a PLC as a primary driver of school improvement. Teachers' professional learning at the local level suggests the power of

44

PLCs in fostering enriched learning cultures founded on trust and collective learning. However, gains in professional authority exhibit tensile properties as they are perpetually negotiated within a bureaucratic system. Trust, observation, and open dialogue that is inclusive of free debate are properties of a PLC that resonate with the concept of a Model II-type organization.

While efforts to promote school improvement through rounds suggest promise, a lack of clarity of school-based rounds and a dearth of research on teachers' lived experiences in PLC rounds hinder the assumed power of professional authority. The review of the available literature on teacher involvement in rounds indicates a theory-research gap. Unresolved issues regarding sources of authority (bureaucratic, technical rationality, or professional), participating teachers' lived experiences with classroom observation and collaborative dialogue, and how authentic professional learning experiences and collaborative engagement may inform and sustain PLC rounds remain unexplored in the literature. The theory-research gap hinders praxis for this study's stakeholders as well as the understanding held by other significant audiences. Previous findings from cycles of inquiry at Polaris and the review of relevant literature will contribute to the theoretical framework for PLC rounds that guides this study.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

*How do you make time for teachers to not feel like rounds is just another thing that they have to do?  How do you make that experience valuable enough for that individual teacher so they want to keep doing rounds?*

- A teacher at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School

This study examines PLC rounds as a collegial practice among teachers within a single school.  As the review of literature in Chapter 2 demonstrates, a theory-research gap regarding PLC rounds and its role as a support for teachers' authentic professional learning persists.  This study explores participants' lived experiences regarding authentic professional learning during PLC rounds, particularly their perspectives of valuable components within the model.  The research seeks to construct a theoretical framework that explains professional learning within PLC rounds, contributing to the literature regarding school-based rounds by providing understanding of the nature of teachers' authentic professional learning and insights into how to support and sustain this work within a PLC.

### The Constructivist Research Paradigm

Despite the existing theory-research gap, Polaris educators have engaged with PLC rounds through the embedded nature of their professional practice.  Linking theory and research with practice is informed by accessing the multiple perspectives of participants with experience with a given phenomenon, bounded by a specific context (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln, 1990; Lincoln & Lynham, 2011; Lynham, 2002).  As this study of PLC rounds is exploratory in nature, the constructivist paradigm provides a philosophical context for inquiry, guides the design and conduct of the study, and shapes the dissemination of the findings.

Multiple perspectives of a shared phenomenon suggest the power of a relativist view for this study, one accepting experientially derived, socially mediated constructions (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011; Willis, 2007). Reality in the constructivist research paradigm is closely coupled with context (Guba, 1990; Willis, 2007) because the nature of reality is intersubjective (Lincoln et al., 2011) and therefore does not contain meaning without personal engagement with the lived world (Crotty, 2010).

The constructivist research paradigm therefore assumes an epistemological stance of co-creation of knowledge. The transactional view of knowledge in constructivism, one that assumes an integration between knowers and what is known, is consonant with the aim of PLC rounds to reduce isolation, share effective practice, and strengthen the PLC. In such a view, a multiplicity of perspectives informs a relative consensus of knowledge emerging within a given context, one that is mediated between the researcher and a study's participants (Guba, 1990; Lincoln et al., 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

The methodological approach of constructivist inquiry seeks plausibly accurate descriptions and ensuring interpretations of participants' experiences with a phenomenon, one that is constructed, negotiated, and co-constructed between multiple perspectives (Lincoln et al., 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Schwandt, 1990; Willis, 2007). This methodological strand relies on the given context and the lived experiences of its constituents via a study's participants and the researcher's interpretations. Binding these descriptions to a natural context and the individuals within it fosters an inductive process for co-constructing and thereby describing meaning(s) attributed to the shared phenomenon (Schwandt, 1990).

An intersubjective view of reality, knowledge construction, and mutual description necessitates acknowledgement of individual values as valid interpretations of experience.

47

Constructivist inquiry cannot be value-free (Guba, 1990; Lincoln, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Lincoln et al. (2011) suggest an axiological stance of open invitation to participants' diverse perspectives. When done well, reflexive practices bring participants' perspectives to the fore and delimit the researcher's influence on interpretation (Greene, 1990). Constructivist inquiry is intentional about the awareness and inclusion of multiple value sets as the researcher and his/her study participants provide thick description of their experiences; this integration of values and perspectives aids the co-construction of new meaning (Lincoln et al., 2011).

In this paradigm, the research journey is an interaction of values lined with individual and collective reflection on experiences and meanings. Lincoln et al. (2011) had the assumption that inquiry shapes future constructions and meaning-making; in this sense, the act of inquiry embodies an orientation toward praxis. An ethical stance of cultivating ongoing learning through reflection and inclusive engagement, coupled with the intent to improve practice, provides an open door to local knowledge construction through which researchers and participants may pass.

According to Lincoln et al. (2011), constructivist inquiry seeks increasingly sophisticated descriptions of knowledge. Knowledge construction is situated in the context of the inquiry, seeks data proximal to application or practice, and may be pursued via many paths (Willis, 2007). Knowledge is therefore bound by time and place, grounded in the context and lives of participants (Greene, 1990; Guba, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). As researchers and participants engage with knowledge construction, the discovery of new meaning transforms existing knowledge (Greene, 1990; Lincoln, 1990; Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Lincoln et al. (2011) maintain the role of this emergent knowledge as a path to action.

Lynham's (2002) general method of theory-building research distinguished inductive forms of theory-building as being drawn from practice and lived experience. Inductive theory-

building is generated through application of existing theories that inform action yet lack full

development in explaining or resolving new or perpetuated dilemmas.  In this sense, applied

forms of theory are open-ended as they undergo revision and refinement in action.  Inquiry

therefore arises from application in a real context, lending to the construction of an increasingly

informed theoretical framework (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).  New iterations of theory are then

operationalized, tested, and reapplied in practice.  Reiterative engagement with inductive theory-

building is reflective of the journey toward the horizon of improved practice (Lynham, 2002).

Previous findings suggest persistent and emergent dilemmas in PLC rounds at Polaris,

informing the need for a more sophisticated understanding of teachers' professional learning.  It

is these findings, replete with the promises of and problems inhering in PLC rounds, that frame

this study's research questions.

**Research Questions**

This study is guided by the following central research questions:

1. Based on participants' individual and shared experiences, what do they perceive to be the

   most valuable components of PLC rounds?

2. Based on their individual and shared experiences, how do teachers perceive their

   participation as a) contributing to their professional learning, and b) sustaining school

   improvement as a professional learning community?

3. What do teachers' experiences in PLC rounds tell us about authentic professional

   learning, if anything?

The nature of these research questions suggest the need for data to provide complex

understanding of social phenomena, a need satisfied by qualitative research methods.  Qualitative

research methods are naturalistic; rather than conducting research in a laboratory or through the

distribution of surveys, qualitative researchers engage directly with participants in the context

where the topic of interest takes place (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln, 1990). The qualitative

researcher is therefore the primary instrument for data collection. By being embedded in the

context of the study, qualitative researchers are in direct contact with data collection, often

creating their own protocols for studying documents or environmental evidence, observing

individuals or groups, or interviewing participants (Creswell, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1992).

Qualitative research conducted in context is assumed to reveal data consistent with the lived

experiences of participants. In the constructivist research paradigm, these data are subjective,

co-constructed interpretations between the researcher and the participants, including the values

and assumptions each brings to a study. However, the qualitative researcher seeks to lift

participants' perspectives of phenomena rather than infuse the study with their own perspective.

By triangulating data, being immersed over time at the research site, and reflecting on one's

values, intents, and biases, the human instrument minimizes the negative potential of subjective

influence while enhancing the study with responsiveness to participants, intuition of emerging

insights, and the provision of rich portrayal (Guba & Lincoln, 1992).

**Grounded Theory Methodology**

Grounded theory is a qualitative approach involving inquiry into the lived experiences of

individuals to go beyond thick description of shared experiences and into theory development

(Creswell, 2007; Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006). Theory is grounded because it is informed by

an inductive process where abstract conceptions emerge from data collection and analysis rather

than from existing theory; however, grounded theorists may also employ deductive reasoning to

verify emerging explanations at later stages of analysis (Charmaz, 2008b; Charmaz & Bryant,

2011). Classic grounded theory was developed by sociologists Glaser and Strauss in 1967 to

strengthen qualitative methods (Creswell, 2007; Hallberg, 2006). By illustrating relationships among categories, Glaser and Strauss sought to create middle-range theories while legitimizing qualitative research through rigorous methods (Charmaz, 2003; 2008a; 2008b; Mills et al., 2006).

The grounded theory method seeks to limit the influence of preconceived theories about the phenomenon, use iterative cycles of reference between data collection and analysis, engage in analytic processes early in data collection, employ an open-ended stance toward possible explanations of relationships or concepts, and generate theory – one that serves situated needs rather than describing grand generalizations posited by formal theory (Hallberg, 2006; Willis, 2007). Such an approach is consonant with a naturalistic research setting such as a school.

The constant comparative method is a common approach to generating grounded theory. Grounded theorists begin by collecting data. These data are then organized into increasingly categorical relationships, and associations are explicated. As discrepancies arise in comparison between the data, codes, and/or categories, the emerging theory is revised to improve its descriptive and explanatory power. This process is repeated until the researcher determines the theory to satisfactorily explain the relationships and concepts that comprise the phenomenon under study (Charmaz, 2003; Charmaz & Bryant, 2011; Hallberg, 2006; Mills et al., 2006; Willis, 2007). Because this process is nonlinear and open-ended in nature, grounded theory is described as an emergent research approach (Charmaz, 2008a; 2008b; Mills et al., 2006; Willis, 2007). Charmaz (2008b) found emergent research methods to be "well suited for studying uncharted, contingent, or dynamic phenomena" (p. 155). In a practical domain such as education, grounded theories can help explain participants' experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Grounded theory is therefore well-suited as an approach to studying practitioners' experiences with PLC rounds.

A student of Columbia University, Glaser's positivist training influenced his objectivist stance toward social behavior (Breckenridge, Jones, Elliott, & Nicol, 2012; Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Hallberg, 2006). He believed meaning to lie in latency within the data; through rigorous methods, the researcher discovers an external reality embedded in the data (Charmaz, 2003). In his classic approach to grounded theory, Glaser advocated for the researcher to avoid related literature to reduce influence on theoretical sensitivity as s/he sought plausible explanations of core ideas; such a stance objectified the researcher's relationship with data (Charmaz, 2003; Mills et al., 2006). Glaser's perspective of emergence in grounded theory is fundamentally analytic in that it describes successive iterations of increasing abstraction from raw data in the careful identification of the core category of study (Charmaz, 2008b; Mills et al., 2006).

Trained in symbolic interactionism in the Chicago School, Strauss diverged from Glaser's classic approach, taking a more relativistic view of meaning in data (Hallberg, 2006). Strauss and Corbin's evolved form of grounded theory asserted that researchers are never bias-free, multiple realities can inform meaning, literature can serve as an informing voice alongside data in theory development, and the development of theory is ultimately a construction made by the researcher (Mills et al., 2006). However, the Straussian grounded theory approach appears to have one foot in a post-positivist tradition and the other in the constructivist; for example, Strauss and Corbin's treatment of data involved complex coding structures, matrices, and diagrams that relied less on emergent methods in an effort to reconcile a multiplicity of perspectives (Mills et al., 2006). This approach that mystified researchers who found Straus and Corbin's relativist view of social dynamics and stance on theory construction to be at odds with such a highly prescriptive approach (Charmaz, 2008b). Mills et al. (2006) posited Strauss and

Corbin's wavering to be a product of concurrent shifts in qualitative inquiry toward the constructivist paradigm.

Kathy Charmaz, a student of Glaser and Straus, drew from the constructivist paradigm to inform an alternate conceptualization of grounded theory (Mills et al., 2006). She infused grounded theory methodology with interpretivist assumptions of multiple realities. By doing so, Charmaz assumed the active co-construction of theory between the researcher and participants, each exchanging and influencing perspectives on the phenomenon of study (Charmaz, 2003; Mills et al., 2006). Through the inquiry process, the researcher gets as close to the phenomenon as possible, immersing in the data and actively constructing and co-constructing meaning with participants (Charmaz, 2003; Charmaz & Bryant, 2011; Mills et al., 2006). As meaning maintains a dialectical relationship with action in that each informs the other, the constructivist grounded theorist conducts research with future action in mind. The constructive grounded theorist is therefore positioned within the social and historical context of the phenomenon for the purpose of advancing practical understanding with and for participants, if not a multiplicity of stakeholders (Charmaz, 2003; Charmaz & Bryant, 2011).

Charmaz (2008a) viewed research procedures in grounded theory studies as a nonlinear path, one that is flexible and responsive to a multiplicity of influences, interpretations, and emerging insights rather than a sequence of methods leading to an objective truth. She held that research approaches must be responsive to the phenomenon itself; this assumption presupposes that methods themselves are emergent constructions that strategically correspond with the context, the participants, and the phenomenon rather than prescriptive, linear paths to discovering an objective truth (2008b). Such an assumption reinforces the tradition of iterative references between data and multiple levels of analysis in grounded theory. In constructivist

grounded theory, this assumption allows the researcher a creative role in designing research procedures that exhibit reflexivity. However, this creativity must be in service of authentic and trustworthy interpretations of the data.

Theoretical sensitivity implies the researcher's awareness of the phenomenon before the study, as well as his/her ability to discern relevant ideas and attribute meaning through careful reconstruction (Mills et al., 2006; Hallberg, 2006). Constructivist grounded theory parts from Glaser's conception of the researcher as a blank slate by acknowledging pre-existing interpretations of the phenomenon via personal or professional experiences, exposure to relevant literature, or previous research (Mills et al., 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Charmaz (2008b) indicated that grounded theorists often construct a study on a phenomenon with which they have intimate personal experience; she noted how both Glaser and Strauss experienced the loss of a parent before engaging in their landmark research on dying. Acknowledging one's experiences and positionality through reflexivity and remaining open to fresh perspectives and surprises are strategies employed by grounded theorists with a preexisting connection to the phenomenon under study (Charmaz, 2008b; Charmaz & Bryant, 2011).

Grounded theorists also tend to avoid using a preexisting theoretical framework to guide inquiry as such an approach is antithetical to the inductive nature of the methodology (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011; Mills et al., 2006). However, the findings from Chapter 1 and the review of literature presented at the end of Chapter 2 implicitly and explicitly inform the research design of this study as foundations for the construction of grounded theory. Rather than ignoring extant concepts that relate to this study, their inclusion is intended to undergird assumptions of constructivist grounded theory as situated inquiry. This framework parallels assumptions of constructivist grounded theory of a socially constructed interpretation of data, an intersubjective

influence between the researcher, the participants, and the phenomenon, and the role of creativity in constructing research design (Charmaz, 2008a). The decision to include previous findings and the literature highlights the epistemological paradox of simultaneously asserting theoretical sensitivity and acknowledging extant concepts brought to a study by the researcher (Charmaz, 2008b). For Miles and Huberman (1994), all researchers have preconceptions derived from previous research or experience that influence their thinking. Bryant and Charmaz (2007b) suggested that literature often informs theoretical sensitivity, reminding readers that "an open mind does not imply an empty head" (p. 20). Charmaz (2008b) noted that "having a rich reservoir of data and experience from prior studies may considerably expedite moving to a specific research question, as well as to conceptual analysis" (p. 168). In this sense, the presence of previous findings and engagement with the literature can inform rather than blight the methodological choices of this study and its ensuing analysis.

**Positionality and Reflexivity**

An inductive approach to theory-building situates the construction of a theoretical framework regarding teachers' professional learning within PLC rounds along a continuum of recurring cycles of inquiry and action. Doing so reconciles the dilemma of approaching grounded theory without preconceived frameworks whilst being an informed insider with heightened theoretical sensitivity and professional experience with the phenomenon being studied. In the context of this study, grounded theory seeks to further inform existing applied theories constructed from previous dilemmas, analysis, inspiration, literature, and application. At the precipice of what is known, with the complexities of real-world application nipping at the heels, do I take a giant leap of faith without a backward glance? Or do I resume constructing bridges from the bedrock of informed practice? My approach is to recognize the emergent

55

qualities of knowledge in the constructivist research paradigm – to assume the likelihood of new insights and interpretations while being guided by lived experience (Guba & Lincoln, 2013). This methodological stance means to reflect the values and experiences I possess as a practitioner and researcher upon the possibility for surprise and new learning on the inquiry journey. Constructivist conceptions of reality, local knowledge, values, and authentic representation strengthen a situated perspective of theory-building and inform the methodological design of this study.

My role as an insider also presents the opportunity for reflexive consideration of my positionality, my impact on the research context, and how social constructions and the participants themselves are portrayed. Rather than approaching an unfamiliar population with consent forms in hand, being a complete member of the Polaris community implies a pre-existing relationship with this study's participants. My relationship with Polaris educators and the ongoing evolution of PLC rounds suggested a highly situated entry into this study. In this case, a constructivist grounded theory approach cannot exist in an empirical vacuum. My research decision-making is therefore informed by existing knowledge and relationships as well as the research questions. To be true to context and the continuum of professional learning, our collective knowledge would need to be of practical service to members' experiences within our PLC – as well as the construction of grounded theory. The multiplicity of roles I bring to this study (participant, colleague, facilitator, and researcher) are informed by the perspectives and values of participating Polaris educators. There is no doubt that a transactional relationship exists between myself, participants of this study, and other members of the Polaris community; my perspectives and actions influence those of my colleagues, just as their perspectives and

actions influence mine.  Therefore my research decisions and interpretations are inexorably

bound to the ongoing learning and relationships that comprise the Polaris community.

Being an insider has its advantages, particularly involving theoretical sensitivity.  My

experience as a designer, facilitator, host, co-observer, and researcher of PLC rounds enhances

my theoretical sensitivity.  Reflections on my own relationship to authentic professional learning,

exposure to existing research through previous cycles of inquiry, and previous findings has

presented compelling problems regarding the relationship between the design of professional

learning and teachers' perceptions of authentic learning experiences.  I believe having intimate

knowledge of PLC rounds heightens my theoretical sensitivity.

However, integrating my interpretations with participants' requires careful and

continuous reflexivity.  In stepping back as a learner, practitioner, and researcher, I have asked

myself many times, "Why are you doing this work?  Where do you want this research to lead?"

The following is a summary of my response to these questions:

I believe that if PLC rounds are intended to be a social practice, the process must belong

to teachers.  There must be ownership among and across the instructional staff.  In the

beginning phases of implementation, I was the primary facilitator of rounds at Polaris.  I

designed the protocols, organized the schedules, led professional development sessions,

and facilitated debriefs and other conversations.  Over time, I began to feel like the 'man

behind the curtain'.  This perception gave me a persistent sense of dissonance.  How can

teachers take more ownership of rounds?  The narrative was one step in this direction; it

was a shared story intended to help my colleagues and me see where rounds had come

from, why it continued, and what we were learning from our participation.  The World

Café intended to invite more teacher voice into the process by giving them time and

space to dialogue about what was effective in rounds, what was less effective, and potential steps for improvement.  The findings from these inquiry efforts have presented me with two gifts.  First, my understanding of PLC rounds and professional learning has been shaped by the participation and voices of my colleagues.  I remain grateful for their past and present input and effort to co-construct our approach to rounds as well as their integrity in reflecting on meaningful learning.  Second, through this interplay of participation, dialogue, and reflection, I have become increasingly aware of the importance of supporting teachers in experiencing meaningful professional learning. *This* is why I am doing this work with my colleagues.  Analyzing our lived experiences is meant to further co-construct an understanding of how to foster teachers' authentic professional learning, thereby increasing their intrinsic motivation and ownership of the process, future learning, and school improvement.

Based on reflection of my own learning and teaching journey and the purpose I have made transparent, I bring several assumptions to this study.  First, I believe all schools require improvement.  As living systems, there is no point of equilibrium, no pinnacle or point of stasis where the learning and improvement journey ceases for educators, schools, or the children they serve.  Second, I believe teachers are professionals who engage in complex tasks, adjust to meet the needs of diverse and changing clientele, and respond to increasingly intensifying expectations.  As professionals, they possess practical expertise while simultaneously seeking to advance their individual and collective practice.  Third, I believe that schools that keep authentic learning experiences for all members of the community at the forefront of individual and collective action improve.  Therefore, the charge of teachers, school leaders, and researchers is to explore, negotiate, and articulate this unfolding landscape of what is known about school

improvement.  As an educator, if not a citizen, I believe these are empowering assumptions to hold.

**Research Procedures**

Permission to conduct research was obtained from the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board under an exempt status (Appendix C).  Permission to conduct research at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School was also provided by Poudre School District (Appendix D).  The building principal of Polaris Expeditionary Learning School also gave verbal and written permission to conduct this study according to the proposal approved by Colorado State University and Poudre School District.

This study employed purposeful sampling to include participants with experience with PLC rounds at a particular school.  There are 16 full-time teachers and two administrators at Polaris; each of these educators has taken part in PLC rounds at the research site.  At the conclusion of the World Café discussed in Chapter 1, these teachers and administrators were informed of the study and were invited to ask questions.  Shortly afterward, an email was sent to these eighteen educators with an invitation to respond based on interest in participating.  I made arrangements to meet with respondents to discuss the procedure for informed consent and answer any remaining questions.  This confidentiality measure intended to protect the identity of potential participants and allow privacy if questions or concerns arose concerning participation in the study.  The informed consent used for this study can be found in Appendix E.

Initial interviews with willing teachers were timed to follow PLC rounds.  A few days after engaging in rounds, two participants were asked to select a time and day that fit their schedule and were given choices for interview spaces.  These participants had approved the use of digital recording for the interview on the informed consent, and each participant was asked

again for permission to record the interview.  Upon their consent, I used two lapel microphones and a splitter to feed the audio into a single digital voice recorder to improve sound quality.

Although I drafted interview questions beforehand, these were only used as a reference.  I felt the need to remain in the moment with each participant: asking open-ended questions, seeking to clarify and validate, and following leads in an individual's story rather than following an interview guide.  For reference, a sample of these interview questions can be found in Appendix F.  Each of the interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.  To promote triangulation, participants were asked similar questions related to key ideas and emerging themes; some questions were also designed to include negative case analysis for comparison.  Participants were also invited to ask questions of me.  At the end of the interview, participants were thanked for their time and insights.

The audio recordings were uploaded to a private hard drive.  The recordings were then transcribed verbatim.  Each participant was then assigned an alphabetical letter by the researcher for reference.  All identifiers of participants and non-participants such as names, subject content area and grade level taught, or department were removed from the transcripts to protect the anonymity of participants and other stakeholders.  Records of the data will remain under lock and key for a minimum of three years upon the completion of the study.

The first two interviews were coded with the line-by-line gerund approach advocated by Charmaz.  I adjusted the margins of these interviews to create space for coding and emerging themes.  These codes were then compared for frequency and significance.  Through constant comparison, initial categories were developed.  The initial interviews were also re-coded with a unit analysis approach (multiple lines and paragraphs) for comparison between coding techniques.  While the gerund approach is intended to capture the social patterns occurring in a

given phenomenon, I found this approach to be cumbersome. Charmaz's approach highlights the role of active verbs in the coding process, while unitizing the data involves coding the data for concepts that possess coherence and mutuality based on the researcher's interpretations. Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2008b) were inclined to regard researchers' professional experience with the phenomenon of study as playing an influential role in informing theoretical sensitivity. This assumption implies how researchers with relevant practical expertise can move with and through the data with greater fluency than those who approach the data with less experience. In alignment with Charmaz's approach, I did find the gerund strategy to frame my own interpretations as social processes that inhere in the data. However, I also intuited a discrepancy between this social orientation of the emerging codes and categories and the intent of my research questions. This study is concerned with the phenomenon of teachers' lived experience within PLC rounds with the intent of informing praxis. An axiological orientation toward applied knowledge, and theoretical sensitivity as a complete member of Polaris, helped me choose the unit approach to coding as more efficient and effective. It is upon these reflexive acts that I made the decision to switch to the unitizing approach as I developed further categories in subsequent interviews.

The next step was to print out an extra hard copy of each transcript and cut the data according to these units of data, labeling each sheet with the participants' corresponding letter for later reference. Looking across these units of data, I then began categorizing them according to emerging themes. Next, I began memoing, writing quickly and leaving the process open to questions, early analysis, and inspiration of new perspectives. I infused quotes from the raw data into these memos to link them with initial categories for reference.

After careful review of the raw data, initial codes, and memos, I selected participants to further clarify, triangulate, follow leads, and refine emerging categories. I included considerations of variation as well as consistency in constructing the theoretical sample. This step involved the intentional following of leads based on the data and intuitions based on theoretical sensitivity.

I approached new participants to further explore emerging categories, adhering to the same procedures of consent and confidentiality. I also adhered to the principles followed in the initial interviews by keeping them open-ended and flexible. The focused interviews were used to check for consistency and discrepancy of emerging categories among participants. At this point, I had interviewed eight Polaris teachers, the principal, and the assistant principal. I continued sorting the memos I had created, replete with quotes from the data, into conceptual categories. As the categories had become saturated, meaning no new insights emerged from the data, I ceased data collection and concentrated on further comparison, analysis, and construction of a theoretical framework.

I used Lincoln and Guba's (2013) approach to articulating the foundations of the constructivist paradigm through a list of conjectures as a way to structure the theoretical framework of this study. Through multiple iterations of reference to the data, categories, and memos, I constructed 20 conjectures that explain the phenomenon of PLC rounds at Polaris. I then member-checked these conjectures with participants for their input and approval. These conjectures are presented in Chapter 5.

**Limitations and Ensuing Delimitations**

This study is qualitative and constructivist in nature; it is also localized within the context of a single school. The profile of the research site presented in Chapter 1 may help

readers discern the transferability, or the applicable utility of findings for other contexts, of the resulting theory (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011).

This study is also limited to a single research site: Polaris Expeditionary Learning School. Polaris was selected due to convenience, existing relationships, and the existing practice of PLC rounds. As the literature review has shown, research and theory on the PLC approach to instructional rounds is limited. Part of my decision to focus solely on Polaris as a research site involved time restrictions as a full-time teacher. However, the information-rich insights available at Polaris present a unique opportunity to amend the theory-research gap.

As a specialized program, an understanding of EL may also help inform readers' sense of context at the research site. EL is a national network of consultants that work with partner schools to enact comprehensive improvement efforts. Because being an EL school often involves deep change in school culture, curriculum, assessment, instruction, and leadership (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2011), it has an impact on the context of a study and the lived experiences of its stakeholders. Audiences considering the findings of this study are also encouraged to consider Polaris' small school size, the nature of EL and Polaris' instructional program, and the established existence of a PLC at the research site.

Polaris is considerably smaller than the typical comprehensive middle and high school. With 16 full-time teachers and two administrators comprising the population for this study, organizational and cultural characteristics influence this study's findings. The sample size consists of ten participants: eight full-time teachers, the principal, and the assistant principal. The participating teachers have extensive firsthand experience with PLC rounds at Polaris (most having participated in PLC rounds since its inception in 2009) and constitute 50% of the total number of Polaris teachers. Patton (2002) viewed purposeful sampling as a strategic use of

available resources that can provide rich information; he also held that, in qualitative inquiry, decisions regarding sample sizes are guided by multiple factors. The focus of the inquiry, why the inquiry is being pursued, how the resulting findings will be utilized, and what resources such as time and access to participants all influence the sample size in a qualitative study. For him, the value of a qualitative inquiry emerges from rich insights and careful reflexive analysis rather than the number of participants (2002). As the use of constructivist grounded theory in this study describes and informs ongoing implementation of PLC rounds at Polaris in support of teachers' authentic professional learning experiences, the information-rich perspectives of these participants are viewed as valuable resources. Readers and stakeholders interested in utilizing any findings from this study are encouraged to consider these characteristics.

I also bring my own insider experience into this study through my roles as facilitator, participant, and researcher of PLC rounds. As a complete member of the Polaris community, interpretations from past experiences with rounds guide my present and future understanding and play a powerful role in research design, analysis, and theory development. I make every attempt to construct a local theoretical framework that is trustworthy and viable for this study's stakeholders and a beneficial contribution to the literature.

This study is also limited by its conceptual and methodological assumptions. The situated perspective, like constructivist grounded theory, is concerned with learning in context. Experiences and interpretations of these experiences are intersubjective. The social context, school leadership, collegial norms, experience with rounds, and positionality of the researcher are just a few of the influences on the research process and the resulting constructed theoretical framework. While careful construction on an abstract level can promote transferability (Charmaz, 2008a), these data and findings are considered to be time-bound and contextual.

My approach to constructivist grounded theory is situated in the continuum of ongoing professional learning at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School. Previous implementation and inquiry efforts at Polaris provided a local body of practical knowledge which inspired a theoretical framework and informed the research methods. Guided by the role of authentic professional learning in refining and sustaining PLC rounds, the research methods were strategically employed to advance theoretical understanding that serves ongoing praxis at Polaris and ameliorates existing literature.

Qualitative studies are evaluated according to criteria that describe authenticity and trustworthiness. Guba and Lincoln (1989) invoked authenticity criteria as qualities of participants' experience within a research study. For example, a study that honors and shares multiple perspectives (fairness and educative criteria), extends participants' understanding of the phenomenon of study (the ontological criterion), and empowers participants to use these new insights to guide future action and learning (catalytic and tactical criteria) resonates with their criteria of authenticity. As a complete member of the Polaris Expeditionary Learning School instructional staff, I take these criteria to heart.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) also distinguished the audience's experience with a study as a determinant of its trustworthiness. The criterion of credibility is sought through the inclusion of participants' voice embedded in the findings. In addition to honoring the primacy of participants' voice, the use of direct, anonymous quotes provides audiences with empirical verifiability (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011), allowing them to see connections between the data and subsequent abstractions. Transferability may be served by the profile of the research site as well as how the theoretical framework resulting from this study resonates with the experiences, interpretations, interests, and situated professional learning needs of stakeholders in other

65

contexts (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011).  I have attempted to address the criterion of dependability

by making transparent the research process, particularly when I felt creative method construction

was necessary to the authenticity criteria as well as theory development.  I also endeavored to

demonstrate the mutuality of concepts by using reflexive memoing, constant comparison,

member-checking, saturation, and refinement through multiple interviews to enhance the analytic

strength of the resulting theoretical framework (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011).  Based on the

findings, the study includes a path to action for the research site, schools and school districts, and

directions for new research to fulfill the usefulness and fruitfulness criteria suggested by Lincoln

and Lynham (2011).

I assume evaluation of this study's trustworthiness and authenticity to be intrinsically tied

to how one perceives professional authority to begin with.  If technical rationality or bureaucratic

authority outweigh my roles as practitioner, facilitator, colleague, researcher, and learner, then

chances are those voices will criticize, refute, and ignore what is presented in the following

chapters.  But if my aims of authenticity and trustworthiness in pursuit of school improvement

and improved understanding of professional learning resonate with participants, stakeholders,

educators, school leaders, and researchers, then I have been successful in my research endeavor.

**Chapter 4: Findings**

*Doing rounds is like when I was a kid and we used to get a preview of the Disney Channel for three days. I already knew I liked Care Bears, I wanted to watch it all the time, but we didn't have the Disney Channel, so I couldn't. But when we had that preview time, I was always so excited, because it's like, 'Oh my gosh, we get to watch all of these things!' That's how I really feel about rounds. It's preview time, and I get to go and watch this, enjoy it, learn from it, and give back to the people that give to me.*

- A teacher at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School


The findings of this study are drawn from ten interviews conducted with eight Polaris teachers and two Polaris administrators during the spring of 2013. While the participants have a range of experience levels as educators as well as participants in PLC rounds, they possess information-rich insights related to their lived experiences with this form of professional learning. In a constructivist approach to grounded theory, a consideration of context is crucial (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011). One way to think of these contextualized findings is as if they have been trapped in amber: the data and the interpretations are representative of a specific point in time, organizational culture, and individual participants' (and the researcher's) lives. Being temporal and relativistic, the participants' and researcher's lived experiences are grounded in a shared history regarding the implementation of PLC rounds. Viewing PLC rounds as an emergent form of professional learning suggests the need for an acknowledgement of previous incarnations, interpretations, and developments.

I have referred to Polaris' approach to rounds throughout this study as PLC rounds. I do so only to clarify the difference between school-based instructional rounds and other network

forms of instructional rounds.  However, it should be noted that participants do not use the term "PLC rounds" at Polaris; their truncated references to "rounds" are intended to refer specifically to the school-based version implemented at the research site.  It should also be noted that the following quotes have been paraphrased or refined from the original transcripts to increase readability.  To ensure the meaning has not been changed, quotes were member-checked with each participant for their approval.  No concerns regarding the use or content of the following quotes were expressed.  These quotes are intended to capture participants' voices and their interpretation of their lived experiences to convey these findings as co-constructions.  Unless indicated, all quotes are indicative of themes emerging across multiple interviews.  To ensure representativeness, all participants' voices have been included in this chapter.

Before delving into the findings of this study, I would also like to remind readers of the suggestion in the first chapter that research questions will surely change as a result of engagement with the study.  In analyzing the data, constructing categories, and making decisions about how to represent findings, I have found the third research question, in light of the first two research questions, to invite redundancy.  Exploration of what has been learned about authentic professional learning will be incorporated in this chapter's presentation of findings regarding the first two research questions as well as the presentation of the resulting theoretical framework in the following chapter.

**Differentiated Approaches to Instructional Rounds**

As indicated in previous chapters, PLC rounds as a school-based approach to professional learning bears important distinctions from the intervisitation approach to rounds – distinctions that must be elucidated to contextualize the findings from this study.

Instructional rounds in schools typically take place through the model outlined by City et al. (2009), including the emphasis on intervisitation. Intervisitation implies teams of educators visiting a host school to participate in instructional rounds. This might involve a network, where intervisitation is an exchange among schools within or across districts (City et al., 2009; Roberts, 2012; Roegman & Riehl, 2012). It might also indicate a clinical model of teacher preparation between a host school (or schools) and a university program (Del Prete, 1997; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2010; Teitel, 2001; Thompson & Cooner, 2001). As Chapter 1 suggests, the intervisitation approaches differ from the school-based, PLC method practiced at Polaris.

Since 2009, educators at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School have developed their own approach to instructional rounds as a means to reduce teacher isolation and share effective instructional practices across classrooms. At Polaris, this practice involves teachers observing peer classrooms and sharing effective instructional practices; teachers and administrators based their approach on the model outlined in *Instructional Rounds in Education* (City et al., 2009). Instructional rounds at Polaris are integrated into ongoing professional learning and collaboration at a single school rather than intervisitations across multiple schools. Rounds at Polaris are also more focused on experienced teachers' professional learning than administrators' or preservice teachers. The findings from previous cycles of inquiry presented in Chapter 1 align with Roberts (2012) and City's (2011) awareness of the challenges of job-embedded learning during the school day. As previous findings at Polaris also demonstrate, engaging in rounds over time has helped Polaris educators strengthen a collective sense of professional community (see Chapter 1). In doing so, distinct considerations for teacher cultures such as the peer-to-peer reciprocity inherent in PLCs differentiate this approach from others. The term "PLC rounds" highlights the

role of professional community in a given school as educators engage in these learning exchanges.

*Instructional Rounds in Education* (City et al., 2009) was newly published when an assistant superintendent of Poudre School District handed our principal a copy for consideration in 2009. The principal passed the book on to me, asking me to help him explore ways to create a teacher-based version of rounds. Polaris teachers and administrators crafted a way to make instructional rounds work as an approach to professional learning that aligned with the existing school culture. By doing so, we developed an approach to instructional rounds that bears unique differences to the intervisitation model. Table 1 outlines general differences between approaches to instructional rounds; it is drawn from the existing literature and previous cycles of inquiry at Polaris; these differences are consonant with the findings of the present study. Table 1 intends to clarify basic assumptions and distinctions of each approach with the caveat that hybrid forms often blur these lines of distinction in practice. For example, Polaris teachers and administrators participate together on rounds in the PLC approach, but our principal and assistant principal take part in an administrator network, and some Polaris teachers also participate in districtwide rounds in partnership with CEL. Table 1 is intended to be a rudimentary framework rather than a provision of absolute categories; readers are asked to keep in mind that it is certainly possible for educators to maintain membership in more than one rounds team. Table 1 is also meant to contextualize the findings from this study.

Each of these four instructional rounds approaches have shared characteristics. Rounds take place in classrooms where instruction can be directly observed. Observations are supported by note-taking that attempt to minimize evaluative statements by describing observable actions and interactions. These notes provide a foundation for debrief sessions, where notes

Table 1

*General Differences Between Approaches to Instructional Rounds*

| Type | Professional learning community | Intervisitation: Teachers | Intervisitation: Administrators | Intervisitation: Preservice Teachers |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Design** | School-based approach | Network between schools and/or districts | Network between schools and/or districts | Network between teacher preparation programs and partner schools |
| **Model** | Teachers' professional learning model of school improvement | Teachers' professional learning model of school improvement | Administrative expertise model of school improvement | Clinical model of teacher education |
| **Focus** | Local problems of practice, demonstrations of effective practice, connection to continuum of professional learning, and/or guiding frameworks | Host school's problems of practice or reference to own problems of practice, demonstrations of effective practice, and/or guiding frameworks | Host school or district's problems of practice, system-wide improvement, and/or guiding frameworks | Demonstrations of effective practice and/or guiding frameworks |
| **Intended Outcomes** | Increased understanding of teaching and learning at the classroom level that informs and enhances practice<br><br>Reduced teacher isolation<br><br>Increased trust, sharing of practice, professional dialogue, and collegiality in a school culture | Increased understanding of teaching and learning at the classroom level that informs and enhances practice<br><br>Reduced teacher isolation<br><br>Increased trust, sharing of practice, professional dialogue, and collegiality in a network | Increased understanding of teaching and learning at the classroom level that informs and enhances leadership<br><br><br><br>Increased trust, sharing of practice, professional dialogue, and collegiality in a network | Development of new teachers' instructional practice and professional capacity<br><br>Relationship with participating schools in service of future employment |

and observations are used to construct patterns and themes between observers' points of view and classrooms visited. Most importantly, observers participate from a learning stance. Rather than observing with the primary goal of informing the host's practice, engaging in instructional rounds positions the observer in a learning relationship with their own practice. The observer's learning stance is a distinguishing feature from other classroom observation models such as teacher evaluations, walk-throughs, coaching, or mentoring. This stance shapes debrief sessions, educator reflection, and the ongoing fidelity of the rounds approach. Without an explicit learning stance in mind, in dialogue, and in practice, instructional rounds can easily shift into evaluative territory, potentially compromising participants' and classroom hosts' trust in the model. Lastly, as a learning stance implies, each instructional rounds approach in Table 1 encourages individual and collective consideration of new insights and how these insights may inform and improve current practice. Participants in each of the four approaches may make use of their rounds experience through new conceptualizations of teaching and learning or explicit practices. As the learning stance is a distinguishing quality of different forms of instructional rounds, it will be discussed further in this chapter as a component of PLC rounds at Polaris.

Table 1 also suggests how the four approaches are differentiated by distinct roles and the respective needs of participants. But the sharpest contrast exists between the intervisitation approach and the PLC approach. In the instructional rounds model as conceived by City et al. (2009), administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders operate as a network through intervisitation: visiting classrooms in a host school or series of schools and participating in observations and dialogue before returning to their respective sites to engage in the next level of work. Wlodarczyk Hickey (2011) and Roegman and Riehl (2012) clarified how the intent is not to change teachers' practice at the classroom level; instructional rounds in the intervisitation

72

framework (save the clinical model) emphasize school and district leadership's use of observations at the classroom level to build capacity for initiating change in instructional practice at the system level. By doing so, instructional improvement may be scaled rather than sporadic in isolated pockets (City et al., 2009; Elmore, 2004; Roberts, 2012). Such an approach adopts an expertise model of improvement, where engagement in instructional rounds builds administrator expertise, systematically enhances school leaders' capacity regarding the instructional core, and fortifies school improvement efforts (Fink & Markholt, 2011; Roberts, 2012). Even with teachers participating in non-hierarchical relationships with their superiors in instructional rounds, the original conception of this model places the locus of control at the bureaucratic level (Roegman & Riehl, 2012; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998; Talbert, 2010). The findings of this study align with the literature on this point, highlighting the importance of distinguishing the implicit purposes and processes in each approach. One teacher described her experience in rounds facilitated by CEL at another school in the district:

> The conversations afterwards were not useful. They were too directed from the top because there was a facilitator and she was saying, 'Talk about this, now talk about that'. And the conversations were not with our observation group. I think part of it was having administrators there because I think administrators aren't there to learn about practice. The conversations weren't along the lines of, 'What did you see that you learned something that you could implement tomorrow?' That's what our conversations at Polaris are always about in some way or another. I think administrators look at the bigger picture. We're looking at the same thing but with slightly different lenses. And when administrators are involved in conversations, they drive the conversations because they're in a position of power, so people defer to them.

Her experience illuminates the role rounds at Polaris has had in informing her practice in concrete ways; it also distinguishes the influence administrators can have on a rounds debrief, particularly when the focus of rounds is on the identification of systemwide patterns (City et al., 2009; Fink & Markholt, 2011; Roberts, 2012; Roegman & Riehl, 2012) rather than informing teachers' individual practice. The focus of such intervisitation rounds has implications even when they are comprised predominantly of teachers. Another teacher provided the following insight on how hosting rounds for her peers felt qualitatively different than hosting teachers from other schools:

> It's the way that we talk about each other and believe in each other. I feel like if somebody from our school dropped into my room to do rounds and things were a mess, I could say, 'Hey, things were way off that day. Let me explain why.' And I wouldn't feel judged. I wouldn't feel like it was something would be held against me. I don't know if that exists when another school comes to my room to do rounds. That causes anxiety for me. I think it says something about our culture and trust in our community. I wonder if the visit bothered me because I felt like I was doing a little bit of a dog and pony show.

Her perspective suggests a difference in comfort levels as well as the authenticity of what she provides as a host for rounds. The situated nature of PLC rounds culture and relationships is therefore distinguished from intervisitation in its purpose and the role of relationships in a school culture.

The literature suggests that micropolitics in schools are powerful forces that can support, hinder, or subvert efforts to cultivate collaboration (Hargreaves, 1994; Louis, 2008). When professional learning practices uproot the tradition of teacher isolation by emphasizing new forms of interaction such as peer observation and collaboration, the task of reconfiguring norms

74

in service of collective learning becomes paramount (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011; Talbert, 2010).  Interestingly, the above finding suggests that despite the establishment of strong norms of trust, professional regard, and collegial learning in a PLC do not necessarily transfer through the vehicle of rounds when the boundaries of school culture are disrupted.

Instead of seeking to remove the firewall between the privacy of teachers' practice and administrators, a PLC approach to instructional rounds intends to reduce teachers' isolation from *one another* in an effort to inquire into the instructional core and inspire individual practice.  In PLC rounds at Polaris, teachers periodically observe and are observed by their peers (sometimes joined by administrators) in a collective effort to generate an exchange of effective practices. We assume using each others' classrooms as sites for collaboration helps us identify and share effective practice with one other, leading to individual and schoolwide instructional improvement.  Therefore, the intent *is* to change teachers' instructional practice while strengthening the PLC in service of school improvement.  However, this change is internally driven rather than externally imposed.  Observation, dialogue, identification of strong practice, and experimentation may inspire and sustain improved practice at the local level.  Such change is intended to happen on an individual, voluntary scale.  Experienced teachers, as professionals, possess instructional expertise and simultaneously seek to advance their practice.  The locus of control for PLC rounds therefore exists locally at the professional level (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998; Talbert, 2010).  By encouraging peer observation, dialogue, reflection, and action at Polaris, we assume an emerging professional interdependency builds capacity for improvement from the inside out.

At Polaris, we have found teacher participation in PLC rounds presents unique challenges that further differentiate this approach from that of intervisitation.  While administrators have

very full schedules, they do not require a substitute to take their place to engage in learning beyond their respective worksites. Yet being a teacher means any learning taking place outside of one's classroom during regular school hours requires careful logistical considerations. To implement a peer observation system, participating teachers must find substitute teacher coverage or use planning periods. Time for debrief sessions must also be built into the schedule, dedicated during a collaboration event, or volunteered by teachers outside the workday. These are the natural constraints of job-embedded learning for teachers.

In response to this finding, we shifted from whole-school instructional rounds events to smaller scale observations that take place at Polaris within a given window of time. We found whole school events, where a large percentage of teachers and administrators take part in instructional rounds on a given day, to be logistically complex and lacking in responsiveness to teachers' readiness to take part in professional learning. Allowing teachers to form their own rounds teams and select classrooms for observation on a flexible schedule means teachers' time and learning needs are honored by providing a degree of choice.

Despite the commonalities of instructional rounds approaches, schools pursuing PLC rounds must keep these key differences in mind: the locus of control at the professional level rather than the bureaucratic, the cultural implications that influence teacher collegiality and collaboration in a PLC, and the logistical constraints of teachers observing their peers during the school day. Without attending to these situated distinctions, attempts to foster teachers' school-based authentic professional learning through instructional rounds may be thwarted.

**Components of PLC Rounds at Polaris**

Because the first research question explores the value participants' place on components of PLC rounds, this chapter desscribes the logistical, structural, and cultural components used

during rounds at Polaris. These components are shared constructions – emerging in the data through participant references during interviews, remaining consistent in meaning when compared to previous inquiry such as the findings from the narrative and my own understanding of the PLC rounds process. Table 2 presents each of these components for clarification.

As job-embedded professional learning, the logistical components are of immediate concern. At Polaris, teachers seek out colleagues, often choosing those who have the same planning period, and agreed upon a date within the rounds window. Although in the past teachers arranged for substitute teachers to cover one or more classes while they participated in rounds, this option was rarely used during the fourth year of implementation due to the extra work required and loss of contact with one's students. The principal and assistant principal were often invited to be a part of a rounds team on a given day, but administrative duties such as meetings or disciplinary action tended to limit their involvement.

Polaris teachers determined classrooms they wished to visit on or before their rounds. Most rounds teams chose to meet for their debrief immediately after these observations if sufficient time remained, although they have the option of meeting after school or the following day. At the end of the 2-3 week rounds window, the entire staff debriefed their experience in a session typically facilitated by the principal. Although this whole staff meeting has not had a name, it will be referred to in this study as the PLC debrief.

The structure of PLC rounds involves engaging in a series of observations with at least one colleague, taking notes on observables, and having a dialogue about observations and how it may connect to one's own practice. One teacher explained:

Teachers identify who they want to see, what they're looking for, and then they find a partner that may be looking for the same things – or it may just work with their schedule

Table 2

*Components of PLC Rounds at Polaris*

| Component Types | Components | Explanation |
|---|---|---|
| **Logistical** | *Preparation for Rounds* | At Polaris, PLC rounds occur 2 – 3 times a year.  A window of 2 – 3 weeks is scheduled.  Teachers identify their partner(s), choose a day and time for observations, identify possible host teachers to observe, and discuss a potential focus for observations.  Administrators may be invited by individual rounds teams. |
| | *Observation* | Teachers observe at least two classrooms with at least one partner, 10 – 20 minutes in duration. |
| | *Debrief* | Observations are debriefed the same day or soon after.  The debrief can occur during plan periods or outside the school day.  Debriefs tend to last anywhere from 20 – 90 minutes. |
| | *PLC Debrief* | A 60 – 90 minute whole staff meeting is scheduled during professional development time at the end of a rounds window. |
| **Structural** | *Instructional Framework* | The 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning (CEL, 2012) framework is used as a reference for observations and dialogue. |
| | *Learning Targets* | Learning targets for rounds are identified and discussed before the rounds window begins. |
| | *Observations* | Observers spread out in the classroom.  They take descriptive notes on observables regarding what the teacher and students are doing and saying.  Depending on the instructional task, observers may ask students or the teacher questions. |
| | *Debrief* | Participants review notes from observed classrooms; they co-construct patterns and reference the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning (CEL, 2012).  Dialogue tends toward greater understanding of the instructional core, interpretation of effective strategies, development of a theory of action, celebrations, and/or implications for one's own practice. |
| | *PLC Debrief* | Celebrations, connections, problems of practice, and/or theories of action are shared/transcribed for future reference. |
| **Cultural** | *Reciprocity* | Teachers observe their colleagues and are open to hosting rounds for others. |
| | *Learning stance* | The implicit purpose of rounds is to inform observers' practice rather than the host teachers' practice. |
| | *Focus on the practice, not the person* | Dialogue is focused on observable practice and is framed as low inference statements.  Distinguishing effective or ineffective practice is done so from a learning stance while maintaining collegial regard. |
| | *Confidentiality* | Rounds partners maintain confidentiality regarding observations and debrief unless pertinent to the host teacher. |

to pair with somebody. Then they go into other people's classrooms, taking notes on observables, and then they debrief by looking for themes they pull out of their observations.

In the third year of implementation, PLC rounds at Polaris were framed by CEL's 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning (2012). The 5 Dimensions include:

- Purpose (standards-based, relevant, articulated, and measurable learning goals),

- Student Engagement (rigorous, equitable engagement; higher order thinking and participation),

- Curriculum and Pedagogy (intentional use of curriculum, instructional strategies, and supports for reaching the articulated Purpose),

- Assessment for Student Learning (student self-assessment, various transparent formative assessment strategies, feedback, and adjustments to Pedagogy), and

- Classroom Environment and Culture (physical space, systems, and classroom culture that encourage and enrich student learning) (CEL, 2012).

The 5 Dimensions (2012) were used to frame Polaris' professional learning targets as well as our ensuing rounds. The inclusion of this framework intended to help participants shape the focus of observations and dialogue without constricting the experience. This practice continued in the fourth year of implementation. One staff meeting agenda from the spring of 2013 includes the targets "I can use the Instructional Rounds process to deepen my understanding of one of the CEL 5 Dimensions" and "I can use the Instructional Rounds process to build my capacity as a teacher".

In addition to the 5 Dimensions framework and learning targets, teachers are provided a general structure for their observations and debrief. The aforementioned agenda offered three

options for framing rounds visits.  While all options held the expectations that rounds were to be done with at least one partner (to promote dialogue) and involve at least two classrooms (to promote comparison), teachers could choose to focus solely on a predetermined Dimension, they could follow up on a previous observation or conversation to see a given practice in action, or they could go in as a blank slate and unpack their observations using the 5 Dimensions.  During observations, participants take notes on what the host teacher and the students are doing and saying.

Expectations for the debrief included generating a list of observables to be shared with the host teacher, discussing patterns and themes using the 5 Dimensions, identifying positive observations to celebrate, and creating a theory of action encompassing observations from one or more classrooms.  Later, at the PLC debrief, teachers were asked to volunteer their celebrations and theories of action.

Having teachers facilitate their own rounds necessitates shared adherence to cultural norms.  Otherwise, the trust that had been cultivated over the previous three years could quickly unravel, spelling the demise for rounds as well as the strength of the PLC as a whole.

The norm of reciprocity implies that observers will also be observed; over time, this norm has stabilized anxieties about having peers observe one's classroom.  Teachers often contact their peers beforehand to ask if they may visit their classroom for rounds.  During a rounds window, each teacher expects to be contacted by one or more peers for an observation.  In the first three years of implementation, willing teachers specified a certain day or class period for an observation.  But in the fourth year, Polaris teachers had become more open to visitations, leaving the day and time of visitation up to the observers.  This emerging finding will be explored later in this chapter.

Like other approaches to instructional rounds, PLC rounds observations are conducted from a learning stance where observers are primarily focused on implications for their own practice. Rounds participants spread out in a classroom and find a spot to take notes. Different vantage points allow a richer perspective of the instructional core because observers can pick up on more interactions, movements, and subtleties throughout the room. Observers get an initial sense of the lesson by watching, listening, and looking for clues such as learning targets on the board or the types of materials students are using. Because Polaris is an EL school, teachers typically employ active teaching and learning strategies. This means there is often discussion, movement, and other interactions taking place among students and the teacher; this teaching style naturally invites observers to move about the room and interview students about their learning when they are not receiving direct instruction. Even though two or more educators may be entering a classroom with clipboards, the experience tends to feel informal, relaxed, and open. The role of the learning stance and reciprocity in sustaining PLC rounds at Polaris will be discussed further in this chapter.

Debrief sessions are also guided by a learning stance. In some meetings, teachers and administrators can easily slip into venting about a particular student, structure, or class period. But in a rounds debrief, venting doesn't have a place. One teacher noted, "In other collaboration times, we allow ourselves and each other to be sarcastic or vent about our frustrations. But that would never come into a rounds conversation." A learning stance helps participants focus on their colleagues' instructional practices and reflect on their own individual needs for improvement or new strategies for dealing with challenging students or situations. Sticking to observables and maintaining a learning stance are norms that foster a healthy PLC rounds process.

Another cultural norm involves focusing on the practice, not the person. When observers reconvene for their debrief, they begin their discussion by reviewing the observables. Sticking to observables serves healthy, respectful dialogue by providing non-evaluative, low inference language for discussing specific observations of practices and student engagement rather than permitting value statements about a colleague's abilities as an educator.

Rounds participants also maintain confidentiality once the debrief is complete; other than celebrations of effective practice, observers do not share their observations with anyone outside the rounds team other than the host. When teachers and administrators keep a respectful focus on instructional practice, draw from their rounds experience from a learning stance rather than an evaluative one, and maintain confidential norms regarding specific observations, it reaffirms trust in the process when observers become the observed. The reciprocal nature of this process further distinguishes PLC rounds from the intervisitation format.

The instructional rounds literature, while limited, reveals multiple approaches to participation. In addition to shifting purposes and intended participants, each form connotes different implications for the logistical, structural, and cultural components that comprise an instructional round. These differences are of particular importance within the scope of this study, for the operationalization of PLC rounds further contextualizes the following findings in service of clarity as well as praxis.

**Research Question 1: Based on participants' individual and shared experiences, what do they perceive to be the most valuable components of PLC rounds?**

Through staff meetings and previous cycles of inquiry, the logistical, structural, and cultural components of PLC rounds have been refined over time by the Polaris faculty to bring greater coherence to the process. However, the findings of this study suggest that teachers have

diverse perspectives regarding the components they value the most.  This research question

intended to provide a basis for understanding the aspect or aspects of PLC rounds that

participants value the most.  While expecting to find a specific component that resonated for

participants more than others, I was surprised by what I found.  The following section explores

findings related to themes of PLC rounds as a pathway for authentic learning and the role of

choice in promoting ownership of the process and enhancing responsiveness.

Participants' interpretations of components that held the most value were split between

the structural components of observation and dialogue.  This teacher preferred observation the

most:

> Being an observer in classrooms is the most valuable part, because a lot of times we get
>
> so in our own mindset of our own classroom that we don't take the time to go out and go
>
> into another person's classroom, which is really important to see what other people are
>
> doing if you're struggling or you just want something new.

The data suggested that engaging in peer observations was valued by several Polaris

teachers because it provided a space to pause their teaching responsibilities, experience different

instructional strategies, classroom norms and culture, and gain new perspectives of students'

behaviors, interactions, and efforts.  Even though the school day is in full swing, teachers and

administrators participating in rounds can set aside their typical workload and bring their

professional learning to the fore.  Stepping from a teacher role into that of a learner allows

participants to view the complexity of the instructional core through a different lens.  One

teacher elaborated:

> Every time I go in someone's classroom, I learn.  Every time I go I'm always surprised.
>
> Actually, I learn most from watching the students.  It's less about a singular practice of a

teacher and more about a whole dynamic of a classroom and how there are so many

variables.  There are always details that I never catch as a teacher that I can as an

observer.  That's what's surprising.

Leading students into learning is a sophisticated endeavor.  In the act of teaching, one has a

particular lens through which the instructional core is experienced.  By stepping out of this role

and taking time to observe others engage in practice, teachers are given opportunities to see the

organic nature of the instructional core with greater clarity and resolution.  This dynamic nature

of classroom observations will relate to a surprising finding that demonstrates a mutuality of

concepts (Lincoln & Lynham, 2011) and further informs this research question.

Some Polaris teachers valued the debrief more than observation, finding the dialogue to

have the greatest benefit.

Having the time to do the dialogue afterwards is so important. That's what makes rounds

meaningful – having that time embedded for the discussion: a time, a place, a space.

Rounds without the discussion is like having common assessments without looking at the

data and changing your practice afterwards.  You're really missing the point.

While debrief sessions are grounded in classroom observations, they provide an interactive space

for constructing and co-constructing meaning and exploring implications for one's own practice.

One teacher clarified the practical value of the debrief: "We were both looking forward more to

the discussion afterwards than the actual observation.  It's all about going to go to the races

thinking about ways to inform our practice."  Another teacher appreciated the debrief as an

intellectual exercise.

I love when I get to distill a truth that I've been working on and can't quite figure it out.

Or I see a connection that comes of out nowhere – all of a sudden it reminds you of

84

something else.  That to me is fun.  When I have the time to make those connections, to

talk about them and then the space to actually make something, that's when I love it.

An emerging finding is a greater awareness of the value of professional dialogue.  One

teacher pointed out, "When we get a chance to talk, good stuff happens.  Teachers like to talk,

and stuff just starts coming out and gets figured out."  Through her participation in rounds at

Polaris, the assistant principal has learned the value of providing a space for teacher dialogue.

The most powerful professional development sessions are where teacher voice is the

biggest voice.  It wasn't so obvious to me before, but it's the truth.  I think that any time

people are given time to work together and be collaborative, they will usually like and

appreciate having that time.

For teachers, the practical and intellectual engagement of a debrief session held more

value than the observation itself.  The debrief can have value for many reasons.  The norms that

guide a debrief have a role in promoting a safe, respectful, and meaningful experience.  Another

reason participants valued the debrief is the opportunity to think deeply about teaching, learning,

and one's own practice in a social setting.  Control over the direction of the dialogue play into

discernment of value, just as personality and learning styles do.  The nature of the observation

itself, such as observing a particularly engaging classroom, can also foster meaningful,

enthusiastic dialogue among participants.  Debrief sessions gave participants greater

opportunities for engagement with and control of the experience and the professional meaning

constructed from it.

The disparity in participants' responses brings to mind the utility of the first research

question regarding teachers' perspectives of the most valuable components of PLC rounds.  If

teachers value different aspects of rounds, how does the first research question advance our

understanding?  Yet in analyzing the data from this study, I've found this disparity to help clarify the concept of authenticity in professional learning.  Webster-Wright (2010) held that professionals enter learning experiences from individualistic places, bringing their own idiosyncrasies and preferences with them.  Professionals construct meaning and value from their own experiences, learning styles, needs, and interests (2010).  Therefore, a central finding of this study is the power of PLC rounds in clearing pathways for professional learning.  PLC rounds can create the space for potential learning experiences in a way that acknowledges the situated, nonlinear nature of professionals' learning – allowing participants to construct their own meaning and attribute their own value to individual and shared experiences.

Reflecting on the first research question, seeking a single component of PLC rounds that participants consistently attribute as having the greatest value has an atomistic feel – a reductionist approach to discerning value.  By stepping away from the language of components and returning to the data with a more holistic view helped clarify an emerging theme that inhered in participants' lived experiences: the theme of choice.

Across the logistical and structural components of PLC rounds, choice was a persistent theme in participants' attribution of value to their experiences.  Choice was an important theme regarding both the observation and the debrief.  While the literature suggested convenience as a factor in choosing a partner (City, 2011; Roberts, 2012), this study found that choosing a rounds partner also had to do with perceptions about the potential for dialogue:

> The choice of my partner was very intentional, because the last time we did rounds we
> had such a great brainstorming session afterwards.  I think we were both really excited to
> engage in that kind of dialogue again, so we immediately gravitated together.

While some rounds partnerships were based on previous experience, other teachers were drawn to extending their relationships with others in the PLC:

> I pick partners I enjoy having discussions with, people that I respect as teachers to go with. But I don't always pick people that have the same thinking style because I want to stretch myself. What trumps all else is my respect for them as professionals.

> Respect for colleagues emerged as a subtheme of choice. While City (2011) suggested

partnering based on content area or convenience, past collaboration, ongoing interactions, and favorable impressions influence rounds partnerships at Polaris.

> A surprising finding was the caution regarding choice and newer teachers. One teacher

noted a potential problem with allowing every teacher to choose their rounds teams:

> If you have an inexperienced teacher, they may choose another inexperienced teacher, and they may miss a lot, so you should think about doing a mentoring partnership the first year where you have someone really experienced pointing out all kinds of cool things during rounds.

The assistant principal agreed. She identified a tension between providing a learning space for teachers and the needs of teachers needing more guidance: "I still think, 'You don't know what you don't know'. Sometimes I wonder what people pick up on. I guess for their own need it might serve them, but is it the need that would most impact kids?" She went on to wonder if rounds with newer teachers might be personalized in a way that "coaches them and pushes them a little further so that their thinking is opened up". These participants' responses resonate with Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of peripheral participation as the way newcomers are drawn into collective practice in a community.

The data also show that most Polaris teachers preferred to go to classrooms outside their content area.  Multiple participants felt they learn more in a different content area because they can think about their own content area in a new way.  They would have never seen engagement strategies in different content areas and the ways each discipline shapes the instructional core. The topic of observing other content areas will be explored further in response to the second research question.

Polaris teachers also appreciated having choice regarding the timing of their rounds experiences.  Finding time to observe peer classrooms is challenging amidst the tide of planning, teaching, grading, meetings, and other duties.  Choice is provided in a teacher's decision to use a planning period or to arrange for a substitute teacher; teachers also have a choice of which day in the rounds window is manageable within the continuum of their work.  One teacher reflected:

> A key ingredient of rounds is being able to choose when you go because one time I had to use a sub and that was awful.  That made me hate it because I don't like being out of my classroom.  But I know some people need that, so having that option I think is really essential.

Another teacher observed how having the choice of when to do rounds enabled her to focus on other choices:

> I think the principal was smart in giving us the option to have a sub or not.  It was convenient either way for me, and I knew that I had the choice.  So it became about 'Who haven't I done rounds with that I want to do rounds with?' and 'Who haven't I seen that I want to see?' or 'Who do I want to go back and see?'

As job-embedded professional learning, PLC rounds conflict with available time and workloads; they can therefore be challenging to initiate – even when they have become a normal

part of a school's professional learning efforts.  The demands of teaching and the structure of rounds are typically at odds.  The assistant principal shared the following insight about the reality of negotiating time and rounds participation:

> Rounds is a big deal.  It puts a lot on teachers' plates.  The control is in the teachers' hands, but that's where the work comes, too.  To write sub plans and give up what you're doing at that period of time and to go off…that's the logistical hurdle.  But you can't discount that because it's real work that people have to deal with.  But if they like and value the process, they are going to be more willing to invest that energy.

Her insights regarding the challenges of engaging teachers in job-embedded learning remind us of the crucial importance of authenticity in professional learning.  Amidst the intensification of professional responsibilities teachers continue to endure (Hargreaves, 1992; Valli & Buese, 2007), awareness of, respect for, and promotion of authentic professional learning experiences for teachers is paramount for school leaders envisioning effective, sustainable school improvement.  Because time and workloads are fundamental constraints within PLC rounds, the data suggest the issue of ensuring a viable trade-off through meaningful learning experiences and ownership of the process as essential.  This emerging finding helps inform the theoretical framework in the following chapter.

Another interesting finding regarding choice and authentic learning emerged from exploring a negative case.  As Polaris teachers gained familiarity with rounds, they tended to balk at being directed toward a specific focus during observations.  Granted, in the first year of piloting rounds at Polaris, we agreed upon the common focus of student engagement.  Having a shared focus provided some stability to the process as we learned and practiced the norms

associated with PLC rounds.  This study found this practice to feel contrived by teachers.  One teacher shared how choice provided him a sense of power:

>When I had to focus on how learning targets were being used in a classroom, I didn't personally get anything out of it.  I think some of it is that I wasn't given a choice.  When I'm given choice, I'm more engaged because I have power.

Another teacher also expressed her distaste for having a prescribed focus:

>Rounds feel contrived when it's really boxed.  I don't like it when somebody else tells me, 'We're looking for how many kids have pencils out or if kids know what the learning target is', because I don't feel like I'm learning.  I feel like I'm collecting data to feed back into a data box.

>In this study, Polaris teachers overwhelmingly preferred to direct their own observation experience.  However, this finding is attributed to their experience levels with rounds as well as with the teaching profession.  Because rounds are antithetical to the tradition of teacher isolation (Nehring & Fitzsimons, 2011), teachers and/or PLCs that are new to rounds can benefit from a common, predetermined focus.  Doing so provides a common ground for exploring this unconventional social practice, allowing local interpretations and norms to be negotiated and take hold.

But after several experiences with rounds, when teachers are expected to look for something specific or are expected to ask scripted questions, they feel their engagement is contrived because, as one teacher put it, "the structure becomes more important than the purpose", hindering efforts to cultivate meaningful professional learning.  Having a learner stance, being curious, and remaining responsive to what is being observed in a classroom heightens teachers' sense of engagement during observations.

90

In a sense, the same can be said for reflecting on the rounds process itself; having a

learner stance on the process itself and being responsive to teachers' needs has promoted

teachers' ownership of the process.  One teacher admitted, "I think we've moved from being

very manipulated and contrived to a huge amount of choice in how we do rounds, so that is a

huge relief to me."  Reflecting on the data, administrators and teachers have learned to take the

training wheels off the rounds process.  Doing so implies an important shift in rounds

implementation: transferring ownership.  PLC rounds are intended to belong to teachers – a

social practice they engage in to further their own professional growth, strengthen the learning

community, and realize school improvement.  Implications for leadership in rounds

implementation and the promotion of teacher ownership will be revisited later.

The theme of ownership is reflected in teachers' preference for being able to guide their

own conversations during debrief sessions.  In the first few years of implementation, debrief

sessions were highly structured, often using a template to direct the conversation.  We began to

notice that by the time participants got to a point where they were beginning to make meaningful

connections to their own practice, the demands of teaching the next class or attending a parent

meeting halted the process.  This study found that Polaris teachers value being able to make

meaning for their own practice above all, which implies a degree of choice in directing their own

conversations.

It is important for the conversation to not be highly structured.  When I was told, 'You

need to do this and check off this box and answer these questions and do the worksheets',

I honestly hated it.  Now I feel I get much more out of it because my colleague and I

know exactly what we want to do – we want to share ideas and come up with some things

we want to work on in the future, and we both will do plenty of reflecting about how to

implement this in our own classrooms.

This study found that choice in directing the dialogue during a debrief was valuable to teachers

in terms of informing practice.  But an open-ended approach to the dialogue also enhanced

participants' ability to mold the conversation to fit the dynamic nature of the observation

experience.  As referenced earlier, the inclusion of choice fit the nature of classroom observation

in a surprising way.

> I don't like being structured in conversation because I'm in classrooms looking for who
>
> knows what, whatever pops up.  And when it's structured, there's less opportunity to talk
>
> about those things.  So even when it was structured, we would get the structured part
>
> done as fast as we could and then talk about what was important to us from the
>
> experience.

> While choice was found to promote teachers' sense of power and to respond to their

idiosyncrasies as learners, it also complements the dynamic nature of the rounds process.  Unlike

traditional, outcomes-based professional development, rounds participants seemed to expect a

degree of uncertainty during observations.  The instructional core in a given classroom cannot be

predetermined; there are too many variables and interactions at play in any given classroom at

any given point in time.  Keeping an eye open for the unexpected can also lead to insightful

discussions with colleagues during debrief sessions.  Doing so allows for responsive,

serendipitous learning opportunities rather than limiting the observation and discussion to a tight

focus.  Therefore, Polaris educators have learned to remain open to the unexpected.

> We have direction in a round, like focusing on student engagement.  And I do that, but I
>
> find my learning will often leak into other areas.  I think it probably has to be with what I

need at the moment as a teacher and so that's what pops out.  I always look out for what I

think I need.  I know it sounds selfish.  But I don't feel like, 'Oh, I can't learn that

because that's not what I'm supposed to be focusing on'.  That's the richness of the

experience.  That's because you just never know what you're going to see when you're in

a classroom.  That's why rounds are exciting and interesting and powerful.  Classrooms

are such dynamic places.  You can have that one focus, but there's so much more to

learn, and I really enjoy that.

The role of choice in adapting one's individual traits, needs, and preferences to unanticipated

experiences is another key finding of this study.  The data suggest a flexible framework for

rounds not only allows participants to step into the process under their own terms; it also helps

them navigate the complexity of the observation experience and to negotiate this complexity

with their own professional learning needs in ways that can help them construct and co-construct

meaning.

But there is an inevitable tension between teachers' authentic professional learning, the

professional authority to direct this learning, and the needs of the organization.  As a social

practice, the needs of the individual and the organization must converge if the work is truly

collaborative.  Having guidelines and a common framework such as the 5 Dimensions of

Teaching and Learning (CEL, 2012) have allowed rounds participants at Polaris to direct their

own professional conversations within a general process framework:

We went through the notes that we had kept, and we correlated what we saw with the 5

Dimensions in a detailed list – exactly what we saw in those classes as observable

evidence of the relevant Dimensions.  Then we identified the overlaps between two of the

Dimensions in both classrooms.  It's really nice to be able to get more familiar with the 5

Dimensions.  It's nice to see it in action in someone else's classroom so that you can

identify it more easily when you're in your own classroom.

Such an approach respects the needs of the individual professional in a way that is

grounded in the collective needs of the PLC.  Having general guidelines that allow for participant

discretion has, for now, been a viable compromise between the individual needs of teachers and

the intricacies of facilitating joint work.  Referencing a common framework generates a shared

language and understanding among teachers and administrators by linking observables, dialogue,

and external research.  The breadth of the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning framework

(CEL, 2012) appears to have helped Polaris educators resolve a Goldilocks dilemma: finding a

rounds configuration that is neither too broad nor too constricting.  Because the 5 Dimensions

framework has been adopted by Poudre School District, its consistent use has the added benefit

of promoting a common language regarding the instructional core between schools – a helpful

byproduct in a district that oversees a diverse array of specialized programs and pedagogies.

In negotiating the tension between cultivating a coherent PLC and fostering ownership,

the principal noted the multiple roles he finds himself playing in the process.

> I take turns leading from ahead, leading from the side, and leading from behind.  The
>
> initial proposal of rounds takes some leading.  As rounds morphed, it took some leading
>
> side by side.  The parts I've handed over or given teachers a voice in how they innovate
>
> upon rounds is leading from behind, as long as we're all on the same page.

This leadership style implies the transition from a starting point of administratively derived,

arranged forms of collegiality to increased ownership of the process by teachers suggested by

Hargreaves and Fullan (2012).  At Polaris, it seems there is an inherent irony in the way school

leaders have made bureaucratic decisions for the purpose of establishing professional authority.

But it is this approach that inheres in the value of choice reported by teachers participating in this study.

To summarize the themes and findings related to the first research question, participants favored either the observation or the debrief components the most. The difference between these responses suggested that participants come into professional learning spaces with different experiences, learning styles, and needs. Due to these idiosyncrasies, choice in the PLC rounds process was universally valued by this study's participants. A rounds framework infused with opportunities for choice has helped Polaris teachers construct authentic professional learning experiences from their own needs and in the presence of uncertainty.

There's a continuum of needs, whether you're a first year teacher, five year teacher, or 10 year teacher. And people have different learning styles. There's extroverts, introverts, different personality types. One of the biggest frustrations teacher professionals have is a lack of choice – professional development that feels contrived and maybe it works for 30% of the staff and not the other 70%. Rounds is no different unless the structure allows for choice. Choice is intrinsic to rounds – you can choose when you do it, what you're observing, who you're observing with, who you're observing, what the focus of your discussion is going to be. If administrators allow for teacher choice in rounds, I think it can be really a rich professional learning experience.

Accommodating the diverse learning needs and styles of teachers allowed participants the space and freedom to direct their own professional learning. The data suggest this provision to be important in discerning authenticity of their experiences.

If you let me decide what I need to work on or what I need to improve on, it's far more authentic. I make that choice. And with rounds, it's something that we're expected to do,

but I also feel like it's not dictated. It's organic. If I want to go see more people, I can. And when I went with my rounds partner, we didn't know what we were looking for, but we learned a whole heck of a lot and had a great conversation. Having the ability to find the ways that we can improve makes it really authentic.

This teacher's insight also suggests how choice is essential to shifting PLC rounds from a process led by school leaders to a social practice owned by teachers. Teachers are able to choose when they will do rounds, where they will do rounds, with whom they will do rounds, and in what manner they will make sense of their experience and whether or not it informs their practice. This discretion also helped participants negotiate the unpredictable nature of classroom observation.

However, rather than implying choice as completely open and up to each participant, the range of choices have been informed by previous cycles of inquiry and ongoing collaboration during faculty meetings. Scheduling a rounds window, adopting the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning (CEL, 2012), refining the debrief process – each of the logistical and structural components have been practiced, discussed, revisited, and refined as Polaris teachers and administrators became more experienced with the process over time. It is from these reflective dialogues that opportunities for choice are brainstormed, negotiated, and adopted. And while Polaris teachers have been given choice related to the logistical and structural components related to their rounds experience, it is the cultural components that seem to hold this process together. These norms have taken hold as Polaris educators have voiced their opinions, preferences, and concerns during staff meetings and one-on-one interviews. Open, ongoing dialogue about the experience and possibilities of rounds allows for the reconfiguration of logistical and structural components as well as norms, yielding increased teacher ownership of

96

the process.  These processes have shaped past and present configurations of rounds at Polaris, and continued participation, reflection, and dialogue is part of the journey of school improvement.  As the principal noted:

> I think we spent that first year really defining and sticking to the debrief process and protocols, which helped keep the process safe.  I think it's changed over the course of time because people wanted it to be more beneficial for themselves as individuals.  So it became more flexible as far as what the focus could be on.  I think we've seen structural flexibility as well, such as the use of plan time.  And I also think that over time the relational trust within the school has developed so that the debrief process could also be adjusted so it's not so scripted.  People can jump right to 'What does this mean for my practice?' as opposed to making sure that we're spending the majority of time sticking to observables.  I don't know if we'll ever land on the best way to do it, but I think it also changes as the staff changes and grows.

The findings related to the first research question are inspiring.  Participants' candid responses highlight the power of PLC rounds as a valuable approach to school improvement. They bring teachers' lived experiences to the fore.  They describe the ways professional authority and negotiation help them navigate the complexities of the instructional core as well as collaboration itself.  Lastly, they distill new knowledge about what is most valuable about PLC rounds – knowledge that contributes to understanding authentic professional learning in PLC rounds.  The second research question, split into two parts, sought to further shape this emerging understanding to further inform praxis.

**Research Question 2A: Based on their individual and shared experiences, how do teachers perceive their participation as contributing to their professional learning?**

A central finding of this study is teachers' emphasis on interpretations of practical value as a determinant of professional learning. By creating the space for teachers to observe each other and engage in dialogue about observations, they have encountered increased opportunities to enhance their own instructional repertoires – opportunities that do not typically exist in the conventional organization of the school day. This research question intended to clarify how participation in PLC rounds might benefit individual professional learning.

One expected finding was the perspective that participation in rounds enhances one's own instructional repertoire. An implicit part of teachers' learning in rounds is exposure to new instructional strategies.

> Every time I watch another teacher, I improve my own practice. Observation is where
> my real learning happens because there's so much to see and learn. Every Polaris teacher
> is very good at what they do, and so I like to watch people who are very good and learn
> from them.

But for experienced teachers, rounds can also be a reminder of specific practices they haven't used in a while. One teacher clarified:

> My tool box is kind of old and jam-packed and I tend to forget what's in there. So it's
> great to see other teachers. Like, 'Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. That's cool. I should do
> that'. So it's not always learning new stuff. It can just be keeping practice fresh.

A surprising finding is the incremental rather than epiphanic nature of teacher learning in rounds. Through their participation, teachers self-identify practices they observe in action and

perceive as meeting a potential need in their own practice.  In doing so, they may adjust a practice to make it their own rather than replicating a specific technique.

> I don't think I've ever seen or been told anything that's incredibly earth-shattering that I have to go home and re-evaluate my teaching.  But I think small things all the time. I see something cool, and I say to the teacher, 'I love the way you do this, and I'm going to figure out how to use it in my room'.  But I don't want to be somebody else.  I don't think the kids want me to be somebody else.  I don't think they want us all to be the same. Those little things, that's usually where my changes come from.

This finding is revealing in that it shifts the mental model of the instructional tool belt from an accumulation of static, clearly defined practices to an amalgamation of personally meaningful, individually constructed strategies.  Pushed to further elaborate the incremental manner in which her practice evolves, the above teacher provided an insightful metaphor:

> I see our practice as being like building something out of clay.  When you start college and you start learning about how to be a teacher, you have different mentors and you have different experiences, and so that sort of allows you to form your practice.  It's like taking a big block of clay and you break stuff off and mold it and create your practice. What is your classroom like?  What is the environment like?  What are your processes and procedures and expectations?  You create this landscape of what your classroom is, and I think it would be really hard to pick up everything you've created and put it back in that block and start over.  I don't know if you can do that.  You can't create your landscape of clay and put it back in the factory box.  Nor should you really try.  So if you've created your landscape and you think, 'Wow, if I move this one thing over here, it would look a lot better'.  The small tweaks are pretty easy to do.  It's still productive,

whereas ripping apart everything you've done and trying to put it back doesn't really

work.

The data suggest that incremental, self-directed learning contributes to the learning needs of

Polaris teachers – a coupling of efficiency, effectiveness, and ownership.  However, incremental

learning patterns sometimes suggest single loop learning, where the assumptions that guide

action remain unchallenged (Argyris, 2004).  Single loop learning has a role in professional

practice; it is the routine maintenance of ongoing practice (Argyris, 2004; Argyris & Schön,

1974).  However, additional findings suggest that creating the space for teachers to directly

observe instructional strategies in real time in diverse contexts and to interpret the effectiveness

of these strategies does more than expose them to a greater body of practical knowledge.

As indicated previously in this chapter, Polaris teachers also enjoy observing classrooms

outside their content area.  Content, instructional practice, classroom structures, or engagement

strategies can be very different across subjects.  Exposure to these differences has helped Polaris

teachers construct a more robust instructional tool belt by getting them out of the confines of

their own content area.

I got more out of observing her classroom because it is a completely different subject.

She does things I would never think to do, but when I tried them, they were very

valuable.  I had my own expectation that in my subject area I was expected to do these

certain things.  But when you go into another subject area and you see something, you

can take it and mold it into your own content area.  So I observed more new and exciting

ideas in classes outside my content area.

Observing different content areas and grade levels challenge the variables and assumptions that

frame one's understanding of practice – literally thinking outside the box of one's own classroom

and content area.  The data suggest that exploring the instructional core in different dissimilar classrooms can promote double-loop learning.

A second expected finding regarding this research question was the role dialogue plays in bridging observations and improving practice.  It is through social interaction that what was observed is mediated, questioned, and confirmed.  As participants draw from observables and their own professional needs, they co-construct a dialogue that moves meaning from interpretations of effectiveness to implications for practice.

My professional learning doesn't feel real until I use it in my classroom.  So the debrief feels authentic because it builds collegiality between me the people having the conversations and it's going to affect the kids in my classroom.  The whole way we make meaning from what we saw is through our own experience.  It's trying to understand what we saw in terms of the content or the age that we teach or the students that we have.  We're making meaning on a real level rather than a hypothetical level.

Participants recognized the role of open-ended dialogue in making rounds an authentic professional learning experience.  Because rounds experiences are shaped by participants' idiosyncratic needs and are implicitly responsive to the natural dynamic of classrooms, the possibilities for discussion are endless.  Participants unpack their observations and collaborate to make sense of the experience with the goal of positively impacting praxis.  The dialogic exchange with others who were part of the same observations is what makes rounds a social practice – a space for co-constructing understanding and developing professional meaning.  In doing so, collegial relationships and sense of professional community are also cultivated and sustained.

Observation and dialogue are interlaced in the rounds process, coupled tightly together in ways that support professional learning. The opportunity to reflect on shared experiences, seek patterns, draw connections, probe puzzles, and craft next steps promotes the authenticity of rounds experiences for participants. In doing so, their critical thinking can shift professional learning from improved practice to increased awareness about teaching and learning at the classroom, school, or system level. Because rounds involve observations of multiple classrooms, participants are able to identify patterns throughout the school. While administrators use observation formats such as evaluative cycles and learning walks to discern patterns and potential problems of practice, teachers are rarely afforded this experience. Short observations of several classrooms allow teachers to generate new insights that can elevate thinking beyond the confines of one's own practice. Consider this teacher's learning with regard to student engagement:

> We talked about the impact the different climate and cultures had on the kids and where do the kids function better or worse in. We came to the conclusion that the kids we observed were participating in a highly engaged way, but it was wildly different. You would think that the foreign language class would be the one where the kids were quietly sort of working and in the art classes they would be bouncing around more, but it was reversed. So we talked about how much our classroom cultures fluctuate. A lot of times we think that the more consistent we can be, the better it is for kids. 'Everything needs to be exactly the same from classroom to classroom'. But that's not what we saw. In these very different classrooms, the kids were doing what they needed to be doing, they were engaged in diverse ways, and they cared. We saw how kids are flexible and can adjust to different environments.

In studying the instructional core in action and making comparisons across classrooms, this teacher experienced dissonance – changing her perspective of students and their flexibility in adapting to different instructional styles and classroom norms. This insight brought her to question the existing assumption that students thrive on consistency from classroom to classroom – allowing to consider the importance of learners' adaptability in different contexts. Her experience is also reflective of the double-loop learning that PLC rounds invites.

Informed by experience and previous cycles of inquiry, teachers' heightened awareness of their own classrooms after participating in rounds was an expected finding. Looking closely at student engagement in a classroom and having a dialogue with a colleague helped these individuals reflect while in the act of teaching.

> Rounds helps you see your classroom from that third eye perspective. What am I doing? What are the kids doing? What is the whole process put together? Because it's not just me and it's not just the kids, it's the interactions that we're having together that really create the learning.

Seeing the instructional core with greater clarity in one's own classroom demonstrates how more than instructional strategies can be transferred into practice. Vicarious experiences such as envisioning other classrooms or a imagining a sudden observation suggest ways that teachers' participation in rounds enhances their self-efficacy.

However, the connection between observation, perceptions of equity, and improved practice was unexpected. It isn't surprising that rounds participants may observe problems of practice that would have remained hidden from view without exposure to other classrooms (City et al., 2009). What is surprising is the immediacy with which a teacher can enact changes to improve equity for students as well as instructional effectiveness.

During a rounds visit at this other school, I saw that none of the students of color ever got

called on. And they were all on the periphery of the room. And I'm thinking, 'That

teacher is probably not aware that this configuration has the athletic, compliant, smart

boys up front.' Teachers don't realize when they are playing favorites. Moving to a

system where it's completely random is a better way to serve every child every day.

That's my theory of action. So I tried it, and it works great. To every kid in the room, I

think it feels more fair. So I've changed the configuration of my room and I walk around

more. To me, that is the very top of my list for a good class: Is every kid engaged?

That's risen to the top of my priorities because of the rounds process. I want the poorest

kid and the kid with learning disabilities – I want every kid to have the same attention as

the bright, compliant, eager student at the top of the class.

Her observation of how teachers can unconsciously play favorites encouraged her to question her

own practice on a deeper level, leading her beyond incremental changes to a more fundamental

shift through a process of double loop learning. For her, this rounds experience prompted her to

think about the moral implications of her instructional practice. By making instructional practice

public, thinking critically about teaching and learning on an individual and organizational level,

and striving to improve one's professional practice, this study found that Polaris teachers

contribute to their own sense of self as a learning professional.

As teachers participate in PLC rounds, they tend to adopt a growth perspective of their

own abilities as an educator. Rather than evaluating colleagues, Polaris teachers use rounds as a

space for reflecting on their own practice. Their ongoing participation reconfigures norms

related to being observed, encouraging them to reflect as learners. Because the norm of non-

evaluative observations during rounds debrief sessions is prevalent at Polaris, teachers' anxiety about being observed has been reduced.

> I got much more comfortable the second time. It was very weird the first time. It felt like they were watching me and evaluating me as opposed to observing the classroom. No one at my university ever talked about rounds or having people in your classroom on a consistent basis. So the unknown made it a challenge. But after having our first conversation and seeing what other staff members fleshed out and how they didn't criticize teachers – they just stayed strictly with the observables – that made the second time much more easy to have people in my classroom.

This teacher's response exhibits his growing comfort with having colleagues observing his classroom. Allowing teachers to volunteer to have their classrooms be observed gives hosts a measure of control, and experience with subsequent observations, reciprocity, and collegial help reduce this anxiety.

The learning stance assumed during rounds observations commits a rounds team's focus on instructional practice rather than a colleague's value as a teacher. Low inference language such as observables and consistent reference to informing one's own practice fosters and sustains trust in the process and one's colleagues. One teacher shed light on how a healthy rounds process helps minimize individual anxieties:

> There are so many things that don't go well: the kids are misbehaving, or a lesson plan blows up in your face, or no one turns in their homework. I think for the most part that as professionals we're more aware of those things that go wrong. When we're observing others, I feel like I'm always looking for the cool things that they're doing and the stuff that they're doing well, and I feel like when I'm watching I see what I'm not doing well.

105

If I was watching you, I would see you do something that maybe you're really good at

and feel like, okay, I need to get better at that. But I don't come into your room and feel

like, 'Oh my gosh, he doesn't have control of any of his kids', or, 'Why is he writing so

small?' Those are nitpicky things that I think a lot of teachers are afraid of everybody

seeing when they come in their classroom. I'm not looking for that. I'm looking through

my practice in what I'm doing so I see how I can improve.

Her perspective shows how a focus on potentially effective instructional practices

provides a foundation for a learning stance, which when practiced with integrity can lead to

colleagues' reduced anxiety and increased relational trust – a finding that will be explored further

in this chapter. But an emerging theme from this reduced anxiety is Polaris teachers' interest in

authentic observation experiences.

When participating teachers were asked whether or not they preferred to be informed of

an observation or would rather have observers drop in unannounced, their responses were

surprising. Participants were consistently in favor of their colleagues and administrators

dropping in unannounced for rounds observations.

If we just pop into each others' classrooms more, we see more of what is actually going

on – there's less of a dog and pony show, which then means there is a more trusting

community. When you are all prepped for an observation and hitting it out of the park, it

creates an inauthentic relationship with the observing teachers.

Participants noted the tendency to embellish their own instructional practice when they knew of

an impending observation. This study found that authenticity in terms of professional learning

goes beyond individual meaning-making, extending into the authenticity of the instructional core

itself. As Polaris teachers have become more familiar with rounds as hosts and observers, as

they continue to think critically about effective practice as trust has been established within the PLC, and as norms focusing on practice rather than individuals are upheld, there is an emerging interest in candid snapshots of the ways the instructional core takes place on a daily basis within the school. Unannounced visits therefore further normalize the rounds process and may promote greater opportunities to discern problems of practice that might have been obscured by the instructional embellishments typically associated with an anticipated observation.

This internal and collaborative commitment to the provision of valid information through increasingly public practice suggests a heightened interest in being a learning professional and collectively advancing school improvement, properties that are reminiscent of Argyris and Schön's (1976) Model II organization. As a social practice, rounds become a cyclical process fueled by a desire to learn and improve one's craft as a teacher. One teacher clarified this point:

> We do rounds because we like to learn, and I think we all value each other and opinions of others and we want to get better all the time. We want to make stuff better for the kids and our classrooms. I don't think we'd be teachers if we weren't learners.

Pursuing the theme of authentic learning experiences, this study also found that when teachers' participation in rounds doesn't connect to their own experiences or practice, it did little to support their professional learning. Teachers were asked if any part of the PLC rounds process felt contrived or ineffective. Their unanimous response was the PLC debrief component. Part of the problem lies with the format:

> When we have the big group discussions, time is constricted, so we don't really get to talk about things, we just kind of present things. And when the meeting is over, there is nothing we have to take away from that discussion. It is such a brief amount of time to

107

talk about the complex phenomena going on in classrooms. I've gotten a lot more from

debriefing with a partner than the whole group discussions.

In the past, there has been a shared assumption that the purpose of rounds at Polaris is to build a

collective instructional repertoire. As participants discuss their experiences, theories of action,

and other take-aways, it was assumed that this shared tool belt of practice contributes to

individual professional learning. A surprising finding from this study is a flaw in this mental

model.

I think an instructional tool belt is based on our individual strengths and weaknesses. We

don't have the same needs that a first year teacher does. And your tools are different than

mine.

Similar to the lump of clay metaphor for how teachers change their practice, this participant

reiterated the theme of an instructional repertoire's individualistic nature. Shared practice is

therefore a misnomer because it fallaciously implies transfer among practitioners. This study

found that direct experience, through practice, observation, and/or dialogue, was the most

conducive to informing praxis. Another teacher pointed out the problem with the current format

for the PLC debrief: "I get very little out of it because it's not about my practice. It's not about

my classroom and how to make me a better teacher. I'm not interested unless it has to do with

my classroom." This finding suggests the need for individual relevance in contributing to

professional learning.

Negative case analysis enhanced the second central finding of practical value as a

contributor to authentic professional learning. In PLC rounds, there is an interplay of direct

experience, collaborative engagement, and practical relevance that supports professional

learning. Participants actively engage in meaning-making from their observation experience and

the needs of their own practice. Several teachers stated that theories of action with which they had no experiential connection felt irrelevant and did little to inform their practice. One teacher clarified this point: "I don't think other people's theories of action stuck because we weren't really engaging with them. We had our original conversations surrounding our own different theories of action, and the rest was just static." Some teachers found the act of creating theories of action to be in itself an irrelevant act, preferring to dialogue with others about next steps in their practice rather than crafting predictive statements of causality. Part of the problem with relevance seems tied to the definition participants attribute to theories-of-action. This study found a persistent impression among some participants that theories are formal, shared constructions that resolve problems of practice for the organization rather than inform the practice of the individual.

> Theories of action sometimes feel forced. And talking about them feels like a limited level of engagement. I do rounds, I observe, and I talk with colleagues. What can I take away from this? What can I learn from this? I can put it to my practice. That's why I do it. That's the whole purpose. But then when we look for this big global thing that we can apply to the whole school, I think that's where the breakdown is for me. What theory will change the whole school? I'm not quite sold on that.

While some teachers questioned the value of theories of action, there was another artifact of the process that teachers did appreciate: debrief notes. Since we first implemented rounds at Polaris, we have struggled with bringing closure to the rounds by reconnecting observers and their host. The non-evaluative nature of rounds seemed to contradict the role of feedback. As the World Café findings in Chapter 1 suggest, the issue of feedback in the rounds process is still a point of debate at Polaris. The most recent iteration was an adaptation made to the more

109

loosely structured, teacher-directed debrief format. Following the expectations of the rounds

process in the fourth year meant providing the host teacher with a list of observables and

connections to the 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning (CEL, 2012) as discussed during the

debrief. Providing the host teacher with notes from the conversation was an attempt to "close"

the round with the host teacher by providing the observers' perspective on the practice and

potential ways the experience informed their own thinking. While the topic of feedback will be

explored further in this chapter, a final finding is that teachers appreciated receiving debrief

notes from their colleagues. One teacher shared: "I did find a lot of value in the notes that my

observers sent back about what they saw and theories of action that they came up with. I thought

that was superb." Another teacher appreciated how her notes captured the natural flow of her

peers' dialogue:

> They just sort of listed the things they saw and the things they thought were engaging for
>
> the kids. They wrote some questions they had about what I was doing, but it was all
>
> really positive and easy to read. It wasn't super structured. It was super organic – like
>
> they just took notes of their conversation. That's my favorite way to get feedback.

In this way, host teachers get a more complete snapshot of what observers noticed and how it

informs others' thinking and practice, bringing a greater sense of closure to the process.

In response to Research Question 2A, this study found that teachers' lived experience in

PLC rounds promoted authentic professional learning in myriad ways. Engaging in rounds as an

observer as well as a host provided venues for teachers to improve their practice, think critically

about teaching and learning on an individual, organizational, and moral level, and increased

views of self and others as professional learners. Professional discretion to make informed

choices about engagement in rounds and collective reliance on norms are supports for individual

110

efforts to enhance instructional repertoires in authentic ways.  Lastly, the value teachers place on

their experiences relate to their sense of authentic professional learning; this value was often

related to one's own direct experience, meaning-making, implications for practice rather than

activities of abstraction, and insights about one's own practice from the perspectives of

observers.  These findings are a celebration of the intent of this study in that they articulate the

processes of teachers' professional learning within PLC rounds.  Thorough understanding of how

teachers learn within the practice of rounds highlights ways to support and sustain this learning.

These findings therefore yield powerful insights for informing ongoing praxis.

Much of what has already been discussed about individual professional learning in this

section is intertwined with the role of the PLC.  Authentic professional learning that resides

within a social practice cannot be separated from the community in which it is experienced.

However, the following section extends the discussion of sustaining school improvement as a

PLC through rounds.

**Research Question 2B: Based on their individual and shared experiences, how do teachers**

**perceive their participation as sustaining school improvement as a professional learning**

**community?**

Participants consistently viewed rounds as a way to strengthen the PLC.  Making

instructional practice public and interactive has created a space for thinking openly and critically

about problems of practice from multiple perspective, a property of Model II organizations

(Argyris, 1990; Argyris & Schön, 1974).

> The more you go into others' classrooms, the more you do these debriefs.  There is more
>
> of a sense of, 'Everyone brings something of value to the table.  We're not going to judge
>
> people.  Let's hear them out'.  There's just more collegiality and a better team.  It feels

111

like we are better able to engage in dialogue and come up with tangible results, and part

of that is figuring out how we help our students learn better.

This study found that collegiality, relational trust, and collaboration in rounds cultivates the

intrinsic motivation Fullan (2011) and Hargreaves and Fullan (2012) identified as crucial to

realizing school improvement from the bottom-up. Webster-Wright (2010) found that healthy

learning relationships are crucial for nourishing professional learning. One teacher related how

the work of improvement at Polaris is also grounded in trusting relationships:

Rounds positively influences a professional learning community by validating the

teaching profession and the hard work the teachers do while still creating a common

value for getting better on an intrinsic level. Not because we have to, and not because it's

'professional development time' and we all kind of moan and roll our eyes and look

around. What rounds does is it builds an intrinsic motivation to want to get better. It

builds a community that's open. People are actually willing to talk to each other about

their practice because they trust each other.

As a newer member of the Polaris community, the assistant principal immediately noticed the

strength of the PLC.

When I came to Polaris, my immediate impression was noticing a very powerful culture.

People are willing to jump in on board and help, even if it is beyond the normal tasks of

their daily job. You always hear in education that people want to do what's best for kids,

but I feel that is really exemplified here. People are independently driven and

intrinsically motivated.

Her observations resonate with the attributes of tenets of PLCs identified in the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 such as a consistent focus on practice, reflection and collaborative action, and reliance on lateral accountability and positive regard.

The data suggest PLC rounds as having an affirming quality.  Part of this affirmation seems to be due to the way debrief sessions are structured to highlight effective practices as well as celebrations.  As members of a conterminous culture, positive regard plays an important role in sustaining the health of the PLC.  However, City and her colleagues (2009) warn rounds participants to be wary of unsubstantiated praise, calling for analysis grounded in observables. Affirmation and celebration at Polaris only come after rounds participants have worked through their observations, sought patterns, and made practical inferences about effectiveness.  In a sense, there is confirmation before affirmation.

> I get excited when people come in my room. I get really bummed out if nobody comes in my room for the whole rounds process because I think we all crave somebody telling us we're doing something cool or doing something well.  When people come into your room and they share with what they saw afterwards, it's really cool to know somebody else who has the same training came in and saw what the kids were doing and thought that they were engaged.

Having peers' perspective on one's practice helps substantiate the strategies in one's repertoire. One teacher elaborated:  "Until somebody else says, 'That's really cool', I don't think we really believe ourselves.  For somebody else to say, 'Yes, that is a good lesson and your kids are excited and they're learning', then it's real."  These teachers' responses help elucidate how affirmation does more than put a positive light on the experience of being observed.  Granted, participants did report enjoying the positive feedback.  Informal recognition between colleagues

113

has promoted a sense of collegiality and membership. But the data suggest affirmation also has to do with gaining confidence in one's own practice.

To further explore this theme, I reflected on my own experience as a host for others' rounds. When colleagues come to see my classroom and they praise a specific strategy they observed, I feel great. I feel recognized, appreciated, and connected to the collective mission of Polaris and my colleagues. But I find that I will then place more value on that strategy in my own instructional repertoire because my peers have validated that practice through their analysis. In some sense, I've mentally bookmarked the practices that my peers discerned to be effective. The reciprocal nature of PLC rounds therefore feeds individual professional growth as well as collegiality among members of the PLC. Rounding as a PLC means I am on both sides of the observation; the norm of each teacher being the observer and the observed highlights the importance of informed affirmation in maintaining safety, trust, and sharing of effective practices.

Another finding was the role of validation in fostering a growth perspective among colleagues. Any teacher knows that classroom observations don't always go smoothly as hoped for. Students can be off-task, or a lesson can be less engaging than anticipated. But because colleagues have observed each other over time, there is an acceptance of each other's momentary challenges. One teacher interpreted how witnessing a colleague struggling increases a sense of professional community.

> Other people watching are like, 'Ah, this has happened to me before, too'. And all of a sudden you now have this bond – we're in the trenches together instead of, 'I'm competing with you'. You have to get to that place where people always trust each other, where people feel validated – everyone has something to offer. And the only way we do

that is if your colleagues are seeing each other and seeing cool things – and that's the norm.

Because colleagues get multiple opportunities to observe each other, there's a good chance they get to see each person facilitate learning effectively at some point. Recognizing that each teacher has strong days as well as days they would rather forget allows host teachers to let go of some anxiety regarding how well an observed class might go. The teacher quoted above shared his thoughts regarding the management of his own observation fears: "Come on in. I know I'm going to screw up somewhere, I know it's going to look goofy, but you already recognize that I've got some good things going on." His perspective suggests that PLC rounds help teachers understand themselves as learning professionals – professionals that struggle, learn, and succeed with the support and encouragement of their peers. This study found that reciprocal observation over time has informed how collegial relationships are forged and sustained.

Within the Polaris PLC, teachers and administrators often use the phrase "pushing practice" to describe the mechanism for school improvement. Improvement is directly involved with the advancements in the professional work of educators. This view is consonant with the idea that practitioners tend to operate at the edge of their abilities (City et al, 2009). To enact school improvement involves practitioner improvement. But whose practice is being pushed? And who is doing the pushing? Is it individual practice, or is it organizational practice? Does pushing practice mean to be evaluative of others, or does it mean to evaluate one's self? One teacher explained his interpretation of how pushing practice is intended at Polaris:

> "In thinking about rounds, I think my perception of pushing practice has changed into more of a collective, system-wide thing. But at the same time, how that gets changed is by individuals making decisions about their own learning. I as an individual am trying to

115

improve my practice somehow. It takes personal decisions by individuals to accomplish this collective goal of getting better."

For the PLC to learn and grow, the individuals that comprise it must learn and grow. To guide individual learning means to reflect the provision of professional learning within the community. The data suggest that pushing practice also involves improving the professional learning experience. A critical, collective look at PLC rounds creates ownership of the process and enhances its responsiveness to the needs of participants. One teacher explained:

It takes continuing to get together as teachers to refine rounds and talk about what works, what doesn't work, and what's next. In order for it to take hold, we need to hear what teachers are asking for and continue to make those things available and to work on them. That's what it takes in order to have buy-in from staff and have it be something that is sustained over time.

The principal acknowledged the need for dialogue about the PLC rounds experience as well as his own stance on engaging in this collective reflection:

For me as the principal, it feels kind of vulnerable because I know that there's this range where you can't please everybody all the time. But discussing what rounds look like or what our learning looks like is one of the most important parts of rounds, along with discussing what good teaching looks like.

The data suggest not only how PLC rounds are emergent, but why. Being a professional learner, one who pushes her own individual practice in concert with others, means experiencing growth and changing needs over time. By adopting norms such as making practice public, focusing on the practice rather than the person, taking a learning stance, and seeking improvement in PLC rounds, Polaris educators have learned to apply the same norms to their

116

own professional learning as a form of double loop learning.  Rather than focusing on solely the instructional core of classrooms, they openly reflect on what I call the *professional learning core* – the interplay of educators, organizational supports, norms, and the professional learning needed to serve students and school improvement effectively.  As school leaders, teachers, and support staff change as professionals and learners over time, the social practice of rounds itself requires responsiveness if it is to continue to provide quality professional learning experiences that fuel sustained school improvement.  In this sense, PLC rounds are emergent – open-ended, dynamic, and informed by past and present experience in each iteration.  Disciplined inquiry and collaborative dialogue have provided a space for negotiating this path.

**Conclusion**

The findings of this study suggest the qualitative differences between the four instructional rounds approaches.  Sustaining rounds as a PLC implies special consideration of teachers' lived experiences and professional learning needs.

At Polaris, observation and dialogue are coupled features that serve as the backbone of PLC rounds.  Evidence that either could hold greater value for participants suggests the idiosyncratic nature of teachers' learning styles and needs.  Participants revealed the importance of choice in the process.  Being able to choose partners, hosts, timing, focus, and direction of dialogue was valuable to teachers.  Flexible entry points and navigation of the PLC rounds experience cleared pathways for teachers to make meaning and inform their practice.  Having choice cultivated ownership of the process and helped teachers respond to the dynamic nature of the instructional core by providing them with a locus of control in bridging their own needs with interpretations of experienced phenomena.

The types of interpretations teachers tended to make were in service of their own instructional practice. Seeking and discussing examples of effectiveness tended to be shaped by one's own needs and tended to be modified to fit one's instructional context rather than replicating another's practice. This learning therefore tended to be incremental, although exposure to a diversity of classrooms (grade levels and content areas) also contributed to teachers' thinking about teaching and learning at greater levels of abstraction.

Teachers' authentic professional learning was consistently connected to having control over the process, steering the experience toward informing one's own practice, enjoyment of the learning experience as well as collegial relationships with rounds partners, and the sense that the observation experience itself was an authentic, candid snapshot of teaching and learning rather than a polished presentation. Inauthentic or contrived experiences were related to having a prescribed focus for rounds, following a scripted or structured protocol, and the utility of theories of action in informing practice. These experiences suggest a lack of control of the process or a lack of personal, experiential connection to theories of action as constraints of authentic professional learning experiences.

Sustaining PLC rounds over time in service of school improvement implies ongoing reflecting on the professional learning core and open dialogue about refining the process. While part of this refinement can be attributed to implementing rounds without much guidance from the literature, it also relates to the continuum of needs that exist in a PLC as well as the way those needs change as participants engage in practice and learning over time. Ongoing dialogue and practice with rounds at Polaris has been guided by the need to carve out pathways for meaningful learning experiences within the logistical, structural, and cultural context of job-embedded learning as a PLC.

This study afforded an opportunity for me and my colleagues to co-construct a more sophisticated understanding of PLC rounds – its history at Polaris, valuable components, and the role of authenticity and dialogue in sustaining this social practice.  In doing so, we have made the practice of professional learning at Polaris public.  The following chapter explores emergent themes that have yet to be resolved in practice.  These themes further inform the theoretical framework and point to potential next steps for Polaris teachers, Polaris administrators, and Poudre School District.

**Chapter 5: Implications**

*It behooves principals to hire good people and then give up power in some ways – just get the hell out of their way and they'll do fine.*

- The principal of Polaris Expeditionary Learning School

Chapter 4 presented findings that describe PLC rounds at Polaris as it existed during this study – findings that celebrate the power of PLC rounds for inspiring authentic professional learning and strengthening the PLC. But findings alone are insufficient for guiding praxis or further research. How these findings fit together are of crucial importance for linking research and practice. And while some themes have described established phenomena, other themes constructed from the data suggest the boundaries of PLC rounds in practice. These "edges of rounds" inform understanding as well as next steps in practice. In other words, the interplay between the interpreted past, the constructed present, and the intuited future blazes a trail toward a new horizon of practice. This chapter reviews articulated and implicit issues that were unresolved at the conclusion of the fourth year of implementation of PLC rounds at Polaris. It also reviews new literature that was published after data for this study had been collected. Emerging insights, new literature on school-based rounds, and unresolved issues in practice provide greater descriptive and explanatory power in the ensuing theoretical framework of PLC rounds at Polaris.

**New Insights on the Practice of PLC Rounds**

Past and present findings provide a new vantage point from which to reflect on PLC rounds. In the constructivist paradigm, this knowledge is viewed as socially derived and accumulating in increasingly refined reconstructions (Lincoln et al., 2011). Reconstruction

paves the path of praxis by exploring dissonance, difference, and ambiguity in service of more

robust understanding and ensuing improvement (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

One source of dissonance is the theme of theory itself. I cannot escape the sense of irony

in engaging in theory-building when several participants have held theory, in the form of theories

of action, with some disdain.

> Sharing out one specific thing that you really value that came out of your rounds, if
>
> everybody is excited about something, that feels more meaningful than what theory of
>
> action might possibly be true. I always think, 'Is this a valid theory of action or not?'
>
> And there is no way to test it right now in place. Theories of action feel more like
>
> guesses of action. So I don't want to even spend time on it. I'd rather say, 'Did this
>
> make it a better class?' Yeah. The kids were engaged. Okay, that's valuable.

How does one reconcile the purpose of theory-building in the context of this study if theory is

not valued by a contingency of stakeholders it intends to serve? Certainly, one way to respond is

to shrug and accept the widely held assumption that practitioners do not care for theory. But

thinking deeply about the role of theory and its relationship to practice and research makes me

wonder if the issue might be a misinterpretation of theory itself. This line of inquiry prompted

me to go back to the roots of our practice in rounds and the role of theory.

The post-positivist tradition has fostered a perspective of theory as possessing predictive

qualities, often reconstituting phenomena in sweeping terms. But paradigms play a role in

defining the purpose of theory, and thereby its shape (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Gregor, 2006).

Predictive theories in the post-positivist paradigm are fashioned with the aim of control and are

refined through testing and the probability of confirmation (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Gregor, 2006).

But in the constructivist tradition, theories intend to describe or explain as a way to understand

lived experience with a phenomenon (Gioia & Pitre, 1990; Gregor, 2006) in subjective

constructions that are tested, refined, and retested through experience (Lincoln & Guba, 2013).

So why does it matter? For me, it meant following the lead of a nagging feeling of

discrepancy. I was compelled to return to the role of theories of action in *Instructional Rounds*

(City et al., 2009). In this text, theories of action are framed as if/then statements that intend to

explain in causal terms the relationships between teaching and learning to predict outcomes.

Like the findings from this study, they found through their own work with instructional rounds

that theories of action may feel inauthentic or "stilted" (p. 42); in their experience, people get

used to theories of action over time and may even shift from predictive statements to more

explanatory constructs (2009). As rounds are a social practice, they require practice.

Although these authors cite the work of Argyris and Schön as inspiration for their use of

theories of action, the original conception is different. For Argyris and Schön (1974), theories

themselves are constructed to explain, predict, or control. Theories of action are normative in

that they clarify situational strategies for deliberate behavior. Argyris and Schön (1974)

interpreted if/then statements as if/then *do* (1974). Their orientation towards informed action

suggests that over time, professional practitioners construct and co-construct sophisticated

theories of practice from interrelated theories of action. In this sense, theories of practice are

akin to a teacher's instructional repertoire. Professionals diagnose a situation, confer with others,

experiment in action, reflect on effectiveness, and make adjustments. Their theories of practice

are initially normative, and as they deem outcomes to be beneficial, these theories become

prescriptive rather than predictive (Argyris, 1992) in that they remain viable strategies for similar

situations in the future. Effective theories of practice are guided by personal experience,

ownership of responsibility, openness to learning, and participation in communities of practice

that foster dialogue, exchange of new strategies, and growth (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Theories of practice therefore inform individual and collective action and drive improvement through engagement and reflection.

Misconceptions about theories of action in PLC rounds naturally invites reflexivity in terms of theory building within this study. This study's operational definition of theory is intended as a descriptive, co-constructed explanation of experienced phenomena – one that guides improved practice in a given context. The data and ensuing findings maintains this original intent by describing and explaining Polaris teachers' lived experience in PLC rounds. An explanatory framework relying on description provides a new threshold for Polaris stakeholders to engage in the practice of rounds and ongoing double loop learning.

As we crafted our own approach to rounds at Polaris, we used City et al.'s (2009) text to guide us; adopting their interpretation of theories of action and the Describe-Analyze-Predict process followed from this interpretation. Perhaps the discrepancy between rounds for supervisors and Polaris teachers through the lens of the implicit purposes of theories of action explain the lack of value for this study's participating teachers. A surprising finding is that prediction is not necessarily commensurate with the needs of teachers in rounds; theories that move from description, to explanation, and into prescription may be better suited to the professional learning needs of teachers. Polaris teachers and administrators are encouraged to explore the possibilities for revisiting and reframing the role of theory building in the rounds process. To do so, these stakeholders might collectively differentiate theories of practice and theories of action, relating this dialogue to the construct of the instructional tool belt (repertoire), and generate language that is more conducive to describing new learning and how it informs practice.

123

An area of difference in this study involved the role of feedback.  Findings from the

World Café and the interviews from this study suggest how conceptions of PLC rounds

periodically brush up against the inclusion of feedback in the process.  Participants recognized

the importance of using rounds experiences as a way to reflect on and push their own practice.

Participation over time, lateral accountability, and connecting the experience of observing with

the experience of being observed helps sustain a non-evaluative learning stance.  The purpose of

doing so is meant to inform one's own practice rather than to evaluate a colleague's

effectiveness.  One teacher clarified this subtle distinction:

> When I go into a classroom, I am not in there to see how the teacher is doing.  It is
>
> evaluative in that I'm seeing what I feel like is working or not working.  But it's not a
>
> judgment of the teacher. It's just the life of our school.  There's a level of trust that when
>
> people come to my room that that's their main goal, too.  They're just looking to see
>
> what's working and what's not working. They're not there to see what kind of job I'm
>
> doing.

Through rounds participation, pushing practice at Polaris has come to mean the

individual teacher pushing their own practice on their own terms.  Through observation,

dialogue, reflection on practice, and continued engagement with practice, teachers self-identify

areas of growth.  This is an important distinction, for it helps clarify the boundaries of PLC

rounds in its current state and reinforces the notion of authentic professional learning.

As teachers strive to push their own instructional practice, some are drawn to the need for

feedback from their colleagues.  Rounds observations are seemingly perfect opportunities for

feedback.  When teachers and administrators come to my classroom for a rounds observation, I

am always curious about their interpretations.  They have spent 20 minutes watching my students

and I engage with content and each other – I would like to know what they saw!  Many teachers also crave such feedback.  But feedback is tricky because it can introduce implications that counter the conception of PLC rounds established in this study.  City (2011) warned that evaluative comments, once invited into the rounds process, have a tendency to multiply.  Her concerns echo the sentiments of Shower and Joyce (1996) that evaluative comments can begin to constrain collaboration.

This study found that Polaris teachers seemed to be open to receiving feedback as long as it came from a place of respect and collegiality.  The primary problem with feedback seems to lie in the possible conflict it can have with the learning stance implied in PLC rounds.  The principal explained, "I think if we're going in there and thinking, 'I have to give positive and negative feedback', then you're going in there with a different focus as opposed to it being organic." Having the presupposition that feedback is part of the rounds process could impact the way participants observe classrooms because it subtly shifts their stance from a learning stance to a more evaluative one.  As rounds are already antithetical to the conventions of most professional development, such a shift could further blur the lines to the point where the norms of rounds contradict one another.  An expectation to include feedback could also increase some teachers' anxiety to the point where, as the principal put it, "the doors might not open as easily".  He favored a more informal approach where hosts are given a choice to seek feedback from their observers:

> I think it would be a sign of healthy learning and trust if a teacher can receive
> constructive feedback without me being involved.  But I don't think it needs to be a
> structured peer coaching model.  If a teacher gets feedback from their peers about a
> rounds observation, and they're willing and open to learn from it, then I invite that as

125

much as possible.  If somebody were observed during rounds and they asked, 'What's

one thing that you found encouraging and what's one thing I can work on?' – I think

when somebody is asking for that feedback, it makes it a lot safer.

However, a few participants did not value this approach during rounds when it has

occurred in the past.  One teacher remarked, "I have had teachers come to me after I've been in

their classroom, saying, 'Tell me what you saw', or, 'What could I do better?'  That actually

feels pretty uncomfortable."  Rather than the assumption that some teachers do not want

feedback, the dilemma appears to be more about the needs of the observer as a learner because

introducing feedback invites increasingly evaluative scrutiny among peers.

However, there are teachers on the opposite end of the spectrum, teachers with different

learning styles or experience in other fields such as business or wilderness instruction who are

used to more evaluative forms of feedback from peers.  They cited frustration with the rounds

process as sometimes feeling too affirmative and focused on observables, whereas in their

experience outside public schooling colleagues tended to provide feedback more bluntly.  One

teacher clarified this perspective:

> I came from an environment where if it's a bad class, you say, 'That really sucked', and if
>
> it's a good class you say, 'That was awesome, I'm going to copy it'.  And those are really
>
> the only two choices.  They are really evaluative statements, and the people don't take it
>
> personally, they're like, 'Great, thanks, that's awesome', or, 'Maybe you're right and I
>
> need to do something'.  It is a culture where we give and receive feedback.  You need to
>
> build relational trust, but it's really tedious for me, and I was always impatient with,
>
> 'When are we going to get through so we can have some real conversations?'  If that is
>
> what it takes to get everyone on board and build relational trust, I see value in that.  But

while relational trust is a worthwhile goal, it is not the end goal.  The end goal is having

the best possible school we can.

The difference in opinions on the role of feedback in rounds reinforces the assumption that

teachers step into professional learning with different learning styles, needs, and goals.  The data

suggest a budding consensus that some forms of feedback would be the next step for pushing

practice on an individual level as well as a PLC.

Ensuing from the issue of feedback and trusting relationships, the challenge of discussing

ineffective practice remains.  There is an affirming, celebratory nature inherent in the way

Polaris educators participate in rounds.  Because more than one classroom is observed during

rounds, an encounter with ineffective practice is often compared in contrast with other

observations.  When possible, participants will direct their attention to more effective classroom

experiences.  This is not to imply that participants do not discuss the ineffective experience.  To

do so is in itself an ineffective practice because it stymies improvement.  One teacher noted, "I

think addressing ineffective practice is part of the process, because otherwise, we're never going

identify problems of practice."  Without an honest look at instructional practices, rounds become

little more than an affirmative practice that weakens individual and collective efforts to improve.

However, engaging in dialogue about ineffective practice that sustains trust as well as

improvement implies an inherent tension.

A theme that remains ambiguous at the conclusion of this study is how to respectfully

dialogue about ineffective practice.  Participants admitted having encountered less-than-effective

classroom experiences during rounds.  But as a staff, Polaris teachers and administrators have not

yet had an open dialogue about how to norm this sensitive topic.  This study found that some

Polaris teachers and administrators have learned to negotiate this tension between trust and

improvement by discussing ineffective practice in a way that guides them toward thinking about potentially more effective strategies in future situations in their own classrooms. One teacher revealed how she has approached discussing a colleague's ineffective practice in this way.

> Sometimes I'll see some things that are really good and I'll think, 'Huh, I should do that more often', and sometimes I will see things that are less effective and I'll think, 'Oh, now I know why I don't do it that way'. We did spend a little bit of time thinking about what kind of project would have engaged those students more. But it really wasn't about, 'This teacher is ineffective', it was more like, 'This part of teaching didn't work', and, 'This part did', and, 'Which parts that worked can we analyze?'

The existing norm of the learning stance and how an observer self-identifies how to push their own practice means conversations lean toward the future rather than making a value statement about someone else's professional ability in the past. Teachers learn from each other's mistakes. In doing so, they also reflect on their own struggles and shortcomings.

This study found that being part of a PLC can mean teachers may be concerned for the professional welfare of their colleagues. Positive regard and collegiality can lead teachers to want to help a struggling colleague improve. One teacher expressed this sentiment and desire for supportive action on her part. "I was thinking, 'Wow, I need to do something. How can I help this person?'" Another teacher echoed this sentiment with the following analogy:

> If we are on a basketball team and someone doesn't know how to dribble, and you are really good at dribbling, you go over and you help them learn how to dribble. You don't say, 'You suck at dribbling'. You just say, 'Hey, let's pair up!'

Their responses convey a sense of professional community and a feeling of responsibility to support a less experienced or struggling colleague. But in analyzing the components of PLC

rounds, interpreting participants' lived experiences, and discerning what it is and is not, I have found it helpful to delineate these teachers' intentions from the rounds process. What they are describing is a way for PLC rounds to link to other professional learning formats such as coaching or mentoring. One teacher described the boundary between pushing one's own practice and pushing another person's:

> The next level of work for the rounds process is figuring out whether we want to agree upon a way to let people know if we saw something that we had a hard time seeing as effective and to give them some suggestions or offer to do rounds with them – to open the door. Does this steer towards linking rounds with a more formal coaching relationship? For me, rounds is not so much about what other people see and the feedback that I get. It's so much more about what I see in other people's classrooms and thinking about my own practice. So even though coaching isn't my role in rounds, maybe I can help a colleague improve because I want to support them. But it's not my job to come in and kind of swoop in and say, 'I'm going to fix you'.

Nested within the trusting, collegial relationships in a PLC are the concerns about one's own practice as well as supporting those who may be struggling. When participants do step into a place of supporting or guiding others, they are stepping out of the learning stance implied by rounds. This is not to suggest that doing so is not a viable approach to school improvement. Coaching and mentoring can be powerful supports for professional learning and collegiality. But their intent is different; therefore, for the purposes of this study, they remain distinct from the rounds process. Polaris teachers recognize this distinction as well, but they also find the ambiguity to be getting in the way of meaningful learning and school improvement.

We need to be tough on the issues and not on the person. But for rounds to be effective, we need to talk about ineffective practices. As a profession, we seem to skirt around ineffectiveness. I think there has to be norming and protocols, but wouldn't it be cool to just say, 'Wow, that seemed really ineffective, and here's what I observed', and then kind of go from there and then be able to get to the point in our profession where we can hear that? In coaching and mentoring, part of your role is to have those conversations, but I don't know where it really truly fits within rounds. But what if two teachers go in to observe a teacher, and there are some observables that are ineffective? If they can at least talk about it and feel comfortable talking about it, then rounds has served its purpose. If there's a way to norm it, to redefine 'non-evaluative' for the staff, I think that that would be good. It would make rounds more effective because then they can come back and they can feel like they can reflect on ineffective practice and not feel like they're doing something wrong, like they're stepping outside of the circle of trust that rounds is supposed to be.

Ambiguity in the process, particularly on issues that engender fear of breaking trust, stymies communication as well as praxis. When ambiguity is coupled with emerging participant needs, it may imply that the present approach is no longer sufficient for meeting the authentic needs of teachers – leading to the reconfiguration of norms that are consonant with existing practice or, like showcase, inviting the exploration of new forms of professional learning. Regardless, it is important throughout to distinguish where rounds end and other formats begin. Doing so helps inform and sustain rounds as a distinct practice, if not other collaborative practices, rather than muddying collaborative waters or collective improvement.

**A Last Look at the Literature**

The learning journey of this study is not unlike participating in rounds. Grounding understanding in lived experiences, exploring multiple pathways for insights and learning, reflecting on assumptions, considering praxis, and remaining open to possibility are just a few of these similarities. Earlier in this work, I made the case that a persistent literature gap inspired a unique approach to school-based rounds as well as the present study. In the spirit of remaining open to new possibilities, I continued to revisit the literature, following leads as well as combing for new literature on school-based rounds. At the end of May, 2013, after the data had been collected for this study, Del Prete (2013) published a book entitled *Teacher Rounds*. Having been involved in rounds as a social practice for teachers for well over a decade, this is his first comprehensive portrayal of his version of school-based rounds.

I have chosen to include a comparison of my findings with his model to identify mutual concepts and approaches as well as where we diverge. I believe doing so further informs the ensuing theoretical framework as well as providing readers with a greater understanding of approaches to school-based rounds than what was presented in Table 1 (p. 71).

PLC rounds at Polaris are similar to Del Prete's (2013) teacher rounds in the following ways:

- The recognition that school-based rounds, as situated practice within a conterminous culture, are by nature more intimate.

- The belief that school improvement is best achieved at the local level; practitioners possess a locus of control and are therefore central actors and decision-makers in the process. Their learning is grounded firmly in the dynamic nature of real-time teaching and learning.

- PLC rounds and teacher rounds are non-evaluative in that engagement does not tie to formal cycles of evaluation or personnel records.

- Both models are in service of reducing teacher isolation, articulating instructional practice in descriptive terms, constructing and co-constructing understanding of the interplay of teaching and learning, promoting collaboration, identifying and exploring local rather than systemic problems of practice, making transparent effective practices, becoming more reflective about one's instructional practice, informing individual instructional repertoires, and contributing to the strength of the PLC.

- As job-embedded learning, PLC and teacher rounds are replete with logistical, structural, and cultural concerns.

- These models recognize the power of having more than one observer and the crucial role of dialogue as a social medium for engaging in learning and change.

- PLC rounds and teacher rounds recognize the inherent complexity of the classroom and the unpredictability of the instructional core. Responding through anticipation and/or adaptation to such uncertainties are an important part of an instructional repertoire.

- Both models are wary of contrived collegiality for participants; each values the authenticity of the experience. The power to guide the process on an individual and collective level, emerging trust and professional regard, and norms that foster shared purpose and lateral accountability act as nourishment for teacher ownership of school-based rounds.

- PLC rounds and teacher rounds are resistant to the influence of technical rationality. In both approaches, audit cultures and checklist mentalities are blunt instruments for understanding the intricacies and complexities of teaching; technical models also fail to

account for the continuum of successes and failures in practice, which upon reflection

and dialogue, can both inform professional learning in powerful ways. However, both

models also recognize the benefit of general instructional frameworks for reference,

sense-making, and goal-setting. A guiding framework is a good fit when it provides

enough elbow room for teachers to draw upon their own experiences, needs, and

relationships with students and colleagues to shape their learning in meaningful ways.

- Both models recognize the potential for dovetailing the process with other forms of

  collaborative professional learning.

I find the similarities between these two approaches to school-based rounds, despite their

independent emergence in different contexts, to be frankly remarkable. Reading Del Prete's

version (2013) sometimes feels like reading my own thoughts. I am grateful for his work

because it validates the efforts by my colleagues to establish, understand, and refine PLC rounds

at Polaris. I also believe the mutuality of these approaches enhances the trustworthiness of this

study's findings and bolsters the theoretical framework.

But upon careful consideration, PLC rounds remain distinct from Del Prete's (2013)

teacher rounds as I understand them in the following ways:

- The observers rather than the host teacher are the primary learners in PLC rounds.

- In this approach, the observers rather than the host teacher largely shape the process.

- In PLC rounds, observers, not just host teachers, respond to the uncertainties of the

  instructional core in how they shape, engage in, make sense of, and apply their

  experiences in rounds.

- Teacher rounds are more highly structured and demanding of time than PLC rounds. Use

  of protocols and templates, inclusion of more observers, and orientation to context and

133

intended purposes imply the use of substitute coverage of classrooms to allow extended, uninterrupted participation. A trade-off exists between the two models in terms of depth and efficiency.

- Teacher rounds are intentional about setting the context of an observation, the continuum of learning, and the purposes and assumptions of planned instructional strategies. In PLC rounds, observers do not dialogue with host teachers other than arranging an appropriate time; these experiences are therefore more raw, organic, and serendipitous by nature.

- While teacher rounds are dedicated to promoting and sustaining professional learning and ownership of the process for teachers, the model presented in *Teacher Rounds* stops short of inquiring into the professional learning core by reflecting on the structure of rounds itself (Del Prete, 2013).

These distinctions are not intended to be a critique of Del Prete's (2013) version of school-based rounds. This text would have been invaluable in implementing rounds in our first year; however, doing so would have significantly altered our own approach. I would not trade the experience of joint work and learning that has been a part of this journey for anything, and finding so much alignment between the two is a celebration of our work at Polaris. Identifying where the two approaches diverge supports the claims made in this study that instructional rounds have emergent properties, that multiple forms of instructional rounds exist, and more approaches are possible. *Teacher Rounds* (Del Prete, 2013) offers a new mirror by which Polaris teachers and administrators may reflect upon the practice of rounds and consider new permutations to meet emerging professional learning needs. But this divergence also suggests that rigid prescriptions for implementation of school-based rounds are unlikely to adhere to a given school culture; rather, there is a creative power in shaping the process to meet the needs of individual contexts,

whether they be new to rounds or actively innovating upon existing routines to satisfy emerging demands.

**A Theoretical Framework of PLC Rounds: 20 Conjectures**

PLC rounds at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School are a co-construction of its teachers and administrators and the context in which they operate. The shape it has taken and the components that give it form are unique to this community. This theoretical framework explains PLC rounds as a situated social practice at Polaris and may not be transferable to other contexts. However, it may inform the work of other educators and researchers interested in school-based rounds.

The following theoretical framework is constructed from 20 conjectures. These propositions are drawn from research and practice; they seek to explain the complex, social phenomenon of PLC rounds at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School. As conjectures, they contribute to shared understanding and may inform ongoing praxis.

**PLC rounds as a space for supporting teachers' authentic professional learning.**

1. PLC rounds are an organic process of professional learning – establishing a space for teachers' authentic professional learning experiences in the habitat of the school. Participants enter this space with different backgrounds, experience levels, interest levels, teaching and learning styles, content areas, short-term and long-term needs, relationships with other participants, and ways of constructing and applying meaning. Each teacher's unique professional learning path is shaped by these influences and the landscape of professional learning opportunities before them.

2. The logistical, structural and cultural components of PLC rounds create a flexible, mutually negotiated framework that intends to honor the demands of teaching workloads

135

and accommodate the unique learning needs of the professional, the direction they take their learning, and the meaning construed from the experience – all while bringing the tributaries of each person's learning together in a collective flow toward a horizon of practice.

3. The demands of teaching are natural predators of job-embedded learning. Sustaining a symbiotic relationship between work and professional learning hinges on the value participants ascribe to their own experiences. Authentic learning experiences, nested within collegial relationships, are crucial to keeping the ecology of the PLC in balance.

4. Collegial norms influence the climate of PLC rounds. Individual learning is enhanced by positive, engaging, respectful, trusting, and supportive relationships. Adherence to norms, mutual accountability, and allowance for reconfiguration when norms are no longer adequate for guiding rounds are all valuable steps in sustaining the process over time.

5. Trust nourishes the habitat of the school: trust in teachers to engage as professional learners; trust in colleagues to focus on, celebrate, and push practice; trust in school leaders to encourage and honor ownership of the process; and trust that the practice of rounds itself can lead to authentic professional learning and school improvement. Reciprocity is a distinct feature of PLC rounds: teachers who observe others' practice are also observed. This relationship implies growth as an observer as well as a host, and it fosters and sustains collegial relationships through shared experiences, trust, collaborative work, and ownership of the process and learning itself.

6. An instructional framework can guide the schoolwide focus of rounds without constraining the individual experience. A quality instructional framework can also foster

a common language around practice. However, participants must remain open to new learning and seek explanations for observations of phenomena that are insufficiently described by a given instructional framework.

**PLC rounds and the individual teacher's authentic professional learning.**

7. Professional learning is situated in, constructed from, and tested through practice. Therefore, teachers' learning is not authentic unless it is experienced directly or vicariously, can be articulated, and can be explored in individually meaningful ways through practice. The further professional development lies from the hearth of one's practice, the less warmth and light shed on meaningful improvement.

8. Teacher learning in PLC rounds tends to be incremental – focused on individually relevant practices. But observations across classrooms over time and collaborative dialogue can invite new, more complex insights that result in double loop learning and powerful shifts in practice.

9. Some of the ways teachers learn through PLC rounds include, but are not limited to:

    a. enhancing or refreshing the instructional repertoire,

    b. describing the instructional core through observable actions and interactions,

    c. making inferences from direct observation,

    d. developing the capacity for conveying non-evaluative insights through dialogue,

    e. understanding the complexity of the instructional core,

    f. professionalizing dialogue about the instructional core,

    g. gaining a more holistic perspective and understanding of the school community across grade levels and content areas,

h.  abstracting new understanding about student learning and the instructional program through analysis of multiple classrooms over time,

i.  gaining greater awareness of student engagement in one's own classroom,

j.  identifying and seeking to resolve problems of practice,

k.  adapting others' instructional practices in ways that improve one's own practice, and

l.  taking ownership of their own professional learning.

10. For teachers, describing the instructional core in predictive theories of action is often a limiting form of knowledge building.  Prediction is too rudimentary for the more sophisticated skill sets of experienced teachers.  Their proximity to practice demands the more precise tools of applied theory.  A robust instructional tool belt implies having many approaches to facilitating learning and relationships and knowing in which situations to apply a specific strategy.  Hence the power of rounds: increasing exposure to others' practices, reflecting on one's own craft, engaging in dialogue, describing new learning as application, and adopting/adapting strategies that result in improved practice.

11. Choice enhances the opportunity for authentic professional learning experiences.  The choices available to teachers in the rounds process help foster ownership.  Choice also helps participants adapt in-the-moment to the dynamic nature of classroom observations and adjust to the constraints and opportunities inherent in job-embedded learning.

12. As teachers engage in rounds, their zone of comfort is expanded, encouraging them to take more risks, including experimenting with practice, being more open with their own struggles, being open to unannounced observations, and sharing their perspectives about the quality of professional learning experiences.

13. As this zone of comfort has expanded, the need for structure has been supplanted by the need for self-direction.  In the early phases of implementation, teachers' participation in PLC rounds was best served as a voluntary, carefully scaffolded process.  But while a greater amount of structure was necessary in the beginning, creating a space for open dialogue about how rounds might be structured, what contributes to authentic professional learning, and what constrains meaningful learning experiences could have created ownership earlier in the process.

**PLC rounds and the organization.**

14. PLC rounds is a social practice belonging to teachers that maintains a dialogue between the professional, colleagues, and the organization as a whole.  The process reduces the prevailing trend of teacher isolation in schools, increases collaborative, authentic professional learning experiences that inform local practice, and enhances the quality of dialogue about teaching and learning – each of which fosters and/or sustains the PLC and promotes school improvement from the inside out.

15. A tension exists between the professional learning needs of the individual teacher and the improvement needs of the school or the system in which it resides.  Professional learning therefore does not exist in a vacuum; rather, a teacher's learning is nested within organizational learning through the medium of a PLC.  In this space, professional and bureaucratic authority are coupled in practice and each must adapt to coexist.

16. Reciprocity implies a willingness for school leaders to make their own practices public regarding the provision of professional learning opportunities.  Because having a voice in the process contributes to teacher ownership of the process, inviting open dialogue about the effectiveness of PLC rounds can communicate school leaders' willingness to "walk

the talk" expected from teachers during rounds.  Reflection and dialogue about experiences, successes, challenges, questions, and concerns help the PLC engage in double loop learning about how to best improve the professional learning core in ways that support teachers' authentic professional learning.  These reciprocal practices can help strengthen the integrity, authenticity, adaptability, and sustainability of the rounds process.

**PLC rounds as an emergent practice.**

17. The needs that inform school improvement are dynamic.  Teachers' idiosyncrasies, the complexity of the instructional core, unfolding collegial relationships, shifting policies, and situated realities are but a few of the contextual influences that reflect the changing needs of teachers' professional learning.  PLC rounds shift continuously over time to adapt to these new circumstances.  Participation in professional learning itself also reshapes individual teachers' needs over time.  The constancy of change, the continuum of learning, and open dialogue about how to respond to these changes suggest the emergent nature of PLC rounds.

18. The transition from initial structures to flexible practice includes refinement of existing components as well as exploring innovations.  As rounds become more established over time, new crops of professional learning are planted, enriching the soil of the PLC.  But the intended yield of these innovations must be compared with shared interpretations of PLC rounds.  While some adjustments to collaborative learning hybridize existing practice, others, such as showcase, are natural companions of rounds that are understood to be separate practices.  Clarity between existing, evolving, and emerging professional learning practices benefits individual and collective improvement.

19. An emerging practice at Polaris is peer feedback.  Because PLC rounds, as a path to school improvement, involve making practice public; engaging in dialogue regarding the instructional core; exploring ways to push one's own practice; and strengthening the PLC through reduced isolation, trust, collective norms, celebration and affirmation, and collaboration, there is a natural gravitation toward the inclusion of feedback for host teachers.  Some teachers desire more intentional peer feedback, yet many recognize doing so challenges the non-evaluative learning stance that is foundational to PLC rounds.  This conundrum presents a frontier of practice for Polaris teachers and administrators – one that may be resolved through open dialogue, reflection, and innovation.

20. Because PLC rounds are emergent, it follows that any theoretical framework that describes it is emergent as well.  As Polaris educators continue their work with, through, and from rounds, these conjectures will surely need to be reconstructed and refined.

This theoretical framework provides a snapshot of PLC rounds in practice at Polaris.  It reconstructs findings to establish a common understanding of PLC rounds and advance practice. The theoretical framework also helps fill a gap in the existing literature.  It therefore serves other educators beyond Polaris Expeditionary Learning School, as well as researchers, who are interested in job-embedded forms of collaborative professional learning for teachers.  Taken into consideration with Del Prete's (2013) *Teacher Rounds*, this theoretical framework explains the little understood, complex phenomenon of school-based instructional rounds and may guide future practice, research, and theory construction.

**Considerations for Polaris Expeditionary Learning School**

This study found many individual and collective benefits of PLC rounds.  Polaris teachers and school leaders are encouraged to continue this practice.  However, the values interpreted

from these experiences are a premium. Continuing the dialogue about the professional learning

core – how PLC rounds can be refined to meet changing professional learning needs – is an

essential strategy for informing ongoing praxis. While the theoretical framework possesses

descriptive and explanatory power, it does not provide explicit recommendations for future

practice at Polaris. However, the theoretical framework, and the thick description presented in

this study, do imply new understanding of this phenomenon. The following considerations

intend to inform the next level of work as Polaris teachers and school leaders continue to practice

PLC rounds.

The issue of feedback is one problem of professional practice needing shared

understanding. While articulated as an expectation in a staff meeting, providing host teachers

with a record of debrief notes has yet to be normed consistently in practice by Polaris teachers.

The data suggest this to be one way to share feedback through an artifact that feels safe, non-

evaluative, and focused on the practice and its implications for the observers rather than the host.

One teacher revealed, "I'm open to feedback from other teachers as long as it is not hurtful and it

is about respect." If practiced more consistently, debrief notes could be one way to integrate

feedback into the rounds process. Polaris teachers and administrators are also encouraged to

explore ways to create a voluntary structure for having a dialogue between the host and the

observers about these notes. A teacher shared his vision for this practice:

> Having a structure that would allow an observed teacher to go to the people who saw
>
> them and ask for feedback would break down barriers because you have to trust someone
>
> if you're going to ask them, and if you don't trust them, then you just won't ask. If
>
> there's a time and a structure that allows for that conversation to happen, that would help
>
> me push practice because I'd be asking for the feedback, I'd be getting the wisdom from

all these folks I have observed and respect.  It gives them a way to say things in non-

threatening ways, and then they can see me in the hall and say, 'Hey, did you try that out?

How did that work out?'  And then there's accountability, too.

Knowing that the host will read the notes and may want to discuss them assists the observers in

adhering to norms that promote and sustain trust and collegiality.  In this way, the lateral

accountability that inheres in teachers' relationships is a two-way street.

Polaris teachers and administrators can dedicate conversations to open dialogue regarding

ways to discuss encounters with ineffective practice.  Because of the tension between sustaining

trust and discussing ineffective practice, an open forum on how to navigate these culturally

perilous waters could promote opportunities to find common solutions and generate increased

ownership of emerging norms.  However, it is likely that this will be an ongoing challenge as

PLC membership, needs, and experiences change over time.

Polaris might want to engage teachers and administrators in brainstorming ways to

improve the PLC debrief structure.  Finding this component to be the least meaningful,

participating teachers reported that this structure was not reflective of the espoused pedagogy of

Polaris and was therefore not relevant to their own practice.  Keeping the conjecture regarding

proximity to practice in mind, school leaders could collaborate with teachers to identify ways to

share learning from one rounds team with others through a more authentic and engaging process.

Doing so might be another way to demonstrate school leaders' responsiveness to its teachers'

professional learning needs.

Lastly, open dialogue, as a form of double loop learning, can invite scrutiny of the

professional learning core itself.  As teachers and school leaders continue to engage in PLC

rounds, they may want to keep the 20th conjecture in mind by continuously reflecting on and

revising the theoretical framework from this study. Persistent reference to the theoretical framework reiterates understanding and practice while allowing norms and explanations to be reconfigured as needed. Open dialogue also creates opportunities to explore the need for new forms of professional learning when existing practice no longer suffices. Ultimately, participants' perspectives of the value of learning experiences play an informative role in supporting both teachers' authentic professional learning and school improvement.

**Implications for Stakeholders and Audiences**

This study's stakeholders and audiences are encouraged to keep the role of context in mind when interpreting the findings and theoretical framework. As part of the EL network, Polaris plays an active role in exploring, refining, and informing instructional, leadership, and organizational strategies that comprise the EL core practices. Polaris attracts teachers and school leaders who are drawn to the EL pedagogy. The past several years have suggested a stable teacher culture with little turnover. Thick description from Polaris teachers and administrators suggest how their lived experiences, actions, and interactions are nested within a learning organization. This unique culture of Polaris suggests that the findings or the conjectures cannot be generalized to other schools. However, it is hoped that thick description and mutuality of concepts in their interpretations provide stakeholders and audiences with logical, compelling insights that inform transferability in service of their own improved practice.

I also encourage this study's stakeholders and audiences to consider the paradoxes inherent in creating spaces for authentic professional learning. These paradoxes include:

- encouraging professional authority in shaping, participating in, constructing meaning from, and exploring implications for one's own practice while adhering to collective norms and cultivating collaborative engagement,

- accommodating the idiosyncratic needs of diverse professional learners while flowing (rather than meandering) toward the horizon of school improvement,

- ensuring the value of the rounds experience outweighs job-embedded constraints and pressures while cultivating ownership of the process in ways that enhance value,

- allowing the components as well as the purpose of rounds to be openly discussed, negotiated, and refined while preserving collegiality and acknowledging previous learning.

These paradoxes are not to be feared. Indeed, I believe they describe "pockets of apparent disorder" (Kuhn, 1996, p. 42) that hint at the emergence of new theories – natural perturbations in the shifting of the professional learning paradigm. I, like many of my colleagues, welcome approaches to professional learning that challenge the conventions of one-size-fits-all professional development. The long-standing traditions of scientific management value the assumptions implicit in bureaucratic authority and the gold standard assumed by purveyors of technical rationality. These assumptions live deep in the marrow of top-down approaches to the professional development of teachers. Conversely, the anomalous nature of these paradoxes suggests the dynamic nature of authentic professional authority in a PLC. When local level learning is a primary driver of school improvement, the assumptions inherent in top-down models of professional development become insufficient for sustaining spaces that promote teachers' authentic professional learning.

The findings, theoretical framework, and conclusions do not purport to make sweeping statements regarding the role of professional authority within professional learning. My colleagues and I at Polaris have constructed but one approach to carving out a niche for learning that accommodates the idiosyncratic needs of teachers and collective endeavor of school

improvement.  However, I believe there are powerful possibilities for PLCs and school systems

that account for the paradoxes of authentic professional learning in the negotiation and design of

collaborative learning spaces.  It is by the norms of exemplar rather than the scripture of

falsifiability that I advocate for reconsideration of the role of the teacher in developing

professional learning experiences.

Ironically, the role of professional collaboration and collegiality can succumb to

accountability.  Bending to the demands of schools and districts who find themselves

accountable to creating more robust teacher evaluation systems, CEL has incorporated a sixth

Dimension that clarifies the expectation for teachers to engage in collaborative activities with

their colleagues (2013).  Yet this evaluative framework does not establish criteria for schools and

districts to establish, nurture, and sustain authentic professional learning.  While holding teachers

accountable for professional collaboration, existing paradigms of professional development do

little to advocate reciprocity for administrators in being accountable to creating spaces and local

knowledge that are conducive to supporting and sustaining collaboration and professional

learning.

Talbert (2010) warned that collaborative cultures are highly susceptible to external

accountability, particularly when implemented under the umbrella of mandates, checklists, and

sanctions.  Doing so implies ignorance of the teachers' social relationships and the organic

nature of collaboration, often subverting existing mutual accountability and resulting in

compliance, resistance, or anxiety.  If district administrators pursue this sixth Dimension of

collaboration, I encourage them to consider Elmore's (2004) principle of reciprocity of

accountability: "For every increment of performance I demand from you, I have an equal

responsibility to provide you with the capacity to meet that expectation" (p. 93).  This principle

suggests that by mandating collaboration at the school level, administrators must explore ways to support schools in developing learning spaces that promote authentic professional learning, foster intrinsic motivation, honor the idiosyncratic needs of teachers, and strengthen mutual accountability through locally meaningful joint work. Talbert (2010) recommended that education systems provide schools with the resources to cultivate professional authority, publicly celebrate innovative practices and processes, and explore the successful strategies of exemplary PLCs. That means district administrators may need to learn new skills for giving up control and oversight in service of facilitating and supporting the nonlinear processes inherent in professional learning; in this sense, district leaders respond to new learning by building their own administrative repertoire for supporting teachers' and principals' professional learning (Talbert, 2010). Otherwise, school districts are in danger of falling into the trap of leading with accountability – inevitably steering PLCs toward contrived collegiality (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1992) and hampering existing efforts and relationships in schools (Talbert, 2010).

Perhaps the original 5 Dimensions (CEL, 2012), reframed through the lens of the professional learning core, are a way to shed light on the practices of schools and districts. What if school leaders and district personnel engaged in collaborative inquiry themselves about how their efforts meet the needs of professional learners? When leaders release the responsibility of professional learning to the local level, they allow improvement to take hold through natural processes of organizational development. A school district sends a powerful message about its trust in its teachers when it uses its bureaucratic authority to cultivate professional authority in schools. Only then would an accountability system of collaboration have merit.

Participating in PLC rounds with Polaris teachers with the intent of distinguishing it from the more familiar intervisitation forms could also provide district leaders with new insights for

helping interested schools develop their own form of school-based rounds.  Del Prete's *Teacher*

*Rounds* (2013) could also be a valuable resource for articulating other possible approaches for

teachers and school leaders.  But teachers and administrators alike are encouraged to design such

professional learning in ways that honor and reflect the local nature of PLCs.

        After all, the manner in which an individual school chooses to implement school-based

rounds is qualitatively different than external efforts to promote their inclusion.  In interviews

with Polaris teachers, they shared their insights regarding PLC rounds at other schools.  One

teacher explained the gradual, organic flow of experiences needed to create an initial sense of

trust in the process and in each other.

> If I was an administrator, I would have rounds at my school.  And the reason I would
>
> have rounds would be to build relational trust and build a professional learning
>
> community.  That's it.  We're going to get to know each other.  And I would give it time
>
> to grow.  Safety first, then learning.

Another teacher advised school leaders to keep the non-evaluative nature of PLC rounds at the

center of social practice.  Non-evaluative norms are a driver of the key components of

observation and dialogue.

> All of the training around the non-evaluative piece is really key.  I feel like we have that
>
> culture now.  How do you establish that culture?  The piece where teachers get to go to
>
> other teachers' classrooms and the idea that they're just observing and not evaluating is
>
> critical, as is the opportunity to discuss.  I think that's the bottom line of having rounds.
>
> Then you figure out for your own school where you go from there.  I mean, that's where
>
> we at Polaris are at. Where do we go now?

Lastly, participating teachers highlighted the tension between structure and choice as a terrain to be mapped out based on the needs of a school's teachers.

> If you have a lot of people that really need structure, then just throwing them in is going to be really, really hard. I think that you would probably need some structure, but I would also offer some choice, because we're just like students. Give people the option to be more organic. But there always needs to be a structure option for people because there's definitely those who crave that structure and need to know what they're doing or they won't feel the purpose in it.

These teachers' suggestions imply the likelihood that PLC rounds will differ due to influences such as context, existing and emerging problems of practice, and the professional needs of teachers. These implications, and the findings of this study, suggest that educators interested in adapting school-based rounds as a way to promote and sustain teachers' authentic professional learning should seek approaches that:

- organize learning spaces that are conducive to the nonlinear, idiosyncratic nature of teacher learning (such as choice and connection to individual practice),
- create processes that sustain job-embedded learning,
- highlight the pivotal role of teachers' voice in informing logistical, structural, and cultural components, and
- advocate for open dialogue regarding the professional learning core itself as individual and collective needs change over time.

As a social practice, PLC rounds should belong to teachers. Even if school leaders must rely on arranged collegiality (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012) to initiate collaboration, their efforts to encourage and utilize teacher voice will speak volumes about their intent to foster ownership. As

149

a result, teacher ownership cultivates authentic professional learning – which in turn fosters enhanced school improvement.

**Implications for Future Research**

Researchers interested in teachers' authentic professional learning and/or PLC rounds have multiple leads available to them. Identifying other schools employing similar forms of professional collaboration for comparison may lead to new interpretations of emergent themes. Historical and cultural analyses of how PLC rounds evolve in a given school could provide a window into how they adapt rounds over time and connect this practice to other forms of professional learning. Exploring the lived experiences of principals and other administrators who work to cultivate and sustain authentic professional learning spaces could lead to valuable insights that bolster the existing literature. Lastly, further research into the tension between bureaucratic and professional authority could shed light on ways to inform policies and accountability systems that honor and support local level learning as a primary driver. As an emerging professional learning practice, there is still much to be learned about the power of PLC rounds and how to study them.

**Conclusion**

PLC rounds have been a potent source of teachers' authentic professional learning experiences at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School for four years. This study explored teachers' lived experiences in PLC rounds to understand what they valued in the process, how they learned, the boundaries of current practice, and where the next iteration of practice might lead. A situated theoretical framework was constructed that explains PLC rounds in practice. This theoretical framework was made available to the study's participants for review and will be used to inform PLC rounds in its fifth year of implementation at Polaris and beyond. For

example, the 20 conjectures will be presented to the instructional staff and opened for dialogue about implications for the ongoing practice of PLC rounds.  These conjectures will be revisited periodically for refinement to be inclusive of new or more sophisticated understanding.  The study itself will also be shared with district administrators to further the ongoing dialogue regarding the role of PLC rounds in realizing school improvement at Polaris and how these findings and conjectures may inform the praxis of other district schools.  Lastly, the findings of this study will be shared with school leaders and practitioners at the Fall 2013 EL National Conference so they may consider the transferability of these findings and the theoretical framework for their own practice, contexts, and local theory building efforts.  Upon request, the study in its entirety will be made available to these participants.

This study also looked critically at the nature of authentic professional learning experiences and how they inform the professional learning core.  As a dynamic social practice, PLC rounds are shaped by the rich, unpredictable space of the classroom, the professional learning needs of teachers, and the collective endeavors of the PLC – all of which embody change.  These local level dynamics are influenced by the system in which they are situated.  The principle of reciprocity (Elmore, 2004) suggests that making teachers' practice public implies making the provision of spaces for professional learning open to scrutiny as well.  In this way, professional learning experiences themselves inform the professional learning core, thereby influencing the individual and organizational learning that guides school improvement.  By opening the door to dialogue about bureaucratic support of and for authentic professional learning, teachers, school leaders, and district administrators can journey together toward the horizon of educational improvement for every student.

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**Appendix A: A Brief Overview of Expeditionary Learning**


A prototype of Expeditionary Learning (EL) came about in 1987 through a project between the Harvard Graduate School of Education (HGSE) and Outward Bound (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2012).  Seeking to include experiential practices in HGSE's curricula, school faculty and members of Outward Bound's public education initiatives began exploring ways to integrate active pedagogy and authentic learning experiences in public schools.  EL was officially founded in 1992, and the following year the fledgling model was awarded funding by the New American Schools Development Corporation to pilot 10 schools across the United States as demonstration sites for comprehensive reform (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2011; 2012).  By 2011, EL was in partnership with over 150 schools (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2011).

EL, a national school improvement network, has evolved throughout two decades of reflection on implementation, ongoing advancements in educational research, and shifting tides in standards and policy.  EL facilitates effective instructional and leadership practices for its partner schools, which are provided consultancy, digital resources, and an array of professional learning experiences.  The growing body of effective EL practices is balanced between educators' experiences, practice-based innovations, and educational research literature.  The organization's commitment to theory, craft wisdom, collaboration, and innovation contributes to an inclusive, open-ended approach to school improvement.

In an EL school, educators promote a stance toward learning where students are actively engaged in challenging work with real-world application (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2011).  Academic experiences are designed to make learning meaningful for students by

connecting content, skills, and experiences through case studies and access to primary sources. Student learning is often a collaborative pursuit driven by challenging academic targets involving analysis, critique, revision, and public presentation to authentic audiences (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2011). Rethinking the relationships among students, teachers, standards, and instruction to promote greater engagement and achievement is central to the work of EL and shapes their ongoing partnership with schools.

EL's work is guided by a set of core practices and design principles (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2011). The core practices are an embodiment of the collective wisdom within the EL network, providing a reference for school transformation through curriculum, instruction, assessment, culture and character, and leadership. Rather than prescribing instructional practice, EL encourages its educators to choose and focus on core practices that fit their respective communities and school cultures. The core practices are complemented with 10 design principles. The design principles embody the tradition of Outward Bound in the context of teaching, learning, and school culture. An individual's relationship to learning, the environment, others in the school and community, and one's self is framed by character goals such as perseverance, empathy, collaboration, and service. Taken together, the core practices and design principles comprise the heart of an EL school and guide a school along the uncertain journey of school improvement (Expeditionary Learning Schools, 2011).

Another important aspect of EL is how adults' professional development is approached. The professional learning of teachers and instructional leaders is designed to be just as rooted in meaningful experience as students' learning. The primacy of teachers-as-learners in EL's professional development model is based on the assumption that helping students actively construct personal meaning from academic experiences necessitates teachers doing the same

from a learning stance (Klein & Riordan, 2011; Udall & Rugen, 1998). This approach to professional learning holds that if students are to engage in authentic learning experiences and applications, then teachers must engage in learning in ways that mirror this process. Unique experiences, collaboration, dialogue, and reflection all play powerful roles in EL's model of professional development (Klein & Riordan, 2011; Udall & Rugen, 1998).

# Appendix B: 5 Dimensions of Teaching and Learning (Version 4.0)

| 5D™ | Subdimension | The Vision | Guiding Questions |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Purpose** | Standards | • The lesson is based on grade-level standards, is meaningful and relevant beyond the task at hand (e.g., relates to a broader purpose or context such as problem-solving, citizenship, etc.), and helps students learn and apply transferable knowledge and skills.<br>• The lesson is intentionally linked to other lessons (previous and future) in support of students meeting standard(s). | • How do the standard and learning target relate to content knowledge, habits of thinking in the discipline, transferable skills, and students' assessed needs as learners (re: language, culture, academic background)?<br>• How do the standard and learning target relate to the ongoing work of this classroom? To the intellectual lives of students beyond this classroom? To broader ideals such as problem-solving, citizenship, etc.? |
| | Learning Target and Teaching Points | • The learning target is clearly articulated, linked to standards, embedded in instruction, and understood by students.<br>• The learning target is measurable. The criteria for success are clear to students and the performance tasks provide evidence that students are able to understand and apply learning in context.<br>• The teaching points are based on knowledge of students' learning needs (academic background, life experiences, culture and language) in relation to the learning target(s). | • What is the learning target(s) of the lesson? How is it meaningful and relevant beyond the specific task/activity?<br>• Is the task/activity aligned with the learning target? How does what students are actually engaged in doing help them to achieve the desired outcome(s)?<br>• How are the standard(s) and learning target communicated and made accessible to all students?<br>• How do students communicate their understanding about what they are learning and why they are learning it?<br>• How does the learning target clearly communicate what students will know and be able to do as a result of the lesson? What will be acceptable evidence of student learning?<br>• How do teaching point(s) support the learning needs of individual students in meeting the learning target(s)? |
| **Student Engagement** | Intellectual Work | • Students' classroom work embodies substantive intellectual engagement (reading, thinking, writing, problem-solving and meaning-making).<br>• Students take ownership of their learning to develop, test and refine their thinking. | • What is the frequency of teacher talk, teacher-initiated questions, student-initiated questions, student-to-student interaction, student presentation of work, etc.?<br>• What does student talk reveal about the nature of students' thinking?<br>• Where is the locus of control over learning in the classroom?<br>• What evidence do you observe of student engagement in intellectual, academic work? What is the nature of that work?<br>• What is the level and quality of the intellectual work in which students are engaged (e.g. factual recall, procedure, inference, analysis, meta-cognition)? |
| | Engagement Strategies | • Engagement strategies capitalize on and build upon students' academic background, life experiences, culture and language to support rigorous and culturally relevant learning.<br>• Engagement strategies encourage equitable and purposeful student participation and ensure that all students have access to, and are expected to participate in, learning. | • What specific strategies and structures are in place to facilitate participation and meaning-making by all students (e.g. small group work, partner talk, writing, etc.)?<br>• Do all students have access to participation in the work of the group? Why/why not? How is participation distributed? |
| | Talk | • Student talk reflects discipline-specific habits of thinking and ways of communicating.<br>• Student talk embodies substantive and intellectual thinking. | • What questions, statements, and actions does the teacher use to encourage students to share their thinking with one another, to build on one another's ideas, and to assess their understanding of one another's ideas? |

167

| 5D™ | Subdimension | The Vision | Guiding Questions |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Curriculum & Pedagogy** | Curriculum | • Instructional materials (e.g., texts, resources, etc.) and tasks are appropriately challenging and supportive for all students, are aligned with the learning target and content area standards, and are culturally and academically relevant.<br>• The lesson materials and tasks are related to a larger unit and to the sequence and development of conceptual understanding over time. | • How does the learning in the classroom reflect authentic ways of reading, writing, thinking and reasoning in the discipline under study? (e.g., How does the work reflect what mathematicians do and how they think?)<br>• How does the content of the lesson (e.g., text or task) influence the intellectual demand (e.g. the thinking and reasoning required)? How does it align to grade-level standards? |
| | Teaching Approaches and/or Strategies | • The teacher makes decisions and utilizes instructional approaches in ways that intentionally support his/her instructional purposes.<br>• Instruction reflects and is consistent with pedagogical content knowledge and is culturally responsive, in order to engage students in disciplinary habits of thinking.<br>• The teacher uses different instructional strategies, based on planned and/or in-the-moment decisions, to address individual learning needs. | • How does the teacher scaffold the learning to provide all students with access to the intellectual work and to participation in meaning-making?<br>• What does the instruction reveal about the teacher's understanding of how students learn, of disciplinary habits of thinking, and of content knowledge?<br>• How is students' learning of content and transferable skills supported through the teacher's intentional use of instructional strategies and materials? |
| | Scaffolds for Learning | • The teacher provides scaffolds for the learning task that support the development of the targeted concepts and skills and gradually releases responsibility, leading to student independence. | • How does the teacher differentiate instruction for students with different learning needs—academic background, life experiences, culture and language? |
| **Assessment for Student Learning** | Assessment | • Students assess their own learning in relation to the learning target.<br>• The teacher creates multiple assessment opportunities and expects all students to demonstrate learning.<br>• Assessment methods include a variety of tools and approaches to gather comprehensive and quality information about the learning styles and needs of each student (e.g., anecdotal notes, conferring, student work samples, etc.).<br>• The teacher uses observable systems and routines for recording and using student assessment data (e.g., charts, conferring records, portfolios, rubrics).<br>• Assessment criteria, methods and purposes are transparent and match the learning target. | • How does the instruction provide opportunities for all students to demonstrate learning? How does the teacher capitalize on those opportunities for the purposes of assessment?<br>• How does the teacher gather information about student learning? How comprehensive are the sources of data from which he/she draws?<br>• How does the teacher's understanding of each student as a learner inform how the teacher pushes for depth and stretches boundaries of student thinking?<br>• How do students use assessment data to set learning goals and gauge progress to increase ownership in their learning? |
| | Adjustments | • The teacher uses formative assessment data to make in-the-moment instructional adjustments, modify future lessons, and give targeted feedback to students. | • How does the teacher's instruction reflect planning for assessment?<br>• How does the teacher use multiple forms of assessment to inform instruction and decision-making?<br>• How does the teacher adjust instruction based on in-the-moment assessment of student understanding? |
| **Classroom Environment & Culture** | Use of Physical Environment | • The physical arrangement of the room (e.g., meeting area, resources, student seating, etc.) is conducive to student learning.<br>• The teacher uses the physical space of the classroom to assess student understanding and support learning (e.g., teacher moves around the room to observe and confer with students).<br>• Students have access to resources in the physical environment to support learning and independence (e.g., libraries, materials, charts, technology, etc.). | • How does the physical arrangement of the classroom, as well as the availability of resources and space to both the teacher and students, purposefully support and scaffold student learning?<br>• How and to what extent do the systems and routines of the classroom facilitate student ownership and independence? |
| | Classroom Routines and Rituals | • Classroom systems and routines facilitate student responsibility, ownership and independence.<br>• Available time is maximized in service of learning. | • How and to what extent do the systems and routines of the classroom reflect values of community, inclusivity, equity and accountability for learning?<br>• What is the climate for learning in this classroom? How do relationships (teacher-student, student-student) support or hinder student learning? |
| | Classroom Culture | • Classroom discourse and interactions reflect high expectations and beliefs about all students' intellectual capabilities and create a culture of inclusivity, equity and accountability for learning.<br>• Classroom norms encourage risk-taking, collaboration and respect for thinking. | • What do discourse and interactions reveal about what is valued in this classroom?<br>• What are sources of status and authority in this classroom (e.g., reasoning and justification, intellectual risk-taking, popularity, aggressiveness, etc.)? |

**Appendix C: Institutional Review Board Exemption Letter**

Date:      February 8, 2013
To:        Rodrick Lucero, Education
            Matt Strand, Education

From:    Janell Barker, IRB Coordinator
Re:       In the Round: Supporting Teachers' Authentic Professional Learning

**IRB ID:**    021-14H       **Review Date:**       February 8, 2013

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) Coordinator has reviewed this project and has declared the study exempt from the requirements of the human subject protections regulations as described in <u>45 CFR 46.101(b)(2): Research involving the use of educational tests,….survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: a) **information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects.**</u>

The IRB determination of exemption means that:

- **This project is valid for three years from the initial review.** After the three years, the file will be closed and no further research should be conducted. If the research needs to continue, please let the IRB Coordinator know before the end of the three years. You do not need to submit an application for annual continuing review.
- You must carry out the research as proposed in the Exempt application, including obtaining and documenting (signed) informed consent if stated in your application or if required by the IRB.
- Any modification of this research should be submitted to the IRB through an email to the IRB Coordinator, prior to implementing <u>any</u> changes, to determine if the project still meets the Federal criteria for exemption.

- Please notify the IRB Coordinator if any problems or complaints of the research occur.

Please note that you must submit all research involving human participants for review by the IRB. **Only the IRB or designee may make the determination of exemption**, even if you conduct a similar study in the future.

# Appendix D: Poudre School District Research Approval

Matt Strand,

Please consider this document as formal approval for you to conduct research within Poudre School District at Polaris based on your application materials originally received 1/27/13. Research project name: "In the Round: Supporting Teachers' Authentic Professional Learning."

* Date of project: Between January 2013 and August 2014 (If additional time is needed to complete the study, please notify me via email).

* I would like to add two conditions: 1) It is requested that the researcher provide PSD an electronic copy of the project summary at the end of the project, and 2) if you decide to submit an article for publication, please provide an electronic version of the article to PSD when completed.

* Priority consideration for future research partnerships with PSD will be given to individual researchers that have a demonstrated track record of submitting final reports for PSD consideration.

* Please feel free to use this email in your correspondent with PSD schools and personnel regarding this research project.

This approval letter signifies that you have successfully met all PSD criteria for conducting research within PSD. Approval from building principals where research activities may occur is also needed prior to beginning research activities at any particular PSD school. Providing principal(s) with a copy of this letter
is an important step in your communication with principals, but please keep in mind that principals have the right to refuse to participate in any proposed research activities that involve the students, teachers, or facilities that they are responsible for. Furthermore, a principal may exercise their right of refusal at any
point during the implementation of an authorized research proposal. Thank you for considering Poudre School District as a research partner. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions, and I look forward to reading your findings.

Dwayne Schmitz, Ph.D.
Director of Research and Evaluation
Poudre School District
(970) 490-3693

**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**
**Colorado State University**

Title of Study: **In the Round: Supporting Teachers' Authentic Professional Learning**

Principal Investigator:                    Rodrick Lucero
                                                        Rodrick.Lucero@colostate.edu

Co-Principal Investigator:                    Matt Strand
                                                        mstrand@psdschools.org

This is a research consent form for a study at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School. It contains important information about this study if you choose to participate. Please read and consider the following information carefully.

**What is the nature of this study?**

The primary aim of this study is to understand how instructional rounds, an evolving professional learning process, contributes to teachers' authentic professional learning. I am conducting this study as a CSU PhD student in Education under the guidance of Dr. Rodrick Lucero, Associate Professor in the School of Education.

**What is meant by instructional rounds?**

In the context of this study, instructional rounds are a form of professional learning that involves a guiding focus related to teaching and learning, collegial presentations of effective practice, non-evaluative observation of and by teachers with one or more peers, professional dialogue regarding instructional practice, and considerations for action. However, the definition and structure of instructional rounds are intended to be flexible within this study.

**Why is my participation being requested?**

As a Polaris educator, your experience as a participant in instructional rounds holds valuable insights. Your participation in this study may help guide future efforts to promote authenticity in Polaris' professional learning practices. It may also contribute to an existing research gap regarding instructional rounds or similar professional learning formats. This information may help other educators and scholars understand ways professional learning communities use practices such as instructional rounds to ensure professional learning is more authentic than contrived.

**Who is invited to take part in this study?**

Full-time Polaris teachers and administrators are intended participants in this study.

**What would my participation involve?**

You may be asked to take part in an interview to answer questions related to the nature of this study. If selected for an interview session, the interview will be arranged to accommodate your schedule and will be 30 – 60 minutes in duration. With your permission, this interview will be digitally recorded to facilitate an accurate representation of your responses. The interview will be focused on your experiences in instructional rounds.

All identifiers (such as your name, subject area taught, etc.) will be removed from the transcript to protect your anonymity. The transcript of this interview will then be made available to you for your approval before any analysis takes place. At this time, you will have the opportunity to withhold or reword any part of the transcript from the study.

The research methodology being used in this study typically includes follow-up interviews to further clarify concepts. As analysis of the data takes place, follow-up interviews are possible.

At the conclusion of the study, any alternate use of this data will require additional consent from you.

**Are there any risks associated with participation in this study?**

There are no known risks associated with this study. It is not possible to identify all risks in research procedures, but the researchers have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown, risks. The Colorado State University Research Integrity and Compliance Review Office exists to ensure ethical research practices. This entity has approved this study according to federal, state, and institutional policies regarding the welfare of research study participants. You do not waive any personal legal rights by agreeing to participate in this study. Poudre School District has also approved this study to be conducted at Polaris.

In this study, all participants' involvement and communication will remain confidential, known only to the researcher. However, Poudre School District and Polaris Expeditionary Learning School will be explicitly named in the study. Therefore, total anonymity cannot be guaranteed. A concerted effort will be made to remove any identifying references to you or other participants to ensure low levels of risk regarding participation.

**If I decide to participate, can I change my mind and choose to opt out?**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide to participate in this study, you may withdraw your consent to stop participating at any time. There is no penalty, risk, or relational consequence for choosing to end your participation in this study.

**How might I benefit by participating in this study?**

There are no known benefits resulting from participation in this study. There is no financial award associated with participation in this study. However, your input may positively influence individual and/or collective professional learning at Polaris. Benefits may also include reflection on professional learning, instructional practice, and collaboration with colleagues.

**If I have questions about the study, who can I contact?**

The researchers are available via phone, email, or in person to answer questions about this study.

Rodrick Lucero
Principal Investigator for this study
Rodrick.Lucero@colostate.edu
(970) 491 – 1916

Matt Strand
Co-Principal Investigator for this study
mstrand@psdschools.org

You may also contact Janell Barker, Senior IRB Coordinator for the Colorado State University Research Integrity and Compliance Review Office, about this study using the following contact information:

Janell Barker
Research Integrity & Compliance Review Office
321 General Services Building
Fort Collins, CO 80523-2011
(970) 491-1655
Fax (970)491-2293
Janell.Barker@colostate.edu

You may also contact Poudre School District about this study using the following contact information.

Dwayne D. Schmitz
Director of Research and Evaluation
2413 LaPorte Ave.
Fort Collins, CO 80521
(970) 490-3693
Fax (970) 490-3001
dschmitz@psdschools.org

By signing below, I have agreed to be a participant of this research study. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I may opt out at any time. I have had the opportunity to ask questions regarding my involvement with this study, and my questions have been satisfactorily answered. I understand that my participation in this study does not waive my personal legal rights, and I will be given a copy of this informed consent.

_____         _____
             Print Name                                 Signature

☐ I consent to my interview(s) being          _____
recorded for transcription.                                         Date

☐ I do not consent to my interview(s) being
recorded for transcription.

**Appendix F: Interview Sample**

1. How would you define rounds as it is practiced here at Polaris Expeditionary Learning School?

2. Why do you believe we use rounds at this school?

3. Describe the experience of being observed during rounds.

4. Has being observed during rounds changed your thinking or your practice in any way?

5. Which do you prefer as a host: planned visits or unannounced drop-ins? Why?

6. Walk me through a rounds experience you took part in. Describe some of your thoughts before, during and after this experience.

7. What choices did you make beforehand, such as approaching a partner or deciding on a focus?

8. Did you go for convenience (common planning time), relationships, new perspectives, a similar belief about approaching rounds, or a combination of these factors?

9. How did you decide on whom to go see? What decisions factored into this?

10. In thinking of a recent rounds experience, how did your dialogue unfold? Did it take place immediately after the observation? Where did you start, and where did you end up?

11. Did your thinking change at all in your interactions with your rounds partner?

12. What makes a theory of action meaningful?

13. What are the components of a meaningful debrief conversation?

14. Did your rounds experience come to mind in the days following your rounds experience?

15. Have you made any deliberate changes to your practice due to your rounds experiences?

16. What are your impressions of the whole staff dialogue that takes place after rounds?

17. How would you define an authentic professional learning experience?

18. Have you had any authentic learning experiences during rounds?

19. Why do you say they were authentic?

20. What influenced your rounds experiences in a positive sense?

21. Have you had experiences where rounds were not helpful or felt contrived?

22. What influenced these contrived experiences?

23. What norms do you believe are the most important to rounds, and why?

24. What do you think are the most valuable components of rounds? Why?

25. How have rounds influenced the process of professional learning in our PLC?

26. How do rounds contribute to and/or sustain your professional learning?

27. What is the part of rounds that you feel needs the most improvement or attention? Why?

28. How and why have rounds changed over time, and how do you feel about those changes? Where do you see rounds heading?

29. What advice do you have for other schools considering implementing a similar form of rounds?

30. Do you have any questions for me?