IPRPD
International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
ISSN 2693-2547 (Print), 2693-2555 (Online)
Volume 06; Issue no 09: September 2025
DOI: 10.56734/ijahss.v6n9a6

ENHANCING PLC IMPLEMENTATION WITH THE INTERNAL COHERENCE FRAMEWORK IN A RURAL DISTRICT

Megan Stokes[1], Paula W. Tharp[2], Kayla Briscoe[3]

[1] *Mathematics teacher (Grades 7, 8, and Geometry), Louisiville Municipal School District, Mississippi*

[2] *Assistant Professor, Department of Teacher Education and Leadership, Mississippi State University*

[3] *Assistant Special Education Director, Kosciusko School District, Mississippi*

Abstract

In a small rural school district in the southern region of the United States, a newly hired superintendent in a traditionally high-performing school district recognized the need for increasing collaboration and depth of instructional knowledge both within and across the district's schools. To address the concern, the superintendent introduced a district-wide Professional Learning Community (PLC) initiative as a means of increasing instructional collaboration. Simultaneously, a teacher from the district attending a graduate program for licensure in school administration was studying the Internal Coherence (IC) framework in her degree program. She was learning that the framework provides a pathway for continuous improvement by placing the development of collective teacher efficacy for high-impact instruction at its core (Forman et al., 2017). Seeing the connection between the IC framework and the district's PLC initiative, the teacher/leadership candidate began conversations with the superintendent regarding the connection and potential value of framing the district's PLC initiative with the IC theory of practice. This paper describes how the district utilized a PLC model as an improvement strategy; it also details how the teacher/leadership candidate connected the work of the PLCs to the IC framework. In doing so, she recognized evidence of teachers' increasingly robust instructional insights and increasing depth of collaboration. The paper presents a case for extending and deepening the work of PLCs when the work is framed by a theoretical model such as the IC framework. The argument is based on the work of Ford et al. (2020), noting that without anchoring improvement work in a sound theoretical model, the work may lack clear direction, resulting in weakened potential for sustainability. The case was developed from interviews with the district superintendent and the teacher/leadership candidate. Participant names have been excluded to preserve anonymity.

Keywords

Internal Coherence, Instructional Leadership, PLC Model, School Improvement, Collaboration, Collective Efficacy, Professional Learning Culture

The Leadership Challenge: A New Superintendent's Dilemma

A newly hired superintendent began his tenure in a traditionally high-performing small rural school district in the southern region of the United States. Early in his tenure, the superintendent began investigating strengths and areas for improvement across the district. The investigation revealed a need to increase collaboration across the district among schools. Further exploration also identified the need for increasing school leaders' knowledge of data analysis, instructional leadership, and leading collaborative teams in their schools. His discovery of isolated practices in classrooms and across schools led the superintendent to initiate a district-wide Professional Learning Community (PLC) initiative to begin the work of strengthening instructional collaboration and leadership. The superintendent knew the project had to begin urgently, stating, "I knew I would have to start rolling out this model fast and that there would be mistakes, but those would have to be monitored and adjusted as they went" (Superintendent, personal communication, May 2024).

During this time, a special education teacher in the district serving as an inclusion teacher in general education classrooms was enrolled in a graduate program to obtain licensure for school administration. Graduate

program content included research, investigation, and application of the Internal Coherence (IC) framework (Forman et al., 2017). As the teacher engaged in learning about IC, she realized the district's PLC initiative aligned with principles of the IC framework. However, while the teacher clearly recognized the connection between the PLC work and the IC framework, and the superintendent understood its relevance, the PLC initiative and other improvement efforts were not initially framed within the IC theoretical model.

In the district improvement initiative, the PLC model served as an immediate strategy to begin to shift leaders and teachers' practice toward more collaborative routines. The IC framework had the potential of adding a structure and process to strengthen the district's efforts to improve instructional collaboration and coherence. Implementing PLC processes without a theoretical anchor such as the IC framework risks limiting impact and sustainability (Stosich et al., 2020; Ford et al., 2020).

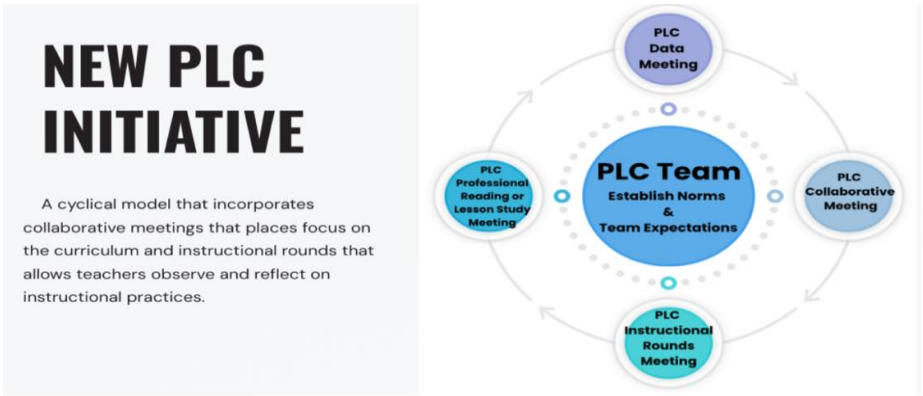
The leadership candidate engaged with the IC framework to understand how coherence-building could strengthen the PLC initiative by adding intentional focus on strategies and structures to guide the district toward increased collective efficacy. Doing so could potentially elevate the PLC work from routine compliance to meaningful instructional improvement. The case describes the PLC structure deployed by the district and how it aligns with the IC framework. The case further presents logic for framing school and district improvement strategies in the IC theoretical model and how doing so could potentially strengthen sustainability of continuous improvement efforts of the PLC initiative. Evidence based on interviews with the superintendent and teacher/leadership candidate provide illustrations of increasing collaboration and instructional focus. The research base for recommending anchoring the PLC model in a theoretical framework – particularly the IC framework – is supported by the work of Ford et al. (2020). In the case of this district, building broader understanding and belief in the importance of anchoring district improvement efforts in a theoretical model such as the IC framework continues to be a work in progress.

.

The District's PLC Model: Building Collaboration Across Schools

The new superintendent recognized that moving the schools toward a more collaborative structure focused on analyzing data, making instructional decisions, and drawing on a team's expertise could move the district from incidental high performance to deliberate and intentional strategies to sustain success. Based on the superintendent's previous district experiences with PLCs and the use of resources from All Things PLC (Solution Tree, n.d.), he began the initiative by collaborating with a district instructional leader to design a cyclical PLC model customized based on district goals. The model featured structured protocols for data analysis, analyzing student work, planning instructional strategies, and allowing teachers to visit colleagues' classrooms through peer observation. The model created a structure for weekly PLCs focusing on a cycle for continuous improvement, as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: *District PLC Model*



Note: The district's PLC model includes the four components: (a) PLC data meeting; (b) PLC collaborative meeting; (c) PLC instructional rounds meeting; (d) PLC Professional reading or lesson study meeting. The illustration is shared with permission.

According to the teacher/leadership candidate, the four areas of focus (Figure 1) for the PLC model were intentionally designed to address areas identified as needing improvement. She explained that in the first session with teacher teams, the teams were to discuss student performance on recent district-wide common assessments known as "benchmark" assessments. The teams walked through a protocol to guide the discussion. The teacher/leadership candidate stated, "We would focus on certain standards that were maybe lower mastery or proficiency, and we would talk about strategies with teaching, what we were doing in the classroom for that specific standard, and…ways that we could improve teaching strategies for that specific standard" (Teacher, personal communication, May 2024).

The second step in the model was for teachers to review student work during their PLC meeting. The process included reviewing student work, selecting a standard from the work, and discussing strategies for instruction based on researching articles or other sources of information to inform the conversation. "We would talk about different strategies to teach that standard and then we would find research-based articles…to support that strategy and figure out what we…thought would be beneficial (in) the classroom to really boost that standard to review for the next benchmark" (Teacher, personal communication, May 2024).

Another protocol the PLC teams engaged in was visiting classrooms. The teacher/leadership candidate described the process in this way. "We would look at work samples specifically to see what those students were doing and then our third round – instructional rounds – we would go into each other's classroom and see how others were teaching to pick up on different strategies of what was working and what was not working" (Teacher, personal communication, May 2024).

The teacher/leadership candidate emphasized the organization and structure of the PLC process. She stated that each person on the PLC team had a particular role and purpose ensuring collaboration. Each team member had a specific responsibility with processes designed to guide the team's work.

A critical aspect of the PLC model was embedding administrators as instructional leaders—not as evaluators, but as partners in learning. Over time, the district introduced teacher leaders for PLCs, training selected teachers to facilitate meetings, thereby fostering distributed leadership (Spillane, 2006; Harris, 2004; Leithwood et al., 2009). This shift empowered teachers to take ownership of their collaborative work, reinforcing the district's commitment to shared leadership (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hord, 1997; Fullan, 2016).

The Internal Coherence (IC) framework and guiding principles are explained in the following section to provide background and context for the purpose of this paper, which is to present the case for framing improvement efforts with a theoretical background that will support and guide any improvement initiative. Information regarding details of the IC framework and principles follows.

Internal Coherence: An Overview

Internal coherence is defined as "the collective capability of the adults in a school building or an educational system to connect and align resources to carry out an improvement strategy" (Forman et al., 2017, p. 2). The construct refers to the collective capacity of a school staff to work together on improving teaching and learning practices through shared understanding of effective instruction. Shared understanding, as the model intends, is brought about through structured collaboration to allow team members to engage in conversations and discourse. The framework includes the need for intentionally generating psychologically safe environments in which teachers and leaders feel confident pressing on each other's thinking. At the core of the framework is the focus on the Instructional Core (Cohen & Ball, 1999) and Academic Task (Doyle, 1983) as a means of ensuring individual and collective efficacy around instructional understanding that is grounded in a solid research base (Forman et al., 2017). The model requires instructional leaders to learn alongside teachers rather than isolated from or in charge of teams. According to Forman and her co-authors (2017), "The Internal Coherence Framework illustrates a causal order of how schools improve, beginning with the leadership practices that foster adult learning" (pp. 3-4).

The IC framework is guided by four principles. First, coherence must center on the instructional core – the relationship between teachers' knowledge and skills, students' engagement, and the content being taught – which serves as the foundation for sustainable improvement (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Elmore, 2004; Forman et al., 2017). Second, the framework emphasizes that improvement is fundamentally a challenge of adult learning, not technical implementation. Authentic progress requires continuous development of new knowledge and practices among educators (Forman et al., 2017; Fullan, 2001). Third, the principle of mastery experiences is based on Bandura's (1997) work, highlighting that successful experiences build collective efficacy, which in turn motivates deeper engagement and improvement. Finally, the framework asserts that clinical practices and structured tools are necessary to make research actionable in day-to-day school practice, enabling educators to apply insights systematically rather than relying on intuition or isolated interventions (Forman et al., 2017). In the case of the PLCs, the protocols are examples of the fourth principle.

The IC principles offer a developmental pathway for schools to align collaborative practices with sustainable instructional improvement (Forman et al., 2017). In this case, the principles are used to examine how the district's PLC initiative functioned as an enactment of coherence-building work.

Connections to the IC Framework principles are evident in the PLC model's design. Data analysis meetings reflected a focus on the instructional core (Cohen & Ball, 1999; City et al., 2009), as teachers examined benchmark results and student work to guide planning. Lesson study meetings exemplified adult learning and clinical practices by fostering collaborative exploration of research-based strategies tailored to student needs. Instructional rounds provided mastery experiences and embedded clinical practices, allowing teachers to observe peers, reflect on instructional approaches, and refine their practices based on evidence of student engagement and learning (Forman et al., 2017; City et al., 2009). Additionally, rotating teacher roles within PLCs supported mastery experiences and

built distributed leadership capacity by engaging teachers in facilitation and shared responsibility (Hord, 1997; Spillane, 2006; Leithwood et al., 2009).

The Importance of a Theoretical Foundation: Why Models Matter

Many district and school improvement efforts are initiated without an explicit theoretical foundation, which can limit coherence, direction, and sustainability. Ford et al. (2020), emphasize that when improvement initiatives lack a guiding theoretical framework, improvement efforts are fragmented and reactive rather than systemic and strategic. Anchoring improvement initiatives in a well-developed theoretical model helps ensure that strategies are not only responsive to immediate needs but are also sustainable over time.

The Internal Coherence framework (Forman et al., 2017) provides both a conceptual model and a developmental pathway, offering schools a structured approach to building collective capacity for continuous instructional improvement. In this case report, the IC framework emerged as a theoretical and developmental guide for the district's work with PLCs, illustrating the importance of grounding improvement strategies in coherent, research-based models.

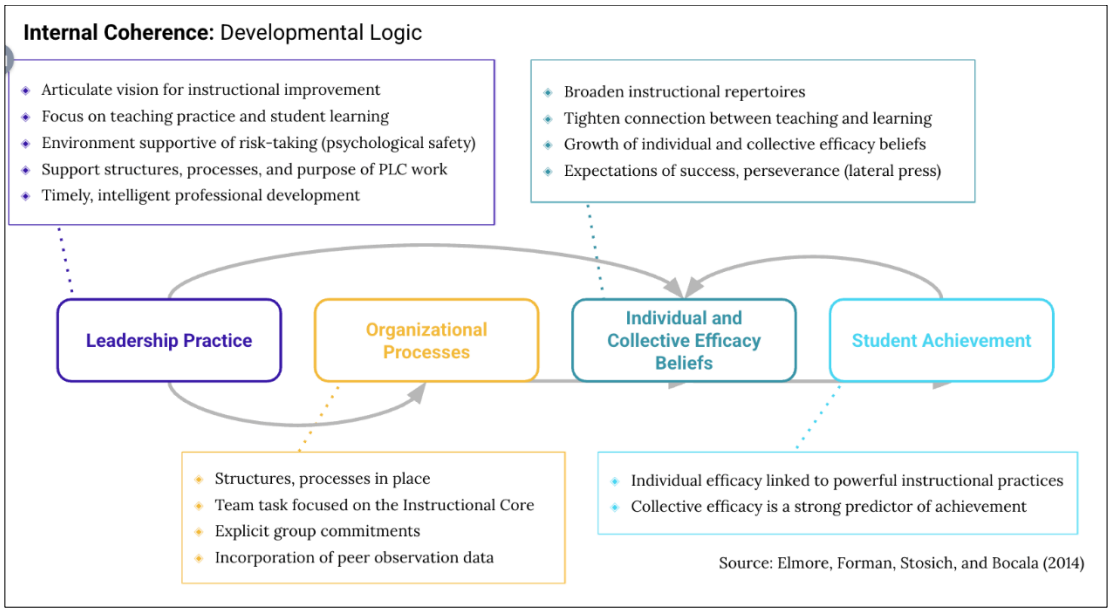
Alignment of the PLC Model and the IC Framework: A Case Connection

Clearly connecting the district's PLC model with the IC framework is the focus of this section of the case, beginning with a statement from the teacher/leadership candidate as she began to realize the intersections. According to the candidate, as the teams were working together in weekly PLCs, teachers used the protocols to analyze student performance and identify evidence-based teaching practices aligned to students' learning needs. She stated, "That led into me being interested in the internal coherence model because it really built on collective teacher efficacy where you're working together to improve each other and improve your student performance, so that's kind of how those two were linked together" (Teacher, personal communication, May 2024).

Although the PLC protocols were developed independently of the IC framework, the collaboration between the superintendent and the leadership candidate clarified the connection between the two and the value of framing the PLC work within the IC framework. The superintendent and teacher/leadership candidate came to realize the PLC initiative was clearly situated within the IC framework as a way forward for improving collective learning, strengthening instructional alignment, and building collective teacher efficacy in ways that reflect the developmental logic of the IC framework.

The visual of the framework in Figure 2 illustrates its structure and focus on grounding the development of collective efficacy on the instructional core (Cohen & Ball, 1999) and academic task (Doyle, 1983). These two interdependent constructs are the key to the section of the framework linked to the box for "Individual and Collective Efficacy Beliefs" in Figure 2.

Figure 2 The Internal Coherence Framework



Note: Shared with permission (Elmore et al., 2014)

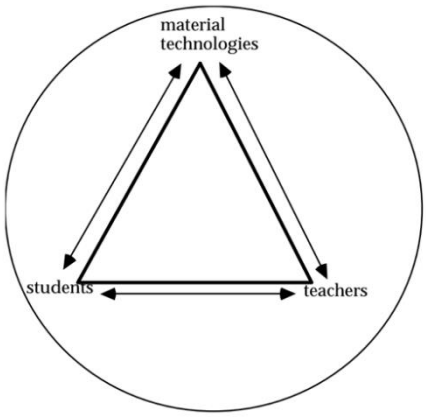
Connections and Potential Enhancements: Strengthening PLCs with IC

Clear connections between the PLC model and the IC framework include the structural design of the district's PLC project, its focus on instruction, and its emphasis on collaboration to improve teaching practices and, ultimately, student achievement. The potential capacity of the IC framework to strengthen the PLC model can be seen in several places.

First, the IC framework begins with the requirement of "Articulating a vision for instructional improvement" (Forman et al., 2017). Anchoring improvement efforts in the shared expectation for instruction when the instructional vision is fully realized gives direction and focus to improvement efforts (Forman et al., 2017). While the district's vision is unknown, the potential of an instructional vision articulated based on the components of the instructional core (Cohen & Ball, 1999) creates an opportunity for staff and leaders across the district to gain a clear understanding of what the vision for instruction requires in terms of the three component of the instructional core: teachers, students, and content or resources and materials (Cohen & Ball, 1999). In addition, the authors contend an instructional vision should be ambitious, promote shared learning among adults, and foster higher-order thinking skills in classrooms (Forman et al., 2017, p. 83). Framing a vision in this way allows the teachers in the district PLCs to position the instructional practices they select within the instructional vision perpetuating collective teacher efficacy and enacting the instructional vision across their classrooms.

A second opportunity for enhancing the PLC model by positioning the model within the IC framework lies in "broadening instructional repertoires" and "tightening the connection between teaching and learning" as seen in Figure 2. The framework connects these two components to individual and collective efficacy. Digging deeper into the underlying concepts of the two components lies the work of Cohen and Ball (1999) around explaining the instructional core, and the work of Doyle (1983) that connects the academic task to the instructional core. As stated earlier, the concepts are interdependent. Cohen and Ball (1999) describe instruction by stating, "We focus on the *interactions among teachers and students around educational material*, rather than seeing curriculum alone or teachers alone as the main source of instruction" (p. 2). Extending this view of instruction, Doyle (1983) states, "The term 'task' focuses attention on three aspects of students' work: (a) the products students are to formulate… (b) the operations that are used to generate the product… (c) the 'givens' or resources available to students while they are generating the product…" (p. 161). Given this explanation of academic task, the task sits at the center of the instructional core triangle because the interactions of the teacher with students around content generates the task. Figure 3 illustrates the instructional core triangle. (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Doyle, 1983; Forman et al., 2017; City et al., 2009).

Figure 3 Instructional Core



Note: The figure is a visual representation of the instructional core (Cohen & Ball, 1999)

In the teacher/leadership candidate's description of the PLC conversations around data analysis and instruction, the description focused on analyzing student data and researching instructional strategies to address learning needs. Deepening teachers' knowledge of the concepts of core and task (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Doyle, 1983) would lead teachers to analyze their teaching choices - what teachers ask students to think about in a lesson, the products students produce to demonstrate their thinking, and the resources available to support students to complete final products. While the PLC model demonstrated the potential to "broaden teaching repertoires," the model would benefit from adding a mechanism to guide teachers to "tighten the connection between teaching and learning" as in Figure 2. This is best accomplished when teachers understand core and task. By adding the IC framework as the theoretical model to guide the structured PLC model, the district has the potential to further enhance collective efficacy of teachers and instructional leaders.

Discussion and Implications: Toward Sustainable Improvement

Even with the opportunity to strengthen the PLC model, evidence revealed that the initiative was generating improvement. Initially, the superintendent began the PLC initiative to increase collaboration and instructional coherence. The teacher/leadership candidate shared that she observed teachers beginning to refer to students as "our students." She saw the shift as an indication that teachers on her team were beginning to take joint ownership of student performance. She stated the depth of the instructional conversation evolved as teachers reviewed literature related to instructional strategies and visited each other's classrooms. She also shared principals and curriculum

specialists attended the PLCs as observers or participants rather than evaluators. Given her observations, evidence indicated the initiative was shifting the culture of collaboration in the schools.

One interesting observation shared by the teacher/leadership candidate had to do with her PLC teams' self-assessment. She recalled, "We rated ourselves a stage three, but we were probably closer to stage one in terms of deep instructional work" (Teacher, personal communication, 2024). The reference to "stage three" comes from the Seven Stages of Professional Learning Teams Rubric (Hord, 1997), where stage three typically reflects a focus on planning instructional activities without fully integrating evidence of student learning into the process. Moving beyond stage three requires teams to engage in reflective dialogue, use student data to inform practice, and foster shared accountability for student outcomes (Hord, 1997; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2016).

According to research, structured PLCs can improve teacher collaboration and the quality with which teams discuss data, instruction, and teaching strategies (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Forman et al., 2017; Hord, 1997). In the case of this district, the teacher/leadership candidate noticed such improvements. For example, when asked about any evidence she saw of increased collaboration, the teacher stated, "At first, we were just filling time, but as we used the protocols, we started really looking at what our students needed and how we could change our teaching" (Teacher, personal communication, May 2024). In addition, her reference to school leaders and curriculum specialists participating in PLCs in roles other than evaluators seemed to be a change in what had been the norm for leadership. Evidence suggests the PLC initiative was moving district staff toward the superintendent's intended direction.

The potential of the PLC model to shift the culture in this district from isolation to collaboration and to deepen instructional practice is working. Even with this clear evidence, the superintendent shared his concern about continuing to improve and sustain the initiative. He asked, "How do we ensure this work becomes part of the district's DNA, beyond my tenure?" (Superintendent, personal communication, May 2024)

In response to the concern, it is clear to the investigators that positioning the PLC initiative within the IC framework can provide direction for enhancing the PLC structures and impact. The focus of the IC model on beginning with a vision for instruction based on the instructional core can set direction for not only the PLC initiative, but also other subsequent improvement strategies the district might select. Additionally, deepening teachers' and leaders' knowledge of the instructional core and academic task (Cohen & Ball, 1999; Doyle, 1983; Forman et al., 2017) provides a foundation for understanding instruction that will outlive any shifts in curriculum or standards imposed from outside sources. And, finally, the focus on "tightening the connection between teaching and learning" will shift teachers' focus from what students learned or missed during lessons to how the components of the core and teaching choices impacted student learning.

The goal of this case is to demonstrate how the framework of internal coherence can guide school and district improvement efforts to enhance collaboration, increase instructional impact, and improve student performance. As demonstrated through this case, the district PLC initiative can be enhanced with the framing of the IC model. With intentional focus on the framework to guide improvement efforts, the district can pursue a pathway for continuous improvement (Forman et al., 2017; Ford et al., 2020; Stosich et al., 2020).

References

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control.* W. H. Freeman

City, E. A., Elmore, R. F., Fiarman, S. E., & Teitel, L. (2009). *Instructional rounds in education: A network approach to improving teaching and learning*. Harvard Education Press.

Cohen, D. K., & Ball, D. L. (1999). *Instruction, capacity, and improvement*. CPRE Research Report Series RR-43. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED431749

Doyle, W. (1983). Academic work. *Review of Educational Research. 53*(2), 159-199.

DuFour, R., & Eaker, R. (1998). *Professional learning communities at work: Best practices for enhancing student achievement*. Solution Tree Press.

Elmore, R. F., Forman, M. L., Stosich, E. L., Bocala, C. (2014, April). *The internal coherence assessment protocol and developmental framework: Building the organizational capacity for improvement in schools.* Strategic Educational Research Partnership. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED564482.pdf

Ford, T. G., Van Sickle, M. E., Clark, L. V., Fazio-Brunson, M., & Schween, D. C. (2020). The science of school improvement: Responding to the call for a systems approach. *Review of Research in Education, 44*(1), 477-515. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/153450842 21112858

Forman, M. L., Stosich, E. L., & Bocala, C. (2017). *The Internal Coherence Framework: Creating the conditions for continuous improvement in schools*. Harvard Education Press.

Fullan, M. (2016). *The new meaning of educational change* (5th ed.). Teachers College Press.

Harris, A. (2004). Distributed leadership and school improvement: Leading or misleading? *Educational Management Administration & Leadership, 32*(1), 11-24. https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1741143204039297

Hord, S. M. (1997). Professional learning communities: Communities of continuous inquiry and improvement. *Southwest Educational Development Laboratory*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED410659

Leithwood, K., Mascall, B., & Strauss, T. (Eds.). (2009). *Distributed leadership according to the evidence.* Routledge.

Solution Tree. (n.d.). *All Things PLC*. https://allthingsplc.info

Spillane, J. P. (2006). *Distributed leadership*. Jossey-Bass.

Stosich, E. L., Bocala, C., & Forman, M. (2017). Building coherence for instructional improvement through professional development: A design-based implementation research study. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 46(5), 864-880. https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143217711193 (Original work published 2018)