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A Narrative Inquiry of Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding Their Professional Development Experiences

Theresa Andrea Nugent

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A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THEIR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES

by

Theresa Andrea Nugent

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
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Dr. Louann Bierlein-Palmer, Advisor

Western Michigan University
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A NARRATIVE INQUIRY OF TEACHERS’ PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THEIR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES

Theresa Andrea Nugent, Ph.D.
Western Michigan University, 2007

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore teachers’ perceptions of their professional development experiences. Qualitative studies are needed to truly understand through “thick rich” descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) what is happening (or not) from the viewpoint of the classroom teacher in reference to their professional development experiences and related impact on student outcomes. In an era of accountability, teachers’ voices are essential for understanding potential connections between teacher learning, via professional development experiences, and improved student outcomes.

This research project involved a purposeful sample of 8 1st-grade and 2nd-grade teachers, identified by their principals as “committed” to a life-long love of learning and to applying new knowledge gained from professional development experiences into their classrooms. These teachers reflected on the experiences they valued, how they applied their learning to support student-learning outcomes, the types of support they received, and the barriers they encountered.

The findings of this study reveal that teachers value professional development experiences that improve their teaching strategies and offer relevant and practical knowledge. To be successful, teachers believe that they need more time to conduct
ongoing informal dialogue with colleagues while applying new learning. In addition to support from colleagues, teachers benefit from the additional assistance provided by internal coaches. Teachers experience barriers related to lack of time and sense of ownership, preconceived notions, insufficient training, and management of noncompliant student behaviors.

In reference to student outcomes, these 1st-grade and 2nd-grade teachers primarily used their observational skills rather than formal assessments to evaluate the impact of new teacher learning on student outcomes. Most teachers did not make a formal connection between participating in professional development experiences and improved achievement from their students. These findings have important implications for the kind of support and follow-up needed in planning professional development opportunities in an era of accountability.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I began this project, I never imagined the fascinating directions this research would lead me, the many people I would meet, or the diversity of experiences I would gain. There are many individuals whose support and encouragement throughout this process drove me to more than I thought possible and opened my eyes to new horizons. First, I would like to thank Dr. Louann Bierlein Palmer, my chairperson, who pushed me to stay focused and always challenged me to think critically about my research and to improve my study. Also I extend my gratitude to Dr. Gary Wegenke, who was there from the very beginning, providing advice and support, and to Dr. Patricia O'Brien who has been my lifeline advisor. She made moving 1,000 miles away from Kalamazoo to New England bearable by being nearby to help whenever I needed her.

There were many times throughout this process where I feared that I would not finish. My special thanks go to Dr. Sally Jensen, my dissertation coach, who inspired me to become a better writer and thinker and offered encouragement, whenever I began to doubt myself. I also treasure the professional discussions I had with Dr. Elizabeth Kubitskey, who shared her knowledge, wisdom, and enthusiasm for professional development with me. I will always be grateful to Dr. Robert Starratt who presented the power of qualitative research.

Thank you to Sue and John Morris for their assistance and support by transcribing hours of interviews and providing invaluable APA knowledge. Also, thank you to Erin Howard who volunteered her free time to edit and check tables and summaries.
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Finally, I would like to thank my family for providing their unconditional love and support. I am grateful that they listened to my ranting and raving, and patiently showed interest in my research. To Becky, Kristin, Philip, and Quinn, I love all of you and am blessed to have such a loving family. Although Julie Larsen is not a blood relative, she was the angel on my shoulder who encouraged me not to give up no matter what. And lastly, to my beloved husband, Dick, who lived this project with me. He sacrificed vacations, endured sleepless nights, and comforted me when I was an emotional mess. I share this achievement with you.

Theresa Andrea Nugent
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

The federal government passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, requiring state and local districts to be held accountable for student achievement and adequate yearly progress (AYP). Although AYP is defined differently by each state, the intent is to determine academic areas that schools need to target for improvement and allocation of their resources (Paige, 2002). Research indicated that there are many factors that influence student achievement (DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Hoachlander, Alt, & Beltranena, 2001; McMunn, Schenck, & McColskey, 2003; Speck & Knipe, 2005). One of these factors, professional development for teachers (North Central Regional Educational Laboratory, 2003), was the focus of this study.

Professional development is defined as “those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they must in turn, improve the learning of students” (Guskey, 2000, p. 16). Professional development experiences are activities such as teacher research and teacher study groups, student assessment events, consultation and planning days, staff retreats, classroom and school visitations, computer and video technology for teacher development, subsidized participation in summer institutes, subject matter networks and collaborations, and other partnerships, networks, or special projects (Harwell, D’Amico, Stein, & Gatti, 2000; 1

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Ultimately, the goal of professional development is increasing student achievement (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Shaha, Lewis, O'Donnell, & Brown, 2004; Speck & Knipe, 2005). Yet, the relationship between the knowledge, skills and attitudes gained from professional development experience and its impact on student achievement has been difficult to determine (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004; The Education Trust, 2004; Fishman, Marx, & Best, 2003). Typically, the only information collected from a professional development experience has been through surveys conducted immediately following a workshop or conference. This method is based on teachers’ opinions rather than impact on student outcomes (Fishman et al., 2003). Even in research where standardized tests are used, the lag time between professional development and the administration, calculation, and publication of test results make it difficult to evaluate the impact of professional development on student achievement (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004). Despite the lack of research connecting teachers’ perceptions regarding professional development to student achievement, professional development has often been promoted as the most important factor to increase student achievement (J. Richardson, 1998).

In the past, most professional development activities were designed to be teacher proof (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Gaudelli, 2001). Teacher proofed professional development was based on the premise that any teacher who participated in a professional development experience, regardless of the years of teaching experience or the content area discipline, would learn the basic knowledge presented, and that such
knowledge would translate into increases in student achievement. Yet, if teachers were
developing new teaching skills and applying them to the classroom, why had the desired
outcome of improved student achievement not occurred? Even with considerable effort
aimed at improving teaching via professional development, students' test scores were not
improving as expected (Sparks, 2002). Time and effort, not to mention financial
resources, were consumed to support professional development for teachers with little or
no visible result (The Finance Project and Public Education Network, 2004).

Researchers have examined various aspects of professional development,
focusing on teacher likes and dislikes (Bischoff, 2004; Buckshaw, 2006; Larson, 2003;
Michel, 2005), barriers to implementing professional development (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004;
Johnson, 2004; Justin, 2005; Klinger, 2004; Sparks, 2002), and various approaches to
implementing new knowledge and skills (Birman, 2000; Rock, 2005; Sparks, 2002). Yet,
there is little research has focused on teachers' views of their professional development
experiences and its connection (or lack thereof) to improved student outcomes, indicating
a need to examine this connection, especially at the elementary and middle school grade
levels (Borko, 2004). The following section reviews the areas of the literature that
provide a framework for conducting such a study to explore teachers' perceptions of their
professional development experiences.

**Conceptual Framework: Building on Previous Knowledge**

Previous research found that teachers value professional development experiences
that align with their beliefs and values (Kubitskey & Fishman, 2007), and are learner
centered (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Such experiences or activities must be embedded
during working hours (The Finance Project and Public Education Network, 2004; Good,
Miller, & Gassenheimer, 2003; Hirsch, 2004; Speck & Knipe, 2005), and colleagues and administration must support the content (Harwell et al., 2000; Klinger, 2004; V. Richardson, 2003).

Research also revealed important aspects of professional development that increased the chances of it being viewed as successful. Studies show that teachers need time to learn the new content and develop the skills in the classroom (Corcoran, 1995; Smith & Desimone, 2003), and time to read and reflect on the knowledge or skill gained by the professional development experiences (Cranton & King, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 1998).

In addition to adequate time, teachers believe that professional development is most effective when it involves supportive and informed leadership (Brandt, 2003; Linek, Fleener, Fazio, Raine, & Klakamp, 2003), an attitude toward continual learning and improvement (Cohen & Hill, 2000), an open and active communication by all stakeholders (Cwikla, 2002), and the formation or strengthening of learning communities and increased collegiality (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Lauer & Dean, 2004; Lieberman, 1995; Little, Gearhart, Curry, & Kafka, 2003). All of these findings are viewed as contributing to learning in a positive school culture, defined as an environment in which teachers and leaders encourage and assist the learning process in order to practice, reflect, and grow together (Brandt, 2003; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Speck & Knipe, 2005). A learning culture establishes the working and learning environment as a necessary element to effective professional development.

Previous research also revealed that effective professional development must be offered as part of a comprehensive developed plan. Such a professional development
plan, according to Speck and Knipe (2005), must focus on improving student learning and achievement. Key components of an effective professional development plan include establishing goals based on the curriculum that will increase student achievement (Barnett, 2003; Hawley, 2002; Hirsch, 2004), promoting teacher growth by expanding knowledge (Firestone, Mangin, Martinez, & Polovsky, 2005), creating a long-range budget (Center for Development & Learning, 2000), identifying necessary resources (Drago-Severson, 2004), and evaluating both program and teacher effectiveness (Hawley, 2002; Killion, 2001). Districts should adopt a professional development plan with the understanding that to effectively implement it, the plan must be allowed sufficient time for implementation (Elmore, 2002).

Yet, a well-designed and executed professional development plan can be hindered by various types of barriers, including lack of time (National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 2003), limited available resources and the lack of support from colleagues and administration (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Rock & Wilson, 2005), and fragmented or unfocused activities not aimed at student achievement (Cohen & Hill, 2000; Corcoran, 1995; Hawley & Valli, 1999).

One key barrier occurs when decisions are made regarding professional development content without input from teachers or without consideration of learning styles (Diaz-Maggioli, 2004). As a result, such teachers are often unwilling to participate in the district’s professional development plan (Sparks, 2002; Zemelman, Daniels, & Hyde, 2005). Darling-Hammond (1996) concluded that teachers need to determine their own professional development rather than having it solely determined by administration. In addition, teachers often become disengaged from any professional development...
experience that does not take their teaching experiences into account (Klinger, 2004). Despite its importance, there are very few studies examining how teachers actively contribute to a district’s professional development plan.

Knowledge is limited regarding teachers’ perceptions of the impact new learning resulting from a professional development experience has on student achievement. Many previous studies examining professional development and outcomes used quantitative research methods to give insight into elements of professional development and enhanced accountability expectations. Such studies were unable to probe deeply into the teachers’ perceptions of the impact of professional development and its effects on improving student outcomes (Creswell, 1998). To this end, qualitative studies are needed to truly understand through “thick rich” descriptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) what is happening (or not) from the viewpoint of the classroom teacher in an era of accountability that holds them liable for all students in their classrooms and schools.

Research Questions

Much is known about professional development for teachers, yet little is still known about how teachers are able to take (or not take) their training and apply it in the classroom to impact student outcomes. In addition, previous research on professional development looked broadly at all teachers, rather than focusing more deeply on various subsets of teachers.

To this end, the goal of this research is to better understand the perceptions of a subset of teachers who value professional development experiences and strive to make the connections needed to improve outcomes for their students. Such teachers can be viewed as “committed” teachers who have demonstrated a life-long love of learning and
the willingness to apply the new knowledge or skills gained from professional
development experiences into the classroom. Indeed, such teachers who plan their
professional development experiences based on their students' needs and work to
improve their teaching skills throughout their careers tend to be life-long learners that are
committed to increasing student achievement (Larson, 2003).

Such a population of teachers provides the best experience to explore connections
that committed teachers might be making between their professional development
experiences and their students' outcomes. If committed teachers are unable to make such
connections, it is important to understand how the process broke down and to investigate
the barriers to applying learning and impacting student outcomes. Four questions guide
this study:

1. What types of professional development experiences are being offered for
teachers, and of these experiences, which do committed teachers find the most
and least valuable in terms of improving students' outcomes and why?

2. To what extent and how are committed teachers able to apply what they learn
from professional development experiences within their classrooms to support
students' learning outcomes?

3. How, if at all, do (a) the learning culture of a school and/or district and (b)
teachers' contributions (the formative input teachers have in constructing the
district’s professional development plans) affect the application of learning
from professional development experiences within the classroom?
4. What *barriers*, if any, do committed teachers encounter when attempting to implement ideas from their professional development experiences in order to impact student learning in their classrooms? How do teachers overcome such barriers, if at all?

**Significance of the Study**

This study of teachers' perceptions of their professional development experiences and any connections to improved student outcomes has practical importance because, according to Gaudelli (2001),

> Districts pour money, human resources, materials, and vast amounts of energy into this ongoing project with little understanding as to how it may affect teachers, scarce empirical research to support their professional development choices, and virtually no evidence about the influence upon student achievement. (p. 4)

To date, few studies explored the teachers' perceptions of professional development, and those studies recommended that further studies be conducted to give voice to teachers (Bischoff, 2004; Larson, 2003). As previously mentioned, professional development experiences shown to improve teachers' knowledge and skills have the greatest impact on improving student outcomes. And yet, the connection between teacher learning and student outcomes is not well understood. There is a need for an in-depth exploration of teachers' views of the connections or lack of such connections, between professional development experiences and student outcomes. To this end, this study provides a deeper understanding of professional development experiences and any connections to improved outcomes for students by asking teachers about their professional development experiences and how these experiences impact classroom
practices. Teachers' voices shed light on how this connection occurs, and when it did not occur, why teachers' learning do not result in improved student outcomes.

Nature of the Study

This study involves a qualitative research method using narrative inquiry to explore teachers' perceptions of their professional development experiences. A narrative inquiry explores individual experiences as told to the researcher or found in documents and archival material (Creswell, 1998). Narrative inquiry previously has been described as either a classical or an interpretive biography. An interpretive biography method incorporates the experience of the interviewee as well as the interviewer. The general assumption regarding narrative studies was that the researcher studies individual life stories and retells them through the lens of the researcher’s own experiences (Creswell, 2003). The researcher conducts in-depth interviews and later recounts the stories, centering the stories around a theme, connecting meanings among interviewees’ responses, and linking the stories to a common meaning (Creswell, 1998). In this study, a narrative inquiry approach reveals the participants' voices, uncovered through their oral accounts of their professional development experiences.

The participants are 8 first- and second-grade public school teachers who had more than 5 years of teaching experience and were from school districts that are within a 20-miles radius from my school district. These two grade levels have similar students, teaching challenges, and a likelihood of similar school improvement efforts that include professional development experiences. These teachers are recognized by their principal as those who demonstrate a passion for teaching, eagerness to participate in professional development experiences, and willingness to apply what is learned in the classroom. It is
such committed teachers, with positive attitudes toward the value of professional
development, who are more likely to succeed in implementing new knowledge and skills
into the classroom (Larson, 2003; Lowden, 2005). Thus, I collected data on the “how,” as
well as the barriers facing these teachers.

I collected teachers’ narratives through individual interviews guided by the
study’s research questions and teachers’ responses to reflective questions. Data analysis
procedures involved coding interview transcripts for constructing individual narratives.

Assumptions and Delimitations

I assumed that the teachers interviewed answered accurately and their responses
provided a valuable source of knowledge about the impact of professional development.
Participants were interviewed at their school in familiar surroundings in order to promote
a relaxed and open interview.

Another assumption was that teachers with 5 or more years of teaching
experiences would have had a sufficient number of professional development experiences
and a level of competency to contribute to this study. In most states, professional status or
tenure is earned with 3 to 4 years of teaching experience. Throughout this time, school
districts or state regulations require a teacher to attend seminars, workshops, or training
sessions.

A delimitation of this study is the inability to generalize the data to a larger
population. The data were obtained from 8 teachers from four school districts. The
participants’ perceptions may not agree with perceptions of others in their district or other
districts. In addition, I had preconceived concepts about professional development that
may influence the interpretation of the results.
Chapter I Summary

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires that administrators and teachers be held responsible for making AYP in their schools. Teachers are the key to accountability and professional development is one factor in improving the quality of teaching. Thus, there is a need to better understand teachers' views of their professional development experiences. This chapter provided an introduction, problem statement, conceptual framework, the research questions, significance of the study, nature of the study, and assumptions and limitations. Chapter II contains a review of relevant literature. It addresses each of the research questions regarding how teachers value professional development experience, how teachers' apply what they have learned, how teachers contribute to their district's professional development plan, how teachers view the role of a learning culture, and teachers' perceptions of the impact of a district's professional development plan.

Chapter III describes the research design, sampling strategy, participant selection along with the researcher's role, data collection procedure, analysis and interpretation, evidence of quality, and feasibility. Chapter IV presents the findings of this study, and chapter V includes discussion, conclusions, recommendations, and implications for policy and procedures.
CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to review current research findings regarding the types of professional development experiences being offered to teachers, what teachers value most within such experiences, to what extent teachers apply what they learn, to what extent teachers contribute to their professional development plans, the impact of a school's learning culture on such plans, and barriers that hinder implementing knowledge or skills gained from professional development experiences. This review focuses on research and articles published within the last 6 years. However, certain older studies are used if critical to the foundation for this study. This literature review is divided into three parts, professional development practices, current research on professional development activities and components, and barriers that teachers encounter when implementing new knowledge or skills.

Professional Development Practices

Teacher-Proofed Practices

Barnett (2003) stated:

The goal of any professional development program is to inform and change teacher behavior as a result of new information. To this end, teachers and other educators spend countless hours in professional activities learning to use new instructional strategies or materials.
Sometimes there is change, and sometimes the person goes right back to doing what he or she had been doing all along. (p. 1)

Historically, professional development experiences were designed to be teacher proofed (Darling-Hammond, 1996; Gaudelli, 2001; Shaha et al., 2004) or one-size-fits-all (Lieberman, 1995; Speck & Knipe, 2005). Teacher proofed professional development was designed to be so explicit that, regardless of the teacher classroom experience, a teacher could not make a mistake executing it. This one-size-fits-all professional development ignored a teacher's classroom experiences and/or content area and required that all teachers participate in the same activity. As a result of such teacher proofed or one-size-fits-all professional development experiences, teachers often were resentful or did not value the experience (Sparks, 2002; Zemelman et al., 2005), and thus did not utilize the new knowledge or skills in the classroom. District administrators often created professional development plans to initiate a change or reduce deficiencies with little or no input from teachers.

In the past, teacher-proofed professional development experiences were often delivered through workshops that could accommodate large numbers of participants, and were not tailored for specific teachers' needs (Center for Development & Learning, 2000). They were considered a temporary fix (Cwikla, 2002), and if a teacher could wait until the pendulum swung to the next reform and new plans, teachers could revert back to their comfortable teaching style. Although there was controversy as to the effectiveness of these workshops, they were useful for raising awareness of new trends in education (Kerka, 2003) and could have been effective if combined with other professional development experiences (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999).
Eisenhower Program: New Thinking and Essential Components

In 1999, the U.S. Department of Education published the findings of a large-scale significant research study on effective professional development practices conducted by the American Institutes for Research. The findings of this research laid the foundation for researchers to systematically determine or evaluate effective professional development experiences. As part of what was commonly known as the Eisenhower Program, 1,027 mathematics and science teachers, who participated in professional development activities funded by Title II of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, were surveyed to determine the change in knowledge, skills, and classroom practices after participating in professional development experiences. The Eisenhower Program identified the features of effective professional development and examined teachers' self-reports of knowledge, skills, and classroom practices. This research project was important to future research because of its insight into effective professional development features and their impact in the classroom as reported by teachers (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). It called for recommendations to change professional development practices of the past and reconceptualized our idea of professional development and how professional development experiences are evaluated.

A Teacher Activity Survey was developed and implemented as part of the national evaluation of the Eisenhower Professional Development Program. A stratified random sample was selected from the districts that used Title II funds. A list of Title II funded professional development activities was generated between July and December 1997, from which two sample activities were drawn from each district. From those sample activities, a random subsample of two teachers who attended each activity was
selected to participate in a survey focusing on the specific professional development activity. Teachers self-reported on their behavior and experiences. Approximately 1,426 teachers were randomly selected. There was a 72% participation response rate, resulting in a sample size of 1,027 teachers.

There was also a second survey used to collect district information. Researchers administered telephone interviews to randomly selected district professional development directors using a computer-assisted form. The researchers contacted 409 districts from the eligible list, and 439 administrators were identified through the screening process. Of those, 88% participated, resulting in a sample size of 386 district administrators.

The data analysis of teacher surveys indicated that there were two main features of high-quality professional development—structural and core. Structural features are the elements of conducting the professional development activities: form, duration, and participation. The core features are content, active learning, and coherence. Overall, the two sets of features consist of six components (Garet et al., 2001).

Of the six components, form was the underlying foundation that supported the remaining components' effectiveness. The delivery method or form of a professional development experience could be either traditional or reform. Traditional professional development experiences were typically short-term workshops, and reform professional development were activities such as action research, teacher study groups, student assessment events, consultation and planning days, staff retreats, classroom and school visitations, computer and video technology for teacher development, subject matter networks and collaborations, and subsidized participation in summer institutes (Hawley & Valli, 1999). Analysis of the evaluation of the Eisenhower Program (Garet et al., 2001)
found if reform professional development activities were used, then the components of participation and duration would be more successful.

Teachers who participated in longer on-going professional development activities were more likely to experience the full impact of the activity for both reform and traditional activities. *Duration* could result in collaboration or conversations regarding content or student success. Also, extended duration permitted time for teachers to practice their new knowledge or skills and receive feedback. Professional development experiences that focused on form and duration supported the third structural feature component for effective professional development, collective participation.

*Collective participation* required teachers to work together to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the knowledge or skill gained from their professional development experience. Garet et al. (2001) found that teachers who were from the same school, district or grade level were likely to gain the most from the professional development experience. The shared experience created a consistent purpose. Even if there were staff members who did not participate in the original professional development experience, they benefited from the group discussions and actions.

As previously noted, effective professional development was formed with structural and core features. Core features, composed of three parts, are the knowledge or skills learned from a professional development experience: (a) content, (b) active learning and (c) coherence. Professional development *content* emphasized subject matter such as pedagogy or building content-area knowledge, on changes to student learning goals, on the way students learn in a particular subject matter, and on changes to teaching practices.
What teachers learned from professional development experiences was as important as how active they were as learners.

*Active learning* involved being engaged in discussions, planning and practice. Garet et al. (2001) found that active learning experiences involved teachers observing expert teachers, being observed by expert teachers with feedback, planning curriculum and its implementation with colleagues, reviewing student work, and presenting, leading, and writing about their professional development experience.

*Coherence* was the extent to which professional development activities were perceived by teachers to be a part of a coherent program of teacher learning and development. Content and active learning were improved upon by the teacher’s attitudes and beliefs about the professional development experience (Garet et al., 2001). Teachers perceived that connections with goals and other activities built upon what they already knew or had experienced. Professional development activities that aligned with state and district standards and assessments were more effective than any form of professional development not aligned with curriculum benchmarks and standards. Coherence could be maintained by communication with others through the formation of learning communities. Coherence to a professional development plan required time to think and the ability to work through any difficulty that arose from the implementation of the professional development skill or knowledge.

In summary, Garet et al. (2001) divided all professional development experiences into two features, core and structural, and six components: form, duration, collective participation, content, active learning, and coherence. These features and components created a general framework for developing and implementing professional development.
This framework was used to guide this study during coding and in identifying emerging themes and during the construction of individual narratives.

Current Research on Professional Development Activities

Significant research on various professional development activities has occurred in recent years. Several areas were of key importance to my proposed study and helped inform my analysis. These included experiences valued by teachers, the application of professional development knowledge, the impact of professional development in the classroom, the connection of professional development to the classroom, and the link between learning culture and teachers' professional development.

*Key Components Valued by Teachers*

Kubitskey and Fishman (2007) stated that professional development should be about teacher learning, whereby teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes were shaped by professional development activity, endorsement of the knowledge gained by an activity, and determined successful based on students' outcomes. To illustrate their findings, Kubitskey and Fishman developed a model of teacher learning. Key components are the three filters that impact or inspire teachers as they participate in a professional development experience: buy-in, knowledge, and confidence in the relationship between teacher behavior and student response (see Figure 1).
Kubitskey and Fishman (2007) suggested that reform-oriented curriculum-aligned workshops need to motivate teachers or encourage them to buy into the new learning gained from a professional development experience. Teachers attending workshops may lack buy-in. Lack of buy-in affects the effectiveness of knowledge gained from the workshop, which results in teachers not changing their existing practices or failing to gain enough knowledge to successfully impact their teaching practices when attempting to apply new learning.

Confidence is another filter that affects new learning gained from the workshop. According to Kubitskey and Fishman, “Teachers initially confident in their practice needed to be convinced the new information would improve their instruction” (p. 8).

Buy-in, change of knowledge, and increased confidence impact teacher behavior. Although the new learning gained from the professional development experience is important, the impact to student responses as a result of the application of new learning was the most important factor to this learning model. Kubitskey and Fishman suggested the need for a follow-up workshop to review concerns and successes of the application of

Figure 1. Model of teacher learning (Kubitskey & Fishman, 2007).
new learning and to review students' assessments in order to maintain the reform. They found that the follow-up workshop is a key element to long-term support.

Guskey (2003) compared 13 different lists of characteristics of effective professional development offered by educators over the last 10 years. Of the 21 effective characteristics that teachers cited, the most important were enhanced content and pedagogical knowledge. Other characteristics included sufficient time and resources, collegiality and collaboration, evaluation of the professional development activity, and whether the professional development was school or site based.

Further studies supported Guskey's (2003) findings. One such study by Good et al. (2003) found that when districts developed a rubric using the National Staff Development Council standards to evaluate their professional development plan, this rubric aided each district in determining the areas of success and needed reform. Good et al. shortened the list of 12 standards to 4 in order to make a manageable list from which to create a rubric. Sixteen school districts' administrators and lead teachers received an overview of the National Staff Develop Council's revised standards for effective professional development that reflected the changing needs of students, schools, and school communities. The standards selected for this study were data driven, research-based, quality teaching and learning communities. Professional learning communities were composed of administrators and staff that shared a common vision, worked collaboratively towards continuous improvement, and sought solutions based on collective research (DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

The next stage of the study involved semistructured interviews to solicit responses regarding two primary themes: improving the self-assessment conversation process and
determining the impact of the conversations on professional development practices at the school level (Good et al., 2003). The participants determined that the current professional development experiences in their districts were needed to improve the quality of teaching and to promote the formation of learning communities.

The goal of the self-assessment dialogues at the district level was to promote a positive school climate as evidenced by “the current best practices of professional development, collaboration as community learners, teacher empowerment, and recognition of faculty expertise” (Good et al., 2003, p. 11). Collaboration involved peer coaching and sharing of information among faculty. The participants were asked to consider the necessary elements for promoting a positive school climate. A positive school climate was created when professional development was linked to student achievement, data-driven decision making, and job-embedded training. The participants requested a follow-up activity that included creating a self-assessment facilitator team. The self-assessment facilitator team would provide feedback on how effective the district was in accomplishing its goal of establishing a positive school climate. This research added to the understanding of what teachers valued when they were encouraged to participate in the creation of a rubric that evaluated effective professional development experiences to a positive school climate. Teachers linked effective professional development experiences to student achievement, decision making, and training, and as a result, Good et al. revealed the importance of teachers’ input in the success of creating a positive school climate.

Other studies have identified the value of time to reflect, learn, and apply new knowledge or skills from professional development experiences. Teachers need to have
time to read and reflect on new learning in order for this new learning to have an impact in the classroom. Support from a coach who has expertise in the content area of professional development increases the likelihood that a teacher will take the time to reflect on new knowledge or skills (Cooter, 2003). Critical reflection time results in research-based decision making (Richie, 2006). Data-driven decision making, building time for critical reflection and having expert guidance increases teachers’ effectiveness (Fishman et al., 2003). Good et al. (2003) found that teachers value researched-based decision making. Therefore, time to reflect with the guidance of a coach increases teacher success in implementing new knowledge or skills and in improving student outcomes.

In summary, there is a clear indication that teachers value having input in their professional development plans. Teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes toward the professional development experience influence what they value: having time to reflect on knowledge or skills with colleagues, building collaboration, improving quality of teaching, and obtaining necessary resources are important to teachers. They value job-embedded training and the experience to evaluate the effectiveness of professional development activities in terms of anticipated student outcomes. My study adds to this knowledge by examining to what extent these elements are important to teachers who value professional development experiences, those recognized by their principals as demonstrating a passion for teaching, eagerness to participate in professional development experiences, and willingness to apply what is learned in the classroom in order to improve student outcomes.
Applying Professional Development Knowledge

When participating in professional development experiences, teachers value having the time to reflect on and practice what they learned. Building knowledge over time is critical for the success of a professional development plan to increase student outcomes (Cranton & King, 2003; Loucks-Horsley & Matsumoto, 1999; Zemelman et al., 2005). Coaching during the learning and application process of professional development is also essential when facing unexpected problems or student outcomes (Cooter, 2003). Teachers who are supported by others increase the application of what they had learned (Loucks-Horsley & Matsumoto, 1999). Thus, if professional development plans are to be effective, they need to be written to anticipate that new knowledge may present new problems or outcomes when applied in the classroom.

Kedro and Short (2004) reported that 25% of teachers who participated in professional development experiences felt like novices in applying the new knowledge even after the second year. However, teachers persisted in trying to apply the new knowledge when they received continued support from internal or external coaches (Reid, 2005). Teachers viewed coaching as a necessary element in the application of new learning (Birman et al., 2000; Garet et al., 2001; Grant, 2005; Justin, 2005; Rasmussen, Hopkins, & Fitzpatrick, 2004; Reid, 2005). Internal coaches could be colleagues, administrators, or central office support personal. External coaches were individuals outside of the school who are knowledgeable regarding the new knowledge or learned skill and continued to meet with teachers through the contracted time allotment. Coaches collaborated with teachers to provide ongoing support and guidance and, as a result, teachers continued to want to improve their teaching practices (Grant, 2005).
Teachers apply knowledge when they are given an opportunity to think about and process what they have learned. Additional studies show that if teachers focus on comparing what they believe to what they have learned, then teachers easily accept new challenges, learning experiences, or ways of thinking about teaching practices (Cranton & King, 2003; Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004; Zemelman et al., 2005). Cranton and King found that reflective learning supports the complexity of teaching and learning during the professional development process. When learners gained new knowledge, they relied on prior knowledge to process, retain and apply what they have just learned. According to a national teacher survey, 35% of professional development activities built from prior knowledge (Birman et al., 2000).

Coherence, as defined by Garet et al. (2001) is the ability to sustain learning for the amount of time it takes to understand the new material, and is a factor when teachers return to the classroom and try to apply what they have learned while struggling through the challenges of implementing new knowledge. This initial struggle is known as the implementation dip. According to Fullan (2001), “The implementation dip is literally a dip in performance and confidence as one encounters an innovation that requires new skills and new understandings” (p. 40). When implementing a new feature or applying a new skill, teachers should not expect instant success. It might take up to 18 months to apply these skills, and teachers need to be supported by their coaches during this time (Busick, 1994). Teachers, as well as administrators, need to plan for an implementation dip when new learning practices are applied.

Applying new knowledge as a result of professional development was different for each teacher. Do teachers need all or some of these forms of support in order to apply
these new skills, knowledge, or beliefs? My study explores more deeply how and to what extent committed teachers apply what is learned from professional development within their classrooms (or not able) to apply what they have learned.

Connecting Professional Development and the Classroom

Few research programs currently link studies of teacher learning to teaching behavior and student achievement. Yet, the contemporary press for accountability requires that all research, even research on teachers and their learning include some recognition of the need for student data. (Wilson & Berne, 1999, p. 203)

Many studies indicate that effective professional development should focus on student achievement as the most important measure in the classroom (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004; Borko, 2004; Center for Development & Learning, 2000; The Finance Project and Public Education Network, 2004; Guskey, 2003; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Lauer & Dean, 2004; Sparks, 2002; Speck & Kniepe, 2005; Timperlye & Phillips, 2003; Wenglinsky, 2000). Yet there are few previous studies that actually link professional development to student achievement (Kennedy, 1998; Killion, 2001; Wenglinsky, 2000).

Content of professional development activities, a core feature component according to the evaluation of the Eisenhower Program, is designed to improve curricular and instructional changes in order to have a “major and rapid effect” on student achievement (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Joyce and Showers indicated that professional development should continue until the desired result, improved student achievement, is obtained. The assumption is that teachers improve student achievement by participating and executing professional development plans that were created with an objective of increasing student achievement (Guskey, 2003; Speck & Kniepe, 2005).
Previous studies contend that the impact of professional development experiences had many predictable outcomes. Various researchers suggest that its impact was to increase student achievement (The Finance Project and Public Education Network, 2004; Guskey, 2000; Harwell et al., 2000; Joyce & Showers, 2002; Killion, 2002; Newmann, King, & Youngs, 2000), to empower or better prepare teachers (Fishman et al., 2003; Good et al., 2003; National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 2003; Speck & Knipe, 2005; Wilson & Berne, 1999), to promote new and more effective teaching strategies (Garet et al., 2001; Hawley, 2002; Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999; Scotchmer, McGrath, & Coder, 2005; Shaha et al., 2004; Sparks, 2002; Trimble, 2003), and to encourage districts to increase available resources to teachers (Newmann et al., 2000).

To increase student achievement, teachers need to be prepared to help diverse groups of students meet continuously evolving curriculum standards (Speck & Knipe, 2005). Effective professional development supports the needs of teachers and students. Teachers who are empowered to use student data and their teaching experiences must determine which professional development experiences best suit teacher and student learning (Good et al., 2003). As teachers become active learners, they become reflective practitioners who focus on student achievement. "Reflective practice is a collaborative search for answers rather than an effort to teach a predetermined response to a problem” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004, p. 4). Active learners draw from prior knowledge, tapping into a reflective practice with colleagues to problem solve and create or diagnose strategies to improve student achievement.
Teachers perceive that building new knowledge from prior knowledge is important (National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 2003). As teachers implement the knowledge or skills learned from professional development experiences, new resources or improved resources are added (Speck & Knipe, 2005). These resources require equipment, outside support from experts, or such teaching aids as manipulatives or supplies.

The impact of professional development experiences is a result of the new knowledge or skills teachers gained. Teachers who focus on a better understanding of subject content matter shift to a more balanced approach to teaching by gaining a deeper understanding of content and how students learn these subjects (Garet et al., 2001; Sparks, 2002). As a result of these experiences, teachers feel more confident, capable and fulfilled (Shaha et al., 2004). When teachers focus on understanding how students learn, they use this knowledge to design effective lessons and implement effective teaching strategies (Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, 1999). Professional development experiences that focus on strategies for teaching higher order thinking teaching result in a greater likelihood that teachers use these strategies in the classroom (Porter, Garet, Desimone, Yoon, & Birman, 2000; Smith & Desimone, 2003).

After teachers gain new knowledge, what should happen next? According to Hawley (2002), effective professional development resulted in lasting changes in teachers' knowledge, skills and behaviors and subsequent improvements in student learning. These changes include addressing students' learning strategies, making curriculum decisions by analyzing student data, continuing to identify what new skill or
knowledge teachers need to meet high demands and improve knowledge, skills and behaviors to support continuous learning and evaluate student outcomes.

New skills and knowledge gained from effective professional development experiences improve teaching abilities and enable teachers to better meet the demands of a diverse student population. Increased knowledge of content areas helps teachers to use data to make decisions. Teachers who are active learners build new knowledge upon prior knowledge and in the process they feel more confident, capable, and fulfilled. My study provides further information regarding what committed teachers did (or did not do) with their newly gained knowledge to impact student outcomes.

*Links Between Learning Culture and Teachers' Professional Development*

Hawley and Valli (2002) stated, “School improvement cannot occur apart from a closely connected culture of professional development” (p. 129). Previous research shows that schools that have a school culture committed to adult learning have teachers who have common goals and effective teaching strategies. As a result, there is a school culture of ongoing learning, collaborative dialogue, shared work, deep reflection and practice with continued support (Cowley & Meehan, 2002; DuFour & Eaker, 1998; Killion, 2001). Thus, a commitment to learning by administrators and teachers supported by a school culture with shared goals and evidence of effective teaching results in a positive learning and working environment for teachers.

A positive school culture includes teachers participating in professional development experiences that provide a strong learning community with a collegial atmosphere and supportive ongoing collaborations (Good et al., 2003; Hawley, 2002; Lauer & Dean, 2004). Learning communities bring together teachers with a variety of
expertise, experiences, and resources for confronting challenges or new situations (Wilson & Berne, 1999). Benefits from collaboration and collegiality include the creation of a feeling of effectiveness in gaining knowledge from all who participate (Darling-Hammond, 1996) and an ability to self-sustain professional development goals and not resist changes (Wilson & Berne, 1999). Without learning communities and collegiality, teachers find it hard to overcome challenges, and thus, revert back to the status quo in lieu of implementing changes to curriculum or other classroom practices that result from a new professional development experiences (National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 2003; Sparks, 2002).

Zemelman et al. (2005) summarized teaching and learning practices that help teachers grow and handle changes. Supportive leadership is key to promoting growth. Teachers rely on school leaders to support them as they make decisions regarding professional development experiences, to possess a clear vision of the school’s mission, to cultivate a positive school culture, and to act as a coach and role model. If teachers are to work collaboratively to reflect and learn, leaders need to devote planning time to the teachers on a regular basis. Building collaboration permits open discussions of current issues. Committee work, staff meetings, and professional development experiences promote teacher leadership in creating a positive school culture.

Once a positive school culture is developed, it is important that it is sustained for continuity of the established culture (Speck & Knipe, 2005). Sustaining this culture ensures that school reform or school improvement plans succeed despite changes in teachers or administrators. Forming learning communities as part of a positive school culture creates a shared vision of school improvement plans.
Open communication is an essential activity to start and maintain learning communities. Sharing, trust and support are elements of strong learning communities, and as a result, teachers communicate in a respectful climate that empowers teachers to make decisions about changing the status quo (Good et al., 2003; Lawler, 2003). Change cannot happen without open communication (Sparks, 2001).

Individuals learn best when new learning is shared and supported by others (Brandt, 2003). Creating a learning community requires supportive leadership, collegiality, understanding that learning is ongoing, and active communication. With the support of local leadership, schools build learning communities. Strong learning communities bring many advantages such as an increased ability to share, greater trust, and a feeling of support among teachers and administration. In addition, teachers working collaboratively dissolve the notion of individualism, such as “my” kids, “my” classroom, and “my” subject (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching, 2003). Moon, Butcher, and Bird (2000) found that when diverse groups of teachers with different teaching experiences and backgrounds came together, rich conversations lead to insight into teaching and learning. Learning communities are developed and sustained by a positive relationship between teachers and administrators (Louis & Marks, 1998). It is the building of these positive relationships that diminishes the notion of individualism and begins the process of collective thinking.

Supportive leadership is a key factor in building a learning community. Leaders have the ability to view a broader picture and can implement changes to curriculum, policy, and environment (Brandt, 2003). In addition to being change agents, leaders need
to share in the continuous learning from professional development (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Ganser, 2000). Sparks (2002) stated:

Leaders matter because they can affect the fundamental choices, mental models, and sense of efficacy of those with whom they interact. They are particularly powerful in leading communities of learning when they stand with others as equals and partners to assist them in creating that which initially may have been viewed as impossible - schools in which all students and staff members learn and perform at high levels. (p. 14–2)

If learning cultures produce high levels of student achievement, then why are there schools that do not create this environment? It is hard to change a community and transform it without anxiety, conflicts, and confusion (DuFour & Eaker, 1998). Indeed, anxiety, conflicts and confusion are a result of many years of professional development focused on “fads and bandwagon movement” (Guskey, 2003). Teachers and administrators believe that professional development swings from one direction to the next with no long-term plan. The lack of a plan conflicts with the development of a learning community (Gallucci, 2003; Guskey, 2000).

The learning culture contributes to teachers’ professional development by creating an atmosphere of shared collegiality and collaboration among teachers and leaders. This environment embraces teachers’ expertise and teaching experiences and focuses on teacher and student learning. A positive learning culture improves confidence and open communication among teachers and administration. Changes in teaching as a result of a professional development plan are supported by open communication, thus reducing anxieties and conflicts associated with change.

As a means to deepen our knowledge about such learning cultures, my study examines a set of teachers, recognized by their principals as demonstrating a passion for
teaching, eagerness to participate in professional development experiences, and willingness to apply what is learned in the classroom, and their perceptions of how their learning communities support (or do not support) their application of new knowledge or skills.

**Teacher Contributions to Their Professional Development Plans**

An exhaustive review of the literature revealed little empirical research that looked at teachers' contributions to a district's professional development plan. Many authors suggest that teacher input is necessary for a successful, on-going, effective professional development plan, but very few directly studied teachers' views on this topic (Bischoff, 2004; Larson, 2003). What we do know is that effective professional development plans should focus on improving student outcomes (Cohen & Hill, 1998). Due to the lack of consensus regarding the best professional development plan format and the lack of research examining teachers' contribution to the entire process of creating a professional development plan, Speck and Knipe's (2005) model for professional development change is used as my framework for discussing teachers' contributions to the components of a professional development plan.

A well-designed professional development plan with a focus on student achievement improves teaching and student success (Speck & Knipe, 2005). A major component of a professional development plan is the use of current data to drive decision making, the empowering of beliefs and values, and the alignment of strategies with the school and district goals. High-quality professional development

Is a sustained collaborative learning process that systematically nourishes the growth of educators (individuals and teams) through adult learner-centered, job-embedded processes. It focuses on educators attaining the
skills, abilities, and deep understandings needed to improve student achievement. (Speck & Knipe, 2005, p. 3)

Speck and Knipe (2005) developed a change model to illustrate a process whereby pertinent subject matter and interactivity between stages supply a “coherence and sustainability to ongoing professional development plans and actions” (p. 6). The findings from the evaluation of the Eisenhower Project revealed that core and structural components are necessary to have effective professional development. Speck and Knipe provide a visual and cohesive model for developing and maintaining professional development plans that support core and structural features and other components of an effective professional development plan. As previously discussed, teachers need to be a part of the planning. They need to reflect on the content, the process, and premise of the targeted goal of the professional plan (Cranton & King, 2003). Teachers’ reflection focuses on the six components comprising the core and structural features: form, duration, participation, content, active learning, and coherence.

Speck and Knipe’s (2005) model establishes a set of six questions that examine the planning, implementation and assessment of a professional development plan: (a) Where are we? (b) Where do we want to be? (c) What is our focus? (d) How do we design our work? (e) How will we get there? (f) How will we know we are successful?

*Where we are* and *where do we want to be* are the first two questions that a district should address to create an effective professional development plan. School districts need to review the current professional development plan and establish goals. Teachers who do not have input from start to finish into planning professional development or school improvement plans lose confidence in the process, and the district
does not improve their goals or successfully implement change (Mintrop & MacLellan, 2002; Obert, 2006). Review of the district and school goals, student achievement and state and national curriculum and standards are the focus of the first two questions posed by Speck and Knipe in their research. Professional development needs to be developed and supported by both teachers and administration. Buckshaw (2006) conducted a study to examine principal and teacher perceptions of how school improvement plans are developed, implemented, and monitored. Buckshaw found that teachers who had a higher level of involvement with the school improvement plan also had a higher level of usage. Principals and teachers viewed the impact of the professional development plan differently. Principals gave it a more positive rating, whereas teachers stated that they needed more resources and coaches inside and outside the district. Teachers expressed a need to have more input than was accepted.

*What is our focus* is addressed by Lowden (2005). Lowden studied the impact of professional development by surveying teachers about their district's professional development process using Guskey's model of teacher change (Guskey, 2000). Out of the 650 teachers from two public suburban school districts in New York State, 205 teachers responded to the mailed survey. These respondents, who taught kindergarten through Grade 12, were asked the nature of the professional development process in their districts. The survey was in two sections. The first section inquired about teacher demographic information and the professional development process, format, and content. The second section focused on teacher's perceptions of professional development using Guskey's change model. Six levels were reviewed: participant satisfaction, participant
learning, organizational support, teacher perception of student learning, and changes in attitudes and beliefs, and change in teacher knowledge, skills and instructional pedagogy,

Lowden (2005) found that 68% of the teachers indicated that they were aware of their district’s professional development goals. In addition, 70% of the teachers indicated that district-level administrators were making decisions regarding professional development plans and activities. Lowden also found that teachers’ attitudes and beliefs towards change were negative and teachers’ views on the use of new knowledge and skills and student learning outcomes were positive.

Lowden disaggregated the teachers who perceived they experienced effective professional development from those who perceived they experienced ineffective professional development. Using Guskey’s change model, Lowden found that those teachers who experienced effective professional development had a more positive experience in all levels of Guskey’s model than did those from the ineffective professional development group. Ineffective professional development is characterized as unfocused and fragmented; not aligned to school improvement and the teacher evaluation process; offered after school, during the lunch hour, and/or on weekends; presented as clinical classroom observations, presentations or demonstrations; training workshops, going to conferences, and/or participating in expert lectures or motivational speeches; and the content is decided upon by teachers only. (Lowden, 2005, p. 12)

Teachers’ perceptions of ineffective professional development involved inconvenient times, lack of collaboration, and no link to teacher evaluation. With respect to Speck and Knipe’s first three questions, teachers desired input into the current status quo of the district, where reform was needed, and what area of student achievement was focused on.
The next question, how will we get there, was addressed by Michel (2005). Michel found that 85% of teachers currently experienced a traditional type of professional development. A cross-sectional survey of 417 teachers using a stratified random sample of schools in Virginia revealed that only 11.5% of teachers experienced a reform type of professional development. Examples of reform types of professional development were teacher study groups, teacher collaboration, networks, task groups, and coaching. Michel found that teachers believed that skill development was acquired even in the traditional professional development experiences. However, teachers who participated in reform type professional development demonstrated a greater increase in skills and knowledge than those who participated in traditional types. Michel also found that professional development was usually individualized and, consequently, the new knowledge or skill was not supported or encouraged through collaboration or collegiality.

Rock and Wilson (2005) addressed the how do we get there question in a qualitative study using interviews, field notes, observations, and journals to clarifying teachers' perceptions of a lesson study process with six upper elementary teachers. Teachers indicated that they needed time to focus and implement the professional development. With that added time, the teachers had increased confidence as they were supported by peer collaboration. As a result, teachers believed that instructional methods improved.

The last question posed by Speck and Knipe was how will we know we are successful? Hirsch (2004) stated, “Professional development planning must occur within the context of district and school improvement work” (p. 12). The Speck and Knipe model suggested the following procedures: gather school and classroom data, revise plans
based on evaluation, and engage in ongoing process. In the literature reviewed, there was little evidence on teachers’ perceptions regarding success and planning for the future (Rock & Wilson, 2005). In one study, Michel (2005) found that 76% of the teachers participating in professional development experiences reported a change in teaching. Interestingly, these teachers reported participating in the reform type of professional development.

Change is necessary for professional development to be successful. McMunn et al. (2003) conducted a 3-year project that studied change by observing teaching activities and obtaining comments from teachers. They found that change must be ongoing, focused on “on-the-job behaviors” and student outcomes, address the district needs as well as those of individual teachers, and be adjustable for unforeseen situations.

Overall, research suggests that teachers must be a part of the change process because teachers’ beliefs and attitudes can hinder change. Teachers who participate in either traditional or reform professional development increase their teaching skills. Teachers require time to master the new knowledge and ongoing collaboration. Expanding teachers’ roles and responsibilities helps expand the teachers’ participation in defining their own professional development, thus making teaching more of a profession (Speck & Knipe, 2005). This study adds to the knowledge of what teachers perceive as the importance of their input into their professional development plan. In addition, this study contributes data regarding teachers’ perceptions on the elements of a learning culture and its impact on successfully implementing new knowledge or skills in the classroom.
Professional Development Implementation Barriers

The preponderance of staff development assessment is short-term. Many evaluations are merely surveys immediately following a staff development event that assess only participants' reaction to the quality of the experience. Evaluation seldom is designed with a long-range view that includes feedback loops with information about how teacher behavior in the classroom has changed and data about how those changes have affected student achievement. (Ambrose, 2003, p. 84)

Evaluations of teachers' professional development experiences are usually completed at the conclusion of such activities and do not include assessments of the implementation of any newly learned knowledge or skills. If there are further assessments of the outcomes of implementing professional development experiences, one outcome might be a better understanding of the barriers that hindered implementation. Indeed, two recent studies indicated a variety of barriers that impact the implementation of professional development experiences, with both studies focused on the impact of professional development plans to improve middle or high school students' academic achievement in science.

The first study, Johnson (2004), used a mixed methods design to evaluate implementation of the National Science Education Standards by middle school science teachers. Barriers were placed into three categories: technical, political, or cultural. The fewer barriers a teacher experienced, the higher the level of implementation. This study found that teachers who had several barriers developed lower confidence. Collaboration among teachers was found to overcome some barriers.

These three types of barrier did not hold the same level of difficulty. For example, teachers who experienced political barriers were likely to be successful at executing a professional development plan because political barriers can be removed or weakened.

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Cultural barriers, defined as teacher beliefs, were found to be the most difficult to overcome. Change occurred when the teacher applied intense reflection on beliefs and practices. Supporting teachers’ beliefs and values through collaboration on professional development design, summative evaluation of instruction, standards-based curriculum, and attentiveness to student achievement all diminish cultural barriers.

In the second study, Justin (2005) conducted an interpretive and descriptive qualitative study of professional development that focused on the obstacles science teachers encountered. A purposive sampling was conducted with middle and high school science teachers. Teachers were selected on the basis of participation in a survey, membership in the state’s science teachers’ organization, or recommendation from a lead science teacher within the state. One of the research questions was “What are the social, personal, professional, or institutional barriers that may hinder teacher preparation in science professional development?” A barrier was defined as “an element that inhibits or restricts a teacher from participating in effective professional development” (p. 92).

Justin (2005) found that social barriers came from the community. The local school board and superintendent were under political pressure from the community, due to their dislike of teachers participating in a professional development activity on a student early release day. The community believed it to be a waste of time and pressured the local school and superintendent to end the early release day.

Individual teachers created personal barriers that interfered with the successful implementation of a professional development plan. Teachers were bombarded with daily responsibilities making it hard to find time during the day to try out a new strategy. Changing students’ routines, especially during the middle of the year, was also
cumbersome when scheduling involved other classes and lunch schedules. Teachers found it difficult to find time to attend professional development experiences. Teachers were unwilling to give up their personal time to attend professional development experiences after school and on weekends.

I also found that professional barriers were the result of development experiences that did not meet the needs of the teachers. Teachers perceived these workshops as valueless. Teachers felt as if they were reinventing the wheel and complained about one-size-fits-all workshops. Teachers requested time to reflect on what they had learned and to make connections into their classrooms. Along with making connections, teachers wanted time to dialogue with other teachers who were going through the same experiences and to discuss the successes and failures of the implementation of the professional development experience.

Justin (2005) also found institutional barriers and divided them into five categories: school culture, support, funding, communication, and time. School culture was defined as school environment and the people within the environment that support or discourage professional development. Support and motivation were very important elements for making professional development experiences successful. Therefore, a barrier existed when some colleagues or administration did not support these experiences. In addition to support, another determinant of the success of the implementation of a professional development experience was the funding to provide needed resources. Too often, teachers found it "tough" to implement a new procedure without the necessary equipment. Time and scheduling were also barriers. Teachers stated there was very little
time for professional development experiences. There was also never enough time to
learn, reflect, or refine implemented ideas.

Justin (2005) also compared her findings to those of Garet et al. (2001). A
majority of the professional development experiences were traditional. This meant that
there were 3- to 4-day workshops with no follow-up sessions with all teachers
participating regardless of the grade level or content. Justin found that for core features,
teachers wanted to participate in active learning and wanted the content to focus on their
individual needs as well as their students’ needs. Professional development experiences
that promote change must focus on these needs.

The combination of social, personal, professional, and institutional barriers may
result in low confidence and lack of desire to implement the district’s professional
development plan. Professional development plans that are written or revised from a top
down decision making administration fail to make true change (Obert, 2006). Teachers
felt that when changes are made without requesting their input or if revisions occur when
teachers have provided input, it demonstrated a lack of respect. Teachers believed that
their input was not valued. Additional concerns were administrations that lacked a clear
vision and teachers who lacked adequate training. These barriers typically resulted in
teachers waiting for the current process to end in order to continue their desired practices.

Without an assessment process that answers the last question, how will we know we are
successful there is often a mere illusion of change. Obert warns:

False clarity occurs when the stakeholders believe they have experienced
change, but in reality they have not. The change they display is only
superficial, perhaps conforming to the expectations of the administration
or producing the required artifacts. This is not true teacher change.
(p. 127)
Although previous research does identify general barriers, my study digs deeper to inquire about the social, personal, professional, and institutional barriers that even very committed teachers (recognized by their principals as demonstrating a passion for teaching, eagerness to participate in professional development experiences, and willingness to apply what is learned in the classroom) encounter when they attempt to implement new knowledge and skills to support improved students' learning outcomes.

Chapter II Summary

This review focused on the previous research findings that lead to the four research questions for my study: What types of professional development experiences are being offered to teachers in this era of accountability, and what professional development experiences do teachers value? To what extent and how do teachers apply new knowledge or skills? How does a learning culture and teachers' contributions to a professional development plan affect professional development activities and impact the classroom? What barriers do teachers experience by teachers when implementing new knowledge or skills?

In examining previous research related to these questions, a number of common themes emerged. Interestingly, these themes corresponded well with the key features from the Garet et al. (2001) findings.

Duration or time dedicated to learning new knowledge or skills is important when teachers face many classroom responsibilities. Time is an important factor that emerged with respect to what teachers value, barriers they encounter, and how teachers applied new knowledge. Professional development experiences require teachers to leave the classroom or school in order to participate in the activity. This time away from class...
involves using personal time, and teachers felt using personal time is a barrier to implementing a professional development plan and having to make up the time missed away from the classroom.

Collective participation is a structural element that emerged as the theme of building learning communities. Teachers and scholars deemed that building learning communities creates group participation and eliminates teachers' individualism regarding students, classroom, or curriculum. Building learning communities emerged with respect to what is valued, barriers teachers encounter and positive school climate. Good et al. (2003) stated:

Validation of current best practices in professional development, collaboration as a community of learners, teacher empowerment, and recognition of faculty expertise are all positive elements related to school climate that were immediate results of the conversations, allowing the program to be deemed successful and worthwhile by the respondents. (p. 11)

Teachers attach importance to professional development activities that focus on pedagogical knowledge and deem it to be one of the major factors having a positive impact in the classroom. Knowledge or skills gained from activities is part of an effective professional development experience. Teachers believe that knowledge or skills learned from the content of professional development experiences produce greater student achievement.

Along with collective participation, active learning with the aid of colleagues and required resources is a common theme throughout the literature. Active learning involves teachers being engaged in discussions, planning, and practice. “The classroom is a learning environment for students just as professional development activities are learning
environments for teachers” (Cwikla, 2002, p. 3). The difference between learning and active learning is the need to interact with others through conversations, brainstorming, and troubleshooting. Active learning includes teachers’ use of critical reflection on the impact of the professional development experience in the classroom.

Adherence to an effective professional development plan is affected by the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs. If teachers do not feel supported and valued for what they are implementing, then their beliefs are the most difficult barrier to overcome. Teachers need to feel confident, capable, and fulfilled in order to develop confidence. Once again, time is a common factor. Teachers need time to critically reflect on the new learning and time to apply it. Fullan (2001) warned of an implementation dip. The dip happens when first implementing new knowledge. Therefore, time is needed to train teachers and collect the data in the classroom so that teachers can make adjustments in order to meet their students’ learning needs.

Another theme that emerged is that not one of the structural component elements offered by Garet et al. (2001) is coaching. Internal or external coaches are important to teachers in order to completely implement new skills or knowledge gained from professional development. According to Kedro and Short (2004), teachers felt like novices when implementing new learning for up to 2 years. Therefore, teachers believe that coaches are needed in order to fully implement a professional development plan. Coaches also help with the influx of new teachers and therefore assure a consistent and continual professional development plan even if there are personnel changes.

Most studies conducted quantitative research using surveys or mixed methods. Only three studies could be found that conducted qualitative research to determine
teachers' perceptions of the impact of professional development, mainly in the area of science. There is a need to acquire more qualitative knowledge on this topic. To this end, I conducted a narrative inquiry with 8 elementary school teachers to probe their perceptions regarding the impact of their professional development experiences on increasing student achievement. The deeper level of knowledge gleaned from this narrative study enhances our current knowledge base, especially within an era of accountability for enhanced student results.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Nature of the Study

This qualitative investigation used a narrative inquiry research method to gain a deeper understanding of how 8 teachers, identified as committed to life-long learning, perceived their professional development experiences and any connections to improved student outcomes. Few previous studies have explored teachers’ perceptions of professional development (Bischoff, 2004; Larson, 2003), and researchers have often ignored the role of teachers’ knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs in effective professional development planning and implementation. This chapter describes the research design, sampling strategy and participant selection, data collection procedure, data analysis and interpretation, and evidence of quality.

Research Design

Quantitative research involves identifying variables, stating a hypothesis, and conducting experiments, resulting in numerical data that can be statistically analyzed (Creswell, 2003). In contrast, qualitative research is the traditional method for discovering a deep understanding of society or human nature. “The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Because this study
focused on teachers' words rather than numbers to explore teachers' perceptions of professional development experiences, a qualitative method is appropriate.

There are five types of qualitative research approaches that have different methods of exploring participants' values, beliefs, or attitudes; each unique method applies to a specific purpose. Ethnography is the study of society or culture conducted over a long period of time that focuses on the beliefs, values, and attitudes that define the behavior of a group or organization (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998). Phenomenology is the study of the impact of a common event through the firsthand experience of participants. In phenomenology various interpretations and understandings from these participants determine the essence of the experiences (Creswell, 2003). Grounded theory derives a theory based on common processes, actions, or interactions. This method uses multiple data collection stages to determine categories of differences and similarities from within the data collected. These categories of information lay the foundation for the theory (Creswell, 2003). A case study is the in-depth study of a single context. “The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (Merriam, p. 19). Case studies are used for decision-making purposes in policy making, best practice, or further research. A narrative inquiry collects participants' stories, and retells the participants' views by combining the researcher's experience with those of the participants to produce a collaborative narrative (Creswell, 2003).

The intent of my study is to illicit teachers' stories by using the narrative inquiry approach. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) described the narrative inquiry approach as:
Inquiry into narrative. By this we mean that narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction, we use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon "story" and the inquiry "narrative." Thus, we say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories by those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience. (p. 2)

A narrative inquiry is needed to provide in-depth information regarding teachers’ perceptions of their professional development experiences and any connections to improved student outcomes. Teachers’ stories provide perceptions of what they valued in reference to professional development activities, their contributions to their districts’ professional development plan, barriers they encountered, how they apply new learning, the role of a learning culture, and the impact of their professional development experiences within their professional world and classroom. These topics are subjective, emotional, and personal. It is the blending of these thoughts and feelings that provides helpful insight into how teachers perceive their profession development experiences.

Sampling Strategy and Participant Selection

This study used purposeful sampling to select 8 participants. The specific strategy employed was criteria sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each participant met three criteria: (a) taught first or second grade (b) had 5 years or more of teaching experience, and (c) recognized by their building administrator as someone who demonstrated a passion for teaching, eagerness to participate in professional development experiences, and willingness to apply what is learned in the classroom. The first criterion was selected because the primary levels of first and second grades have similar routines, curricula, and professional development experiences in core content areas as mandated by the state’s
curriculum standards and benchmarks. The second criterion of selecting teachers with 5 years or more teaching experience reflects the state teaching requirements that define a teacher with professional teaching status as someone with more than 3 years of teaching and who has met the licensing requirements. Teachers who have taught for 5 years will have gained professional status and were presumed to have developed competency in teaching. The third criterion to select individuals identified as having a life-long love of learning help assured that participants could provide information-rich stories drawing on their personal experiences to help answer the research questions posed in this study.

Using these criteria, four different principals recommended potential participants from their respective schools. These principals had from 10 through 26 years of teaching experience and from 1 to over 20 years of administrative experience in their respective school districts. The principals were asked to identify teachers solely based on three criteria and not to use any other factors, such as personality or friendship. Once identified by the principals, each teacher was contacted and invited to participate. In accordance with HSRIB, all reviewed the consent form and ultimately 8 teachers voluntarily agreed to participate. See Table 1 for a summary of the 8 teachers participating in this study. Each teacher selected a pseudonym to provide confidentiality of her identity, and I gave each school district a pseudonym.
Participants were selected from four school districts that were conveniently located within a 20-mile radius from my school. Each of these districts has a professional development plan that may or may not be attached to a school improvement plan. One of these districts employed me in that I was a principal for a third- through fifth-grade building in that district, but had no daily interaction or administrative responsibility with first or second grade teaching staff. Characteristics of the four districts are represented in Table 2. These districts are small, urban fringe school districts comparable in terms of population and performance with noted exceptions in the percentage of students who qualify for free or reduced lunch and per pupil cost.
Table 2

School District Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Springdale</th>
<th>Autumn</th>
<th>Fall Brook</th>
<th>Summerview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title 1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School of Choice</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Student Population</td>
<td>1,302</td>
<td>1,668</td>
<td>2,809</td>
<td>2,653</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity (Caucasian)</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>96.0%</td>
<td>86.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/Teacher Ratio</td>
<td>13.9/1</td>
<td>15.3/1</td>
<td>15.3/1</td>
<td>14.3/1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per Pupil Cost</td>
<td>$7,339</td>
<td>$6,976</td>
<td>$6,858</td>
<td>$9,906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free or Reduced Lunch</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AYP</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Arts</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Very High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mathematics Scores</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: MS = Meets Standards for Cycle IV; English language arts and mathematics (based on Composite Performance Index): Very High = 90 – 100%, High = 80 – 89.9%, Moderate = 70 – 79.9%; School of choice permits students from one districts to apply for enrollment in another district.

The Researcher's Role

I have 18 years in education with teaching experiences spanning second grade through college. Over this time span, I attended many different types of professional development experiences. The most common type of professional development was workshops. As a teacher and administrator, I helped develop and execute many professional development plans. It is my philosophy that every teacher must commit to life-long learning as well as appreciate the value of hard work. These factors influenced me when participating in any professional development experience.

I became interested in seeking good professional development when I was working to reform our mathematics curriculum. It was through this process of revising a curriculum and seeking educational resources that I became aware that without proper training, the initiative and all our hard work would be ineffective. Training was important.
because it included a philosophy of the math program that was drastically different from my methodology classes or previously implemented programs. This new math philosophy involved a shift of my understanding of the role of the teacher from a knowledge facilitator to a knowledge resource. The facilitator of new knowledge shifted to the student and the role of the teacher shifted to building independent thinking students who know how to use the resources around them. Without understanding the shift in the philosophy of teaching, teachers would not have used the program. The important piece, the new teaching philosophy, would not have been implemented and the program would have failed.

My strong philosophical beliefs create certain biases towards teachers who do not eagerly accept new challenges. This is not to say that every professional development experience creates excitement, but they do require an eagerness to learn. My role as researcher required that I accepted differences of opinion and maintained an awareness of them during the data collection and analysis.

Data Collection Procedures

This study utilized a narrative inquiry research method. Narrative inquires involve the researcher retelling participants’ life stories. There are four primary qualitative data collection types (observations, interviews, documents, and audiovisual materials; Creswell, 2003), with interviews being the most method most recommended to collect participants’ narratives. In narrative inquires, interviews are often conducted in an informal conversational manner to encourage the participants to reveal their individual stories.
In an interview conversation, the researcher listens to what people themselves tell about their lived world, hears them express their views and opinions in their own worlds, learns about their views and their work situation and family life, their dreams and hopes. The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subject's point of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, and to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations. The qualitative research interview is a construction site of knowledge. An interview is literally an interview, an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest. (Kvale, 1996, p. 1)

It is from these interviews that narrative inquiry research draws its meanings and rich, emotion-laden stories.

**Designing the Interview Protocol**

The interview protocol contained a greeting, description of the purpose of the research, research questions, interview questions, follow-up questions to each key research question, interview questions between key research questions, space between follow up questions for my notes and observations, and space for reflective notes (Creswell, 2003). Using the research questions, I developed open-ended questions with follow up questions to probe for deeper meaning (see Appendix A).

**Conducting a Pilot Study**

The advantages of a pilot interview are to build my confidence and interviewing skills, and to perfect the interview protocol (Kvale, 1996). I conducted pilot interviews with 2 elementary school teachers to refine the interview protocol and to practice conducting face-to-face interviews.

After conducting the first pilot, I learned that I used words that were too technical and some of the questions were redundant. Also, in my questioning method, I asked questions, and, without listening for the answer, would be thinking about the next
question. Therefore, I revised my questions to make them more open ended. I learned to listen more deeply to the participant rather than firing more questions. The result yielded a richer story and deeper insight into the participant’s perception of her professional development experiences. In both pilot interviews, I discovered that the participants recalled stories out of sequence. For example, 1 participant referred to a recent event, then recalled an experience from a few years earlier, and then described further details of the recent event. I learned that it was necessary to ask for a time reference for each event in order to keep the timeline of the participant’s professional development experiences accurate.

**Screening Process**

There were three criteria for selecting participants for this study. The participants met three criteria (a) taught first or second grade teacher (b) had 5 years or more of teaching experience, and (c) recognized by administration as someone who demonstrates a passion for teaching, eagerness to participate in professional development experiences, and application of the new knowledge and skills to the classroom. To identify participants who met these criteria, I interviewed selected building principals from the surrounding area districts located within a 20-mile radius from my school district. Principals recommended 2 participants from their schools who met the selection criteria. I contacted the 8 candidates via email or mail (see Appendix B) to determine if they were interested in learning more about participating in this study. I arranged a meeting to review the participant’s role in this study, and to gain consent. When there not enough participants from a given school, I solicited additional recommended participants from the previously mentioned principals. In one case, a school district had only 2 teachers who met the
screening criteria, and none voluntarily agreed to participate. I replaced the district with
another district that was within the 20-mile radius by meeting with the district’s
superintendent, who in turn, permitted me to meet with the building principal. Two
teachers were recommended and agreed to participate in this study.

Gaining Consent

I contacted each participant to introduce my proposal and myself. I asked for
permission to send them a letter requesting participation (see Appendix A). Receiving a
teacher’s email or written notice indicated interest in learning more about my study and
determined if the teacher wanted to participate. I contacted teachers who had not
responded after a week and asked if they were planning to respond to my participation
request. If a teacher was not interested in participating, I solicited additional names of
potential participants from the principals.

At the first appointment at the participant’s school and before the interview
began, I reviewed the purpose of the study and selection criteria with each participant. In
accordance with the university’s Human Subjects Review Board, I provided a consent
form (see Appendix C) that described the study and each teacher was asked to read and
sign it before the interview began. I also outlined information regarding the benefits of
participating in this research project along with any possible risks. I assured each teacher
of confidentiality through the study. The teachers were informed that they were free to
end the interview or ask questions at any time.
Interviewing Process

The interviews were exploratory with open and semistructured questions. Following the recommendation of Kvale (1996), regarding the interpersonal behaviors necessary to conduct a good interview, I posed clear and concise questions, and was gentle and sensitive to the participants by permitting them to talk at their own pace and listening carefully for subtle meanings.

As the researcher, I was knowledgeable about the study. As a teacher and administrator, I was very familiar with the responsibilities and the demands of a classroom teacher, and have administered and participated in professional development experiences. This knowledge helped when interviewing teachers; it helped me know when to probe deeper into a response. I understood the subject area in order to steer the participant into the area of knowledge. It was important that I kept an open mind when interviewing participants. However, critical inquiry required that I could not take all responses at face value. This study required teachers to recall their past experiences and time may had altered their memory. I used field notes and follow-up questions to probe for consistency in the response, and tested or reexamined an area in order to check for consistency.

When interviewing, it was important to take notes in order to recall information that may not be part of the recorded conversation. In addition to using two digital recorders, I took notes and referred to them throughout the interview. I was able to clarify what the participants said and checked with the participants for the accuracy of the paraphrasing.
First Interview

An initial face-to-face conversation was conducted after school hours in a private location in the participant’s school building. The interview questions were broad in scope to encourage the participants to tell their stories (see Appendix A). The purpose of the first interview was to begin the discussion of the participant’s professional development experiences and its impact on student outcomes. These interviews lasted approximately 90 to 120 minutes, determined by the time the participant needed to finish relating her experiences.

Reflective Journaling

Following the first face-to-face interviews, I asked each participant to reflect more deeply upon the impact of the professional development experiences (see Appendix D). It was important that each participant took the time to reflect upon their experiences to recall events, beliefs, or impressions over a longer period of time. Ample time allowed teachers to examine old files or find resources that may prompt memories, which would add to the insight into the participant’s perception of professional development experiences. Each participant responded via email or I picked up responses at the participants’ schools before the next face-to-face interview.

Second Interview

A follow-up meeting allowed me to check the accuracy of my notes, clarify the participant’s responses, and ask any follow up questions that arose after reviewing the transcripts of our first meeting. This meeting was between 45 minutes and an hour long. Participants received a draft copy of their stories prior to our meeting. Two participants requested to be contacted by telephone rather than in a face-to-face meeting. Narrative
stories were emailed to all participants with a request to email or call to discuss corrections, clarifications, and elaborations. Two participants did not respond and thus they were recontacted by leaving a voice message at their schools and by another email to let them know that the narratives sent to them would be used in the study. A return receipt was received from both participants; I interpreted their nonresponse to indicate that they did not disagree with the content.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

"Data analysis is a complex process that involves moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning, between description and interpretation" (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). Data analyses included transcribing, coding, and constructing eight narratives.

Transcribing

I used a professional transcriber to transcribe the eight interviews. The transcriber signed a confidentiality form (see Appendix E) to protect the confidentiality of the subjects and study. Transcribing the data after each interview kept the transcriptions manageable and allowed me to begin to review them for suggestions of emerging themes. All transcripts are kept on a CD-ROM in a secured office in my home.

Coding

Coding individual transcripts is a necessary part of describing, classifying, and interpreting the data. Pattern coding involves identifying "explanatory or inferential codes, ones that identify an emergent theme, configuration, or explanation" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 69). Pattern coding is helpful for reducing large amounts of data into
related themes. To this end, each individual transcript was coded and emerging themes were used to construct the individual narratives.

**Constructing Narratives**

Written transcripts were used to identify discrete experience segments of text in which the participants talk about a single event or experience. I reviewed the transcripts for places where there was change from one experience segment to another. I reordered the segments in order to create a logical sequence or story. Individual segments were used to demonstrate particular themes. The construction of the narrative provided a sequence of experiences that reflected the participants' experiences and the themes that emerged from them. Member checking with the participants added accuracy to confirm the reconstruction of these experiences.

**Evidence of Quality**

This study ensured the accuracy and trustworthiness of its findings by using the four criteria posed by Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility, conventionally known as internal validity, establishes the participants' perspective as the determinant of believability. Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to five ways to produce credible data and interpretations: prolonged period of engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. It should be noted that the authors did not indicate that all five means must be utilized to check for credibility.

Prolonged period of engagement involves spending extended time with the participants to aid in understanding the culture, checking for misinformation, and building trust. This period of time permitted me to look at the "scope" or the extent of the
observation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304). Persistent observation is the detailed reporting of acknowledged elements that are important to the understanding of the research inquiry. Triangulation is the use of different data collection methods or theories to help in understanding the research inquiry. Peer debriefing is the use of an external auditor to explore every aspect of the inquiry by probing for meaning, ethical and legal issues, researcher’s biases, and methodologies. Member checking is the process of checking for accuracy in the data by the participants. “Member checking is directed at a judgment of overall credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, p. 316).

To achieve credibility, I, as the researcher, met weekly during the data collection and analysis with an external source to review the primary findings and emerging interpretations. Member checking was conducted by having participants review the transcripts of the interviews (although 2 chose not to comment on them). The research achieved triangulation of data by using my field notes, the participants’ reflective journals, and the interview transcripts. According to Creswell (1998), triangulation of data is the use of multiple sources of evidence to determine a theme or perspective.

Transferability, conventionally termed external validity, is the second source of maintaining accuracy and trustworthiness throughout this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that establishing transferability is very different from establishing external validity. Transferability is achieved by a “thick” description of a wide array of information from the data collected in order to make transference (p. 316). This study created eight narratives to provide a thick description of the teachers’ professional development experiences and perceptions.
Dependability involves noting any changes that occur during the study. Two sources are suggested for maintaining dependability: field notes and an external audit. I kept field notes to record changes and observations during the study, and an impartial individual examined the process and product of these observations and assessed their accuracy as part of the external audit. The external auditor “verifies the bottom line in order to check that the data, findings and conclusions are accurate” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318). In this study, I kept field notes of the observations and interpretations of the findings and conferred weekly with an external auditor, who was an expert in qualitative research.

Confirmability, conventionally termed objectivity, refers to the confirmation of a study’s findings by others. An audit trail and the inclusion of the field notes used to establish dependability will demonstrate confirmability by others (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The audit trail has six parts: raw data, data reduction and analysis products, data reconstruction and synthesis products, process notes, materials relating to intentions and dispositions, and instrument development information (p. 319). In my study, the raw data were electronic recordings and field notes. Data reduction and analysis products included summaries from field notes, transcripts and preliminary coding and thematic analyses (examples of these work products are presented in tables in chapters IV and V). Data reconstruction and synthesis products were the narratives, descriptions of cross narrative themes, and conclusions, along with the final dissertation. Process notes were methodological notes (research strategies and rationale), audit trail notes, and trustworthiness notes relating to credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Materials
relating to intentions and dispositions were personal notes, expectations, predictions, and intentions.

Chapter III Summary

I conducted a qualitative narrative inquiry to provide insight into teachers’ perceptions of professional development. For this study, I conducted open, semistructured face-to-face interviews with 8 purposefully selected first and second grade teachers who had a minimum of 5 years teaching experience and were recognized by administration as individuals who demonstrated a passion for teaching, eagerness to participate in professional development experiences, and willingness to apply what is learned in the classroom. Participants were asked to record their reflections regarding professional development experiences. Individual narratives were constructed to represent major common themes. This study attempted to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness throughout by fulfilling the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirrmability.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

In this chapter, eight teacher narratives offer insight into their perceptions of professional development experiences over the course of their careers. Each of the 8 participants provided a definition of professional development, described the most and least valuable professional development experiences, indicated the role of school culture when applying new learning, described the impact on students, and explained the barriers faced when applying new learning. The text was created from face-to-face interviews, written responses to reflective questions, and follow-up interviews to check for accuracy.

Jean’s Story: Building a Community of Professionals

For more than 20 years, Jean has taught at Springdale Elementary School. Ten years before the interview, she was asked to teach in a multiage classroom for first and second graders. She enjoyed the challenge of teaching a curriculum that had no academic limits and aligned individual needs of students with the appropriate curriculum objectives.

Jean viewed professional development experiences as opportunities to improve her teaching abilities, thus leading to improved student outcomes. Jean’s school district encouraged her to visit other school districts, attend conferences, and participate in a master’s degree program to expand her professional experiences. She believed that the
variety of professional development experiences made her a better teacher. With 2 decades of teaching experience, Jean said,

I believe that the cumulative impact of my professional development has been the way it has shaped my entire thinking about instruction ... [I embrace] anything that I'm involved in that is going to help me do my job better.

Jean’s Views on Defining Professional Development Experiences

There were many forms of professional development experiences. In Jean’s view these experiences were not limited to the 4 days each year that her district provided. She viewed many types of experiences as learning opportunities. In addition to workshops and graduate courses, Jean’s view of professional development experiences included meetings with colleagues to discuss curriculum, parent conferences to discuss how to build student success, and participation in mentoring a colleague.

For Jean, the main reasons for participating in professional development experiences were to expand her knowledge and to positively impact students. She defined professional development experiences,

As the way I continue to evolve and grow as an educator while always keeping in the forefront the direct link to my students. My professional development has helped my student outcomes by helping me view each student as an individual. Because I value the direct link to students, I am always mindful of assessing where each student is, her individual strengths and goals, and subsequently, knowing the next level to which I will support her achievement.

Jean enlarged her definition of professional development to include what she defined as “informal” professional development. Jean stated, “I think really informal professional development can be viewed as building a community of professionals who feel very comfortable sharing with each other.” This informal professional development
grew out of the community support that sustained Jean, primarily the support of her colleagues. Without the support of colleagues and administrators, Jean would not have participated in the wealth of professional development experiences that she did. This community support provided a foundation for Jean’s participation in professional development experiences and her application of new learning. For Jean’s story, community was defined as colleagues that are within the district, and colleagues are first- and second-grade teachers.

Jean’s Views on Types of Professional Development Experiences

Jean strongly believed that teachers “are more willing to try or apply things learned in professional development if they can see that link to students.” Jean had no preference for one type of professional development experience over another. She felt that if a program would benefit students, she was open-minded about trying new programs and then made the decision about whether it was right or wrong for the classroom. She explained,

I successfully apply knowledge and skills by jumping in and trying them! I enjoy taking risks in trying new things and am not afraid to run into difficulties because I feel that I am flexible enough to stop and retry after I have examined what may have gone wrong.

Having the courage to take risks came from 20 years of teaching experience.

Jean felt that at this point in her career she was only interested in professional development that would expand her knowledge. She stated,

So I think at my point in my career, I’m thinking that I look for things that aren’t going to tell me—content I already know—I want to kind of push myself and see things that are interesting and that will push me in a direction that will extend my teaching.
Most valuable. Although Jean did not identify any specific type of professional development experience as the most valuable, she did indicate what she valued: professional development experiences that were tailored for a multiage classroom, caused her to reflect on her teaching and how it impacted students, involved group work, and were left up to teachers to choose to attend. These experiences should validate knowledge or skills and build cognition about how to look at kids that is going to make a difference. Jean appreciated veteran teachers, who provided practical information, and she valued open discussions with her colleagues and experiences that prepared her to hit the ground running.

Jean valued professional development experiences that presented new learning tailored for a multiage classroom. She and her colleagues had opportunities to participate in district-sponsored workshops designed for the multiage classroom. Jean recalled, “We went from one workshop to the other and heard from our own colleagues the kinds of work that they were doing, and it was tailored for our age group.” However, besides her master’s program, there were the few workshops designed specifically for a multiage classroom.

Jean and 11 colleagues earned a master’s degree from a local university well known for research on teaching in a multiage classroom. These courses caused Jean to reflect on her teaching and how it impacted students. She stated,

It became part of the way I teach. It wasn’t just a few courses I took just to get a degree. It really changed the way I thought about literacy and helped me go on from there. So that was a real big part of professional development.
What made Jean's master's experience so meaningful was the support and encouragement from her colleagues. Jean valued the experience of working with colleagues and the group work. She recalled,

And there were 11 of us in the district, in the elementary portion of our district, who participated in that master's course in literacy and curriculum development. And it was wonderful because, in one sense it was wonderful because we were all doing it together. We all, every time someone said, "I've had enough," everybody would say, "Oh, come on. We can do it. We can do it." And there was a lot of group work. So we got to work in groups with our colleagues.

To this day, Jean's experience from her coursework continued to be the most memorable and valuable of her professional development experiences. She felt these experiences provided her with a firm foundation for understanding literacy and curriculum development.

In addition to her master's experience, Jean valued workshops that she could choose to attend. Jean gave an example of a workshop sponsored by another school.

It was done in a one-afternoon, kind of a workshop thing, and hand-outs were given. Its question and answer period was something that we could choose to go to or not choose to go to. It was done after school.

Jean stated that the workshops that she chose based on her own interests were the most valuable.

At this point in her career professional development experiences do not necessarily expand Jean's knowledge or skills but rather validate knowledge or skills. She felt that when she attended workshops on literacy,

I was validated by the things I had been doing, and saw that, yes, those were cutting edge. And it also made me think more deeply about how I can use literature and all the literacy components of the classroom and how they can be interrelated.
Jean valued professional development experiences that *made her cognizant about how to look at students with knowledge that could make a difference.*

Things that we can take away and whether we take away things that we use directly with the children, or whether it's things that we just become cognizant of as the teacher in the classroom looking at students. You might not use it with students, but it might be something that you have to build into your cognition about how to look at kids that is going to make a difference.

Jean felt that good professional development experiences made her think deeply about her teaching and make connections that would impact her students.

Some of the most valuable development had to do with my thinking as an educator, which I could directly connect to the way I interact with students or the way I changed my behavior or management procedures that positively affected the students.

In her quest for deeper learning Jean appreciated instructors who encouraged discussion, provided knowledge about research, and were *veteran teachers.* Jean valued an instructor who "delivered the information with a wonderful sense of humor by sharing stories of his dealings with difficult students and of how his approach became more effective as he gained more experience in the classroom." The veteran teacher provided valuable *practical information* such as "quirky aspects of assessments" and had materials prepared for teachers to take back to class. Jean trusted the information provided by instructors who had teaching experience.

In processing new learning, Jean valued opportunities for *open discussion with her colleagues* to discuss and make sense of the new learning before she returned to the classroom.

So we were not only given the training, but then we were given the opportunity to talk together, look at how we could make it work, and we
worked through. ... We could kind of say, “oo, I could use it here, I could use it there.” We could talk to each other about it right there, after we heard the presentation. And it just seemed to be, it fit what we wanted, and we were able to dialogue right there ... that really meant a lot to us that we could ask and explore right there and then, and then take away what we wanted to.

In addition to workshops that offered opportunities for open discussion with colleagues on how the new learning could be applied to a multiage classroom, Jean valued those that provided materials that enabled her to hit the ground running.

We could hit the ground running in September and had an understanding of how to get rolling on this, and learn the program at the same time. So we took the training and then used it to tailor it to what we were doing specifically, which was a huge help to all of us beginning a new program.

Least valuable. There were many aspects of professional development that Jean valued. As for her least valuable, she did not benefit from cursory half-day workshops, on-line courses, been there, done that workshops, administration not knowing where we've been when designing professional development experiences, programs that did not take into account multiage classrooms, programs that would not stick around to be used again, and those that did not provide preparation or support when applying new programs.

Jean found cursory half-day workshops did not provide time to explore the content. She stated,

I think sometimes, just a half a day. Sometimes you don’t feel that you get enough out of the half a day, if something’s brought in for a workshop for half a day. It seems to be, that’s just a cursory there’s not enough time to really get into it.
In addition to the half-day workshops, Jean did not value on-line courses. She preferred open discussion and the ability to have face-to-face interaction with colleagues or instructors. “Web courses” prevented that interaction. She explained,

As far as seeking out, say, something on the Internet as a course, a web course or something like that you have to do. I prefer having a person there as an instructor. I don’t think I’d take a computer course. That’s just my own personal feeling about it.

Jean did not value workshops or programs that did not present new knowledge. She referred to these professional development experiences as been there, done that. She considered the money spent on these been there, done that workshops, especially in literacy, wasted, and found that they lacked the “epiphany” that she felt at other professional development experiences.

I have my master’s in literacy. A lot of the things that this person was telling us, showing us, [taking] time out of the classroom to see it, it was like, been there, done that. I mean I learned a couple of new things, but it was almost like it could have been done in a workshop situation, and I think that thousands and thousands of dollars that was spent on bringing this person to do this kind of professional ongoing development, I’m sitting there waiting for the epiphany, and instead, I’m like, “Yup, mm-hm, heard about that many, many years ago.”

Jean found that professional development experiences were least valuable when new administrators “didn’t know where we’ve been.” She noted,

So I think that the least valuable are things that we’ve been doing, and sometimes it’s frustrating because, and I think too it depends on where we are as a district, new administration comes in and they don’t really know where we’ve been. They need to get to know what we’re doing, where we’ve been. ... I’ve been doing it for the last 10 years.” So I think those kinds of things are least valuable, things that, “Okay, I know that.” ... So that’s why you have to really take a look at when you bring things in, who is on the staff, what is valuable, what is needed.
Jean felt that administrators often imposed new programs on everyone without
investigating how it would impact a multiage classroom. Jean was left to apply new
programs and resented the extra time and effort it involved to adjust a new program for
use in her multiage classroom. Her dedication to the multiage classroom motivated her to
“figure it out.” She recalled,

But I just didn’t like going into it saying, “Okay, you’re going to do this
program. We’re buying this program for everyone. You’re going to do it.”
I didn’t like that. Because I felt that, I felt that they didn’t investigate how
it would impact multiage, and it was almost like, “Oh, well we’ll figure it
out.” Which we’ve done year after year after year.

Jean felt that her district started too many new programs. In some situations, new
programs were applied for a few years then dropped with little or no explanation. In other
situations, new short-lived programs were expected to be added to an already full day
without considering the classroom schedule. Jean enjoyed learning new programs but did
not value having to invest additional time and energy when the program would not stick:

It seems like every year there’s something new that they want us to try,
and that seems to have been happening over the last 5 years or so. Before
we did our Fundations, 2 years before, they brought in a Telian program
with the phonics. We got to know Italian. I loved Italian. And then before
that we were asked to look at the phonics. So it seems like it’s just new,
new, new, new, new, new, new. I just hope that it sticks around now that
we’ve got it going.

Jean devalued new programs that did not provide her with preparation or support.
Two years earlier a new phonics program was added to Jean’s classroom, and like many
programs over the years, was not designed for a multiage classroom. Jean found that in
addition to having the responsibility of “figuring out” how to make it work in her
classroom, she had no preparation or support during this process. She explained,
I feel strongly that educators should never be expected to use a completely new program with absolutely no preparation or support. I feel that way not because I feel that teachers are unable to work through a new program, but because of the feeling that we are not being supported in implementing a new program.

Jean's Views on the Role of Learning Culture and Participation in Planning

Jean had participated in 10 professional development experiences in the previous 5 years. She believed that all of these experiences had shaped her thinking about "instruction." She felt,

When I use the word instruction I mean it to embody a wide range of approaches; from actual activities and methodology used with students to the schema that has been created in me as an educator. I have to think of my ability to instruct as the cognition I use when approaching every single aspect of my interaction with students.

To apply learning in the classroom, Jean depended on the support of others. Jean found that colleagues were her strongest supporters. She also relied on strong administrative leadership, an informal and accessible community, and, occasionally, coaches who provided guidance. Jean found that planning and providing a professional development plan was necessary to ensure that experiences promoted new learning.

Jean collaborated on a daily basis with other multiage classroom teachers as well as teachers who taught in a traditional classroom that had the same learning objectives. She considered communication with her colleagues important so that teachers did not "shut that door and never talk to anybody all day long." Jean thrived on the daily informal dialogues. Jean noted,

We all talk to each other all the time and we all are talking about, "Well what did you try? What did you do? What went wrong? What bombed?" It is open. At the primary grades we all get along and it is huge to say, "That lesson—." Go back to Everyday Math. "That lesson on whatever, did you present it differently? How did you present it? Are your kids getting it any
better? I did it this way. Do you think?” I’ll ask anybody for help when I think it need it and when colleagues say, “Well, yeah, I did it this way,” or “I used this,” or “I did that.” It’s almost like, “Wow, I never even thought of that.” So it just opens it up to everybody else’s thoughts on it, which is, it’s so valuable. It doesn’t mean that I might take away the way I would present it myself and my personality or that kind of thing, but just looking at it in a different way or something that I might not have thought of that works, I think it just fleshes it out so much more to talk to colleagues about it.

Jean felt that this type of communication resulted in colleagues being vested in each other. As she stated, “that’s why this community is so strong is because we kind of are vested in each other and kind of take care of each other.”

Jean and her colleagues worked collaboratively on lessons. She found that creating lessons with a teaching partner was important because of the large class sizes. Without a partner, Jean would not have been able to provide individualized attention to students. She explained,

Because with our numbers, at 25 and 26, and we’re doing more individualized work than ever before in education, but to have somebody down the hallway that you might go to and say, “Well, what book do you think I could use with these kids?” is 1/100th as effective than if that person came into the classroom and did a collaborative lesson with you or did a small-group instruction with the kids that you’re really concerned about. Because when the bottom line comes to it, it’s the one-on-one that you can provide for kids that is the most effective. And if you’ve got two people in there, you’re going to get to a lot more kids than if the teacher goes out and asks a coach, “All right, what do you think I should do with the kids.” So it just is common sense.

Some of Jean’s colleagues were college instructors with a variety of teaching and curriculum expertise. Her colleagues with expertise in literacy became an important resource for Jean when she was applying a new reading program. She described professional development experiences where colleagues presented new learning at
district-sponsored "mini-workshops," and appreciated learning from the "wonderful resources" that resided in the district. She stated,

There's one that really sticks out in my mind. It was the time when in our school district, we had colleagues, in-house colleagues, who set up miniworkshops on an in-service day. Those workshops grew out of a survey that was done about what we're interested in, where we'd like to see, what we'd like to get more information on.

After these workshops, Jean used these colleagues as coaches. She explained, "colleagues in-house that when we were trying these things, if we had further questions, were right there as a resource, a continuing resource." She used the reading teachers as coaches. She stated, "They were open to dialogue, so they are already doing the coaching." Jean felt that external coaches were unnecessary. She stated, "to put somebody in a position, pay them a salary to just coach you, I think is ludicrous."

Within the last 5 years, Jean had implemented a new math program. Before she applied it in the classroom, Jean and her colleagues observed teachers in a neighboring school district who were already using it. At the end of Jean's observation time, Fallview teachers provided Jean and her colleagues with follow up support and became external coaches whenever Springdale school needed them. She recalled,

They came back and did a follow up. ... "How are things going?" blah blah blah. They were just in Fallview, so I mean, they said, "Call us any time." Emails, we could email them about any questions or whatever. But then they did come back one time in the fall. "How are things going? What are some glitches? Can we help you figure it out?" So they were informal and accessible.

Jean felt she benefited from observing the new math program and receiving support from colleagues during the first year.
Jean felt that Springdale Elementary had a very close community. Veteran teachers supported new teachers. She noted,

New teachers that have come on board, we've been able to mentor them, and let them know some of the pitfalls and some of the things that they don't have to stress about, and other things they should focus on and that kind of thing.

Jean understood the value of a coach. However, she felt that an external coach was not needed given the talent on the staff, and that any coach, external or internal, needed to be a person valued by the staff. In Jean's view, an external coach who did not have an established relationship with her fellow teachers would not be accepted. She explained that the staff would be uncomfortable having an outsider observe them if this person was not trusted and identified as being a veteran teacher in her close community. She noted,

I do not think that somebody saying, "Okay, once every month the coach is going to come in and watch you. Mm-mm-mm-mm." People aren't comfortable at that. Now, if I'm comfortable with a colleague and say, "Just come in and watch this, see what you think," then that's really effective. But not when administration or someone else says, "I want somebody to come in every month just to watch how you do it." I don't care how they say it, but they're making someone come in to watch you, it's not a comfortable feeling ... wanting to be watched, and next, valuing that person, because then you can pick the person who's coming in. It might be someone you have a very comfortable relationship with and you really value their opinion. Say, "Come in and watch this. I don't know if this is going right." So more effective for what I got out of it, and more effective for me being open to delivering it without "ouch, am I doing this right?" I just want to do it the way I'm doing it. Not worry about if I'm doing it right for the observer. I want to see if I'm doing it right for the class, not for the observer.

Jean welcomed her colleagues and administrators' comments after conducting an observation. Jean felt very fortunate to have good district administrators who were
approachable by everyone. She found the administrators to be good listeners and open to new ideas. For example, Jean felt that as a veteran teacher she needed an alternative to the professional development experience offered by the district to novice teachers. On a particular occasion, the district wanted to provide in-service training for a new math literature series. Jean did not feel that this experience would expand her knowledge because she was already familiar with the program. She recalled a conversation with the curriculum coordinator.

I went to the curriculum coordinator about the math literature thing, and “wow, you can really use math literature in the classroom.” I said, “Jim, we’ve been doing it for years and years. Thank you very much.” We love the books, but just to let you know, because sometimes if they don’t ask, and we don’t tell them, but we don’t know what to tell them if they don’t know, so I feel very comfortable just going up and saying, “You know, really. We did blah blah blah.” And so I talk to the administrators about it. It’s not done as a unit thing. It’s just done as a very collegial, “we really have been doing a lot with this already. I wonder if we can look at something a little different.” Or, “Can we maybe look here or there.” So it’s more of an open dialogue kind of thing, if you feel comfortable doing that.

Over the years, Jean felt that administrators exercised forward thinking in the planning and implementation of new programs. Jean appreciated administrators who did not force her into new programs. Jean recalled a former administrator who believed that staff would come to his way of thinking if allowed time to think about the process. Jean said, “He thought he knew that if you want to do it, you’re going to make it work better than if you’re told, ‘all right, you’re going to do that.’”

Forward thinking, approachable, and not forceful were important attributes in an administrator, yet Jean found that encouragement and supportive attitudes are what
motivated her to participate in professional development experiences. Jean recalled in the past how administrators were instrumental in encouraging her to “see what’s out there.”

We also can go out and take courses on our own. I mean, they either can okay it or deny it or whatever. So people do a lot of that. We’re encouraged. [Springdale] has, historically, has encouraged their teachers from years and years and years ago to go out and see what’s out there, go out into different communities, go out and take courses. Very supportive in people getting their master’s degree before you had to do it. … So historically, [Springdale] has always encouraged and provided that with reimbursement. So we go out and we seek things out as well that we’re interested in, and that’s always been supported.

Jean explained that the principal often said, “If I am asking my staff to do a new program or to start something new, they need the support and the training to do it and to put it in place.” Jean viewed the administrator’s role in professional development as providing teachers support when applying a new program. She felt her administrators kept “an open mind and embrace the idea that not everything I do will be successful on the first attempt is liberating and ultimately spurs me on to trying new things.”

Jean was concerned that there may be changes in the administration’s attitude towards participation in professional development. She stated,

Over the years the staff has had varying degrees of input regarding the selection of professional development. Lately, it feels that we are being told what to do, what we can and cannot pursue regarding professional development, and that we have not had a lot of opportunity to provide input.

Jean believed it is important for teachers to have input in the creation of a professional development plan. She felt that having input would result in fewer been there, done that workshops. When designing a professional development plan, administration should take into account teaching experiences and previous training and
anticipate upcoming classroom needs. Jean also felt that direct teacher input would create a feeling that administrators and teachers were colleagues. "I believe that when administrators welcome suggestions from teachers about professional development, everyone benefits because the teachers feel that their opinions are valued and that they are viewed as colleagues instead of employees."

Jean’s Views on Student Impacts

Jean believed that participation in professional development experiences had a positive impact on students. When applying new learning, Jean observed that students needed time to adjust and respond to Jean’s comfort level of teaching a new program. In those cases, the flow of the classroom improved and proficient readers became miniteachers. She measured student outcomes using a variety of her own assessment techniques. Jean relied on educated eyes to make judgments on the effects of the new program. Her main assessment tool was observation of students’ behaviors while setting high expectations for all students.

Teaching in a multiage classroom required Jean to make adjustments to new programs. She found that to get a program started students needed time to adjust. Jean learned that the students’ first reactions were not always an indication of how a program worked. Jean recalled when she first introduced a new math program how different it was because it included a journal, several workbooks, and many new math manipulatives. She recalled,

Because when we first looked at these journals, I thought, “uh-uh. They can’t do this.” I mean, that’s your initial “Wow.” It was very different. And as it went on, and I thought, “Well, let me give September. See what happens.” And as they became more and more at ease with the whole program, I thought, “Wow, this is really working.”
Jean found that her comfort level in teaching new material had a powerful impact on students when applying a new program. Jean felt students mirrored her attitude toward an assignment. It was important for the success of the program that Jean felt at ease. Jean recalled that to properly apply a new mathematics program she had to split the students into two groups according to grade level. Jean recalled,

And once I got used to how to flip the pages and what was highlighted in the first-grade book and in the second-grade book, and so it was also my comfort level, how, and I watched myself and how did I become more comfortable with it, to say, “Okay, I really get this now. I really get how I can work with two groups of kids, with one whole group, and then split them up.”

Though she and her colleagues spent hours trying to “fix” the program to work in a multiage classroom, in the end they realized that they had to split the students according to their grade. This arrangement was contrary to the philosophy of a multiage classroom, but Jean knew that teaching this program next year would be better because she would be more comfortable with the material and with splitting the students because half of the class would be returning and thus would be familiar with the program. Jean noted,

But I think next year, I’m really excited, knowing the program, to go in and say, “All right, we’re ready to do it,” and I’ll have all my little buddies back again. … And so I think it’s going to be a better year next year for them, because I’ll be more prepared. They’ll know that I know what I told them that they should know, and it’ll run smoothly, so I think it does impact them. Not that it’s going to make or break them one way or another, but comfort level, and their ease with the material, and being able to use it has got to be better.

Jean could observe when the program was having the indicated impact on students by the flow of the classroom. She explained,

So to see the flow of it was also something that let me know, “This is working.” I could send a group back and they’d work quietly at their seats,
because they knew what they were working on while I did another group up on the carpet. So it was that whole thing, how do you even manage the movement with the materials with those two groups.

When the classroom was flowing, students were able to work independently until they faced problems they could not solve. However, working with small groups meant that Jean was unable to troubleshoot problems with individual students. The solution was for Jean to create *miniteachers*. Jean used her proficient readers as miniteachers and she taught them what to say when a fellow student was struggling. Jean recalled,

So I kind of make them little miniteachers, and when they're partnered, I walk around. So I will praise, “that’s great to say that.” ... “These are the things I heard my reading coaches doing with students.” So I highlight the things that I want them to do. I heard someone say, “Great. You went back to the beginning of the sentence and started that over again.” I heard someone else say, “I heard the first sound come out when you weren’t sure about that word.” So I tell them, there’re no secrets. I tell them, “This is what you need to be doing. This is what you need to be looking for.”

Students’ behavior and the quality of completed work were indicators of a successful lesson. Jean felt that she was a confident and experienced teacher who could take risks and know that her mistakes would not have lasting effects on the students. She stated,

When we’re in here and we try something new, you can tell pretty much, pretty quickly, how it’s working or if it’s serving the purpose you thought it was going to serve. Sometimes you deliver a lesson and you look at it and say, “I didn’t want them to get that out of it. It didn’t go in the right direction.” Or, “but I don’t think it’s going to mess them up, so that they can’t recover.” I never had that feeling. So things go bad sometimes. It’s like, “Okay, that didn’t work. We’ll go on to the next thing.” And I’m not worried that I’ve ruined them. I don’t think that’s what a good teacher does, so it’s, “All right, that didn’t work,” or “Can I do it a different way,” or it may work.
Jean relied on *educated eyes* to determine the impact of a new program on students' outcomes. She evaluated or made judgments on the developmental appropriateness of a new program for first- and second-grade students based on her teaching expertise. She explained,

You've got to always be evaluating. And I don't think anything is black and white. But you'll think, "All right, this is not going to work." So I think you have to look at it through educated eyes and say, "Okay, is that something that will work with this age group? Is it not? Is it something that I can try? Is there a grain in there that I can take from it and build on and have that component there, but have it work better, maybe, one way or another."

For Jean, *observing* student behaviors was the key to determining student outcomes of a new program. She identified whether a program was successful by observing whether the students were having fun and their level of involvement. She explained,

I think you have a real good sense of, is the outcome what you want it to be, or is it just fluff, or is it confusing the kids .... You just get a sense of it from the kids of what's working and what's not working and whether they like it or not.

Jean recalled a math lesson from the new math program where "watching the way they worked" provided valuable insight:

I would like to think all teachers at the primary level watch kids on an individual basis. So my indicator was watching the responses, watching the hands, watching the way they worked in their journal, with their books, the kinds of observations the children were making during the lessons. So it was just, it was a real day-to-day, in the trenches, watching the way they work with that, the kind of responses, see how familiar they got with working with number grids and how their number sense grew, and how it became easier for them.
Jean commented that through observation a teacher could determine not only whether the lesson was successful, but also whether students were developing a deeper understanding. Jean described the difference in students’ behaviors if they were engaged or not engaged in the lesson:

Uninvolved. Just like kind of sitting there, not really interested .... I like the room to be more dynamic than that, and it can be dynamic in a quiet way. They can be writing away on an idea that is like that they totally love and in that way it’s dynamic, or they can be just sitting there, “I don’t know what to write. I don’t know. Well what do you mean?”

Jean felt that when starting a new program a teacher should have high expectations for their children, should communicate those expectations to individual students and parents, and should be persistent and supportive in guiding the children to reach those expectations.

Jean’s Views on Barriers to Applying New Learning

Jean’s process of applying new learning in the classroom included the ability to adjust any program to make it work in a multiage classroom. There were, however, frustrations that impeded Jean’s ability to make those needed adjustments. Class size, cumbersome programs, and not enough training were her barriers.

Jean found that new programs were designed for ideal teaching conditions, such as a class size of 18 students. Over the last few years, Jean’s class sizes had been 24 to 25 students. Jean felt that those extra 6 or 7 students made a big difference in her ability to apply new learning programs. “With the reading with each kid, it just doesn’t get done. It doesn’t get done as effectively as if you only had 20 or fewer kids.” She stated,

I think some things that are presented are presented in a way where people are coming with maybe 18 kids that they’re dealing with, and you throw 7 more kids in there, and it’s not going to be as effective. So I kind of pick
and choose what I know works with kids, and what I can work with in a class this size, what makes sense. So some of the things that are way too detailed, way too cumbersome for paper and recording and filing and, that takes away from the actual interaction with the child, I think, I haven’t used.

Jean found that applying a new program that has many components was too cumbersome for the teacher. Jean felt that paperwork involving recording observations on students and certain types of assessment took too much time. She explained that if a new program required individual assessment or instruction, it was not worth the time investment:

I just found that cumbersome. That was something that, I don’t know whether it’s because I’ve been doing it a long time, but I can look at a kid’s name and kind of, I don’t know whether I just put it in my brain or what, and I will write notes down, but not in the formal detailed, it was just way too cumbersome for the time that I was spending doing it. Let me rephrase that. The time I spent doing it didn’t glean as much information as the time invested in doing it. What I mean? It just seemed to be an overload.

Cumbersome paperwork and recorded observations were not the only frustrations or barriers that Jean had to manage. Jean tried to make every program work in the classroom, yet not enough training reduced her chances of adjusting the new program to her multiage classroom. She explained,

Another frustration might be not having enough—I hate to say—training because we sound like animals, but support before you begin something. That is a frustration. Being just dropped in the middle of it, and say, “Do it.” That’s a frustration. I have a real positive attitude of “Okay, let’s go, let’s get it, and let’s get it done. Let’s do it. We’ll figure it out.” And if something’s not going right, you read, talk about it, think about it, and shift gears a little bit. So I think the biggest frustration is not being as prepared as you could be, and dealing with the number of kids you have to deal with, to implement things.
Summary of Jean’s Beliefs and Values

Jean participated willingly in professional development experiences to improve her teaching skills and improve students’ outcomes. She found that valuable professional development experiences were tailored for a multiage classroom, caused her to reflect on her teaching and how it impacted students, involved group work, and were left up to teachers to choose to attend. These experiences should validate knowledge or skills and build cognition about how to look at kids that is going to make a difference. Jean appreciated veteran teachers, who provided practical information, and she valued open discussions with her colleagues and experiences that prepared her to hit the ground running.

Jean’s least valued experiences involved cursory half-day workshops, on-line courses, and been there, done that workshops. She devalued professional development experiences that involved administration not knowing where we’ve been, programs that did not take into account multiage classrooms, programs that would not stick around long, and those that did not provide preparation or support when applying new programs.

When applying new learning, Jean depended on her colleagues for support when applying new learning, to collaborate on making adjustments, and to foster open communication. She found the administrators very approachable, forward thinkers who were encouraging, and felt that having access to community provided her with expertise in curriculum and instruction that proved very useful. Though Jean did not have many experiences with external coaches, she found that modeling and observing the
neighboring school district teachers more helpful. Having an input into building the district’s professional development plan was important.

Jean found many factors that impacted students’ learning. Jean learned that students needed time to adjust to a new program, her comfort level influenced students, students needed to adjust to the flow of the classroom, and “miniteachers” were developed to support fellow students. Jean relied on her educated eyes to make judgments of the new program. Observation was her main assessment tool to determine students’ behaviors, quality of completed work, evidence of expected outcomes, level of involvement, and demonstration of fun. Jean believed that high expectations were needed for all students.

Even though Jean can “fix” or adjust new programs to the multiage classroom, she found there are barriers that impede the process. Jean felt that class size was the biggest barrier when applying a new program. She believed that most programs were provided to be successful with class size of 20 students or less. She felt that programs were too cumbersome due to the large amount of paperwork and the many different components of the program. Finally, the lack of proper training and the sense of not being prepared frustrated Jean.

Sara’s Story: What is This Going to Mean to Me and My Classroom?

For 31 years, Sara had taught first grade for Autumn Primary School. She believed that she would teach for 2 more years and then retire to spend more time with her family and pursue hobbies. As she reflected back over her career, she felt that professional development has changed. In the beginning of her career, there were few opportunities to attend workshops or training sessions and no requirement that she attend
workshops on a yearly basis. More recently she has participated in the district's required professional development program and attends workshops outside of the district. Over the previous 5 years, Sara participated in over 15 workshops and curriculum trainings. These experiences focused on core curriculum with new programs or on mapping/revising curriculum frameworks. Sara felt that she is a life-long learner and understood the importance of continual improvements and learning that professional development activities provide because "teaching is an ever-changing art."

*Sara's Views on Defining Professional Development Experiences*

Every time Sara left the classroom to attend a workshop, she reminded the students "it doesn't matter what your age is, you're going to be learning your whole life."

Sara viewed professional development experiences as not just a day away from the classroom, but an opportunity to learn something new and take it back to the students.

Sara defined professional development as:

When I think of the term professional development, I think about what is going to improve me as a teacher. And some of the things that we've been exposed to are not necessarily something that is going to improve me. Improving me as a teacher has a better chance of improving my students' experience in first grade too, if I can bring it back to the classroom in some way, shape, or manner. ... Specifically to teaching and me ... it's workshops. It's courses. It's examining curriculum. It is anything that will come together and help me grow as a teacher.

Improving herself as a teacher has motivated Sara to participate and apply new skills or knowledge in the classroom.

According to Sara, it is important to apply a program as it was intended because the program has proven to be valid in the exact way it was created. When she first applied learning from professional development experiences, Sara strove to stay true to the
program, and it was not until she felt that she had mastered the program that she began to make any modifications. She justified these modifications as necessary to adjust to the learning needs of the students or to fit the class schedule. Sara believed that the main goal of professional development is what you are “going to bring back from it that will directly impact your kids’ learning.” With each experience, Sara asked a simple question, “What is this going to mean to me and my classroom?”

Sara’s Views on Types of Professional Development Experiences

Sara viewed professional development experiences as “getting exposure to a lot of different things” and as “opportunities to try different things.”

I try to draw from the many professional development experiences I have been exposed to as I teach my first-grade curriculum, knowing what works for one class may not work for another and what works for one student may not work for another. The more experiences I have to continue my journey as a learner, the more I have to offer my students.

Sara felt that she has had her share of most- and least-valuable professional development experiences.

Most Valuable. Sara recalled valuable elements of professional development experiences and application of these learning to the classroom over the course of her career. She was amazed at how much she could remember about her experiences and how, in some cases, she continues to apply some of these strategies today. Themes that emerged from Sara’s valued professional development experiences were meaningful, comfortable pace for learning, ready to go, making choices, seeing it in action, and revisiting. Sara stated, “I believe that because I philosophically agreed with each of these teaching practices, I worked harder to make them work in my class.”
Meaningful events involved learning new skills and having the opportunity to practice these skills during the professional development experience. The chance to become familiar with the material or skills and then to have time to discuss them reminded Sara of taking college courses. Recalling one valuable professional development experience involving a new writing program she stated: “So it wasn’t a half day or even a full day. It was almost like a course that you would take.” The workshop lasted 5 consecutive days. This course provided Sara with a comfortable pace to learn. She noted “continuity and an opportunity to explore a practice in greater depth made for a more meaningful experience.”

Sara recalled another workshop that was similar to others she had taken, in that it was offered in the summer over the course of a few days. She remembered,

[There were] a couple of outside workshops that I attended. One was on assessment opportunity, assessments and how to have your assessments drive your instruction, and that was 2 and a half days off campus, during the summer. I came back pretty enthusiastic about that one. I saw, it made sense to me, [and] ... we’re going to try to get this information on the students, and then use that information to actually plan your teaching. It was actually aligned with the current assessment system.

The opportunity to participate in many different types of professional development experiences suited Sara’s belief in life-long learning. Sara smiled and recalled:

Years ago, the superintendent was fantastic at getting grants and writing grants, and we were getting exposure to a lot of different things, the good, the bad, and the ugly. But it was the beginning in my career, of professional development. There were things we could use. And the superintendent was never one to say you had to use something, but she just gave us a lot of opportunities to try different things.
The variety of types of professional development experiences that Sara deemed “the good, the bad and the ugly” had to do with her participating in workshops that focus on her grade level, maintain a comfortable learning pace, and provide on-going support. The good or valuable professional development experiences focus on her and the students, and the bad and ugly are those experiences that do not focus on her and the students. Sara valued experiences that are ready to go. She participated in many summertime professional development experiences and found she liked to learn a new skill or knowledge and apply it right away. Sara remarked,

It was 5 days during the summer in a row, so it was continuous learning and practice and it was fairly near the start of school, so it was kind of, then we rolled right into the beginning of the school year, and I felt that everything that I could, that I was learning there, I could then take right back to the rest of the class and everything.

Being able to take all the necessary ready-to-use materials back to class was one of the most important aspects of professional development experiences. Sara remembered one seminar on drill-and-practice techniques for math facts that provided a great example of ready-to-go materials. “I think part of that one was that you came away with some actual materials, too, that you could go and start your own, incorporate right away, beyond just the ideas, you had some materials too.” She felt, “the longer I go without using what I have learned, the more likely it is that I will not apply it in my classroom.” Materials that are user friendly make new learning easier to implement in the classroom and are often what makes the difference in being able to apply that learning.

Making choices regarding professional development experiences is important to Sara. She appreciated that the school district provides choices in professional development experiences and she was free to choose whether she wanted to participate. If
she did choose to participate, she could make a choice from the list of opportunities. “So you could sign up or not sign up, because it was really on our own time, but it was provided by the school system.” Thus, Sara did not experience a directive to participate, and the variety of opportunities helped her find things she is interested in learning.

*Seeing it in action* made it easier for Sara to understand how she was going to apply new ideas in the classroom. Sara and a few colleagues traveled to Great Falls, Montana to attend a seminar and she discovered that watching another teacher present a lesson that she was expected to do in just a few weeks at her own school made it easier for Sara to learn the nuances of the program. She recalled,

> We were trained by a person in Great Falls, Montana for a good part of a week, probably a full week out there, and it was interesting going to some schools and watching it being done and that’s really helpful too. That’s a good piece of professional development is seeing the program in place somewhere.

In addition to seeing it in place, Sara found that *revisiting* the focus of a professional development experience allowed her to ask questions and improve her understanding of the content or process. She stated,

> In terms of immediate classroom application, the most valuable have been the reading and math workshops that were actually several days throughout the year. I found the years that we had a specific professional development focus for the year the most valuable. They were valuable because they were on-going and more in-depth. There were opportunities to try practices and then return with questions rather than … listen to this, try this, and we’ll never see you again.

Sara walked into each professional development experience with an open mind toward learning. Overall, she focused on what new skill or knowledge she might take back to the classroom for the students and herself.
Least Valuable. Professional development experiences that did not provide the elements that Sara valued were unlikely to be applied in the classroom. Sara devalued professional development experiences when they were a blip in time or lack a sense of a professional development plan. She felt that programs that are mandated, that do not apply to the classroom that have too broad an audience range, or are recycled or recirculated were also not valuable. Sara did not buy in to experiences if they did not match her values or convictions and resented using professional development time to complete tasks that should be someone else's responsibility.

Perhaps the single most important reason that Sara did not apply the learning from her professional development experiences in the classroom was that they were presented as a blip in time. Sara recalled a professional development experience on differentiated instruction. The concept made sense to her because she taught in an inclusion classroom. An inclusion classroom is composed of students with various levels of abilities, some of whom are on an individualized educational plan. There are times throughout the day when the classroom teacher is alone and must rely on a knowledge base of teaching strategies to meet the learning needs of all students. Sara recalled that the professional development experience on differentiated instruction presented ways to making teaching strategies and lesson plans meet the wide range of academic levels of students. Sara wanted to learn more about meeting the needs of high-performing students and was eager to learn about this type of instruction. The experience was a day and a half event and she noted, "We used the terms. But it was just maybe not enough exposure to it." Sara felt that the blip in time did not allow her to develop a level of competence so that she could apply new learning for the benefit of all the students.
At another time, the staff was assigned to work on curriculum on their district’s professional development day. After the day, there was no further work on these curriculum assignments, and ultimately Sara wondered about the purpose of these experiences.

Those tend to be ones that we might just have for a half day, a little blip in time [or] ... a miniexposure to a technique that we may or may not actually end up using. It might have been like the Curriculum Mapping we did fairly recently. It ended up being basically kind of copying our manuals into a computer program, and then sort of ending at midstream and never picking up with it.

During another workshop on curriculum, Sara felt that the day was not well planned and was a waste of time.

Some of our social studies curriculum development ended up being stopped midstream and it stayed there for probably about a year and a half now. I came away from some of those professional development days thinking somebody did not have anything for us to do, and they were looking [to find us something to do]. And so I don’t know if that may or may not be true, but that’s the sense that I get. They were kind of looking to fill time.

Sara sensed there was a lack a sense of a district professional development plan. Instead the school district responded to local, state, and national mandates. With so many competing influences, it was difficult to create an individualized plan for a specific grade in a specific school in a specific district. So responses are typically a one-size-fits-all plan. Workshops that are geared for K–12 do not lend themselves to learning specific skills or knowledge for teaching first grade.

Don’t just try to fill my time for the sake of whether the state says you have to have x amount of hours of professional development or, let me just give 185 student days then. That, to me, would be time better spent.
The lack of a district professional development plan created confusion when Sara’s district changed reading programs without giving enough time for the previous program to be implemented fully. Sara found that the two reading programs differed greatly in philosophy and approach to teaching reading.

It’s confusing to me because the Guided Reading wasn’t [introduced] all that long ago. It was fairly recent that we were trained in Guided Reading, and it seemed like that was the direction that we were going to go in. But the Open Court is being adopted. And I don’t know, I mean, I don’t want to say that the two philosophies clash, but they kind of do in my mind, so I guess I’m getting a mixed message from the administration, I guess, just to which way we’re headed.

At the time of the adoption of the new reading program, Sara was on the committee to oversee the application of the reading program. Although the decision to implement the new program was already determined by the district learning team, Sara and the committee needed to make decisions on how the new reading program was going to be implemented in the district. Sara was discouraged that despite all the committee’s work in planning the application of this new program, Sara felt the district had already made a decision. She disagreed with how the program was initiated in the district. Instead of starting the reading program in the lower grades and building on it as the children progressed through the grades, the administration decided that the program was to start at the upper grades.

Well, I was on that reading committee too, and I think we tended to, I don’t know if there was a plan. It just seems like we went in the wrong direction. We went from fifth grade down. I understand why we did that. I’m not sure I agree with it. Fifth grade and fourth grade had trade books only. The administration at that time wanted them to have a basal, a K–5 scope and sequence to teach the same things.
Mandates from different sources affect all grades. Students below second grade do not take state-required tests and yet Sara felt the effects of standardized tests. More time is needed to prepare the children for the demands of testing and “some of the good things get pushed aside.” She felt,

A lot is being mandated, and it’s being mandated by people … and I’m not even thinking at the town level or the district level. I’m thinking at the state level and the national level. Of course, what’s happening at the state level here is the whole MCAS thing. Everything is being MCAS driven, which we don’t give in first grade. It’s impacted with the trickle down, so because we need to cover x, y, and z.

Sara devalued experiences that did not apply directly to the classroom, such as learning that would not directly impact her teaching in the classroom and the students’ experiences or that could not be used on a daily basis.

Sara did not buy in to professional development experiences that focused on applying concepts from the business world or that are too heavy in theory. “I went to the training and I attempted to incorporate a piece of it into my classroom, and I still do, but it’s something that I just haven’t latched onto.”

I just feel like then, to me, the (Baldridge) concept is a business concept and we’re just kind of losing that whole humanistic piece of our, of being a school, a school environment, the nurturing piece. It’s … just something I personally did not buy-in to.

Sara found that professional development experiences that are too broad an audience range were not valuable because they did not provide learning that she could take back to first grade. She recalled:

When you get into those K to 12 experiences, there’s just a limit to what you’re going to get out of it personally, what I’m going to get as the first-grade teacher out of something they’re telling K to 12. Not that I’m not interested in what goes on up there, but it’s just not going to be a direct hit.
for me. So mostly my involvement that I can think of is just like jotting down ideas when they needed some things to come back to [report] to committee.

It has been Sara’s experience that professional development experiences often introduce a “new” program that Sara recognized as a recycled or recirculated program from the past.

I think I’m fairly open to trying new things, although sometimes I wonder now, as I’m getting older, if I’ve just seen more and I kind of can sort it out a little better. And we may have tried things and they’re recycling, recirculating, or whatever you want, and you say, “This is, we’ve tried this but it was under a different name 25 years ago.” It happens a lot in education.

Sara did not value participating in a professional development experience that involved working on curriculum that should be someone else’s responsibility. Many times throughout Sara’s career, she has been asked to write and revise curriculum. She felt that it was the responsibility of others. She stated,

With the professional development this year, I’m thinking a lot of our frustrations, a lot of it was around the science curriculum development, and a lot of the frustration that I felt, and I think some of the others at the grade level felt, is that we were kind of doing other people’s jobs. We were writing curriculum, but we really were hired to be classroom teachers.

Sara’s Views on the Role of Learning Culture and Participation in Planning

If professional development experiences presented new concepts that differed from Sara’s values or beliefs, she was willing to participate and apply those learning if she believed they would have a positive impact on her and the students. She felt that successful application of professional development experiences allows students to explore and reach their own developmental level within the classroom. Sara found that
applying new learning is easier if she has support from her colleagues, internal and external coaches, administrators, and a practical and cohesive professional development plan. Sara felt that time to build a good knowledge based and the support of colleagues were the most important elements for applying new learning.

Having colleagues attend the same workshop supported Sara when applying new learning. She felt that teachers sharing materials, discussing ideas, and supporting each other as they tried new strategies or concepts was very important. Sharing materials makes it possible to apply the program correctly. Sara stated:

I think that’s a major factor, of just being able to touch base with them, or on a more formal level, just get materials together with them. No, I think that’s a big factor in making something work for you in your classroom.

Going to workshops with peers helped Sara come back from that experience and be ready to go. Sharing supplies maximizes resources, both money and time. Sara and her colleagues discussed ideas with each other and compared how each class is performing. If Sara was confused or did not receive the response from students she expected, her colleagues offered suggestions. These relationships contributed to the success of applying a new program in the classroom.

Staying true to a program is easier if there is a fellow teacher (internal coach) on staff who is trained to support everyone. The internal coaching support can be very informal, but it is ready when a teacher needs it. This person is accessible and can pull it all together for us. Sara expressed frustration at having to wait for a response from an external coach to a question while she fumbled through a process. She found that an internal coach who is right next door made interactions seamless, thus she preferred having an internal coach. The internal coach was helpful with pacing, planning, and
problem solving because the coach was also teaching the same lesson in the next room or down the hall. Sara felt that a coach could help with the day-to-day problems. She recalled:

I do a lot with [the internal coach] because we’re open to each other in our physical set up. So we’ll compare a lot in the math. Sometimes we’ll compare, like where are you in math, and that sort of thing, but beyond that, she’ll say to me, if she’s a lesson or two ahead of me, she’ll say something like, “Don’t bother doing it this way, the way the manual says to do it. Try it this other way. They [students] got more out of it. It was just much more manageable.”

Sara felt privileged not only to have a great internal coach but also to have administrators as she applied new learning. Administrators “have been really open to professional development, trying new things, backing us up, and not forcing things.” She believed that administrators who value continuous learning of the staff created a supportive environment. She also believed that an administrator needs some classroom experience to understand what is really happening in the classroom. She stated:

I think as one piece of how it works or doesn’t work at the administrative level is, if your administrator has had some classroom experience too, and is not too far away from that, or at least is still kind of in touch with what went on in the classroom. Sometimes the higher up the administrator goes, that gap is bigger, and obviously that person has sometimes never been in a classroom.

Sara valued an administrator who had good listening skills, made many classroom visits, and had some familiarity with the new skill or knowledge being introduced. Sara believed that administrators should recognize that teachers need time together to discuss the different aspects of the program. Administrators who develop and maintain open communication can help teachers apply a new program.
Sara’s impression of the district professional development plan was that it is confusing and contradictory. Curriculum committees, individual school-improvement committees, and staff surveys provided recommendations for yearly professional development activities. The District Learning Team reviewed the recommendations for new programs or additional trainings.

Sara felt that professional development plans need a timeline that includes adequate time for preparing materials, and applying the program. She recalled:

The ideal situation, it’s hard for me to say that, because I’ve been the [internal coach], but I’m thinking for my other teachers at the grade level [who] need opportunities to go through the materials, there’s a phenomenal amount of materials that comes with it, and you can’t just have that arrive in August, and just absorb it all. So you need time to go through the materials.

In order for her to buy in to the plan it must have included practical ideas and materials that Sara could directly use with the students.

Sara’s only contribution to the professional development plan was when she served on a reading committee several years previously. Sara did have opportunities to jot down ideas and submit them to the various planning committees. In many instances, Sara felt that when she did make suggestions, plans had already been decided by the administration; Sara stated, “It was frustrating where I feel I gave input and it’s not mattering.”

As she thought about having more input into determining her professional development experiences, she noted,

Instead of someone at an administrative level saying, “What are we going to have these guys do,” so maybe we need to be more active as classroom teachers, me and my grade level, instead of grumbling when we get what
we get—coming up with a list or some ideas ahead of time of things that we would think would directly impact our classroom life.

Sara’s Views on Student Impacts

As Sara stated many times, a valuable professional development experience must address “what is this going to mean to me and my classroom?” What she brought back to the classroom must directly impact students’ learning. She knew when applying a new program whether it was working by the students’ reaction. Sara found that the pace of a new program makes a difference in trying to meet the needs of each student’s ability level. When reflecting on applying new learning from professional development experiences, Sara considered the effect on academic and social demands that these experiences place on every child.

When introducing new learning into the classroom, pacing is important because not all students learn at the same rate. Sara felt that “we want them to do everything at the same time. That’s not real.” She suggested there needs to be time for considering different learning rates and a professional development application time frame should last an entire year in order for “different kids … to reach those milestones at different times.” Having an entire year provided Sara with the opportunity to get feedback from students, parents, and coaches.

Sara suggested that when applying new learning, especially if it involves a new program like a new math or reading series, the developmental needs of the students must be considered. She found that first graders need to have time to explore new concepts rather than keeping a pace that is not realistic. Exploration is a natural way for children to learn at their own pace. She suggested,
So I’ve always tried to gear toward those professional development opportunities, the kind that were not the end product or the activity or whatever, kind of what the kids explore or there was no necessarily right or wrong, but if the kids could get something out of it at whatever level they were at that point in time. Like sometimes with the math explorations that will happen too. Different kids will get more or less or different, not even more or less, but just different things out of an exploration.

Sara warned that the pacing for struggling learners can be too fast and for the higher ability learners can be not challenging enough. Learning from a professional development experience must take into account the students’ varying abilities.

Applying a new program must include materials and teaching strategies to meet students’ different developmental learning rates. Sara stated, “If you can be more developmental, I think your professional development piece can then kind of carry you through the whole year and different kids are going to reach those milestones at different times.” Sara thought it was not reasonable to ask that the students progress at the same rate, nor was it reasonable for the state-mandated testing to determine a child’s developmental rate. She stated,

I’m thinking that with the No Child Left Behind Act and the MCAS impact, the state is kind of telling you what they [students] need to know. It’s also leaving less room for developing that whole developmental piece of a child. … Because there is so much more required by the time they get to their third or fourth grade tests – whether it is reading or math or writing. So we have to expose them, but yet at the same time, I realized that I cannot take every single child to the same point. I can expose them, but I mean it is the whole developmental piece of who’s ready to master a concept or get this knowledge and really apply it. So what I tend to look for is where this child came in and the progress over time over the course of that year. If students came in at a lower level, I would be thrilled if they reached an average at the end of first grade where they are expected to be.

When applying a new program, Sara monitored the different ability levels throughout the year. New programs should include materials needed to meet the demands
of high- and low-ability students. Sara focused on differentiated instruction methods to modify her lessons to meet the various learning-style demands. Differentiated instruction involves creating lessons that contain different deliveries and activities in order to accommodate different students' abilities, interests, or learning needs.

When Sara reflected on student outcomes, she measured students' success based on whether they enjoyed the lesson. She recalled when first applying a new math series, she knew she was teaching it correctly and the program was making a difference because of “their enthusiasm for that piece of the day … they love it when we’re doing math.” She explained that the students' enthusiasm and the parents' positive feedback are the measures of success. Parents told Sara how impressed they were with their child's knowledge and what their child brought home for homework. Sara did not mention test scores or assessments as measures of students' outcomes. When she was asked why they were not mentioned, she noted that they never came to her mind.

Sara understood that to meet the ever-changing academic and social demands of students, she must continually improve her skills and knowledge. She stated,

I would like to believe that my students are incredibly smarter because of my professional development experiences, however that is probably not the case. I do believe that because I have had exposure to many different programs, workshops, speakers, etc. it has afforded me an opportunity to bring current practices and theories back to my students. If new information or techniques are available to me as a teacher they should then be available to my students through me.

She continued to explain why there is a need to introduce new learning into the classroom.

I try to draw from the many professional development experiences I have been exposed to as I teach my first-grade curriculum, knowing that what
works for one class may not work for another and what works for one student may not work for another.

*Sara's Views on Barriers to Applying New Learning*

There are many frustrations when applying a new program or learning from a professional development experience: *lack of time, lack of knowledge* when applying new learning, *need for support* from colleagues, coaches, or administration, and professional development experiences that *do not meet the needs* of students.

*Lack of time* was a frustration that Sara mentioned repeatedly that interferes in a number of ways. Sara felt that there was not enough time to apply a new program and continue to teach the required curriculum every day. In some situations, Sara found that new learning were often added to an already very busy schedule or an old program was replaced with a new program that is more time consuming. Particularly frustrating was the time it took to prepare new materials:

You go in to try. You've been trained in a program. Then many times the time that it takes to get the materials is not factored into part of the professional development, so you get the training on something, and you go to, you want to try it in your classroom, but you really need more time to get it all set up, and that's frustrating, because you still have your regular classroom life going on and so it's teaching. It's understood that the day doesn't end at 3 o'clock when the kids walk out the door. I think this could be a 24-hour job.

Sara was frustrated when a program did not work with the students and there was no follow up. She took responsibility for this failure due to her *lack of knowledge* of the program. She noted:

I mean that's frustrating. It's frustrating if you get it back and then it just doesn't work with your kids. Then it's, "did I not get this myself," and you maybe need some follow up. Sometimes follow up is not available and I think over the time, when I look back on the whole scope of professional development over time, it's the ones that are frustrating are when we've
had just little pieces of things, and then we never revisit it, and that happens a lot. So it’s frustrating to try to take a little piece, maybe a half day worth of someone talking to you, and then trying to either implement it in your classroom or learn more about it further. I really think you need to have repeated exposure like [the] opportunity to check in with your colleagues. Then you need more exposure. You can’t just leave it. You need to keep coming back to it.

Thus, follow up after the program has been implemented was essential for Sara to overcome the frustrations of staying true to the program. However, if problems arose she needed support from colleagues, coaches, and administration to apply new learning. Without this support, Sara felt that she could not successfully implement a new program.

It was frustrating to Sara when she determined that a program did not improve her teaching or it did not meet the needs of the first grade students. She recalled,

I guess part of my frustration is feeling about how I feel about a program, that it just didn’t have any meaning. ... I got my message across that I questioned whether it was the right program for first grade.

Summary of Sara’s Beliefs and Values

For Sara, professional development was about “improving me as a teacher and having a better chance of improving my students’ experience in first grade too, if I can bring it back to the classroom in some way, shape, or manner.”

Throughout Sara’s teaching career, she has experienced many professional development experiences. The most valuable experiences involved meaningful learning at a comfortable pace, being able to apply new materials that are ready to go, making choices about her professional development experiences, observing others applying the learning and having the opportunity to revisit. Sara devalued professional development experiences that are a blip in time, lack a sense of a plan, are mandated by state and federal authorities, are presented to too broad an audience range, cannot be applied to
the classroom, she does not buy in to, are recycled or recirculated, and should be someone else’s responsibility.

Sara found support from her colleagues by sharing materials, discussing ideas, and comparing how each class is performing. She appreciated the support from an internal coach because of the informal meetings. She valued a coach for the ability to pull it all together for us. Administrators were a strong support for Sara. She believed that administrators should value continuous learning, and understand what is really happening in the classroom by making many classroom visits. Sara appreciated administrators who had good listening skills and had familiarity with the new skill or knowledge from professional development experiences.

Sara found her professional development plan to be confusing and contradictory. Although Sara and her colleagues had opportunities to make suggestions for the professional development plan, she felt that plans had already been decided. She believed that teachers should have more input into the process. Any professional development plan needs a timeline that includes adequate time for preparing materials.

Sara found when applying new learning that she needed to meet the needs of each student’s ability level. She felt that pacing was an important element for successful learning. Sara thought it necessary to meet the various developmental needs of all students. She believed that improving her skills and knowledge had a direct effect on improving student outcomes. To determine the success of the new learning, Sara relied on how much the students enjoyed the lesson.

Sara found barriers that interfered with applying new learning. Her greatest barrier was a lack of time. She found that a lack of time occurred by applying new
learning in an already busy day and lack of time to prepare new materials associated with a new program. Sara found lack of knowledge frustrating due to no follow-up support. She knew that to successfully apply new learning, she needed the support of her colleagues. Although Sara felt supported by colleagues, she knew in a situation where a colleague may not be available, she would be unable to completely apply new learning without glitches. New learning that did not meet the needs of students were a barrier that frustrated Sara.

Pia’s Story: Improving My Repertoire

Since 1971, Pia had taught on a variety of elementary grade levels, yet for the previous 17 years, she had taught second-grade inclusion at Summerview Elementary School. Pia’s classroom is a typical example of an inclusion classroom composed of students with various levels of abilities, some of whom are on an individualized educational plan. Pia felt fortunate to live and work in the same town. Her location provided Pia with a connection to the school even while on leave for 7 years to raise her children.

Over the previous 5 years, Pia participated in more than 15 professional development experiences. These experiences included revising and developing new curriculum, mentoring new teachers and student teachers, training in literacy assessments, and applying new mathematics and science programs. She felt that writing, mathematics, and reading were her primary focus in the classroom, and appreciated taking college courses to expand her knowledge in these areas.
Pia’s Views on Defining Professional Development Experiences

Pia defined professional development as “the district offering me things that will improve my repertoire, my teaching.” Pia explained that any workshops or college courses she elected to participate in were not included in her definition of professional development. She stated, “There are the courses that you take. I guess I don’t consider that professional development because I’ve taken them on my own.” Therefore, she believed that professional development experiences were only those opportunities provided by the district.

Professional development experiences expanded Pia’s teaching repertoire, yet she did not connect these experiences to student outcomes. She reflected,

I never really think about the connection between the professional development and the outcome I get with my students, but it’s just, because once you’re with the students you’re not thinking, “I’m going to do this because I took this course, and that’s going well because I learned this new technique.” So I guess you do keep it separate in your mind. You don’t think about it, because, I don’t know if that’s a normal thing, but I just don’t think about it, as far as the outcome.

Pia continued to think about connecting professional development experiences to improving student outcomes and stated, “I guess if I sat down and I looked, I’d say, ‘Well maybe they’re doing better with this because they’re making more connections.’” Pia did not connect professional development experiences with having an impact on student outcomes.

Pia’s Views on Types of Professional Development Experiences

Although there was no specific type of professional development experiences that Pia preferred, she felt that she was at a point in her career where she could pick and choose the types of professional development experiences that interested her.
You pick and choose. Of course when you do that, adopt the individual plan; you have to kind of get the things all around, so I kind of pick and choose. But right now I’m at the point that I’m not looking to take things unless something interests me.

Pia was selective in the professional development experiences she attended, in part because she did not have to earn a master’s degree. When she started teaching, it was not a requirement. To maintain her teaching certification, she had to earn professional development points (PDP) by attending professional development experiences.

Now I’m just interested in the PDPs to recertify and that’s it. So I take, there’s certain things that are offered that perhaps I take, but I’m not worrying about going to get a course or that type of thing. The pressure’s off of me.

**Most valuable.** Pia was at a point in her career where she could pick and choose professional development experiences to improve her teaching repertoire. Pia valued experiences that *opened a new door for teaching core subjects*, and trained her to use new programs that would be *used on a daily basis*. She also valued professional development experiences that were *training we need*.

Pia valued professional development experiences that provided her with the skills needed to apply a new program. These experiences *opened a new door for teaching core subjects*, mathematics, writing, and reading. Pia recalled,

She really gave us some insight into certain things to do with the children. ... So that kind of opened up a new door for me with the reading for meaning and the schema and the making connections. I really enjoyed that and I found it very useful. So in the core subjects, when I can get the training in the core subjects, I really find that more useful for me, not that I’m not interested in the sciences or the social studies. ... I really [think] the children are coming in so low. I just want to get them to move along with the reading, the writing, and the mathematics.
Pia explained that professional development experiences that involved new learning that she could use on a daily basis in teaching the core subjects were most valuable. She felt that “It has always been my goal to find something new during the professional development training that I am able to use.” Pia noted,

I found the most memorable training to be that presented to instruct me on how to deliver a new program being introduced to students. I consider these experiences to be the most memorable because most of the instruction received was used the most on a daily basis.

One program that Pia learned about and then used on a daily basis was a new spelling program.

I think professional development, obviously when, if there’s something a program that’s new and I’m going to use, then it’s most helpful. There is Sitton spelling. We got that a few years ago, so when I was trained on that. That was helpful, because I was going to do it.

In addition to trainings related to core subjects, Pia valued professional development experiences that were training we need.

The computer, we’ve had that type of thing. That works, where you’ve got a lot to learn with that, so we’ve had a lot of that training which we need. That’s become so much a part of our lives now.

Least valuable. Pia devalued professional development experiences that represented ideal conditions but it’s not reality and that involved training that did not match exactly how the district wants us to use it.

Many of the workshops attended presented wonderful ideas but it’s not reality of large classes and noncompliant students. Pia felt that reality included large class size, emotionally and academically challenging students, and a daily schedule that was already overloaded. During these workshops, Pia’s reality was not addressed. She described,
I have found out that all these workshops I’ve gone to and these millions of things, people get up there and they’re certainly passionate about what they’re presenting, they’re passionate about what they want to communicate to you, but it’s all well and done when you’re sitting in that big room with the people, it’s wonderful, and they show you the videos of the teacher working with the student, and look how wonderful it is. Or the Guided Reading lessons and isn’t that wonderful. But it’s not reality. Reality is that you’ve got 19 or 20 students that you’ve got two that are so noncompliant, they’re putting their fingers in their ears and doing what they want to do, and then you’ve got this going on there and that going on there.

Pia devalued professional development experiences that involved training that did not match exactly how the district wants us to use it. She provided an example of a specific reading program where the district changed the design of a program so that it could apply to all students. At the training, she was instructed to use this program only for a specific type of student. Yet, when it was time to apply the program in the classroom, administration required her to use it with all students. She explained,

What happens in my district, what I’ve noticed over the years is that they give you professional development on certain things, but I don’t think what we’ve been trained is exactly how the district wants us to use it … I’ll give you an example. We’re trained in [a reading program]. I was specifically told that it’s not for our whole class. It’s for your struggling readers. It’s for your children that are already receiving support. Your average second grade strong reader doesn’t need the instruction because they’ve got those skills.

Pia’s Views on the Role of Learning Culture and Participation in Planning

Pia’s district offered 2 full days and 4 half days each year for professional development experiences in many different curriculum areas. Although Pia felt it was her responsibility to make any program work that was designed to improve students’ ability in core subjects, she appreciated the support from administrators and colleagues and, on
occasion, coaches. Pia believed that teachers needed to have more input into the professional development plan at the individual and district levels.

Pia had mixed feelings regarding the support she received from administrators. She referred to two categories of administrators—principal and central office. Over the years, Pia interacted with principals who had a variety of different management styles, ranging from principals who rarely entered the classroom to principals who visited the classroom frequently. Pia appreciated principals who were there if you needed her. She related an example of how one principal supported Pia when she adopted a new and time-consuming assessment:

She’s wonderful. Because with DIBELS and with other assessments, she gave us an email [stating] if we needed to come in to do a read-aloud with the children, she would do it while we were taking some kids. So that was lovely. In that way, [she is] very supportive, which we never had before.

Pia explained that this principal “had empathy and understood what teachers needed to do.” Pia appreciated that the principal was receptive and focused on the successes. Pia related,

My principal is very receptive if you need to talk to her about certain things. And she likes to share the positive. She likes to hear the successes and then she likes to take it further to the children. If a child is having a success because they’ve had an issue and then they show a success, she will go to the child, so she communicates with, brings it down to the child as well.

Pia explained that central office administrators were located in another building and did not make frequent visits to the elementary buildings. Pia had very infrequent contacts with central-office administrators and felt that they did not seem to really listen to teachers. For example, Pia explained how a group of teachers piloted a new program
and after using it for a time, concluded the program should not be adopted. She felt that central office administrators did not listen to these teachers. She recounted,

We’ve had people pilot things in the past, and then even though people piloting saying what the pros and cons, [there was] a feeling more against using it. [Central-office administrators] do it anyway. So sometimes our administration in the past doesn’t seem to really have listened.

Pia stated that central-office administrators never come back and ask how the program was working. She recalled,

All they do is tell us what we’re going to do. We don’t hear from them … [They] really never do come back and [ask,] “How’s it going?” and never asks our opinion: “I’m thinking that we might need this. What do you think?”

Once a new program was adopted, Pia objected because some colleagues did not use it. Pia was frustrated that central-office administrators did not hold staff accountable for applying a new program. She explained,

Because of this MCAS and the frameworks, there’s more accountability. … The programs coming in and the people not following, and that’s the administration’s [responsibility]. I think it puts the burden on them, because it’s their responsibility to make sure that’s being followed.

Pia explained the effects of accountability and the fallout when her fellow teachers did not follow the plan. “They didn’t follow the program and it showed that they didn’t follow the program, because the kids did not have the skills.” Pia felt that all teachers should follow the plan so that all students would have the same experiences with new programs. Because principal and district administrators did not ensure that teachers applied new learning in their classroom, Pia found that certain students who had not experienced the new program did not have the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful in second grade.
Pia felt supported by her colleagues who were always available when she applied new learning. Pia explained that working together *takes a lot of stress off* of her.

When you work together, that takes a lot of the stress off, because everybody’s going through the same issues. Misery loves company. So when you’re frustrated [and] when everybody’s frustrated, it’s a little comforting because then you kind of come up with a plan. People working together could come up with a plan to try to eliminate issues that they’re having.

To facilitate group planning, Pia advocated regularly scheduled *second grade staff meetings*. She felt that working together and planning together with colleagues should be an important part of the school day.

If we had once a week that we could meet for an hour as a grade level, that would be wonderful. That would be nice, to kind of plan, and we’ve tried to do this in a rushed way, to try to plan certain things that we’re going to do. So if we knew we had an hour every week that would be really nice. I’m not talking 7:30 in the morning before school. I’m talking 1 o’clock to 2, but we’re talking perfect world.

Pia felt that it was important to have a chance to *banter back and forth* with her colleagues. She stated,

It’s very nice to be able to sit down, because everybody interprets things a little different or has a little different slant. It would be nice to banter back and forth, to say, “What did you think of that,” or “Oh, I never thought about that.” We are a very sharing group.

The informal sharing of professional opinions gave Pia the opportunity to compare with others how she was applying new learning. She explained that she and her colleagues relied on each other to remain *on the same page*.

We all like to be on the same page and know what we’re doing. So you always think, “Oh, boy, I’m not moving really, I’m not moving that fast in this math.” And then you see everyone over there, “Oh, she’s in the same unit.” We kind of rely on us, each other for that type of thing. So we’re all
different but we try to do certain things and keep them the same, which is good.

When applying new learning, Pia found that working together with colleagues in planning and sharing resources made it less work. Pia recalled,

Next year, three of us are doing one particular unit together and it’s the people that I work well with. So I think with the three of us kind of doing it together, as far as planning, I think that will help me to do a little bit more next year. If the three of us plan it together, it’s less work.

In addition to support from administrators and colleagues, Pia found that having a coach available when she needed it was helpful. When asked about external and internal coaches, Pia expressed a preference for an *internal coach* who had direct experience piloting the program and could provide practical information on how to apply it. Pia explained,

They’re on our grade level so they have the experience piloting it, so they kind of knew what worked [and what] didn’t work. So that’s very helpful when you can do that and they’re right there. “Hey, Deb, what do I do with this,” or “where do I find that?” So that’s very nice, when that can happen. ... They’re going through with you, so they can kind of help with the administration of it.

Pia had mixed feelings regarding external coaches. She had found them to be helpful when she contacted them with a question. She recalled, “I called up the 800 number, we had an issue, and they helped us with it.” Yet more often, “They give you an email address sometimes, you can maybe ask a question, but I don’t see too much interaction when you’re done.” The lack of ongoing support was the reason Pia preferred internal coaches who were readily accessible rather than external coaches.

Pia’s district relied on a *professional development plan*. An annual plan consisted of two parts, individual and district. She explained that her district provided every teacher
with a small stipend to pay for teachers' workshops and experiences that would support their individual professional development plan.

Over the past 10 years, Pia had not contributed to the district's professional development plan. She believed that individual teachers should have more input into their professional development plan. "I think that there are certain things that people would like a little ownership with." Pia believed that teachers should communicate with administration regarding their teaching needs and have the district create annual plans to maintain a current knowledge of curriculum and assessment. She explained,

The ideal role of a teacher in a district professional plan would be the teacher's needs being communicated to the administration. Teachers know what they are accountable for and also are aware of what is needed to improve their everyday teaching. [No Child Left Behind] and the frameworks have added a great deal of curriculum and assessment that needs to be covered each year. In an ideal district, the teachers would have a say on how the grade-level framework tasks could be met with the least amount of programs that are expected to be covered.

*Pia's Views on Student Impacts*

Although Pia stated she never made the connection between professional development experiences and student outcomes, she was a seasoned teacher and had deep reflections about gauging the impact of instruction on students' outcomes. Teaching in an inclusion classroom required Pia to think about how a lesson impacts different students. Pia reflected that she *communicated in different ways* to reach more children; that she had to adjust to different groups that had *different rates of learning*; and that she evaluated students' understanding by their ability to *come up with a connection*. She measured student outcomes by observing their *engagement, using her own judgment*, and by celebrating their improvements reflected in *the grade* on a standardized test.
Pia felt that “Student outcomes improve when I have a varied repertoire of techniques that I am able pick and choose to help meet the needs of the children in my class.” Her ability to communicate in different ways to different students allowed her to reach more students. She stated,

It’s about me being a better teacher and communicating to my students what I want them to know in perhaps different ways. Because you might learn a different way to communicate something, and the more ways you can communicate it, the more children you’re going [to reach].

Pia has found that because she has class sizes of 19 or more, one-on-one teaching “doesn’t help me in my classroom.” She has found that each year, each class has a
different rate of learning, and therefore, progression through a program “depends on the group and how quickly they can move.” Therefore, each year, Pia progressed through the curriculum at a different rate and ended at a different point.

Pia knew students gained understanding when they were able to come up with a connection. She believed that students needed to make connections to “broaden their meaning” of the subject. She commented,

They get so excited when they come up with a connection. I think that that helps to stretch their minds. I think when we’re reading and discussing any topic, those connections help to broaden their meaning of what we’re doing. So that, to me, was wonderful. An example of students making connections occurred when students applied a new component designed to improve reading comprehension. Pia recalled the excitement that she and the students felt when the students began making connections.

And I brought that back last year for the first time, and I was amazed that I introduced it to the students because they hadn’t heard it at all at that point, and I was amazing how many connections they started to make. I was really amazed.
To assess student outcomes, Pia relied on the level of student engagement, her own judgment, and to some extent, standardized testing. She commented, “I see them engaged. ... It just was my observation that [let] me know that they really did a good job. I mean, there’s no assessment per se on certain things, obviously. You’ve got to use your own judgment.” Her judgment was based on outcome, “Behavior, their presentation, the final outcome, that’s basically, on many things on this level. It’s not like high school; you can’t test them on everything.” Yet, Pia explained that students are required to take a standard test in the spring and fall to determine reading level. Pia referred to it as the “Grade test.”

When we took it in the fall, the outcome in the grade was really pretty much where [we expected them]. And the spring ones showed wonderful growth, which you’re thrilled with that. I mean, I was amazed. That was one, especially for the inclusion students. We were like jumping up and down. We were very excited. Grade, I’m really happy with the grade.

Pia’s Views on Barriers to Applying New Learning

Pia felt that “there’s a real frustration with teachers that you’re given so much that they want you to teach and do, and you feel like you can’t do certain things well because you have to do so much.” Frustrations or barriers to applying new learning happen due to add on and spread so thin, students with noncompliant behaviors, rushing and piling it on.

Pia felt that new programs were added on to already busy days, making it difficult to give every aspect of the day when she was already spread so thin. Pia described, “I feel things get spread so thin that I don’t do as good a job. I’m a little bit on everything, but sometimes that is not as good as I could do on all of them.” Teaching core curriculum that has many components took a large amount of class time each day. Pia was concerned
that adding to this busy day made her question the purpose. She explained, “I have no idea. Again, that’s why I feel that they just put out to add on, add on, and add on.”

Pia noted, “Because your plate is so full, they want you to do some extra, but children are coming with so many issues.” One of Pia’s biggest barriers when applying new learning was students with noncompliant behaviors. Pia explained that she needed to work through social and emotional issues before she could teach some students. She stated, “Dealing with the behaviors and getting through your day and modifying and negotiating. I don’t negotiate. They know I don’t negotiate, but working out the problems and it’s very exhausting.” She continued regarding difficulty with noncompliant behavior,

> We talk about accountability, so they’re not willing to learn and you’re dealing with these issues. [For example,] you go to assess them and this one little student; we really couldn’t assess this child this year. The child is an inclusion student. Because this student says, “I don’t want to. You can’t make me. I’m not doing it.” And then how much can you deal with this child because you’ve got to go to the next one.

Equally as frustrating as noncompliant behaviors, Pia felt that another one of the biggest barriers was rushing and piling it on. She created lessons so students would be busy every minute. She explained,

> This year we especially all felt that frustration of having to rush, get this done. All right. Get this done. No time to breathe. There’s no fun. I’m not saying they don’t have a good time, and I’m not saying that, but you do need to keep them busy every minute because [if] you don’t keep them busy every minute then you have issues.

As a result of all this rushing to keep students busy, Pia felt that students did not have time to completely finish work. Pia felt that she was piling it (class work) on. She described a typical event that led to piling it on.
“All right, boys and girls if you’re not done, that’s okay. Just put it to the side and we’ll have a meeting and then you’ll go back to it.” But they just have a very difficult time with the transition. So that’s a very big frustration is trying to rush, rush, rush. You know what I’m saying? Because piling, that’s a result of piling it on.

Summary of Pia’s Beliefs and Values

Pia defined professional development as “the district offering me things that will improve my repertoire, my teaching.” Pia attended professional development experiences as part of the job of being a teacher. Though Pia does not have any preference for certain types of professional development experiences, she indicated those experiences that she valued and did not value.

She valued professional development experiences that opened a new door for teaching mathematics, reading, and writing, trained her to apply a new program that she used on a daily basis, and training we need like computers. She devalued experiences that did not represent ideal conditions, as it’s not reality and involving training that did not match exactly how the district wants us to use it.

Pia appreciated the support from administration, colleagues, and coaches who were colleagues. Pia discussed two types of administrators: principals and central office administrators. Pia valued a principal who was there if you needed her, and receptive, and focused on the successes. She believed that central-office administrators did not seem to really listen to teachers, never come back and ask how the program was working, and did not hold staff accountable for applying a new program. Pia’s colleagues were her greatest support. She felt that they took a lot of stress off her. She recommended regular second grade staff meetings to promote needed opportunities to banter back and forth and ensure that all teachers were on the same page. Working together with colleagues made the
application of new programs less work. Internal coaches were available when she needed them and understood her job, because they were trained staff that could help apply a new program. External coaches did not provide ongoing support.

Pia communicated in different ways to reach more children, adapted to different groups that had different rates of learning, and evaluated students understanding on the basis of their ability to come up with a connection. She measured student outcomes by observing their engagement, by using her own judgment and by noting improvements reflected in the grade on a standardized test.

Pia faced many barriers such as the add on that created more work and being spread so thin that there was no time to go into depth in a lesson. She felt that the biggest barriers were rushing and piling it on through the day and working with social and emotional needs of noncompliant students.

Lillian’s Story: The Artful Practitioner

Lillian had taught at Springdale Elementary for the past 25 years. For the past 15 years, Lillian had taught in a primary multiage classroom composed of first and second grade students. The district offered parents a choice between a traditional classroom and a multiage classroom. A multiage classroom allowed the students to be taught by the same teacher for 2 years and have lessons that match their academic ability level rather than chronological age. Lillian’s classroom integrated students who were the chronological ages of traditional first and second grade students. The nontraditional classroom structure presented challenges for Lillian when applying learning from professional development experiences.
Lillian described herself as a life-long learner who enjoyed learning new skills or knowledge especially when it would improve students' outcomes. Her attitude about learning was, “we need to keep growing, just like the kids keep growing.”

**Lillian's Views on Defining Professional Development Experiences**

Lillian was very clear about her definition of professional development and why she felt it was necessary to participate. She stated,

I think professional development is experience or coursework that I might involve myself in to enrich an understanding or develop a new understanding. ... Professional development should support the individual teacher's meaningful acquisition of skills and understandings vital to developing the unique learning of every child.

According to Lillian, professional development is about “what's going to help this child learn best.” She continued to explain that to directly affect the students’ learning, she needed to continually grow and to reflect upon her practice. At the start of Lillian's career, she relied on teacher manuals and scripted programs as the only choice of guidance at that time. Later, as she became more knowledgeable and stopped relying on manuals for ideas on lessons and building teaching materials, she felt that what she learned from these manuals gave her a strong foundation. She recalled,

When I first started teaching, I read my manuals, and after a couple of years, I sort of knew what the manuals said, and so I was able to say that, and add my own to it. And so, little by little, it became a little bit more artful maybe or a little bit more me, but I had that as my underpinning, so I was able to go on. And I can remember talking to a colleague about it, and who was having a really hard time with how can people think that's the way they used to that they need to teach ... And the reason that we know some of the stuff that we know about how to build a lesson is because we taught out of those manuals that gave us a foundation. They told us what to do first, how to preview vocabulary; they told us what to do next.
Having a strong foundation, Lillian felt confident in her ability to make necessary modifications to programs for the sake of the students.

Lillian believed that professional development experiences “force us to examine what we’re doing. And ‘Yes, I agree with you,’ or ‘No, I really don’t agree with you and here are the reasons why.’” Even if an experience seemed to use the same material from a workshop she had previously attended, she believed the second time would provide a deeper understanding. Repetition enabled her to “own” the learning from professional development experiences,

We need to be able to do this and we need to be able to do that, and so we just keep doing it and doing it and before we know it, we truly have, what’s the word I use all the time on my report cards, we truly have taken it into ourselves and we own it.

Dedication to improving student outcomes, a desire to increase her knowledge in order to make the right choice, and a commitment to building skills needed to make informed decisions motivated Lillian to participate in professional development experiences. She felt that “professional development has made me an artful practitioner.”

Lillian Views on Types of Professional Development Experiences

In the past 5 years, Lillian had participated in 10 workshops and training seminars, although none compared with the learning gained from her master’s program at a local university. Lillian believed that all professional development experiences were valuable. She never attended a professional development experience that did not offer new learning or affirm knowledge she already possessed.
Most Valuable. Lillian reflected on the most valuable professional development experiences:

I can't help but think that it is difficult to determine which type has been the most valuable in terms of classroom application. I think the obvious answer is those experiences which increased my knowledge base on how children learn, as well as those which increased my personal understanding and skill implementing specific strategies, are most valuable. I also think that coursework which helped me gain insights as to developmental appropriateness of materials and/or content were valuable, as well as assessment tools and practices.

Themes that emerged from experiences that Lillian valued are increasing her teaching repertoire, reflecting upon her current teaching practices, affirming her knowledge, feeling energized, being on top of her game, returning to the classroom with something tangible, research-based knowledge, and providing time to make meaning.

Lillian attached importance to the new learning from professional development experiences because they made her a better teacher. She felt that increasing her teaching repertoire was necessary to provide continuous growth to meet the demands of the students. She recalled,

You do build up a repertoire, and it sort of just comes out of you, and even the assessment of what might be the issue with a child, and so, okay, so now you're pulling out that particular little trick.

The new learning made her reflect upon her current teaching practices and how this has added to her repertoire. Lillian processed what she learned to make connections about how this new learning improved her ability to support students.

I think that perhaps my most memorable professional development involved coursework or experiences where I felt that what I was learning or experiencing would cause me to reflect upon my current practice, examine new learning in that light, and cultivate new skills that would have direct bearing on student learning.
Lillian’s school district offered many professional development opportunities each year, however, not every one added to her repertoire of skills. Some served to affirm her current skills and knowledge:

Every time you go to a seminar and there’s a person standing up there and they’re saying maybe everything that you said yesterday in the teacher’s room. But “Gee, somebody else is saying it.” And I feel affirmed. I feel that, “Gee, I must kind of know something, because there’s a speaker up there saying the same thing that I said yesterday to my girlfriend.” So I don’t think I’ve ever, ever come away saying, “That was a total waste of time.”

Feeling energized from a valuable professional development experience added to Lillian’s enthusiasm for applying new learning. Lillian enjoyed reading research and learning about the benefits of different programs with her colleagues. Her experiences energized her to go back to the classroom and try out the new learning. She stated, “We were taking courses and coming back to our classroom to use [these] new strategies. [It was] so energizing.”

Feeling energized created a sense of being on top of her game about her teaching. She stated, “I felt really on top of my game, because I was learning so many new things, or things I hadn’t thought about in that particular way.” Being on top of her game, Lillian felt confident to participate and share her opinions with staff, administration, and parents. For instance, when she participated in school council, she felt that people valued her opinion and listened to what she had to say. She thought it was “a good professional development thing for me to do. Get out of myself a little bit; say what I think.”

Lillian also valued returning from a professional development experience with something tangible to apply to the classroom. She recalled about her master’s program, “It was the weekend program, and there wasn’t a Monday morning that I didn’t come
back with some real, something tangible, some idea that somebody had exchanged that I could try in my classroom.”

Lillian valued research-based knowledge. Although she wanted to “make it her own,” she was careful not to be so creative as to alter the foundations of a program. To ensure that this did not happen, she continuously assessed, evaluated, and monitored her consistency to the program design and the resulting impact on students’ outcomes.

We were able to use a lot of the research time to develop, to develop the underpinnings for our multiage program, to really examine that and that was really very meaningful to me. … I want to read what you say about it, because I value the research that you’ve done in creating that program, and I want to learn all that, and then sort of make it my own.

Lillian also valued school districts that provided teachers with the time to attend conferences and apply new learning. She attended district-sponsored professional development experiences that were well-planned and provided Lillian and her colleagues with the time to make meaning out of new learning. She recalled,

Both these courses provided for multiple discussion with colleagues, ample time to “make meaning” and try/practice strategies, numerous opportunities to reflect upon how the strategies would really work in the classroom, and perhaps most importantly, ongoing support throughout the first year of implementation. And we were given time and we were given money, and I think we were even given credits to do that. So this system traditionally has been very supportive to teachers in that way.

Lillian valued research-based types of professional development that increased her knowledge of how children learn, as well as those that increased her knowledge of and skill in implementing specific strategies and assessment tools and practices.

Least Valuable. Lillian thought carefully about her professional development experiences and could not recall one that was not valuable. She stated, “I honestly can’t
think of anything that I’ve gone away from saying, ‘I really didn’t learn anything’,” They were all “worth the time!”

For Lillian, the only negative professional development experiences related to applying a new program designed for a specific grade level that had to be adapted for multiage classroom. Being in a multiage classroom, Lillian needed a program that did not rely on grade-level objectives. “Any time you give me a graded program to now use in an un-graded structure, you make my job harder.” When faced with new programs that separated first grade and second grade teaching objectives, Lillian had to adapt each grade level’s objectives to form a seamless flow of curriculum with the new program. Once the new program objectives were joined together, she used the strengths of each child to determine the starting objective. For example, if a student was reading at a second grade level, Lillian would start this child with the second grade objectives, regardless of chronological age.

**Lillian’s Views on the Role of Learning Culture and Participation in Planning**

Lillian enjoyed the challenges that came with applying new learning. When applying new learning, Lillian depended greatly on her colleagues for support, felt encouraged by her administrators, and relied on coaches for demonstration and support. She believed it was important to contribute to individual and district-wide professional development plans.

Lillian appreciated her colleagues’ support when applying new learning into her classroom. The multiage classroom teachers at Springdale Elementary dedicated time to meet as a group and discuss concerns and successes unique to this teaching arrangement. Lillian stated, “In order to successfully make classroom application of new skills and
knowledge, it is important to have ongoing support, collegial discussion, and sufficient
and appropriate materials.” Lillian sought advice from her colleagues to verify her
teachings, to share successes and failures, or to seek other perspectives. Lillian explained,

We go in our rooms and we’re so involved with our kids and what we
have to do, that talking to each other is just so invaluable, and getting
someone else’s perspective on whatever—those kinds of experiences, I
think, are really valuable … When I get to talk to the teacher two doors
down that maybe in 3 months we’ve said, “Hi.” But it’s so-and-so’s
experience “I’ve had a little difficulty in this and I’ve tried this, this, this
and this.” And “Well, gee, I know exactly what you mean and this is the
lesson that I did about that.”

It is these conversations that Lillian found so valuable when applying new learning.

Lillian recognized the value of collegial support and willingly offered it to new
teachers, especially when they struggled with the same concerns that Lillian had
successfully resolved. She related,

But for young teachers to engage in that conversation with people that
have been around a while, not in a know-it-all kind of way. Just a kind of,
“Yes, I know exactly what you mean, and this is what has worked for me,”
or, “I had that problem last year and this is what I tried last year and it
seemed to help.” That kind of collegial support …

Throughout the year, Lillian’s school district scheduled meeting times for various
groups to come together and share their experiences when applying new learning, to plan
for the future, and to create needed materials for the classroom. She recalled how she
worked with her colleagues,

We did meet periodically through the year. “How is this going? How does
this mesh?” We planned that. And as I said before, multiage teachers did
work together, because we were all in the same boat of trying to meld
those two resources for a math program, those two different levels of
resources.
Lillian understood that in addition to her professional development needs, there were building and district needs and professional development experiences to be discussed at a community level. Lillian recalled,

As a staff, [we] had to have that conversation about what we believe about learning, or what we believe how to best support that learning, what materials we’ve got, what materials we need to get. ... I think sometimes that the professional development is, I have my own personal stuff, but then in a larger community, there’s that professional development too, where we as a staff need to figure out where we’re going and how we’re getting there based on the best possible research that we have.

Lillian found that “coming together of minds” to discuss “where we’re going to go from here” provided a full scope of professional development experiences for the district. At the building level, Lillian contributed to the school council. The community planning done by the school council provided the opportunity to participate in discussions regarding building goals with colleagues, parents, and administrators. “Planning is important work and a task I took very seriously for the 5 years I served.”

Working in a collegial environment supported Lillian’s openness to applying new learning in her classroom based on recommendations from other teachers. For example,

We’ve all really been allowed to -- however you enrich your curriculum, you enrich your curriculum and we learn from one another. I mean, I went to this seminar on the seven steps to blah blah and you went to Writer’s Workshop. And so the extent that we can talk to each other and share those or say, “This is really the best, the best course on creative writing that I’ve ever been to. I want to recommend it. They’re going to offer this summer. I know you’d love it.” That kind of thing.

Just as colleagues provided support when applying new learning, so did internal and external coaches. Lillian found that internal coaches, members from the staff, were extremely helpful because they were there whenever she needed them. She explained,
“Our reading teachers are wonderful. They’ve come in and shown little strategies, just done the whole lesson with the class. Those kind of professional development opportunities happen all the time.” Internal coaching involved teachers modeling new learning for each other. Lillian said,

I know I’ve had people come in and watch little lessons and things like that. It’s a structural thing. It’s hard sometimes to set it up. But if someone is having difficulty and needs to see what it looks like. ... So it’s always that kind of, “I learned this. If you’d like to see it, just tell me and I’ll show it to you.” So that kind of thing happens here all the time. And I think that is beneficial [because] we are all busy.

External coaches are those coaches who came from outside the district and are knowledgeable about new programs or techniques used in a classroom. Lillian’s district did not use external coaches often, but when the opportunity presented itself, she found them to be helpful. When she worked with an external coach from a local university, the coach led discussions, shared materials with the staff, and visited two or three times throughout the year to work with a group of teachers. Lillian preferred to have a coach demonstrate learning and provide discussion to review key learning. Also, Lillian believed that a coach should understand the skills and knowledge of each teacher to determine the type of needed support.

Supportive administrators are crucial to the successful application of a new program or skill. Lillian was fortunate that she could go to her administrator and say, “This is what I need to know, and can I please do this to help me be the best I can be in the classroom?” The principal was always available to her and asked questions regarding how a particular professional development experience was going to serve student learning. Lillian would have been bothered if the principal said “no” before hearing all
the facts. Instead, she felt supported knowing that the principal would permit her to
choose individual professional development experiences that would meet her needs.
Lillian summarized her feelings regarding the qualities of a supportive administrator:
“When we ascertain a need, administrators must listen – and act - to provide teachers
with quality professional development – in the best interest of children!”

Lillian distinguished individual and district-wide professional development plans.
District-wide professional development plans should take into consideration teachers’
needs. She felt that her input into her individual professional plan should be considered.
She noted, “If I identify something that I need in order to do a better job in my classroom,
I would hope that that would be something that would be taken seriously.” Lillian
reflected on balancing individual and district needs,

I think, though, in all fairness, that when you’re looking at a staff, it can’t
all be about what I need. It has to be about the vision of the district, so
anything new coming down the pike that we all need to know, certainly I
would hope that that would be looked at.

Because it is easy for a district to set goals to apply to a wide range of teaching
abilities, Lillian warned that trying to meet the needs of teachers who range from novice
to veteran does not meet anyone’s professional needs.

You need to make sure that you’re meeting both ends. We have here a lot
of young teachers. Of course, they’re all involved in master’s programs,
and they’re fabulous and then we have a few people that have sort of been
around for a while, and then we have some people that are looking at
retirement in the next 3 to 5 years, and so there’s a range.

Lillian also believed that professional development planning should not subscribe to “one
size fits all.” Teachers should receive differentiated instruction as do the students in the
classroom. She remarked,
I would expect that my district would be able to say that too. They would be able to look at the different people, where they’ve been, what they’ve been exposed to, where they’ve come to, and be able to plan appropriately for all.

Lillian supported the district’s decisions on what professional development experiences were offered. She noted, “We’re always looking at programs. We’re always looking at different ways to make learning efficient and effective for kids.” Many of the professional development plans came from curriculum work designed largely by teachers and she believed that a teacher should be involved “in all aspects of a district’s professional development plan.” The planning process must be a joint effort of the administration and the classroom teacher.

Certainly administration has vision – that’s the expectation! But that vision should go hand-in-hand with the day-to-day knowledge and expertise of the practitioner. It is the practitioner who brings real life experiences, that is reality to the vision. Practitioners supply the “how to” for the ultimate goal we all share – optimal student growth …. My community has traditionally and routinely involved teachers in the planning for professional development through interaction with the various curricula committees, in this way learning from teachers what their perceived need may be.

Lillian’s Views on Student Impacts

Lillian welcomed any opportunity that made her a better teacher and provided skills she could use to help her students improve. Lillian felt that high stakes testing was raising the bar for students’ outcomes. She personally holds herself accountable for her students’ learning and performance. She felt there were times that raising the bar by expecting more skills from some students was unrealistic and that a new program should take into account the different learning rates and progression of all students. Lillian reflected that the way she teaches has a powerful impact on students’ success.
Reflecting over her 30 years of teaching, Lillian’s experience had been that expectations for student outcomes have increased. Lillian noticed this to be especially true since standards for student outcomes were established by AYP and NCLB. She used a newly adopted mathematics program as an illustration:

I like Everyday Math, and I do think that it’s far better, because it’s much more challenging than what we used to do, and that’s, I guess that’s what I can compare it to. What we used to do - used to ask kids to do. Of course we keep raising that bar. We keep raising it and raising it. I mean, as I told you, I started out with third grade, and I know what I used to teach in third grade 30 years ago, and I’m teaching it in first grade now. Hopefully I’m doing it in a developmentally appropriate way, because I still do believe in those words, but yeah, we have raised a bar a lot.

Increasing expectations for students meant that the expectations for teachers also rose. Lillian holds herself accountable without excuses for the success of all students.

Participation in professional development experiences offered the opportunity for Lillian to stay knowledgeable and to meet the different needs of students. She stated,

It doesn’t make one bit of difference, because kids come to us and kids’ backgrounds are different. Kids’ home experiencing may be different. We need to keep learning in order to keep up with their needs, whether they are emotional or social, as well as the academic.

Lillian held herself responsible for each child’s progress. “I mean they all have their needs. Some are going to learn it today and some are going to learn it tomorrow, but bottom line is, I need to see that that child is progressing.” Lillian measured the impact of the program by assessing the students’ progress. Creating “pretty lessons aren’t what it’s all about. It’s all about student outcomes. And if my children don’t know it; it’s my fault.” In order for a new program to work in the classroom, it must take into account the different learning rates of students. Lillian recalled,
I respect that kind of learning, and I also respect any kind of program that says it’s okay if you don’t know it today, because we’re going to do it again tomorrow, and we’re going to do it again the next day. Everybody doesn’t learn the same things in the same way, and this might be easy for you, and that’s hard for you, and that’s okay, because we’re all different. We’re all different learners.

In addition to having a program that is designed to take into account the learning rates of students, Lillian believed it was the way she teaches that had a positive impact on students. She believed that teaching is an art that draws on many years of professional development experiences that have been tested and perfected to meet various learning needs of students.

Even the most seasoned among us may question her resolve to “teach the child, not the program”? Herein lies the art! Feeling empowered to do what that child needs at that moment is the cumulative impact of my professional development, and the art of teaching. I do believe that the decisions we make to appropriately differentiate instruction positively impact student outcomes.

Lillian felt that even a veteran teacher struggles with positively differentiating instruction for improving students’ outcomes. She said she recognized “the differences among my children. I have learned to let assessment guide my instruction, and not the table of contents.” Students’ progress is not determined by whether students complete an assignment or a workbook, but instead by the mastery and application of a skill.

*Raising the bar* for student outcomes, *holding herself accountable* for her students’ learning and performance, *taking into account the different learning rates* and *the way she teaches* has a powerful impact on students were the major themes that Lillian expressed when talking about the impact of professional development experiences on students in the classroom.
Lillian’s Views on Barriers to Applying New Learnings

There are many barriers that impede a teacher’s ability to apply new learning. Lillian found that having a lot of legwork, acquainting teachers, students and parents with a new lingo, students’ eyes glazed over, and programs that are not able to meet the social and emotional needs of students are the barriers she encountered when applying new learning.

Lillian faced a lot of legwork when teaching a new mathematics program and introducing a new phonics program. Although she and her colleagues agreed on the objectives, she was overwhelmed with the amount of materials she needed to organize to teach the mathematics program as it was intended. She reflected,

It was very difficult doing it with the materials. And we’re still on that learning curve with the Foundations program. ... I had wonderful professional development. Then bringing it back into the classroom, there was still a lot of legwork and a lot of stuff that needed to go on individually. ... It’s not fair to a program if I don’t do what I’m supposed to do, because then I can’t say the program works or doesn’t work, if I don’t do it the way they want it done. So that’s a frustration.

With each new program, Lillian found that there was a new lingo to learn. Once she learned the vocabulary and began to apply it, the new terminology could create confusion and misunderstandings with parents. Lillian recalled when the mathematics program was introduced,

Because a lot of times, when we adopt something new, there is a vocabulary. I know parents had a devil of a time with Everyday Math. And they’d get the papers home and they’d say, “I don’t know what you’re supposed to do.”

Another barrier was the need to follow all aspects of a new program and to engage students in learning. For example, Lillian found that students did not participate
as well during a repetitive routine or drill. *Students’ eyes glazed over* and she felt that the routine was “boring.” She explained,

I want kids to have the confidence that they know things automatically, but that drill sometimes, it’s frustrating to me, because I would rather building concepts .... and I know kids need drill. But after a while, I personally find drill boring. And it’s important, and okay, we do it, but then I want to do something else, and if I’m buying into a program that requires this, this, this, and this, and I look at my kids and I see them glazing over, that’s frustrating to me.

New programs that are *not able to meet the needs of all students* were frustrating for Lillian. Lillian’s students had a variety of emotional, social, and academic needs.

Lillian felt that before she could address a child’s academic needs, she had to work to address a child’s emotional or social needs. Lillian explained,

*Kids come to school, as individuals, and they have their needs, and where I might look at a child and see my primary purpose is their academic needs, I need to take care of the social and emotional, because those impact their learning so much, that sometimes, until you get past their emotional and their social needs, to get to the academic is very difficult. Or to allow them to achieve academically while dealing with their emotional and social issues is a barrier.*

Lillian felt that there were barriers that impeded her ability to apply new learning. They are programs that require a *lot of legwork*, the need to acquaint teachers, students and parents with a *new lingo*, *students’ eyes glazed over* and programs that are *not able to meet the social and emotional needs of students*.

**Summary of Lillian’s Beliefs and Values**

Lillian’s beliefs and values regarding her learning from professional development experiences and its impact on students were very clear. She liked to stay on *top of her game* by learning new things. She felt that it was part of her job to constantly evaluate and assess not only the students but also herself as she applied new learning.
Lillian had taught for 30 years, and during that time, she had come to know that individual student’s learning needs are changing and demanding. She felt, “if you really look at the child, what does this particular child need to know today? And let me pour out everything that I know about how to help that or how to support that.” She respected different types of learning and programs that allowed for the learning differences of children. She noted,

And so any time there’s a program or there’s a method or there’s a strategy that respects that difference in children, I think that shows respect for kids. ... What’s appropriate for one child may not be appropriate for another on any particular day, and I need to understand that as your teacher.

What Lillian valued about professional development experiences was increasing teaching repertoire, reflecting upon her current teaching practices, affirming her knowledge, feeling energized, being on top of her game, returning to the classroom with something tangible, research-based knowledge, and time to make meaning. There was no single professional development experience that was worthless, yet she did not value professional development experiences that were designed for a specific grade level.

Lillian enjoyed the challenges that came when applying new learning. She depended on her colleagues for support and advice, felt encouragement from her administrators, relied mostly on internal coaches for modeling and consulting, and believed it was important to contribute to individual and district-wide professional development plans.

Lillian found that raising the bar for student outcomes can be unrealistic for some students, she held herself accountable for her students’ learning and performance, new programs must take into account the different learning rates and progression in order for
all students to succeed, and she believed that that the way she taught had a powerful
impact on students' success.

There are many barriers that impede a teacher's ability to apply new learning. For
Lillian, the barriers were a lot of legwork in preparing lessons and materials, acquainting
all stakeholders with a new lingo, students' eyes glazed over, and programs that are not
able to meet the social and emotional needs of students.

Mandy’s Story: Rich Conversations

Mandy had taught second grade at Fall Brook School for 1 year. Prior to that, she
taught fourth grade for 4 years and sixth grade for 3 years, and had spent 5 years as Title
1 Director/Math Specialist/Curriculum Director. With 8 years of teaching and 15 years in
education, Mandy had participated in many professional-development experiences and
earned a master’s degree at a renowned university. Mandy had completed an internship
with her district’s curriculum coordinator as a requirement for her master’s degree
program. Her responsibilities were to assist the curriculum coordinator implement
training in a new district-wide writing program. This experience provided Mandy with an
opportunity to experience professional-development both as a teacher and as a planner.
She gained insight into how important professional development could be as a catalyst
for change. Mandy felt that professional development was important and questioned why
her fellow teachers would not want to participate in all professional-development
experiences offered. She stated, “If we want our students to learn, why do we as a
profession stop the desire to do the same?”
Mandy’s Views on Defining Professional Development Experiences

Mandy felt that professional-development experiences are necessary to expand knowledge for the teacher, and in turn, the student. She commented,

I have much more respect for people who attend professional-development opportunities or participate in those opportunities that really stimulate actual growth, not just on the student’s part, but really on the teacher’s part, because the student part’s not going to go anywhere unless the teacher has grown in their thinking, how they approach a problem.

Mandy’s philosophy of professional development centered on students. She chose to participate in professional-development experiences that strengthened and expanded her teaching abilities. As a result, Mandy felt that,

Professional development is the constant pursuit to become better than one was yesterday. It is consistent learning, communicating, exploring, revising, challenging, and failing many teaching strategies/methods/thinking to best serve all students, everyday. It is college courses, team-teaching, peer-coaching, study groups, mentoring, creating/implementing/revising grants, and professional dialogue about teaching and learning for both students and teachers.

Mandy’s Views on Types of Professional Development Experiences

Mandy understood the importance of participating in professional-development experiences to improve student outcomes. She reflected about successful and unsuccessful teaching experiences to improve her teaching strategies. Mandy relied on the knowledge she gained from college courses, classroom experiences, and professional development to improve her lessons and improve student outcomes.

Most Valuable. Mandy valued professional-development experiences that were research-based college courses. In addition, there were elements to professional-development experiences that Mandy valued, such as affirming current teaching practice
or *toot my own horn*, *go back into the classroom* to apply new learning, and *follow up* sessions.

*Research-based college courses* were the most valuable type of professional-development experiences. Mandy stated,

The most effective ones have been probably research-based college courses that I took. Doing a lot of research is what studies out there are worth implementing in class, who do they benefit, who sponsors the studies, those are the ones I found most effective.

She further explained that the advantage of a research-based course is that new knowledge has been studied, discussed, and presented to work effectively. These studies “are out there” and have proven to be successful. Mandy valued “those courses that really challenged how I presented the material and that allowed the students to be their own captains of their ships to guide them.”

Some research-based courses provided Mandy with a *toot my own horn* feeling. Being a teacher before starting a master’s degree program, Mandy based teaching skills on her instincts. When she started taking courses, she found these courses affirmed her skills.

The other courses that I took that are research-based ones, a number of the things that I did, not to *toot my own horn*, but a number of the things that were presented in those classes I did do. I just didn’t know the terms.

Mandy found courses that provided that *toot my own horn* feeling also clarified her understanding by “shedding light on something that you knew was there, but just getting the fine tuning that you needed to hear from someone else.”

Mandy valued professional-development experiences that she could *go back into the classroom* and start applying new “pieces.” She was excited about new “pieces” that
she wanted to apply. She explained, “There were other pieces that I never thought of, and when it was presented and you actually get to participate, and that was the other piece in those particular classes, you actually implemented what you were presented.”

Mandy valued professional-development experiences that provided a follow-up session to discuss new learning. Having the opportunity to discuss with colleagues, classmates, or instructors was valuable for Mandy to completely understand or solve problems. Mandy recalled her district offering workshops on in-service days when teachers had to select a content area and then a workshop that interested them. Following the morning workshops, Mandy and her colleagues had an opportunity to break into groups and discuss what they had learned and how they were going to apply it to the classroom. Mandy felt that the follow-up discussion after participating in these workshops was the most valuable part of the experience. She explained,

You had a follow-up session, which, though I'm not a huge fan of doing half-day or small-hour presentations, what I found was most effective with that, during the initial workshop, they threw out the information, we discussed it, figured out what we wanted to implement in our classrooms.

Least valuable. Mandy devalued “workshops or courses that don’t directly improve teaching style, how you teach, and ultimately improve student learning.” Specifically, Mandy did not value one-day-drive-through-drive-out-one-shot deals, another newfangled thing, questions are not answered at workshops, one-size-fits-all professional-development experiences, and no money left.

Mandy enjoyed new learning that would make her a better teacher. Professional-development experiences, particularly workshops or presentations meant to promote teaching materials or that had no connection to learning, were the least valuable. Mandy
referred to these experiences as the one-day-drive-through-drive-out-one-shot deal. She felt that workshops offered little real dialogue and no follow-up. She recounted,

The ones I found the least effective were the one-day-drive-through-drive-out-one-shot-deals, basically presented by publishing companies. You go in, hear a speaker who’s just there to collect their money. And they give you a couple of cute little ideas. But there’s very little engaging between presenter and the participants; very little dialogue between the participants themselves to share ideas; no follow-through for those. You come back and you get the day off, you go get your materials, you wear your jeans, you get a cup of coffee, you come back and nobody bothers to ask anything.

Mandy found that new programs were being adopted and being dropped almost as soon as they were started. Mandy knew that another newfangled thing would be here for a short time and did not want to waste time and energy by applying it to the classroom. She recalled,

Just another newfangled thing coming down the pike and how is that really going to help me. … It’s whatever new thing coming down the pike. It’s only going to be a year, so don’t worry about it.

Mandy felt that she learned by asking questions and developing a dialogue with a presenter or participants. Professional-development experiences that do not promote open dialogue were not valuable. Mandy devalued professional-development experiences where questions are not answered. Mandy stated, “[I] was extremely hesitant to get involved in it, because my own questions aren’t being answered by the people who present.” Mandy felt that the presenters stuck to the script in their presentation and would not accept questions that related to a less-than-ideal classroom.

Along with workshops that do not promote asking questions, Mandy did not value professional-development experiences that promoted new one-size-fits-all programs.
Mandy recalled about a professional-development experience that involved a new program and did not accommodate the learning styles of all of the students. She questioned the presenter and did not receive an answer that would enable her to apply the new learning.

“Well, that’s nice, but I have a student who I know that’s not going to work with.” “Well, it should work.” Not everything is going to be a one-size-fits-all. I’ve experienced that and have not been invested enough to my comfort level to implement that on a consistent basis.

Over the years, Mandy found that money in the budget for professional development was not always available when she wanted to attend a conference. She was told that there was no money left to pay for substitute teachers or conference fees. Mandy believed that less meaningful conferences were approved without consideration for future planning. She explained,

I have a beef with less-than-constructive professional-development opportunities that are out there that are paid for, simply because someone knows what’s coming down the pike, puts the papers in before someone who has a really fabulous, well-worth-it professional-development opportunity. But just because they didn’t get the paperwork done on time, there was no money left for them to attach [to the registration form].

Mandy felt that teachers “might not be able to afford that on their own.” This was discouraging when a meaningful conference became available and she could not attend.

Mandy’s Views on the Role of Learning Culture and Participation in Planning

Mandy prided herself on being able to reflect on her actions to improve her teaching, especially when applying new learning. Application of new learning from a professional-development experience required a reflective approach and ongoing professional conversations with colleagues and administrators. She explained,
I have become more reflective about how and what I do within my classroom to better educate my students as a result of valuable professional-development opportunities. I often ask myself, “Why?” in terms of the strategies, methods, and techniques I currently use to teach my students or as I look at new ones. This question is a direct result of sound, realistic, and researched professional development opportunities. I have discovered the more I reflect upon how and what I teach, the more I need to discuss these reflections with other educators and administrators to further this thought process and journey. Thus the opportunities to conduct consistent professional conversations are needed.

Mandy believed that the greatest assistance to applying new learning came from working with colleagues. She stated, “Working with colleagues collaboratively I think is just an unbelievably rich and underutilized opportunity.” Mandy felt that mutual respect and being “on the same wave length” was needed to work as a team. She believed that everyone benefited from rich dialogue.

The team-teaching opportunities and vertical and horizontal discussions proved to be the most effective in terms of classroom application. These opportunities provided real, reflective conversation between educators, thus allowing rich dialogue to improve the educational process for both teachers and students.

Mandy thought that early on in a their careers, teachers should understand the value of team effort because “working with your peers who, for the most part, have the same philosophy that you have is an extremely freeing opportunity. The minds, you feed off of each other.”

Mandy felt that administrators support teachers and set a collegial atmosphere for discussion among staff. She believed,

If you have an administrator that sets a very cooperative, collegial atmosphere, nurturing it along, sometimes pushing people along, that whatever method is possible was a very necessary piece and actually does help the whole process. If you have an administrator who’s not like that, it

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would be tough. Not insurmountable, but it would be very tough to get those rich conversations with your colleagues.

She appreciated her principal for promoting *opportunities to talk* among staff by arranging weekly grade-level meetings. Mandy explained that though the teachers set the agendas, the principal chose “hot-topic questions.” She felt these meetings were important to learn from each other.

We do have those opportunities in the building to talk. I don’t think we always use them to the best of our abilities to have really rich conversations. However, our principal does choose important hot-topic questions on the agenda or has suggestions and wants you to look into that. It may seem like a small thing, but it opens up some really rich dialogue. We have them. I think they’re good at utilizing the time.

Mandy stated that administration “needs to take a very careful, honest, respectful approach in how you’re going to present this professional development.” Mandy valued an administrator who promoted *agents of change* within the building staff. This process involved teachers developing ideas for new programs and discussing these new programs with the principal. Mandy felt that the principal would ask very probing questions that were not meant to be discouraging, but thought provoking. After the discussion, if the idea was sound, the principal would support the professional-development experience needed.

Mandy felt that the principal *listened* when she wanted to attend a course that she thought was worthwhile. She and the principal would discuss the course and as a follow-up, the principal would inquire if the experience was worthwhile. She noted,

The present administration is phenomenal. If there was a course offered that I thought was worthwhile that I was very excited about, not only would she sit down and listen to me, she would really make sure I was very passionate about attending this. She would sign off, but I know this is
the type of person. She would come back and say, “Okay, you were all hyped out about it. Was it worth it? Is it something that you think we could be using?”

Mandy felt that there was a wall between administrators and teachers that could only be bridged by honest conversations.

You need to have very honest conversations between administrators. Again, I use that term between. You need to have communication, honest communication with administrators, with alongside of teachers. It’s not between. Because automatically you get that, there’s that wall. You got administrators, you got administration over here, you got the teachers over here. So you have communication with them, ongoing, honest.

External and internal coaches provided Mandy with support as she applied new learning. She expressed, “I’m a big proponent of internal coaching, team teaching, peer coaching, whatever you’d like to call it—huge proponent of that.” Mandy expressed that not everyone was ready to have a coach. Some of her colleagues would close the door, and she felt that it was ironic that these same people were the ones who needed a coach the most to improve their teaching skills and knowledge. Mandy believed that opening doors and allowing others to come into the classroom to improve her teaching was important. She explained, “It’s an issue of opening doors and realizing that as professionals we don’t have all the answers. We need to have people come in and help us. … We don’t have the answers. It’s a practice.”

Mandy felt that teachers need to be able to be open with coaches. She felt that many different types of professionals can be helpful in the classroom. She explained,

We are fine-tuning our skills. And we need to be able to be open and say, “I don’t have all the answers. Come in and let me know.” Whether it’s your administrator, whether it’s a peer down the road, or whether it’s a person halfway across the country.
An external coach can be beneficial, but Mandy warned that these coaches do not always have classroom experience and can lack validity in their presentations. She noted,

I think the external coach has benefits. But making sure that you select that external coach very carefully, because some of them have been out of the classroom or have never been in the classroom, so implementing that coaching, that particular topic, if you’ve never been the shoes of that teacher, or any shoes of a teacher, I think there’s no validity in what you’re presenting. You won’t gain the respect of the people who you’re trying to coach.

Relying on the external coach that trained Mandy was not always a good solution. She felt that having that support would not happen if it was just for her benefit.

The biggest piece is implementing and then turning around and asking, “Okay, I did that lesson.” Where are you Joe Shmoe that flew in for the day who did that one-shot deal for me? Where are you for me to ask further questions? You’re sitting there thinking, as they’re presenting them, you’re trying to play it in your mind.

If Mandy could reconstruct the information from the coach, she would rely on her intuition. She noted, “There’s always that small chance that there’s a curve ball and you’re stuck there when you’re in the middle of it going, ‘All right, sure that’s not it, but I’m going to go with it as my gut.’”

Mandy stated that internal coaches had the most to offer. Mandy explained that the district hired two teachers who were responsible for coaching kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers in all core content areas. She found the opportunity to be rewarding, yet not all her colleagues saw these coaches as a rewarding opportunity. Mandy found these coaches to be great resources. She noted,

We would have two women who shared a position. It’s job sharing, and they would go in and would actually model lessons on that particular program, all the different units that you would call. That was successful for those who participated willingly, who wanted those people to come in.
Those two women did a phenomenal job. They did a great prep. They tried to teach, tried to get as much information out. They acted as resources. But I also know from the other end, the other end from being the central office, it was extremely frustrating for them to try and get into the classroom and allowing, I don’t think teachers truly understood what the whole purpose was. Like, “they want to come in and coach me.” That means “I’m going to help you.” Not “I’m going to come in and do your lesson for you. And you sit back and take notes. No, we’re working on this together.”

Mandy believed that teachers need to have honesty and a willingness to take risks.

She felt that teachers need to be more honest about what they do not know; the admission would be used to create the professional-development plan.

The ideal role of teachers’ contributions to a district professional-development plan is honesty and a willingness to take risks. Teachers do not know everything and in true educational philosophy, need to continue their own learning everyday. Teachers need to be honest about what they are comfortable in knowing and teaching as well as what they are not comfortable in knowing or teaching. In an ideal setting, this admission will help the profession become stronger as collectively we do know a lot, but have more to learn, together. The willingness to take a risk will only improve the individual teacher, in turn the profession, and ultimately, the education of our students.

Mandy felt that consistency was missing in preparing a professional-development planning. There was no consistent follow-up or conversation about what was working. By going into something new each year, the necessary conversations among staff and administration may not happen. She explained,

There’s not consistency. The administration chooses a new thing each year, so it might be, as I said, we did John Collins for a year. Put a lot of money into that, bought a lot of the supplies, tried to offer many different things, but if there’s not consistent follow through, you don’t go back and revisit that topic you presented 2 years ago and find out. What’s really working? What’s not working? Was it worth doing? We don’t have those conversations.
With a changing professional-development focus every year, Mandy noted, “It’s ‘whatever new thing is coming down the pike. It’s only going to be a year, so don’t worry about it.’ Those are things you hear. … This attitude was to be expected with so much change.” Mandy’s suggestion was to develop a 3-year plan that followed up on what was working.

Professional development on a particular topic should not be a one-shot deal, 1-year deal thing. It should be 3-year plan. Discuss it, really start to implement it. Second year you are implementing it. Third year, you go back and look at it and say what was working, what didn’t, because now we’ve spent 2 years with it in development. What are we going to change to make it work?

*Mandy’s Views on Student Impacts*

Mandy recognized the need to accommodate students’ different learning styles when applying new learning. She knew if she based the success of a lesson or the program on students’ positive reactions, she would be “waiting a long time.” Mandy felt that students were benefiting from the learning when they were truly understanding and able to work through the entire process and articulate their thinking. The most effective teaching method was open-ended questions according to Mandy. She believed that teachers have grown in their thinking to improve students’ outcomes, responsibility for student learning really does all come back to the teacher, and if the lesson was not successful, then she would always look at herself.

Mandy felt that in applying new learning she and the students were a team. She warned, “If you’re not set up properly, that’s going to be one part of a downfall.”
She found evidence that students were truly understanding it by working through the whole lesson. She explained, “Evidence of their truly understanding it, working through the entire process.”

In addition to working through the whole lesson, Mandy judged students’ success by whether they were able to articulate their thinking; then they were successful learners. Mandy felt that if students could explain what they were doing and why, then they had a true understanding of the material.

How well a student can articulate their thinking from getting A to B, posing the question, how did I get there, and here’s my answer. And being able to say to a student, “I still don’t get it. Give me another way to explain that.” And if they can give me another way, then I know they got it. If they only give me back the same things, they’ve only scratched the surface. So I’m looking for really well-articulated thought-out answers to the question, being able to demonstrate on a number of different levels.

Mandy found that asking open-ended questions was the best way for students to learn.

There is not one neat answer to many of the questions we ask our students. The value of asking an open-ended question, with providing little guidance, not in all, but in some cases, is much more effective than you walking them step by step by step. You’re walking them through that experience. It becomes true learning when they do that.

She was concerned about meeting the needs of all students and found that open-ended questions could be adjusted for students’ different abilities. She expressed, “Having a very open-ended question, giving them different parameters to experience answering that question, making sure you’re attending to all the different learning styles, that was very successful.”
Mandy believed that teachers have a direct and immediate impact on students and professional-development is necessary to stimulate a teacher’s growth. Teachers must have grown in their thinking before they can stimulate student growth. She explained,

I have much more respect for people who attend professional-development opportunities or participate in those opportunities that really stimulate actual growth, not just on the students’ part, but really on the teachers’ part, because the student part’s not going to go anywhere unless the teacher has grown in their thinking, how they approach a problem.

Mandy felt that the success or lack of success of a lesson really does all come back to the teacher. She stated,

Sometimes when it doesn’t always work it really does all come back to the teacher and how long, did they prep enough or put enough thought into it. That’s when I found it didn’t work the way I wanted it to work.

In addition to preparation of a lesson, Mandy felt that if a lesson did not go well she always looked at herself. She noted, “The kid doesn’t do something, you don’t necessarily look at the kids. I always look at myself and say, ‘What did I not do to make this successful? Why isn’t this kid engaged?’”

Mandy’s Views on Barriers to Applying New Learning

The barriers Mandy experienced when applying new learning or when planning for a professional-development experience were harsh realities, finite amount of money, not being properly coached, and not being allowed to have conversations with peers.

There were harsh realities for Mandy when she applied new learning. She explained,

It is difficult to implement new things if you’re unsure of it, if you think it’s going to be too time consuming. Those are the harsh realities. Or if you think it’s going to cost you too much money, time, or emotion.
Having a finite amount of money in the budget created certain limitations on the number of professional-development experiences in which Mandy could participate. She found that the money budgeted for professional-development experience was used quickly by teachers, and that money for professional development is “one of the first things cut from any budget.” Mandy felt that “the biggest piece that really limits successful and effective—one of the biggest pieces that hinders or limits successful implementation of professional development is money.” If Mandy wanted to attend a workshop or conference after the allotted money was spent, she would be expected to pay for it herself. She felt that not everyone was in a position to pay for conferences or workshops out of their own pockets.

Mandy found that not being properly coached before applying new learning was another barrier. Feeling comfortable and prepared were important traits for Mandy to be successful. She explained,

[You] really need to be comfortable in what you’re presenting. You as a teacher need to understand the whole concept of math and mathematical thinking that goes behind it. If you’re not properly coached, you just scratch the surface and you’re not really getting what needs to be done.

Another barrier was not being allowed to have conversations with peers as part of the professional-development experience. She believed that conversations with peers were one way she learned how to properly apply new learning. She explained, “With professional opportunity, we’re not allowed to have conversations with your peers? [Then] they’re not going anywhere. It’s like planting a seed and not watering it. You need to have it.”
In summary, Mandy tried to work around barriers, but not without difficulty. The *harsh realities* of applying learning from professional-development experiences were that they cost too much in terms of money, time, and emotion. School budgets had a *finite amount of money* for professional-development experiences, and in times when schools were faced with cutting the budget, professional development was the first thing that was cut. Mandy found that when applying complicated new programs she was *not properly coached*. Mandy relied on her colleagues to help her understand how to properly apply a new program, and professional-development experiences that did *not allow her to have conversations with peers* hindered her ability to successfully apply her learning.

*Summary of Mandy's Beliefs and Values*

Mandy felt that the professional-development experiences

Have improved my teaching style, challenged my educational thought processes, and restructured some aspects of the teaching methods I use within my classroom. Combined, the above have improved overall student outcomes and have developed a richer, safer, and encouraging learning environment for my students.

Mandy valued *research-based college courses*. Other professional-development experiences affirmed her current teaching practice or *toot my own horn*, be able to *go back into the classroom* directly after taking a course and apply what had been learned, and participating in *follow-up sessions*.

Mandy devalued experiences that were the *one-day-drive-through-drive-out-one-shot deals, another newfangled thing, questions are not answered at workshops, one-size-fits-all* professional-development experiences, and felt discouraged when there was *no money* left for conferences.
Mandy relied on her colleagues for support. Respect, rich dialogues, and having a team effort were ways that Mandy’s colleagues supported her. Administrators were responsible for setting the culture. Mandy felt that the administrator set a collegial atmosphere, promoted opportunities to talk, cultivated agents of change among teachers, listen[ed], and prevented honest conversations from forming between teachers and administration.

Mandy felt there was a need for internal coaches when applying new learning. She found an internal coach was most helpful, because coaches can help with the need to be able to be open and be a good resource. External coaches were good unless they lacked validity by not having classroom experience. Mandy believed that a professional-development plan was important to make changes in the curriculum. She felt that teachers needed honesty and a willingness to take risks and, with administration, build a 3-year plan. The plan must have consistency with follow-up conversations to determine if it is working or not.

Mandy felt that students benefited from the learning if they were truly understanding it, and could work through the entire process and articulate their thinking. Mandy felt that open-ended questions were the most effective teaching method. She believed that teachers had to have grown in their thinking to improve student outcomes, and that teachers’ responsibility for student learning really does all come back to the teacher. If the lesson was not successful, then she always looked at herself.

Mandy tried to work around barriers, but not without difficulty. The harsh realities of applying learning from professional-development experiences were that they cost too much in terms of money, time, and emotion. School budgets had a finite amount
of money for professional-development experiences, and in times when schools were faced with cutting the budget, professional development was the first thing that was cut. Mandy found that when applying complicated new programs, she was not properly coached. Mandy relied on her colleagues to help her understand how to properly apply a new program, and professional-development experiences that did not allow her to have conversations with peers hindered her ability to successfully apply her learning.

Lobster’s Story: Inner Peace about My Teaching Skills

For 33 years, Lobster had taught first grade at Autumn Primary School. She enjoyed being a teacher, yet was looking forward to retirement the next year. Lobster felt fortunate to have a close-knit first-grade team composed of people she thought of as her friends. She was a dedicated teacher with a great sense of humor. For example, when she selected her pseudonym for this study, she just blurted out the first word that came to mind. Instead of requesting a name change, she enjoyed the usualness of it and it quickly became her nickname among her friends.

Lobster had participated in 20 professional development experiences over the previous 5 years. In those 20 courses, she was trained in a new math and reading program for her students. The next year, Lobster planned introduce yet another new reading program. Lobster felt that she and her colleagues were subjected to much change in administration, curriculum, and professional development. In general, Lobster appreciated her professional development experiences because these experiences provided her knowledge and skills that her college preparation did not. She stated, “I think a lot of the things you learn in college you can’t necessarily apply when you get into the classroom, and some of these professional development days have given me
some things that we’re lacking.” Lobster explained that these necessary courses were classroom management and ways to motivate students.

*Lobster’s Views on Defining Professional Development Experiences*

Lobster defined professional development as “ideas that can make the kids feel better in your classroom, or you can be a more effective teacher by implementing those ideas.” Lobster realized that her definition of professional development was not just about the 4 in-service days offered by her school, but about any time she participated in an activity that improved her teaching knowledge. She noted,

> I came specifically to talk about my professional development days that have been assigned to me by the school. But now that we’re talking about it, I have done a lot more professional development days than I perceive. I think maybe those, to me, are the school’s professional development days. And they will tell me what I have to do then.

Lobster changed her view about professional development as any opportunity to increase her knowledge or skill for the betterment of her students regardless of whether it is a result of in-service days or experiences she chooses.

*Lobster’s Views on Types of Professional Development Experiences*

Looking back over her 33 years of teaching, Lobster found inner peace about her teaching skills. She noted,

> It’s just an inner peace I have now. I guess it’s from all the professional development and all the people I’ve worked with over the years, and all the different programs I’ve been exposed to. I just feel I’m in a place now where I know what I’m doing, I feel comfortable with what I’m doing, and I have love the last 4 years [because] I had some of the best classes ever.

Lobster did not prefer any particular type of professional development experience.

Over the previous 5 years, she had participated in professional development experiences that focused on curriculum, classroom management, assessments, and enrichment.
activities. Professional development was important to Lobster to keep her teaching certification current and to stay current with the best teaching practices. Her school district had a tight budget, and programs, such as professional development, could be the first to get cut. Lobster felt that even when the school budget was minimal, it was important to maintain these opportunities because she believed, “the kids are really first, and you’ll do that extra if you really think it’s going to help the kids.”

*Most valuable.* There were many aspects of professional development that Lobster found most valuable. She felt that she learned better in a *small group setting*, and the content pertained to *what I need at that time*. Having a program *that you could take and plop* into the classroom was important. Lobster valued professional development experience that had *practical knowledge* and skills, that is ready to go and aimed at the betterment of all students. She felt she must have a *vested interest* in what professional development experience she would like to attend, and *make sense* of her new learning. Lobster valued *presenters* who have certain qualities along with workshops or seminars that take a short *time*.

*A small group setting* provided an opportunity for everyone to share or participate. Lobster felt to match her learning style of asking a lot of questions that a small-group setting was the answer. She explained,

The smaller group professional development is much more effective or more meaningful to me. I think when you’re in the large group, well, I personally am intimidated, sometimes, to ask a question, thinking what a silly question this will be. But when it’s a more comfortable small-group setting, you tend to maybe get more information out of it.
Every year, Lobster had a new group of students with a different set of academic and emotional needs. She appreciated professional development experiences that provided her with the knowledge or skill _I need at that time_. She stated,

> It seems sometimes the professional development is almost what I need at that time, or what I’ve been looking for or a different way to do something. Then you get it, you’re very happy to hear it, and you can go right back and put it into place.

In addition to meeting her immediate needs, Lobster desired each professional development experience to be one that she could _take and plop_ into the classroom.

There were things that I could take and plop into any situation in my room. I think the most valuable ones are things that I can take right back to the classroom, not materials I have to go and make or buy, or any further training.

Professional development experiences that provided _practical knowledge_ were a necessity for Lobster. The most valuable ones were when her new learning could be applied to all students and could be used throughout the day. Lobster recalled a workshop in which the district’s occupational therapist presented ideas on how to improve teaching with “simple strategies.” She remembered,

> We’ve gone to some workshops on, well we had one from a former OT person who was excellent in her job to begin with, so when she presented to us, she just gave practical things that you could use in your classroom, just some very simple strategies for children with OT issues. But I find a lot of times, if it’s someone who’s really good in their field, they’re giving you ideas that you can apply to all the children, not just necessarily the children who need the extra help.

The learning from these experiences stayed in Lobster’s memory for many years because these pieces of knowledge and skill _made sense_ to her. An example of a
professional development experience that made sense to Lobster was an anti-bullying program, called Peace Builders.

But the Peace Builders was another I thought, a professional development day that was very, very worthwhile. That we were introduced to that, and that’s something that has been adopted, I think it’s been a very positive thing, and I think people could understand it and it made sense, and we really went into that and adopted it.

Lobster invested her time and energy in programs in which she had a vested interest. She believed that if she requested a new program that did not go as planned, she would be committed to going back and trying to make it work.

I think if you have a say in it, then you certainly are going to feel better about it, and you’re going to make an effort to carry it through or make it work. I think if they pick professional development that we have initiated or we have asked, then we would have more of a vested interest in it, and I think even though it might not seem to work, you might be more apt to go back and give it a try.

Dynamic presenters who have experience teaching were very valuable to Lobster when attending workshops or lectures. She appreciated presenters who had experiences teaching, especially in first grade. Lobster respected the practical suggestions from an enthusiastic presenter who has shared a similar experience. She stated,

I think sometimes if they can give personal stories, if they’ve taught first grade and they can tell you, this can fit in here or this can go right here, then you might value what they’re saying better. ... I think it really makes a difference to me if it’s someone in the field doing what they’re talking about ... [and it is] a person who I would tremendously admire. ... They have to get my interest, or they have to get me on board right away. We need to get going, and then that gets your attention, and then you’re more willing to listen and take it back.

Though Lobster had no preference for a particular type of professional development experience, she certainly had a preference for the amount of time a
workshop or seminar should last. She felt that to meet her learning style and attention, workshops should be no longer than half of a day. She contributed this need to the fact that she can maintain her attention for only that length of time. She explained, “I guess maybe half-day sessions are my thing. In my opinion, half-day sessions are more worthwhile, because like the kids, we can only sit so long and then you pretty much have zoned out.”

*Losest valuable.* “As soon as you hear the term professional development, I guess, to me, it does have a negative [connotation], ‘What will they have us do this time,’ or ‘Oh, I’m going to have to sit for all those hours,’” explained Lobster. Though she admits to having many wonderful professional development experiences, there are times when the planning, the content, or applying the new learning is not valued. Lobster described her least-valued experiences such as projects that don’t get back, having difficulties applying new learning due to jump on every new thing that comes along, been there done that programs, content that is too cutting edge, the workshop has too large of a group, and a defined attitude.

Lobster’s professional development plan required the staff to review curriculum on a regular bases. Lobster found participating in reviewing and aligning curriculum to be meaningless, because she and her colleagues would start the work and don’t get back to finishing. She explained,

Another thing we started but we didn’t finish was our social-studies curriculum. It seems a lot of times we start something, but then it kind of gets put aside and then something else comes along and we don’t get back to it. I am not a curriculum writer. We can put some lessons together that look good, but I don’t know if that’s really a curriculum. And again, we have been writing curriculum since I started: writing and rewriting and revising, and I understand you have to do that all along the way, but at
some point we should be able to have some kind of finished product that we could work with for 3 or 4 or 5 years, with minor revisions.

Experiencing difficulties applying new learning due to *jump on every new thing that comes along* was least valuable in professional development experiences. For example, Lobster explained how at the end of a school year the administration made a decision to introduce a new math series at the beginning of the next school year. She and her colleagues had just a few days to become acquainted with the materials before using them with students. She recalled,

I think sometimes a professional development comes after the fact too, and that’s a real drawback. I’m sure we’re going to have professional development in the fall for the reading series, but I’m wondering should we have it a little bit sooner or some time before we even jump into it. And I think that was with the math also. We were in the math and then we had the big dose of professional development. … We’re just changing it because something new is out there or a new book is out there, but we don’t necessarily have to jump on every new thing that comes along.

The content of professional development experiences is a concern for Lobster. She finds that over her 33 years of teaching, programs are recycled. She explained, “So a lot of things are hard to understand, I think, especially when you get older and you’ve seen the same program but with a different name now.” She felt that these *been there, done that* programs did not work the first time.

I didn’t think it was valuable the first two times I saw it. I hope I will go and at least be polite enough to listen and be open minded, but I’m sure I’m thinking, “Been there, done that didn’t work. So why are we doing it again.” … So a lot of things are hard to understand, I think, especially when you get older and you’ve seen the same program but with a different name now.

Lobster felt that the district goes through extremes when making changes. If the district was not recycling an old program with a new name, then it was introducing a new
program that was too cutting edge. She recalled when the superintendent encouraged teachers to experience as many new programs as possible. There was no plan as to what professional development experience teachers were attending. Many teachers came back with many good ideas, but some of these ideas were not appropriate at that time. She explained,

She sent through a lot of things that were cutting edge or something brand new. Very often, we had it here first. A lot of the things were good, but a lot of the things were just almost too cutting edge and it wasn’t our time to adopt that yet.

Over the years, Lobster found that professional development experiences that were too highly attended or too large of a group were intimidating and ineffective. Lobster believed that a wide range of teaching levels, such as kindergarten through 12th grade limited the discussion to a broader topic rather than looking at reading for young readers. She explained,

I think when you’re in the large group, well, I personally am intimidated, sometimes, to ask a question, thinking what a silly question this will be. I think when it’s also maybe limited to a specific area, not K through 12. I really don’t find those very effective. I think it’s too large of a group and I don’t see how you can meet the needs of the K teacher and the 12th-grade teacher. I know when we did share our ideas just recently from what happened in reading from K to 12, I was interested in maybe K and 2, what comes before me, what comes after me, but personally, I didn’t need to sit through what happened in 12th grade, and I get the feeling that the 12th-grade teachers really didn’t need to or want to hear the first grade version of it.

Until recently, Lobster took advantage of selecting her professional development experiences. Although she would participate in any district-required professional development experiences, Lobster sensed a defined attitude. She explained, “There is a
real attitude. There is a definite attitude then that the school is making me do that, whether I want to do it, find value in it or not, I have to do it.”

Lobster’s Views on the Role of Learning Culture and Participation in Planning

Lobster understood the importance of professional development as it relates to improving student outcomes. Applying new learning, she found that her colleagues, administrators, and coaches were helpful. She had mixed feelings about the effectiveness of the district’s professional development plan, yet saw the potential in what an effective professional development plan could offer.

The first grade teachers at Autumn Primary School were a very close-knit team. They enjoyed each other’s company in and out of school. Lobster felt her colleagues were the most important influence when applying new learning. She identified her relationship with her colleagues as them being her support group. She found their weekly meetings, though they are held on their own time, to be important. During these meetings, the team discussed concerns, questions, and problems when applying a new program and regularly shared materials. Lobster explained,

I think just sitting afterwards and talking about what your perception of it was, as opposed to mine or somebody else’s or what someone else found was important. That helps you. I really value the opinion of the people on my team to begin with, and we are a close-knit group. ... It’s a team in school and it’s also a support group outside, and I just think we are very, very close.

For the most part, Lobster’s support system had been together for almost 10 years. Her team experienced many changes and Lobster relied on them because it clarifies some ideas and gets another point of view. She noted,

We sometimes talk it over and share ideas. “Well, I’m going to do this.” Or “I thought that was no good. I’d never do that in my classroom.” So I
just think it is important. It is important to me, and I think that sometimes it clarifies some ideas. Sometimes things that you thought you heard one way, you find out, well that’s not the way they meant it at all, and by talking to your team, you can get a lot of clarification on that. ... Even if one of us says, “Boy, I really like that,” and another one thinks, “I didn’t like it at all.” You listen and then maybe there’s something you can take out of it that you didn’t first get when the presenter presented it. Now when you hear someone else explain how he or she’re going to use it or it’s of value to him or her, you get another point of view.

Sharing materials, helping each other out, and supporting each other in any way were valuable to Lobster as she applied new learning. Another great support when she first started teaching was her mentor. Lobster recalled,

My mentor was Joy. She was never trained to be a mentor or anything else. She had just, she actually came into teaching after I did, but she was a little older than I was, and she did seem to have wisdom on how to handle the children. You could talk to her, and even if you knew you were on completely opposite sides, she would just give her point of view and you’d give yours and then you’d listen to each other, and very often I saw her point of view. But until I got it from her, I saw my own view and that was it. And she said, “Well, did you ever think maybe.” It’s the way she did it and the way she said it. Joy was my mentor way back before we even had them.

Lobster divided administrators into two parts—building principal and central office. Lobster felt that her principals had encouraged her to be exposed to things or investigate new teaching materials. Lobster explained,

She wanted you to be exposed to things. She wanted you to know what was out there. And she wanted you, as a professional person, to make a decision, hopefully with your team, on what was best for the children.

Lobster felt that every principal was willing to let her try new things and would back her up if she got in a big glitch.

I think every principal I’ve had here has been willing to let you try things. I never felt like they didn’t agree. I’m sure they didn’t agree. But I think every single principal I had wanted you to try something that you thought
was effective. I feel they would back you up if you got into a big glitch and needed some extra help or whatever.

In addition to building principals, central-office administrators did not include any one person dedicated to building a professional development plan until just recently. The district learning team, administrative leadership team, and various committees developed an annual professional development plan. Lobster believed the focus on having a plan was so administrators would have something to show to fulfill an obligation to the school board and to meet the requirement of hosting 4 days of professional development. She explained,

I think they’re coming from a point of view where they might have to present to the school committee what went on, and they need some papers, like a curriculum or a binder or a something to show what we did all day.

Lobster felt administration did not connect to the worthwhile needs in first grade. She described a difference between teachers and administration. She noted, “I think there’s a difference in what we, as teachers, think might be worthwhile, and what the administration or the people who plan the professional development feel is worthwhile.”

When applying new learning, Lobster’s school district offered teachers coaches to help them apply new programs. Coaches can be external or internal. External coaches are individuals, hired by the district, who have advance knowledge of the program being introduced into the classroom. An internal coach is a teacher or a staff member who is trained to be an on-site expert who is willing to help all teachers apply the new program. Even though Lobster worked with both external and internal coaches, when she was asked about the impact of having a coach, Lobster referred only to internal coaches. She felt comfortable having one of her first-grade team members coach her by observing
Lobster, providing suggestions, modeling lessons, and suggesting a time factor for moving along the curriculum. "She knew what we were trying to accomplish and the time factor," remarked Lobster. Lobster felt that she is very willing to apply new learning if a familiar person is providing information. She recalled when the new math program was being implemented. Her internal coach's name was Julie. She said,

I think it's the person doing the training or the person running the session that makes a big difference, because we knew Julie was into it. Julie found value in it, so when she presented it to us, that was almost one plus already. Julie said this will work. Julie said we can do it, so let's get going.

Lobster believed that she knew that any coach she admired would provide her with worthwhile information. This admiration of a coach was an necessary factor for Lobster to accept new learning. She explained,

[This coach was] a person who I tremendously admire. I've been in teams with her and everything else, so again, I consider the source and I knew if she was telling me, it was something very worthwhile. I believed it and I knew it would work because she had been in the classroom before and experienced things like that.

Professional development plans were produced through various committees and teams in Lobster's district. She felt that teachers should have a stronger voice in developing these plans. Teachers should formulate a plan because they know what is needed to improve student achievement. She stated,

Ideally, I think the teachers should formulate the district professional development plan and they be given a chance to present and defend their suggestions. In my school system, teachers have been asked at various times for their input, but only one suggestion was ever implemented. Many people feel that their ideas are not taken seriously. I think teachers know exactly what they need further development in, and what would improve student achievement.
She also believed that each teacher can decide whether they want to contribute or not to the professional development plan.

The district did accept teachers' suggestions when these suggestions were submitted through various committees. Yet, Lobster believed that the decisions have already been made without concern for teachers' suggestions. She noted,

Then you go through a period where you want to be part of the group and you want to be on the committees and you want to, “I don’t like this, so I need to get on the committee.” So I have certainly joined committees over the years. Some have been good experiences and some have been committees where you get there and you realize that the decisions have already been made and yes, you’re signing your name, but you have nothing to do with what’s going on.

Lobster continued to explain that because the decision has already been made and despite the fact that she can make suggestions, she believed that teachers don’t have a say in the matter.

I was on a report-card committee a long time ago and we gathered information from our team and we brought it and presented it, and basically it was okay, but this is what we’re going to do. So I think when you have some experiences like that, you tend to say, “What’s the point?” You’re spending all that time and then you find out, you really don’t have a say in the matter. It has already been decided.

Lobster felt that professional development plans were not organized and you don’t have a plan in place until just before the required in-service days.

I think that sometimes the professional development is not organized or thought out here. I think sometimes when you don’t have a plan in place until 2 days before; then it seems like you’re just grabbing someone who maybe has a good idea and can present it to the group. But it saves money when someone just one of your peers presents it, but it’s not necessarily something that needs to take a whole day or 2 days to be presented.
Lobster’s Views on Student Impacts

When applying new learning, Lobster found that she needed to be aware of the students’ developmental learning needs, her actions toward students’ learning, and understanding how to assess the new learning. Students’ developmental learning needs vary each year. She believed that children were entering school with very different needs and children perceive different things differently from the way they did years before.

Lobster found that, “Different aged children perceive different things differently, and we all should be aware of that.” To know how to be successful with these learning differences, Lobster took her cue from kids. She stated,

Some lessons are wonderful. Some lessons are little piddly things. You just say, “Oh, let’s do this and be done with it.” And they get so into it. I think you just take your cue from the kids you have that particular year.

Assessing success or failure of new learning was important. Lobster, who felt comfortable with her years of teaching experience, knew the students’ enthusiasm was a strong sign of success along with student product like papers on the board. She explained,

I think the enthusiasm. The kids had a real interest in this when it was something different than the day-to-day. I think you can just see the enthusiasm of the children, and then they would bring it up to other children. “And I think we need to use the thinking star now. We need some time to think,” and they would start using some of the terms and some of the specific things that you were teaching them. The enthusiasm and hanging the papers on the board, and the parents coming back and saying, “They like that so much. That’s so different.”

Lobster knew when new learning was not successful. She simply stated, “And then if it’s a disaster, they will know or they’ll let.”
Lobster felt that her actions had an impact on students. She felt that students reacted to her emotions or her enthusiasm for new learning. She explained, "I find that if you’ve got the enthusiasm, they will go along or jump on the bandwagon."

*Lobster’s Views on Barriers to Applying New Learning*

Lobster had her share of failed lessons or "bombs." As she thought about the frustrations of applying new learning, she recalled when she came back from a professional development experience ready to apply what she learned. Lobster quickly realized that she didn’t have the whole process down. She recalled,

You do it the next day, but you haven’t really thought the whole thing through or you don’t, at least in my opinion, I don’t have the whole process down. I should probably go over the notes, pick a lesson where this would work, and we could be successful with it.

Lobster felt that time was a big barrier. She found that professional development was so involved there was not enough time to get it done, or did not have time for the other important parts of the student’s day. She recalled a professional development experience that lasted 2 days and involved introducing a way for teachers to teach students how to research. Lobster referred to the program as Double IM, designed to help kindergarten through 12th graders gain the skills needed to collect data and write a research report. Lobster attended the elementary presentation involving kindergarten through fifth-grade teachers, and enjoyed learning about Double IM, but could not see it working into her classroom’s schedule.

I think some of the things we do in professional development are so involved that you can’t [do it all]. There’s no time in your day to put some of these things into practice. Sometimes you can take bits and pieces away, but to get a whole new program. That thing that we had, Double IM, I thought that was very, very interesting, but in first grade, during the course of my day, that doesn’t fit in. Little bits and pieces of it I could do,
but to take the whole thing and run with it, I absolutely couldn’t. … I think sometimes you got too caught up in the, “I’m going to do this and this and this,” and you forget that I have to teach reading along the way and get all these objectives in.

There were times when Lobster did not buy in to the professional development experience. She has deemed that new learning isn’t any benefit to me when she does not follow through to apply it. She explained,

I don’t always follow through with it, because there’s so much going on, but if it’s a professional development that I really don’t feel was any benefit to me, I just take the manual, and I have a place in my closet where they go, in case I want it later, but I don’t think I’ve gone back to that closet very often at all.

Lobster knows that even after 33 years of teaching “there’s still room for improvement.” She described herself as a creature of habit that has a hard time changing. Yet, there had been too much change and she felt a barrier when she didn’t see major flaw in the previous program.

I know that I am a creature of habit. I know and I need to move forward and I know I have a problem with change and everything, but I do think it’s difficult. Schools change a lot. We’ve adopted the new math program one year in first grade, printing program the next year, and then 2 years later, we’re doing reading. And then we’ve got science also. That’s a lot of change to keep up with too, especially where you didn’t really see a major flaw in some of these things to begin with.

One of the reasons she has a hard time changing was Lobster had usually formed a preconceived notion about the professional development experience.

I come in with that preconceived notion that whatever they’re going to tell me, I know they’re wrong, because one reading program isn’t for everybody. … I guess I do maybe see what we’re going to do, and then I form an opinion probably before I even set foot in the door.
Lobster found that students prior to coming into first grade had knowledge about the new learning. She was unaware of students' prior knowledge and after applying new learning felt that the students *burst my bubble*. She explained,

> I remember we were doing something and I thought it was going to be so exciting and they were going to love it, and I can remember someone saying, “We did this in preschool.” And [it] just burst my bubble. I thought it was a great idea.

Lobster reacted to this barrier by either dropping the new learning or having to modify it to benefit all students.

*Summary of Lobster's Beliefs and Values*

Lobster’s definition of professional development changed from only involving district-sanctioned professional development experiences to involving any situation that improved her teaching knowledge and skills. Lobster valued a *small group setting* to have discussions when attending professional development experiences. She desired workshops that were designed *to what I need at that time* to best help the students. Having a program *that you could take and plop* into the classroom was important. Lobster valued professional development experience that provided *practical knowledge* and skills that impact all students. She had to have a *vested interest* in what professional development experience she would like to attend, and *make sense* of her new learning. Lobster valued *presenters* who had certain qualities along with workshops or seminars that take a short *time*.

Lobster described her least valued experiences such as projects that teachers *don't get back to it* such as starting revisions on curriculum and only doing half. She felt that there were difficulties applying new learning because administrators *jump on every new*
thing that comes along. Lobster devalued been there, done that programs that did not provide her with new knowledge. She found that some professional development content is too cutting edge and would not benefit the students. She disliked workshops that were too large of a group because it was too intimidating to have discussions. Lobster felt that defined attitude would result from being required to attend professional development experiences rather than being given a choice.

Lobster felt that her colleagues were the most important factor in helping her apply new learning. She felt that she and her colleagues were a close-knit team who formed a support group. Lobster felt fortunate to rely on her colleagues to clarify some ideas and get another point of view. Though it was many years earlier, Lobster treasured the relationship she had with her mentor for support and advice.

Lobster had mixed feelings about administrators. She found her principal to encourage her to be exposed to things regarding professional development. Lobster felt that her principal was willing to let her try new things and would back her up if she got in a big glitch. Yet, Lobster believed that central-office administrators needed to conduct in-service days so that they had something to show to fulfill an obligation to the school board rather than to produce worthwhile experiences for teachers. She felt that there was a difference between teachers and administrators when designing worthwhile professional development.

Internal coaches made Lobster feel more comfortable when observing her in the classroom. Lobster found her coaches’ suggestions to be valuable, especially as it pertained to the time factor for moving along the curriculum. She felt it was important
that she admired the coach and found that these coaches provided worthwhile information.

*Professional development plans* were produced through various committees and teams in Lobster's district. She believed that teachers should *formulate* a plan because teachers understood what was needed to improve student outcomes. Contrary to the need to help formulate a district plan, Lobster felt that *the decisions have already been made* and that teachers really *don’t have a say in the matter*. When plans were made, she found them to be *not organized* and made at the last minute, causing her to feel *don’t you have a plan in place*.

Lobster found that the impact of new learning was dependent on how *children perceive different things differently*. She took her *cue from kids* as she applied new learning and found that a way to assess success or failure was from the students’ *enthusiasm*. Lobster assessed student success through their *papers on the board* or student product. She believed that *her enthusiasm* had an impact on success.

Lobster felt that there were barriers that created difficulties when applying new learning. She found that she *didn’t have the whole process down* before applying new learning to the classroom. Time was her greatest barrier especially when a *professional development was so involved* that she did not have enough time for everything that needed to be done in a day.

Lobster found that if new learning *doesn’t feel was any benefit to me* then she would not follow through and apply it. She admitted she was a *creature of habit* and that change was difficult, especially when there were so many new programs applied and she *didn’t see any major flaw* in the old programs. Lobster knew she would had a negative
preconceive notion about a professional development experience and these beliefs hindered the application of new learning. Lobster would simply return to class and place the book in the closest where it remained untouched. There were experiences when Lobster felt that students burst her bubble when applying new learning. This lack of enthusiasm from students was a result of students having experienced the new learning before entering first grade.

Lori’s Story: What I Need to Get the Job Done

Lori had taught in various capacities for Summerview Elementary School for over 14 years. During this time, she was a Title 1 teacher, permanent substitute teacher, and for the previous 6 years, first-grade teacher. For the 4 years when she was not a classroom teacher, Lori had the opportunity to work in various classrooms and with many different teachers. She felt that these opportunities provided her with a wide range of examples on how to be a good teacher. She explained,

I was in a lot of classrooms, so I got to see what each teacher was doing, and what was working, which was nice, and I got to see different grade levels, which was even better because then I could see what happened, after kindergarten and at first grade, and what they were building on. So that was nice.

She believed those early-year experiences were valuable: She needed concrete modeling because teaching was not her first career. She had spent more than 20 years in business before she decided she needed a career change. It was for her love of reading and helping her own children to learn that led her to become a teacher.

Lori appreciated any professional development opportunity that would help her improve student outcomes. She particularly sought professional development experiences that improved her teaching skills for students who did not speak English as a first
language and for special-needs students. “I try to make sure I have a good handle on what I need to teach and how I’m teaching. So I’ve got to concentrate my focus area for professional development.”

*Lori’s Views on Defining Professional Development Experiences*

Lori defined professional development as “something that enhances what I already know, to help me do a better job in my job. And it could be taking a course or it could be mentoring with someone.” She explained that she participated in professional development experiences whenever she could. Lori was flexible in the time of day that professional development was offered. She participated in professional development experiences during the school day, after school hours, and on Saturdays. Lori felt that in addition to gaining teaching skills needed to help improve student outcomes, she improved her salary by taking college courses.

People are taking courses, from what I see, it’s to make more money. The bottom line is that that’s the only way we go up in the pay scale. It’s tied to how many courses you take and we all want to be more professional. But the bottom line also is you’re not going to make any money. ... I’m trying to take to earn more money, and also learn as much as I can to be a better teacher.

*Lori’s Views on Types of Professional Development Experiences*

Lori felt that participating in professional development experiences was important, “because it instructs us on new methods of teaching and keeps us motivated.”

*Most valuable.* Lori valued professional development experiences that she can pick and choose, attend conferences that had presenters that have a proven track record, participate in hands-on learning, and collaborate with peers. She preferred professional
development experiences that were directly related to what I needed to get my job done, and try it right away.

Lori felt that she understood the needs of students and knew where her knowledge or what skills she needed to improve to help improve student outcomes. The district supported her by giving her the ability to pick and choose professional development experiences by providing a $350 stipend every 3 years. Lori felt that in addition to knowing what knowledge or skills she needed, she found that being able to choose also made her feel more comfortable applying new learning. She stated,

I pick and choose what I want. I know what I need. I know what is going to help me do my job better. So if I go out there and look for a specific thing, then I'm more comfortable with it and I can use it.

When Lori selected professional development experiences, she selected conferences or workshops based not only on the content, but also on people that have a proven track record. Presenters who are experts in their field were proven to be knowledgeable. Lori explained, “The names that we know that are recognized in the field,” people that have a proven track record of development and meeting the needs of the classroom teachers. “We’ll look at them and we’ll know right away, ‘That’s a good one. It’s proven.’”

Lori also selected workshops or conferences that involved hands-on learning. She found that experiential learning is the best method for her to gain new knowledge and skill and believed that it is also an important method of learning for students. “Some things I can pick up quickly with the training and the hands on.” In addition, Lori felt that experiential learning and being able to collaborate with peers is the ideal learning environment. She noted,
I feel the most valuable professional development experiences that I have participated in are the ones that include collaboration with my peers and hands on learning, where I can try something new and learn as I work with my peers and instructor.

Lori recalled the professional development experiences that focused on core content knowledge, such as mathematics and reading. Lori valued professional development experiences that *directly related to what I needed to get my job done*. She explained,

> I think management of the classroom, anything that involved any kinds of management; reading—any of the reading strands; anything that has helped me put together a reading program for the levels that I’m in. The ELL [English language learners] courses were also good, because they directly related to what I needed to get my job done.

Lori valued professional development experiences that permitted her to apply new learning and go back to the classroom and *try it right away*. She stated, “When I learn something new, I usually go back to the classroom and try it right away.” She recalled a professional development experience that focused on teachers with ELL students. She was delighted that she could refine what she learned and immediately apply it.

> I really could take everything I learned every day back into the classroom and try it. So it was pretty immediate. I got what I needed, brought it back to the classroom, tried it out, tweaked it, and it was perfect, just what I needed.

*Least valuable.* Although Lori enjoyed learning new teaching strategies, she devalued professional development experiences in which teachers *don’t have a vested interest*, were *not really looking at our needs*, *not going to open that book again*, understanding that *every grade level is so different*, were *not something we really need to spend time on*, feeling *no passion*, and taking those *day-long things*. 

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Lori found that professional development experiences in which teachers don't have a vested interest were difficult to find value in it. She recalled an example where the administration decided to apply an additional assessment program. Lori and her colleagues were conscientious in applying it to the classroom. However, Lori believed that the new assessment was unnecessary and did not apply well to her grade level. She explained,

We knew was not a good product. And we could tell that it was not developed by anyone who has ever taught in first or second grade. We already have a proven and reliable assessment tool. This one doesn't give us the results we need to reach benchmarks. But it was being done in Rhode Island, and that's where our Assistant Superintendent is from. And she's very familiar with what they do in that district area, so she was vested in it. But we weren't, and we learned it. We were good little troopers. We went down there and got our timers and learned how to do this. But when we tried it out, brought it back to the classroom we were, "This isn't what we need." So it's going to be a struggle next year, because it's not going to be heavily vested in it. It's just not. And you're not going to get good results, if that's the case anyway. ... We don't have a vested interest in it, definitely.

Lori found that the district's professional development experiences did not take into account the needs of teachers. Lori felt that administration was not really looking at our needs. She felt that,

Least valuable would be some of the things that administration does in the district to say we're having professional development. We wondered, "Where did they come up with that idea?" They're not really looking at our needs, sometimes. It sounds good on paper, but it really doesn't give us the tools to reach goals or objectives. Elementary is unique and different from upper grades.

Lori felt that those professional development experiences were nice to learn but did not have relevancy to the classroom. She believed it was important to be aware of
current trends and knowledge, but felt that she was not going to open that book again.

Lori stated,

The other [professional development experiences] are just nice, but I’m really not going to open that book again. I’m not going to use it. It’s not something that I need, and for this kind of environment you’ve got to be on top of everything. And you don’t have time to waste ever. Not even outside the classroom.

Over the years, Lori found that professional development experiences did not focus on her specific grade-level needs. She felt that every grade level is so different. She devalued professional development experiences that did not meet specific grade-level needs. She stated,

Just there’s so much that we’re doing. Maybe because it’s not one subject that we’re teaching. It’s the uniqueness of the job. I don’t think you can say, in a district, well, we’re all going to have professional development like this, because I think every grade level is so different?

Lori continued by expressing that an experience that did not meet her teaching needs was not something we really need to spend time on regularly. She referenced the new assessment tool as she explained, “We were a little bit surprised that we were going to learn another one. When we tried it out, it was just not something we really need to spend time on. So we were a little disappointed with that.”

Lori was committed to improving her knowledge and skills to the betterment of students. She did not desire to apply new learning if she had no passion in it. She felt that she was required to participate in the training and apply new learning despite her feelings. She explained,

But we did it, but it’s not, there’s no passion in it, and there’s no like when we do a running record, we know, we know who’s fluent and we
determined the comprehension level because it’s a valid tool, and we learned it, and we know the information that we’re going to get out of it.

Lori’s district planned on conducted 2 full days of professional development and 4 half days professional development in each building. Those day-long things were not productive for Lori. She felt that these days were geared to meet a mandated requirement for the No Child Left Behind Act. She thought, “Sometimes when we do those day-long things, when it’s a professional day, and you have to have so many because of the No Child Left Behind and all that stuff. Some of those were like, ‘Oh, hm, bad choice.’”

Lori’s Views on the Role of Learning Culture and Participation in Planning

Lori found support when applying new learning from colleagues, administration, and coaches. She followed the district’s professional development plan to guide her to maintain current teaching strategies and understand curriculum.

Lori felt that her colleagues provided the greatest support when applying new learning. With an ever-present job, she thought I don’t think I could get through the day without their support. She stated,

If I didn’t have the support with the people that I work with, I don’t think I could get through the day. It’s that type of job. I don’t think you can. It’s very stressful, and working with the kids and the parents, because you’re teaching them the foundations. This is sometimes the first time that child’s been in school full time. It is a daunting task.

Lori and her colleagues have time when they meet to discuss various concerns. She and her colleagues felt it was important that everyone was on the same page. She noted,

It was actually very good, because someone that’s in your building has pretty much the same materials, and we’re all on the same page. So that was helpful, to listen to people and try things out with each other and see if we can try it back in our classroom.
Lori found that it was hard to find colleagues during the day unless they scheduled times. She was grateful that *we meet together as a grade* at lunchtime, staff meetings, or whenever they could fit it in. She explained,

So we’ve got avenues, and we meet together as a grade and we meet together as a school with the two grades, so we discuss a lot of those things. If they’ve taken it and they’ve used it. I mean, if you’re not going to use it, forget it. We don’t have time. I don’t have time for that. So a lot of times you’ll get recommendations from people.

During these meetings, Lori felt that she received *good information* on how to apply new learning. She appreciated the back and forth discussions. She recalled,

You’ve got to have somebody to bounce things off of to try to iron out any little kinks, sometimes one class, every class is different and then you get a class in, and you think you knew everything about a particular lesson or whatever, and they’re just not getting it. So you go and ask someone and ask, “Have you had this problem? What do you do in that case?” And a lot of times, you can get some good information, some good hints and things that you could bring back to the classroom and try, try it a different way, present it a different way. We’ll work closely with someone that’s near, and we’ll say, “Did you try this? This class doesn’t seem to get it. What have you used to supplement it?” We go back and forth like that.

Lori and her colleagues scheduled *staff meetings in each other’s rooms.* Colleagues used these times to teach each other things that have worked for their students. She stated,

What we’re starting to do is have some of our staff meetings in each other’s rooms, and then you get to see what other rooms look like, which we’ve never done before. So you’re sitting in someone else’s room, and you’re sharing and trying some things. And we’ve had a couple of times where we’ve taught each other things that have worked, so we’ve had, teachers get up and say, “Listen, this is what I’ve tried and let me show you.” So that was new this year too.
Lori found that she needed support from her colleagues because she needed a 

little bit of feedback as well as to compare notes. Without this support, Lori believed she would not be successful. She explained,

If I didn’t have that support, I would probably feel as if I wasn’t being successful. I need like a little bit of feedback sometimes, so I can say, “Hey listen, here’s what they came up and this is what happened with this lesson.” I’m perplexed. I don’t know if I did it right.” So it’s nice to have that person to bounce things off of. … When I learn something new, I usually go back to the classroom and try it right away and compare notes with a colleague. I compare what I was doing before and analyze the results.

Administration is another source of support for Lori. She found her principal to be open and receptive to new ideas. The principal would be visible and aware of what Lori was doing in the classroom. Lori appreciated these actions. She stated,

Our new principal is very open, very receptive. She’s very, very aware and very visible in a nice way. She pops in and she can see what we’re doing. Then you can pull her aside and say, “See, this is working,” for example.

Lori had limited contact with central-office administration. When she had questions or wanted to provide feedback on a professional development experience, she would speak directly with the principal.

Lori embraced the support of a coach. She believed that it was helpful to go to an expert. She noted,

I think it would be great to go to an expert that you could just go to and say, “I tried this. It’s just not working for me. Is it me or is it the product? What is it?” It would be nice to have an expert in the building that can say, “Well, didn’t you try this.” Or, “Let me come on down, let me watch you.” They might let someone watch you in a nonthreatening way to just kind of say, “I watched how you did this, but what? If you tried this, in this way, I bet you’ll come out with a better product.” Be nice to have someone like that.
In addition to a coach, Lori appreciated the support she received from a mentor.

She said,

I have always felt that one can learn the most from an experienced mentor who has the gift of teaching and can communicate well. In some professions, novices learn from their mentors for many years before going out on their own.

Lori explained that the need for a mentor was universal in all situations. She felt that there was new learning that she could learn quickly. She stated,

A little bit of everything. It depends on what it is. Some things I can pick up with quickly with the training and the hands on, and then sometimes it's a little more difficult for me. I need a little more support, a little more mentoring.

Lori believed that teachers should be included in formulating a professional development plan because teachers have a stake as to what is best for them. She noted,

I feel teachers should be included in the professional development by being asked what they need in order to do their job the best that they can. Teachers are constantly seeking out professional development on their own since it is tied to pay increases anyway, so it makes sense to have them be involved in the planning process.

Even though Lori believed that teachers should have input into a professional development plan, she admitted that she was leaving that up to the principal. She explained,

I'm more into day-to-day operations, so I'm leaving that up to the principal. We rely on her to come and like tell us, this is what we need to be doing down here. We need to go in this direction.

Lori trusted that the district brings in the professional development experiences that were needed.

We have to teach, whatever we have to teach, the district brings in that program. So if it's Project Read, a writing program or any of those
[programs], the district brings that in and we get our professional development for that.

The district offered an excellent password-protected website for teachers to communicate the professional development plan, upcoming opportunities, and current information on teachers' teaching-certification status.

**Lori's Views on Student Impacts**

"There's a child with unique styles or there's a new kind of learning that you need to figure out," stated Lori. She believed the important factor to having a positive impact on students when applying new learning was to set my goals around what the kids need to do. She stated, "I set my goals around what the kids need to do, if they need to be at a certain level by the end of the year, then I set my goals around that."

*Time management* was another factor that Lori focused on when applying new learning. She understood the time restraints of adding on another part of a busy day. Lori used centers to manage the learning needs of her students. She explained,

It's time management, if it's that kind of thing: then I will rework the space in my classroom, or if it's center-based learning, then I will try centers and learn how to manage those centers and actually use them. I can physically change the classroom and I can also change the materials and then the way I teach and present.

Lori attributed the new learning from professional development experiences to having a positive impact on students by being able to pinpoint why there may be obstacles in their growth. She stated,

My professional development experiences have helped me to engage my students and enable them to grow, learn, and develop. I have also been able to pinpoint why there may be obstacles in their growth and what I need to do to solve the problems. For instance, without the professional development courses it would be trial and error and it would take a longer time to figure things out, which might impact learning.
Lori used tests to determine the students’ success. She felt that they have lots of tests that are conducted several times a year. She was concerned that, “There’s just so many tests, we find that we’re testing a little bit more than we would like to, which takes away from instructional time. So we’re at that point now.” She continued to explain, “You can assess several times a year to monitor and do running records regularly to check for fluency and comprehension.”

*Lori’s Views on Barriers to Applying Learning*

*Time* is Lori’s greatest barrier. She found that there never seems to be enough time to get everything done in a day. She stated,

> There just never seems to be enough time, even though I manage time, I think, pretty well. It just seems to go so quickly. There are so many things I want to accomplish, carry forward—like I wanted to do more in the writing. I said this year I was going to do x, y, and z. I just couldn’t get to that point and that’s probably the most frustrating. ... Then quality of the things that we’ve done. I’m very concerned about spending enough time. Is the quality, the output, good enough? Are they ready to move to the next step?

She continued to explain that there’s not enough time to teach the new learning even though she and her colleagues come back excited about it.

The only problem is, we’re all gung-ho. We come back. There’s not enough time to teach it, there is reading, writing, math, and spelling, etc. All these things and then we’ve got to put the science in. We found these science kits were great. We just couldn’t get to them as much as we liked. There wasn’t enough time because we had all this other stuff.

Lori suggested how to adjust for not having enough time to do everything in the day was to prioritize better.

> Probably the only way is to let something go. Something has to go. We have to prioritize better. What is it that we want? What do we really need for them to move on to the next level? What’s the most important?”
Another barrier was not to have enough of the materials or the materials at hand might not help you. She explained,

We may not have enough of the materials. That might be the only thing. Like sometimes they have a great reading strategy or something and we don’t have a book closet and we don’t have some of the things that we need, and not everyone is investing in that. So sometimes the materials at hand might not help you.

Lori found that there wasn’t enough information, training, or support. She believed that a possible reason was the professional development experience was not long enough. She recalled,

It wasn’t enough information and training, not enough time. Like sometimes if it’s an in-district thing, it’s quick. It’s a 1-day thing, and there’s really not enough time to really get your arms around it and then come back and do it. And there isn’t enough support sometimes. You don’t have that extra piece. You’re trying it, but who do you go to when you run into a snag? What am I going to do now? The training’s over. It was 1 day or 2 days and that’s it. So that can be a problem.

Summary of Lori’s Beliefs and Values

Lori believed,

My professional development experiences have helped me to engage my students and enable them to grow, learn, and develop. I have also been able to pinpoint why there may be obstacles in their growth and what I need to do to solve the problems.

Lori valued professional development experiences that she was able to pick and choose. Presenters that had a proven track record were a deciding factor for Lori when selecting experiences. Lori found that hands-on learning and collaborating with peers were additional factors when selecting professional development experiences. She preferred that the content of these experiences be directly related to what I needed to get
my job done and be designed for her to try it right away when she returned to the classroom.

Lori devalued professional development experiences that did not connect to her needs. She found that some new programs adopted by the district were not really looking at our needs; she and other teachers did not have a vested interest, and were not really looking at our needs, and was not going to open that book again. She understood that every grade level is so different and trying to provide professional development experiences for everyone was not valuable. She believed that she and her colleagues found that some experiences were not something we really need to spend time on, and they had no passion to apply some new learning. These unwanted and unnecessary professional development experiences occurred on those day-long things that Lori wanted to avoid.

Lori found her greatest support by applying new learning from her colleagues. She believed that she could not get through the day without them. Lori felt that she and her colleagues were all on the same page to ensure that happened they would meet together as a grade at lunchtime or at regularly scheduled meeting times. Lori found that she received good information from her colleagues and appreciated having staff meetings in each other’s room to receive a little bit of feedback and compare notes on applying new learning.

Lori felt supported by the administration, especially by her principal. She noted how visible and aware her principal was of Lori’s teaching needs. She found her principal to be open and receptive to new ideas.
Lori found coaches to be helpful to go to an expert when she needed it. She also found that mentors had the gift of teaching and were necessary when she found herself unsure as to what to do.

A professional development plan should include teachers as part of the planning process according to Lori. However, she does not contribute to a plan and has been leaving it up to the principal to make decisions. She trusted that the district brings in the necessary experiences.

Lori set my goals around what the kids need to do because each year the classroom is composed of students with different academic needs. She felt that changing centers improved the time management for students, especially in a busy classroom. Lori found that new learning from professional development experiences prepared her to be able to pinpoint why there may be obstacles in their growth. In addition, Lori administered many tests throughout the year do be sure students were progressing.

Lack of time and materials and inadequate training were barriers that Lori encountered. Lori’s greatest barrier was time. She felt that there never seems to be enough time to get everything accomplished. In fact, Lori felt there’s not enough time to teach the new learning. Lori believed she needed to prioritize better by letting something go. Another barrier was not having enough of the materials she needed to teach the new learning or the materials at hand might not help you. She found that there wasn’t information, training, or support that she needed to properly apply new learning.
Kasey’s Story: Ownership to Pick and Choose

Kasey had taught second grade at Fall Brook School for the previous 2 years. Before teaching second grade, Kasey taught third grade for 7 years in the same building. She felt that with only 9 years of teaching she was at the very beginning of her career. Kasey had a busy life raising 3 young children, and was currently working on completing a master’s degree at a local university.

Kasey’s Views on Defining Professional Development Experiences

Kasey thought she had limited experience with professional development. Yet, in the 9 years of teaching, she felt that professional development should improve your teaching ability, especially when there was a strong focus on state testing. Kasey said, “I feel like if they want to do professional development, it should be to enhance what we are currently doing, because there’s definitely room for us to improve, especially with our state scores and areas like that.”

Kasey believed that professional development was linked to enhancing curriculum and was a medium through which teachers could interact. She stated,

When I student taught, that was obviously my first exposure to professional development, and I viewed professional development as a way to enhance your current curriculum. [It was] an opportunity for teachers to interact with one another on a collegial level as well as a curriculum level.

Yet, Kasey further qualified her response with, “I feel professional development hasn’t really, I would say, enhanced me. I think getting my master’s and taking a course that I have been interested in has been more helpful.” Kasey perceived professional development as district-sponsored days and did not include any experiences that she chose outside of the district.
Kasey's Views on Types of Professional Development Experiences

Kasey had mixed feelings regarding professional-development experiences. She believed that professional-development experiences were district sponsored. Kasey described a typical professional-development day.

Since I’ve been teaching, I think we have, either it’s mandated or kind of like built in 3 professional days a year, and out of the 3 full days that we have, 1 is almost, I hate to say this, almost like a fluff day, where it’s, “Okay, from 9 to 11, work in your teams on anything that you feel is upcoming and you need to discuss.” Break for lunch, which we know, after a meeting for 2 hours that feels like the lunch break, and then from 1 to 3, talk about things that you’d like to see happen in the future. I always feel like I’m speaking for a lot of my colleagues that professional development is like (yawn).

Most valuable. Kasey had no preference for any one type of professional-development experience. There were elements of professional-development experiences that she valued, such as experiences should be embedded in our school days, when there’s been choices given, pertained to something I was currently doing in the classroom, could take back to my classroom, and great facilitator.

Kasey preferred that her personal time be spent with her small children rather than at professional development. She valued professional-development experiences that were embedded in our school days. Kasey stated,

[It was] embedded in our school days that were accounted for. I like it better that way because it’s built in part of our schedule. Having young kids, I think I’m very selective as to how I spend my time. ... I think I’m more apt to do something within the school hours that’s built into our scheduled day.

Kasey recalled an example about how embedded learning was beneficial to her schedule and learning style. She described a new math program and how valuable it was
as opposed to another professional development experience about a topic Kasey found less informative. She stated,

I know 3 years ago when we started the program we had a built-in math instructor who would meet with us once a month or once every book. ... It was a professional-development day that was built into our schedule, that really kind of piggy-backed what we were already doing. So we didn’t feel it was a day like, “Oh, let’s just sign up and do something about differentiating instruction.”

Kasey valued when there’s been choices given rather than being forced to participate in a professional development experience that had no meaning. Having choices provided Kasey with the feeling that she had ownership of her professional-development experiences. She stated,

I think the most successful professional days have been when there’s been choices given, because you almost feel like you have ownership over what you’re attending. I’d rather choose something where I’m going to go, make it, take it, learn about it, and bring it back to my classroom. The professional development that I feel has been most valuable is the example of like choices. We’ll be given a survey in our mailboxes, maybe [with] 7 to 10 choices. Choose your top 3. And usually we do get them, and it’s great because I feel like I’m going to something that I’m interested in doing.

Kasey chose professional-development experiences that not only involved content that she was interested in studying, but also information that pertained to something I was currently doing in the classroom. She recalled an experience regarding photography.

I do obviously jump to interests of mine. However, just last March they were offering photography, and I was in the middle of doing this huge photography unit with my class, and I thought, “I’ve never seen photography offered. And here it is.” And it was how to take photos and all these amazing things that you can do with photography with children. I signed up for it because it interested me but also pertained to something I was currently doing. So I guess I’ll choose something depending on what I’m currently doing.
Being able to attend conferences or workshops that Kasey *could take back to my classroom* and apply immediately was valuable. She defined these opportunities as make it–take it classes. She appreciated that everything she needed to apply the new learning was available. She recalled,

I would want to learn something that I could take back to my classroom that would make me a better teacher, whether, it’s assessing children, meeting the needs of all children; something that would really require me to use what I’ve learned like those make it–take it classes. ... I brought it back to my classroom and it was great, because I had everything right there and I was able to give it to my students as well as the writing lab, and how to organize your thoughts.

Kasey appreciated professional-development experiences led by a *great facilitator*. Kasey felt that great facilitators modeled good teaching and provided teachers with a complete picture of how to apply new learning. Kasey found that seeing applied learning from the beginning of the lesson to the end was valuable. Kasey recalled a facilitator who was presenting reading strategies.

Great facilitator. She had us do the picture walk through the story just like you have your students do. She took us from the start of the lesson to the end of the lesson, so we feel like things are mirrored or modeled for you. It’s such a great learning tool because then you can go back and do that as well.

Kasey continued to explain another example of a great facilitator. The presenter instructed teachers on how to apply new math games to the classroom. Kasey appreciated not only the facilitator’s great enthusiasm, but also the organization of the professional-development experience and the after school follow-up session.

I’ve signed up for the math ones. I have a strong interest in math. The facilitator was phenomenal. She was an outside district person that was brought in. You were set up in stations. You had all the materials there for you. Honestly, if you were going to make the games that she had out, it...
would have been like an easy 50 bucks. But we went and she had everything there. We made the games. We brought it back to our class the next day. And then she had a follow-up session. Obviously it was voluntary. It was outside, after school hours. It was great because we got to continue to make or build up what we already had done, and she offered advice. “You can do it this way or you might want to try this for your advanced students.” That was a really good one.

Least valuable. Kasey felt very strongly about professional-development experiences that were least valuable. She devalued experiences that were this is nothing new, things that almost aren’t going to happen, almost like a filler, did not feel like she had any ownership, did not always get PDPS and feel like secretarial stuff.

Kasey found that she did not value professional-development experiences that were redundant or felt like this is nothing new. She stated,

Other professional development was redundant. “Okay, we’ve had professional development on this before. This is nothing new.” ... Or I wouldn’t sign up for differentiated instruction. I feel like I’ve taken a lot of courses. I feel like it’s redundant.

Kasey believed it was important to serve on committees. Yet, she recalled volunteering for a committee about portfolios where she invested a lot of time and effort that resulted in things that almost aren’t going to happen and a feeling that things were almost like a filler.

My first year teaching, I remember, “I’m going to get involved.” We had professional development on portfolios. Portfolios were big 9 years ago. So I thought, “Great, I’ll get on the portfolio committee.” I signed up. Room number, name, and grade I taught. Never heard {back from them] again. So I said, “All right.” We were in the process of changing over our curriculum director. So 4 or 5 years later, another professional development, saying we need a subcommittee. We need someone for portfolio. And I really find that there’s some value in portfolio, so I thought, “portfolios would be interesting to learn about.” I just feel like, there’s almost been like a stereotype some of us laugh like, “Oh, professional-development day. Sign up for subcommittees.” It’s almost
like they, it's almost like a filler. They fill this day of professional
development with things that almost aren't going to happen.

Kasey's district offered staff a survey to determine interest in workshops or
conferences for in-service days. Kasey knew attendance at these workshops or
conferences was mandatory. As a result, she did not feel like she had any ownership. She
stated, "Professional development—you're signing up for something because you have to
sign up. I don't feel like you have ownership."

Kasey needed to participate in professional-development experiences to earn
credits to maintain her teaching certification. Participation in professional-development
experiences earn teachers credits known as professional development points (PDPs).
Kasey felt that even if a professional-development experience was not worthwhile, she
would at least earn PDPs. Kasey felt that professional-development experiences in which
you don't always get PDPs was least valuable. She recalled an example about when she
was serving on a report-card committee. In the end, Kasey and the committee never
produced a new report card, felt that time was wasted, and did not receive PDPs. She
stated,

They're going to make or break ... so it's frustrating because I enjoy being
on it, and I invest my time in assessing children. But it's discouraging
because you're offering your time; sometimes you don't always get PDPs
for it, and I don't really feel like it's quality time spent.

Kasey appreciated opportunities to meet with other second-grade teachers. She
and her colleagues created the agenda for each meeting. Kasey felt that these
professional-development experiences were needed to focus on curriculum. Yet, there
were times when the agenda focused on daily routine issues rather than curriculum or
instruction. After Kasey attended these common planning meetings, she felt that the focus was on *secretarial stuff*. She explained,

> If we don’t have that team time to focus on curriculum, I feel like our team meetings are more like, “Hey, report cards are going out. Oh, we need to start planning our field trip.” It’s more like I feel like secretarial stuff as opposed to really focusing on curriculum, so it’s just that common planning time was to find out how everyone’s doing.

*Kasey’s Views on the Role of Learning Culture and Participation in Planning*

Kasey appreciated support from her *colleagues, administrators, and coaches*. Yet, she found that the district’s *professional-development plan* was dependent on the budget. *Colleagues* were the greatest supporters for Kasey when applying new learning. Kasey found that the second-grade teachers formed a *cohesive team*. She relied on the weekly work sessions. She explained,

> Our second-grade team is a very cohesive team. We do a lot together. For example, on like Friday afternoons we do math centers where the focus might be fractions, but each one of us is tackling it a different way. Some are cutting [and] some are using manipulatives, so we try to take one focus and meet everybody within those centers.

Kasey felt that getting together with colleagues kept them focused on the same way of working. Kasey believed that every time she and her colleagues met it was their *private professional-development time*. She and her colleagues worked at developing a close team by pairing with each other. She recalled,

> There are six of us, so we’re constantly pairing off and it’s good for the kids to see, “Oh, my teacher’s going to work with this other teacher,” and it builds a nice rapport throughout the entire wing, so I feel that as a second-grade team, we use our private professional development time really well.
Kasey and her colleagues had regularly scheduled staff meetings, where they control the agenda. She felt supported because she could add to agenda items that were important concerns, such as applying a new program.

What we do as a second-grade team, first of all, is our choice. We control the agenda. We all email and say what we'd like to see on the agenda for the week. I feel like it's more of, obviously, an intimate meeting. It's just the six of us. [We get] a lot accomplished.

Kasey had opportunities to serve on district-wide committees. She found that she was less likely to share her thoughts with people with whom she did not feel comfortable and who may not share a similar philosophy. Kasey recalled a situation when she described her feelings of working on a district-wide committee and working with the second-grade team. She found that she was more likely to share her thoughts in a comfortable environment where she had an established relationship. She noted,

Our professional development is usually the entire district, so I could be sitting in the room with a high school teacher, a male high school teacher who's got a totally different philosophy than I might have because at we're two different ends of the spectrum. I think it gets really tricky to kind of be yourself and take away what you were hoping to as opposed to when we meet as a second-grade team, even if I don't agree with a colleague, it's more of a comfortable environment. You can say, "That's a good idea, but maybe we should do this instead."

She continued to explain that she had a voice even with my own building rather than at the district-level. Without a voice, Kasey felt that she was unwilling to share ideas or opinions, especially among others who may have strong personalities. She explained,

I guess it depends on what level. I think my voice at my second-grade team meeting makes a difference. I think a voice even with my own building makes a difference because, between K, 1, and 2, there's only 18 actual teachers. I think I have a voice. But, once we go district wide and it becomes bigger, committees get bigger. I feel like if you are one of the strong personalities or you've got the in, you have just got that voice.
Kasey felt supported by administrators in her building and central office. She found the principal supportive because she's been there. Kasey believed the principal understood what she was experiencing as an elementary teacher. Kasey stated, “Our principal was an elementary teacher. I think she’s been there. She’s done that. She understands.”

Kasey appreciated that the principal ran a tight ship. She pops in our room daily and created a supportive environment. Kasey felt that the principal takes our opinions into consideration. She explained,

I feel like my principal is very good to all of us. She runs a tight ship but I feel like we always know where we stand and she takes our opinions into consideration. She pops in our room daily if not twice a day; just to check in and kind of see where you’re at. Kind of like informal observation. And I think that for the most part it’s a very supportive environment.

Another administrator that Kasey recognized as being supportive was the central office curriculum director. Kasey felt that the director understood Kasey’s needs because she walked in our shoes. Kasey found working with the director to be motivating and an example of a great teacher. She noted, “She’s walked in our shoes, but I just know that she’s a very motivated. She’s a great teacher, and I think she knows the direction that we should go. I think she’s a good voice for all of us.”

Kasey appreciated presenters, administrators, and coaches who had experienced teaching. She felt that coaches needed to present and support teachers so that teachers could go back to the classroom to apply new learning and almost simulate her discussions with teachers. She explained,

It was great just to go back and almost simulate her discussion to us adults, because she, not treated us like children, but she had us set up as if we were kids, organize your paper this way. So I felt like when I went
back to my classroom, I was her and the kids were doing as we had done
during the time with her. That was a great one.

Kasey found that her greatest support from internal coaches was from mentors.
Kasey understood both sides of being a mentor. Kasey felt that mentors provided one-on-
one instruction. She recalled working with a math specialist and how she appreciated the
personal contact. She stated,

That year we had enough funding for a math curriculum specialist. But she
was great, because she met with us every week and she said, “This is
where you’re at. How’s it going? This is what you have to look forward
to.” She was more of the in-house. And I just felt that she provided like
that more intimate, one-on-one, really individualized instruction for us
teachers. So I’m a person that likes a more personal contact.

Funding for professional-development experiences changed each year depending
on the budget. This meant that each year the professional-development plan could
change. Kasey noted that money budgeted for professional development was “always a
huge key factor in what we’re able to get.” Kasey felt that she had opportunities to submit
her ideas. She explained that the principal would solicit input. Yet, Kasey found that this
method did not yield interesting professional-development experiences. She explained,

My principal does send around that piece of paper, “What would you like
to see for professional development this year.” So in that sense, I have
written down, “These are the things I’d like to see happen.” And again, it’s
typically curriculum based to enhance what we’re already doing.

Kasey’s Views on Student Impacts

Kasey felt that the training from a professional-development experience should
include what a successful lesson involved and how to identify evidence of success. One
of the key factors when applying new learning was to sell it to the kids. Kasey felt a key
to selling it was that she was organized and ready to go. She stated,
I think making sure I was set up and I was organized, ready to go, and I remember feeling like I thought she sold the idea to me, so I felt like it was my job almost to sell it to the kids so they became invested in it and would want to do it again.

Seeing it from start to finish was another way that Kasey knew if students were successful with the new learning. She found that the process for applying new learning was to grasp the students’ attention, encourage them to enjoy the program, and know the end product. Kasey explained,

So you visually are seeing it from start to finish, as if this is how I want to do it. This is how I plan on introducing it, grasping their attention, really selling it to them, but by the same token, where is it that I want them to end and how do I want them to feel at the end as well.

Assessing students’ success involved a visual rubric. Kasey explained a visual rubric comprised of knowing the end product with a written tool from the professional-development experience. Kasey stated,

I look for the end product: if they’re doing what I had hoped they would do. And most of the times, going to professional development would give me some type of written tool—expect this or the kids will have succeeded if they’ve mastered this. So I use that as almost like my visual rubric.

In addition to the visual rubric, Kasey used a sense of accomplishment as a tool to determine success. She explained, “But it’s almost just like that sense of accomplishment. When you’re walking around the classroom you can tell that they’re happy with their work and I’m happy with their work.” Ironically, Kasey indicated that even though the district is very standardized-state-test driven, “there’s very little recording assessment” used to track students’ success.
Kasey’s Views on Barriers to Applying New Learning

Many of Kasey’s barriers were from lack of time or unsuccessful interactions with colleagues. Time was the greatest barrier for Kasey. She felt that there’s so much to do from 9 to 3 that there may not be time to apply new learning. She explained a situation where the district offered a new computer package designed to identify students’ weaknesses in a core content area and create a tutorial to improve these weak skills. Kasey and the computer teacher were excited to apply this new tool, but could not find the needed time during the week. She felt that with lunch, recess, and specials (art, music, physical education, etc.) that there was no spare time. She explained,

“Yeah, let’s do it.” Then I’m like, “That makes more sense to me,” but we didn’t end up doing it, because there’s just a time thing. There’s so much to do from 9 to 3, let alone lunch, recess, and their special. So I don’t know. Maybe I’ll still open to considering. It’s almost like our computer teacher had it set up. We could just walk in and do it almost. But we had our computer teacher leave in the middle of the year. I think I would still be interested in doing it, but it’s just one of those things, that making the time.

Kasey felt that administrators put a lot on us as teachers when administrators decide on new programs or take the many suggestions offered by teachers. Kasey felt that in the past administrators left the decision making to the teachers, yet recently that was not the case. She explained,

It’s frustrating that our administrators put a lot on us as teachers. I feel like sometimes even just saying, “That’s a great idea. That’s what we’re going to do.” And just leave it at that, because they’re not all going to agree 100%. And I’m feeling like, “Well, when you’ve decided and you’ve agreed upon it, let us know.” That’s never going to happen, so just take what we mostly agree on and kind of make an administrative decision.

In addition to not having an enough time and piling up new programs, Kasey felt that a barrier was that she was expected to give so much of our own time. Kasey would
not mind giving up this valuable time, but she felt that this time was wasted on not completing tasks. She also felt that in addition to the waste of time, she was not paid for giving her extra time. She stated, “Another thing that’s frustrating is, we do give so much of our own time. Things don’t get accomplished. We don’t necessarily get compensated for it. So that’s frustrating.”

Kasey found that working with colleagues on committees can be frustrating when teachers could not stay on task and were not invested in the goal of the committee. She recalled an example when she volunteered to work on designing a new report card. Kasey was frustrated because with all the work and the off-task behaviors, the report card was never developed. She recalled,

I think it’s frustrating as colleagues that there’s sometimes we share so many different opinions, and I realize it’s part of the career, but sometimes you’ll be frustrated or annoyed with a particular someone that they don’t really stay on task, or they just weren’t there for [all the meetings]. They weren’t invested for the same reasons, maybe, everybody else was. So it can be frustrating on many different levels.

Kasey continued to explain that even after investing many hours of time in revising a report card, the colleagues from another elementary building in the district decided that the revisions were not acceptable. Kasey was left feeling discouraged from hearing you don’t like it.

It’s frustrating to bring back to the other faculty, like this is what we agreed on. They’re like, “Oh, what the heck. We don’t —” and you’re like, we just [spent] 20 hours to come up with this and you don’t like it. So yeah, it’s been frustrating.

When applying new learning, Kasey found that lack of resources and no one to ask for support were overwhelming barriers. Kasey felt supported by the mathematics
curriculum person when she was applying the new math program. Due to budget cuts, this position was eliminated. In addition to the loss of support, Kasey found that she lacked resources needed to properly apply teaching strategies as suggested in the new mathematics program. Kasey explained,

Implementing was frustrating because there is a lack of resources and the math-curriculum person was cut. I've only taught this like once, and now I'm teaching it again and I'm adding more to the curriculum and there was no one to ask or have direction to or where to order this from or where can I get that. Frustration was definitely like how it was implemented and the lack of resources.

When applying new learning, Kasey experienced that she wasn't able to keep floating along with the lesson. She found it difficult to get students back on track when she was still learning the program. She recalled an example when she returned to the classroom after attending a follow-up session for the new math program.

It was within a couple of days of it. It was my turn now to do the teaching. And I just remember I'm asking the questions. The kids weren't giving me the same answers. They weren't almost, in our program, literally, you ask the question in bold. My kids were coming up with very different answers, so I wasn't able to keep floating along. And sometimes if a kid gets off track you can curb it and get them back on. I started thinking, “Oh my gosh, am I teaching the same lesson?” [It was] just very different. So I think sometimes the kids’ answers or what they volunteer definitely strayed from that lesson, because I remember feeling like, “Okay, we’re going to get back on track,” and I looked back at my book and just kind of went where the book was, because whatever direction [the coach] took us on, I know I was not able to do that.

Summary of Kasey’s Beliefs and Values

Kasey believed that professional development was linked to enhancing curriculum and a medium by which teachers could interact with each other. Though she had no preference for the type of professional-development experience, Kasey did identify most and least valuable components of these experiences. Kasey valued
professional-development experiences that were embedded in our school days rather than before or after school hours, pertained to something I was currently doing in the classroom, make it–take it experiences that she could take back to my classroom, and was inspired by a great facilitator who made applying new learning easier.

Kasey did not value experiences that resulted in feelings that this is nothing new. She did not prefer to work on committees, where things that almost aren’t going to happen, did not happen. Mandated professional-development experiences made Kasey feel like you don’t feel like you have ownership. Kasey devalued professional-development experiences that don’t always get PDPs, and common planning time that make her feel that they were discussing secretarial stuff rather than discussing curriculum or instruction.

Colleagues were Kasey’s strongest supportive group. She felt that the second-grade teachers had a cohesive team and the time they were together was like private professional-development time. Kasey appreciated that at second-grade staff meeting they were in control of the agenda. Kasey felt that she could express her opinions because of the comfortable environment not only with the second-grade time, but also because she had a voice even with my own building.

Administrators were supportive to Kasey. She appreciated that the principal was supportive because she’s been there as a teacher. Kasey felt that the principal ran a tight ship by popping into our room daily and taking our opinions into consideration. In addition to the principal, Kasey felt supported by the curriculum director. Kasey appreciated that the director walked in our shoes and found working with the director motivating. Kasey admired the director who was a great teacher.
Kasey felt that coaches were supportive to her when applying new learning. She appreciated coaches who would present a lesson in the same manner that Kasey would present it in the classroom. When Kasey returned to the classroom and applied the new learning, she could almost simulate her discussions with the coach during training. Also, Kasey valued internal coaches or mentors for support. She appreciated the one-on-one instruction and the personal contact.

Though Kasey had input into the professional-development plan, she knew the opportunities could change depending on the budget. She also knew that she could submit input into the plan through the principal.

Kasey found that successful application of new learning involved sell it to the kids to engage them in learning. She felt it was important to see it from start to finish, using a visual rubric, and looking for a sense of accomplishment from students as ways to determine successful learning.

Kasey found that time was the greatest barrier. She felt that there's so much to do from 9 to 3 that it was difficult to add any new learning to the day. Kasey felt that administrators put a lot on us as teachers when making decision. She was resentful to give so much of our own time on projects that would not be completed. Kasey was frustrated by working with colleagues who did not stay on task, were not invested in the goal set by a committee, and did not agree upon a final product by stating you don't like it. Kasey found that lack of resources and no one to ask for support were overwhelming barriers. Kasey found that after returning from a professional-development experience that she wasn't able to keep floating along with the lesson. She found that the scripted
lesson did not match the responses from students and therefore the lesson strayed from its original purpose.

Chapter IV Summary

This results chapter offers narratives of 8 first and second grade teachers regarding their perceptions of professional development experiences over their careers. Each participant provided a definition of professional development, described the most and least valuable professional development experiences, indicated the role of school culture when applying new learning, described the impact on students, and explained the barriers faced when applying new learning.
CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

This final chapter describes teachers' insights about their professional development experiences by summarizing the findings and comparing these findings to current research. This discussion addresses four research questions with tables that depict the themes from teachers' experiences. Theoretical and practical implications of this study are presented along with recommendations to suggest ways to follow-up on these insights with further research. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Question 1

Summary of Findings

The first research question I explained is "What types of professional development experiences are being offered for teachers, and of these experiences, which do committed teachers find the most and least valued in terms of improving students' outcomes and why?" Participants described what they most and least valued about professional development experiences in terms of improving students' outcomes. In some cases, teachers' definitions of professional development included only the in-service days required by a school district. The opportunities in which teachers chose to participate were not always perceived as professional development.

From participants' interviews, three themes emerged that illustrate most valued professional development experiences, least valued professional development experiences, and why?
experiences, and the limited viewpoint of professional development experiences only including mandated in-service days (See Table 3).

Table 3

*Professional Development Experiences by Most and Least Valued*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Sara</th>
<th>Lillian</th>
<th>Jean</th>
<th>Pia</th>
<th>Lori</th>
<th>Lobster</th>
<th>Mandy</th>
<th>Kasey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>Teachers Most Value Professional Development Experiences when Certain Elements Exist, whereby it:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1a</td>
<td>Offers knowledge relevant to their teaching assignment</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1b</td>
<td>Includes Time for Reflective Thinking</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1c</td>
<td>Includes New Learning Readily Applicable to the Classroom</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1d</td>
<td>Contains Practical Knowledge</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1e</td>
<td>Empowers Teachers to Make Professional Development Choices</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>Teachers Least Value Professional Development Experiences when Certain Factors Exist, where it:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2a</td>
<td>Does not Include Planning Focused on Teachers’ Needs</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2b</td>
<td>Contains Redundant Knowledge and Lack of Application to the Classroom</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2c</td>
<td>Does not Include Teacher Ownership</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2d</td>
<td>Does not Include Sufficient Time to Learn</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>Teachers Do Not Recognize Other Sources of Professional Development Other Mandated In-service Days.</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Theme 1.1.* Teachers value professional development experiences that offer relevant knowledge, time for reflective thinking, readily applicable new learning, practical knowledge, and empowerment for teachers to make choices regarding professional development experiences. All teachers in this study experienced traditional and reform types of professional development experiences, and determined both types are
acceptable if certain characteristics are in place as subscribed via the subthemes that follow.

Subtheme 1.1a found that teachers value professional development experiences that offer knowledge relevant to their teaching assignment. Teachers feel that research-based, meaningful knowledge is important to expand their teaching repertoire. They prefer knowledge that they identified as needed now to meet students’ needs. Teachers want new teaching strategies on core subjects to stay current on effective teaching strategies, to be able to recognize student learning, and to use hands-on learning methods to best meet teachers’ learning styles. For example, Mandy feels that knowledge gained from research-based college courses were the most valuable type of professional-development experiences. Mandy states,

The most effective ones have been probably research-based college courses that I took. Doing a lot of research is what studies out there are worth implementing in class, who do they benefit, who sponsors the studies, those are the ones I found most effective.

Subtheme 1.1b indicates that teachers value professional development experiences that include time for reflective thinking. Teachers need time to make meaning, revisit a new program to affirm or improve their knowledge, and reflect upon their teaching strategies. As an example, Lillian recalls a professional development experiences that led her to reflect upon her teaching strategy.

I think that perhaps my most memorable professional development involved coursework or experiences where I felt that what I was learning or experiencing would cause me to reflect upon my current practice, examine new learning in that light, and cultivate new skills that would have direct bearing on student learning.
Subtheme 1.1c reveals that teachers value professional development experiences that offer new learning that is readily applicable to the classroom. They desire that, when applying a new learning, it be ready to go or hit the ground running when teachers returned to the classroom. Teachers also prefer that when applying new learning that it can be done at a comfortable pace. For example, Sara voices that she values professional development experiences and that, “Continuity and an opportunity to explore a practice in greater depth made for a more meaningful experience.”

Subtheme 1.1d reveals that teachers value professional development that contains practical knowledge. Teachers define practical knowledge as something tangible, used on a daily basis, tailored to the specific type of classroom needs, and training like computers. For example, Pia recalls how she appreciated having computer training so she could communicate with parents and colleagues.

The computer, we’ve had that type of thing. That works, where you’ve got a lot to learn with that, so we’ve had a lot of that training which we need. That’s become so much a part of our lives now.

Subtheme 1.1e indicates that teachers value professional development that empowers teachers to make professional development choices. They feel empowered by the ability to choose to attend a workshop or conference or to be able to make a choice among a selection of options. Teachers are empowered when selecting a professional development experience in which they have a vested interest. For example, Kasey values being given a choice rather than being forced to participate in a professional development experience that had no meaning. She notes,

I think the most successful professional days have been when there’s been choices given, because you almost feel like you have ownership over what you’re attending. I’d rather choose something where I’m going to go,
make it, take it, learn about it, and bring it back to my classroom. The professional development that I feel has been most valuable is the example of like choices. We'll be given a survey in our mailboxes, maybe [with] 7 to 10 choices. Choose your top 3. And usually we do get them, and it's great because I feel like I'm going to something that I'm interested in doing.

*Theme 1.2* reveals that teachers do not value professional development experiences that do not include planning of teachers' needs, contains redundant knowledge and lack of application to the classroom, do not include teacher ownership, and do not include sufficient time to learn.

Subtheme 1.2a summarizes that teachers do not value professional development experiences that do not involve planning to include the teacher's needs. Teachers recall their professional development experiences as poorly planned or the lacking teacher input due to lacking a sense of a professional development plan, not meeting the needs of teachers, and not understanding the needs of teachers. Further dislikes include programs that would not endure, did not provide teachers with proper preparation or support when applying new learning or training that did not match the intended use of the program. For example, Lori found that the district's professional development experiences did not take into account the needs of teachers. She felt that administration was not really looking at her needs.

Least valuable would be some of the things that administration does in the district to say we're having professional development. We wondered, "Where did they come up with that idea?" They're not really looking at our needs, sometimes. It sounds good on paper, but it really doesn't give us the tools to reach goals or objectives. Elementary is unique and different from upper grades.
Subtheme 1.2b reveals that teachers do not value professional development experiences that contain redundant knowledge and lack application. Teachers describe these professional development experiences as been there done that workshops, recycled or recirculated, too broad of an audience, or too cutting edge. As an example, Lobster notes her opinion regarding professional development experiences that presents redundant information.

I didn’t think it was valuable the first two times I saw it. I hope I will go and at least be polite enough to listen and be open minded, but I’m sure I’m thinking, “Been there, done that, didn’t work. So why are we doing it again?” ... So a lot of things are hard to understand, I think, especially when you get older and you’ve seen the same program but with a different name now.

Subtheme 1.2c shows teachers do not value professional development experiences that do not involve teacher ownership. Professional development experiences that are mandated by administration, lack buy-in from teachers, or perform someone else’s responsibilities are examples on how teachers describe lack of ownership. For example, Lori feels that professional development days were geared to meet a mandated requirement for the No Child Left Behind Act. She voiced, “Sometimes when we do those day-long things, when it’s a professional day, and you have to have so many because of the No Child Left Behind and all that stuff. Some of those were like, ‘Ho, hum, bad choice.’”

Subtheme 1.2d indicates that teachers do not value professional development experiences that do not involve sufficient time to learn. Teachers refer to these workshops as blips in time, one-day-drive-through-drive-out-one shots, or cursory half day workshops. As one example, Mandy feels that these one-day workshops were not enough
time to learn a new program. She believes that with such a short amount of time for a professional development experience that teachers lose interest. She states,

The ones I found the least effective were the one-day-drive-through-drive-out-one-shot-deals, basically presented by publishing companies. You go in, hear a speaker who's just there to collect their money. And they give you a couple of cute little ideas. But there's very little engaging between presenter and the participants; very little dialogue between the participants themselves to share ideas; no follow-through for those. You come back and you get the day off, you go get your materials, you wear your jeans, you get a cup of coffee, you come back and nobody bothers to ask anything.

*Theme 1.3.* Teachers do not recognize other sources of professional development other than mandated in-service days. In most cases, teachers believe that professional development experiences is required by the state and maintained by local school districts to fulfill teaching licensing requirements. Teachers do not connect any further professional development experiences, such as teacher study groups, student assessment events, or special projects like revising report card cards, to their definition of professional development. To illustrate this point, Pia defines professional development as "the district offering me things that will improve my repertoire, my teaching." Lobster continues to explain how professional development is directed by the district and she does what she is told.

I came specifically to talk about my professional development days that have been assigned to me by the school. But now that we're talking about it, I have done a lot more professional development days than I perceive. I think maybe those, to me, are the school's professional development days. And they will tell me what I have to do then.
Comparison of Professional Development Experience Findings to Current Research

The findings of this study noted thus far can be related to features of effective professional development experiences suggested by Garet et al. (2001), both structural and core. Structural components are form, duration, and collective participation; core components are content, active learning, and coherence.

The findings indicate that teachers have no preference regarding types of professional development. Teachers value both traditional and reformed methods of professional development, as long as certain elements are in place. This finding differs from Garet et al. (2001), who suggested that reformed type of professional development resulted in a more successful experience when reviewing participation and duration components.

In this study, teachers perceive content as an important component of professional development experiences. Teachers describe their most valued professional development experiences occurred when the content was aimed to improve teaching strategies, and offered relevant and practical knowledge. Themes reflect both most valued and least valued elements that would affect the success of new learning and its application. Garet et al. (2001) supported this study’s findings by suggesting there should be a balance between improving teacher knowledge and how students learn from this teacher knowledge.

Empowerment, working with colleagues, reflective practice, and applying learning are all areas that teachers believe engaged them in new learning. One key area of concern voiced involves current practices of planning, because teachers' needs are not always considered. In a similar manner, Garet et al. (2001) found teachers perceive active
learning as an important component of the professional development experience. The study by Garet et al. (2001) also suggested that collective participation is the extent to which professional development activities are perceived by teachers to be a part of a coherent program of teacher learning and development as identified by the common category of affirmation and motivation.

The findings of my study are also supported by Guskey’s (2003) review of the 21 characteristics that teachers cited as most effective. Guskey’s study suggested that enhanced content and pedagogical knowledge were the most important qualities for teachers. Related to these findings, Klinger (2004) suggested that all teachers do not have the same needs based on their teaching experiences and classroom expectations. Klinger suggests that planning carefully consider the “complex factors” of teachers’ needs.

Teachers, in my study, emphasize the duration of time as another factor that affects effective professional development. Teachers feel that they did not have time to waste, and therefore, the time they invest must reflect the meaningfulness of the learning. My findings also suggest that duration is conditional on whether the new learning was presenting a new concept or developing a deeper understanding of an already introduced concept. The length of time of a college course is preferred for teachers to develop a deep understanding, yet, short, half-day experiences are preferred when presenting, reviewing or following up on already-learned knowledge or skills. This finding suggests a distinction not noted by Garet et al., who found the longer the duration of professional development experience, the more likely the experience would have an impact on learning.
The findings from my study suggest teachers devalue professional development experiences that do not include teacher ownership. The findings reveal that teachers want to be able to choose their professional development. Teachers did not indicate whether this choice would be outside of the mandated in-service days or among the possible choices offered on in-service days. In a similar manner, Diaz-Maggioli (2004) proposed that a deterrent to effective professional development experiences is the lack of ownership and its results. As a result, teachers do not apply the new learning as it was intended. Sparks (2002) also supported this study’s findings by proposing that ownership and enthusiasm are important for teachers to participate in professional development experiences and to focus on student outcomes.

Teachers also devalue professional development experiences that do not include sufficient time to learn before applying it to the classroom. My study finds that teachers feel most professional development experiences are too short to learn all the components of a new program. In a similar manner, Boardman and Woodruff (2004) suggested that teachers are likely to apply new learning if they are given time to learn as well as ongoing support and feedback while applying that new learning. In addition, Smith and Desimone’s (2003) study proposed that teachers preferred sustained professional development rather than “blips” in time that only last a day or less. Smith suggests that teachers are most likely to link with student outcomes if teachers have long enough time to learn.

One particularly interesting finding of my study is that teachers do not recognize other sources of professional development other the traditional mandated in-service days. This means that although teachers may value informal teacher dialogues or mentoring,
they do not recognize these as professional development experiences per se. Many teachers believe that professional development experiences are things mandated by the state to maintain teaching certification. When comparing this finding to current research, no other study could be found that revealed this insight that teachers define professional development experiences to only include mandated in-service days.

Another interesting finding was that few teachers specifically mention that they valued professional development experiences that directly connect their learning experiences to student outcomes. This observation will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Research Question 2

Summary of Findings

Research question 2 is “To what extent and how are committed teachers able to apply what they learn from professional development experiences in their classroom to support students’ learning outcomes?” Research question 2 explores teachers’ connections between new learning from professional development experiences and its impact on improving students’ outcomes. From the results, three themes emerged that depict teachers’ beliefs and understandings.

1. Assessment of students’ outcome are based on multiple methods including: (a) teacher’s observation of student progress, (b) student’s behavior and product, and (c) teacher’s interpretation of student’s emotions;

2. Teachers expect professional development to meet the ever-changing needs of students; and
3. Teachers believe their teaching strategies and attitudes directly impact student learning (see Table 4).

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Application to Support Students’ Learning Outcomes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 - Assessment of Student Outcomes are Conducted Using Multiple Methods, including:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1a - Teacher’s observation of student’s progress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1b - Student’s behavior and product</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1c - Teacher’s interpretation of student’s emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 - Teachers expect professional development to meet the ever-changing needs of students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 - Teachers believe their teaching strategies and attitudes directly impact student learning.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Theme 2.1. Teacher assessments of students’ outcomes are conducted using multiple methods. The state in which this study took place requires that its school districts measure reading and math scores for students in first grade and higher. Although there is no specific standardized state testing before third grade, teachers in this study administered formal assessments using programs such as DRA or DIEBELS. In addition, they used informal assessments such as observations of student progress, as well as behavior and emotions.

Subtheme 2.1a reveals that assessment of student outcomes is often conducted using teacher’s observations of student’s progress. Many teachers rely heavily on
observation, a visual rubric, using own judgment, flow of the classroom routine or educated eyes to determine students’ success when applying new learning. For example, Jean evaluated or made judgments on the developmental appropriateness of a new program for first and second grade students based on her teaching expertise. She explained,

You’ve got to always be evaluating. And I don’t think anything is black and white. But you’ll think, “All right, this is not going to work.” So I think you have to look at it through educated eyes and say, “Okay, is that something that will work with this age group? Is it not? Is it something that I can try? Is there a grain in there that I can take from it and build on and have that component there, but have it work better, maybe, one way or another.”

Subtheme 2.1b shows that assessments of student outcomes are conducted using student’s behavior and product. Teachers describe how they collect data through observing students’ making connections to new learning, listening to students articulating their thinking, reviewing students’ products, and monitoring the flow of classroom routine. To illustrate this point, Mandy judged students’ success by whether they were able to articulate their thinking. Mandy felt that if student could explain what they were doing and why, then they had a true understanding of the material.

How well a student can articulate their thinking from getting [from] A to B, posing the question, how did I get there, and here’s my answer. And being able to say to a student, “I still don’t get it. Give me another way to explain that.” And if they can give me another way, then I know they got it. If they only give me back the same things, they’ve only scratched the surface. So I’m looking for really well-articulated thought-out answers to the question, and being able to demonstrate on a number of different levels.

As a final part, Subtheme 2.1c shows that assessments of student outcomes are conducted using teachers’ interpretation of student’s outcomes. Teachers observe and
interrupt student's enjoyment, feeling of success, and engagement as assessment measures. As an example on how teachers use one of these informal methods of evaluation, Sara reflected on student outcomes by measuring students’ success based on whether they enjoyed the lesson. She recalled when first applying a new math series, she knew she was teaching it correctly and the program was making a difference because of “their enthusiasm for that piece of the day … they love it when we’re doing math.” She explained that it is the enthusiasm of the students and positive feedback from parents that is the measure of success.

Theme 2.2. Teachers expect professional development to meet the ever-changing needs of students. In applying new learning from professional development experiences, teachers describe the importance of meeting the needs of all students. Teachers find that students are coming to school with more unmet emotional, social, and academic needs than ever before. Adjusting for difference in students who are learning impaired, non-English speaking, or emotionally impaired has become increasingly important. Most teachers in this study were not trained in special education, yet all of them have had students with special needs. Many teachers in this study were concerned about successfully meeting the wide-spectrum of social and emotional needs of students as well as with those students who had special learning needs. In this study, teachers noted that they were worried about meeting the different development rate of students, and addressing the different learning rates and progression for all students. To illustrate the point, Lillian described that a new program must take into account the different learning rates of students. Lillian recalled,
I respect that kind of learning, and I also respect any kind of program that says it's okay if you don't know it today, because we're going to do it again tomorrow, and we're going to do it again the next day. Everybody doesn't learn the same things in the same way, and this might be easy for you, and that's hard for you, and that's okay, because we're all different. We're all different learners.

Additionally teachers believe that students perceived new learning differently, and need time to adjust to the new learning. How a teacher paces the lesson and uses open-ended questions are ways teachers feel they could connect to a wide-spectrum of learning needs. For example, Mandy found that asking open-ended questions was the best way for students to learn.

There is not one neat answer to many of the questions we ask our students. The value of asking an open-ended question, with providing little guidance, not in all, but in some cases, is much more effective than you walking them step by step by step. You're walking them through that experience. It becomes true learning when they do that.

Theme 2.3. Teachers believe their teaching strategies and attitudes directly impact student learning and outcomes. Teachers are confident that as they improve their teaching knowledge, so in turn, their teaching strategies improve. Along with increased knowledge, teachers observe that the way they taught had a powerful impact on the students, and with different learning styles their enthusiasm affected students' attitudes toward learning a new skill. Throughout the entire student learning process, teachers held themselves accountable for students' successes or failures. For example, Lillian holds herself accountable without excuses for the success of all students. Participation in professional development experiences offers the opportunity for Lillian to stay knowledgeable and to meet the different needs of students. She states,
It doesn’t make one bit of difference, because kids come to us and kids’ backgrounds are different. Kids’ home experiencing may be different. We need to keep learning in order to keep up with their needs, whether they are emotional or social, as well as the academic.

Teachers believe that students reflect teaching attitudes back to them. Teachers feel they were more successful if they had a comfort level with the new learning when they tried to apply it. Teacher’s roles include being able to pinpoint obstacles in students’ growth, communicate to students in different ways, and set high expectations. Teachers feel that setting their goals around students’ needs created an environment for successful application of new learning for everyone in the classroom.

**Comparison of Current Research to the Students’ Learning Outcomes Findings**

Many studies indicate that effective professional development should focus on student outcomes. This study found three common themes regarding issues that teachers identified when assessing and supporting students’ learning outcomes. Teachers informally assess students’ progress, expect professional development experiences to meet the ever-changing needs of all students and believe their teaching strategies and attitudes impact student outcomes. In a similar manner, a study by Boardman and Woodruff (2004) found that teachers must clearly understand the new learning and be able to pinpoint this new learning to meet individual students’ needs. In addition, teachers must perceive that the new learning sets high standards for student outcomes and meets their learning needs.

My study suggests that teachers focus on students’ learning strategies by the way they communicate in different ways for different students and are setting goals around
students' needs. In a similar manner, Killion (2002) suggested that meeting student learning needs increased student achievement.

Deeper content knowledge, more content-specific instructional strategies, and greater understandings about how students learn will better enable teachers to craft instruction to meet the varying needs of students and help them achieve rigorous content standards. When teachers meet student learning needs, student achievement increases. (Killion, 2002, p. 9)

Teachers, in this study, perceive that adjusting teaching strategies and classroom management skills helps students meet various curriculum changes and learning challenges. To support this finding, Speck and Knipe (2005) proposed that to increase student achievement teachers need to be prepared to help diverse groups of students meet continuously evolving curriculum standards.

Few teachers in this study used student data through formal assessment as a means to determine student success. Most assessment tools used were informal, such as observing student behavior, using teacher judgment, and using visual rubrics. In contrast, related research has indicated that teachers need to collect and use objective data to determine student success (Fishman et al., 2003; Good et al., 2003; Kubitskey & Fishman, 2007).

My study found that teachers do not make a clear connection between the professional development activities and student outcomes. Teachers understand that professional development experiences should improve their teaching strategies, yet not all teachers made the connection between the knowledge gained from professional development and improving students' outcomes. Other current research indicates that effective professional development should focus on student achievement as the most important measure in the classroom (Boardman & Woodruff, 2004; Center for
Research Question 3

Research Question 3 examines, “How, if at all, do (a) the learning culture of a school and/or district and (b) teachers’ contributions (the formative input teachers have in constructing the district’s professional development plans) affect the application of learning from professional development experiences in the classroom?” Building a learning community requires a positive school culture that includes teachers’ participation in professional development experiences with a collegial atmosphere and supportive ongoing collaborations (Good et al., 2003; Hawley, 2002; Lauer & Dean, 2004). To answer Research Question 3, the findings were examined using things that influence a positive school culture: colleagues, leadership, coach, and professional development planning (see Table 5).

Summary of Findings

Garet et al. (2001) found that active learning experiences involved teachers observing expert teachers, being observed by expert teachers with feedback, and planning curriculum and its implementation with colleagues by reviewing student work. This collaboration forms a strong learning culture that contributes to teachers’ professional development by creating an atmosphere of shared collegiality among teachers and leaders. In a similar vein, three themes relate to the role of colleagues within the learning cultures for the teachers in this study.
Table 5

Influences of a Positive Learning Community

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Colleagues</th>
<th>Sara</th>
<th>Lillian</th>
<th>Jean</th>
<th>Pia</th>
<th>Lori</th>
<th>Lobster</th>
<th>Mandy</th>
<th>Kasey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.1 - Teachers welcome informal dialogues among colleagues</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.2 - Teachers desire ongoing support with colleagues via:</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2a - Regular meetings (embedded during the day)</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2b - Sharing materials, advice, and ideas</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 - Teachers value team work and the need for vested interest in each other</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
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<td>3.4 - Teachers most value leaders who:</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.4a - Are supportive</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3.4b - Build collaboration</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>3.4c - Are good listeners, observers and catalysts for change</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>x</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.4d - Promote growth of teacher knowledge and acts as a role model</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.5 - Teachers desire an internal coach as a readily available, trustworthy classroom resource</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Professional Development Planning</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.6 - Teachers desire input into plan that allow for individual and district needs</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>x</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Theme 3.1. Teachers welcome informal dialogues among colleagues. Teachers indicated that many conversations took place in the hallways, lunchroom, and workroom. They describe these conversations as *collegial discussion, banter back and forth, coming together of minds*, and *bouncing off ideas*. Teachers value daily *informal discussions* for added support regarding students’ success, teacher frustrations, or ways to apply new learning. It is this *ongoing support* that teachers found to be important when determining if they were on the same page or the *coming together of minds* when problem solving.
For example, Jean considers communication with her colleagues important so that teachers do not “shut that door and never talk to anybody all day long.” She thrives on the daily informal dialogues. She notes,

We all talk to each other all the time and we all are talking about, “Well what did you try? What did you do? What went wrong? What bombed?” It is open. At the primary grades we all get along and it is huge to say, “That lesson—.” Go back to Everyday Math. “That lesson on whatever, did you present it differently? How did you present it? Are your kids getting it any better? I did it this way. Do you think?” I’ll ask anybody for help when I think it need it and when colleagues say, “Well, yeah, I did it this way,” or “I used this,” or “I did that.” It’s almost like, “Wow, I never even thought of that.” So it just opens it up to everybody else’s thoughts on it, which is, it’s so valuable. It doesn’t mean that I might take away the way I would present it myself and my personality or that kind of thing, but just looking at it in a different way or something that I might not have thought of that works, I think it just fleshes it out so much more to talk to colleagues about it.

Theme 3.2. Teachers desire ongoing support with colleagues via (a) regular meetings and (b) by sharing materials, advice, and ideas. Although, teachers value the time they can spend talking to colleagues in a formal method of regularly scheduled meetings, they did not have a preference for informal or formal communication with colleagues.

One part of this idea, Subtheme 3.2a is that teachers desire ongoing support with colleagues with regular meetings that are embedded during the day. Teachers perceive regular meetings as more formal communications because meeting times are scheduled. Grade-level or building-wide staff meetings and the ability to control the agendas for these meetings are important for teachers. Being responsible for organizing and prioritizing the agenda items permits teachers to identify important curriculum,
instruction, or assessment topics. As an example, Pia feels that working together and planning together with colleagues should be an important part of the school day.

If we had once a week that we could meet for an hour as a grade level, that would be wonderful. That would be nice, to kind of plan, and we've tried to do this in a rushed way, to try to plan certain things that we're going to do. So if we knew we had an hour every week that would be really nice. I'm not talking 7:30 in the morning before school. I'm talking 1 o'clock to 2, but we're talking perfect world.

As a second part, Subtheme 3.2b, I found that teachers desire ongoing support with colleagues by sharing materials, advice, and ideas. Teachers felt that that this ongoing support provides feedback, private professional development time, meeting in each other rooms to share ideas, and comfort knowing they had community support. This support differed from the informal dialogues because the sharing of advice, materials, and ideas occurred at formal meetings. Most teachers indicated that they had an amiable group of teachers who were supportive, felt comfortable to share ideas, and sought advice from one another. Teachers appreciated the community support of sharing materials. For some teachers this meant having staff meetings in each other's room to share ideas. These opportunities were described as private professional development time. To illustrate this point, Kasey felt that getting together with colleagues kept them focused on the same way of working. Kasey believed that every time she and her colleagues met, it is their private, professional-development time. She and her colleagues worked at developing a close team by pairing with each other. She recalled,

There are six of us, so we're constantly pairing off and it's good for the kids to see, "Oh, my teacher's going to work with this other teacher," and it builds a nice rapport throughout the entire wing, so I feel that as a second-grade team, we use our private professional development time really well.
Theme 3.3. Teachers value team work and the need for vested interest in each other. Team work was an important part of a learning community, because teachers could work collaboratively and take a lot of stress off each other. A few teachers described this collaboration as forming a close-knit team. Teachers appreciated team work because it provided less work for each team member. Some teachers stated they would meet once a week and share hand-outs or prepare science experiments together. Teachers felt vested in their learning communities. Teachers’ vested interest created strong communication, collaboration, team work, and a deep respect for each other. They developed a vested interest in each other, such as when veteran teachers mentored new teachers to perpetuate a strong learning community. As an example, Jean notes, “that’s why this community is so strong is because we kind of are vested in each other and kind of take care of each other.”

Theme 3.4. In reference to leadership, this study found that supporting a positive school culture requires ongoing collaboration between staff and administrators. As subthemes of this idea, teachers value leaders who (a) are supportive, (b) build collaboration, (c) are good listeners, and (d) promote growth of teacher knowledge and acts as a role model.

As a first component, Subtheme 3.4a teachers value leaders who are supportive. Teachers describe supportive leaders as always available, provide encouragement, are visible, motivating, receptive to new ideas, and approachable. To illustrate, Pia appreciates that the principal was receptive and focused on the successes. Pia related,

My principal is very receptive if you need to talk to her about certain things. And she likes to share the positive. She likes to hear the successes
and then she likes to take it further to the children. If a child is having a success because they've had an issue and then they show a success, she will go to the child, so she communicates with, brings it down to the child as well.

As a second component, Subtheme 3.4b teachers value leaders who build collaboration. Teachers value leadership that is open to new ideas, do not force them into new programs, and consider input from teachers. As an example, Kasey appreciates that her principal is open to new ideas before making a decision. She states, "I feel like my principal is very good to all of us. She runs a tight ship, but I feel like we always know where we stand and she takes our opinions into consideration."

As a third component, Subtheme 3.4c teachers value leaders who are good listeners, observers, and catalysts for change. Teachers describe actions of leaders who are good listeners to cultivate a positive school learning culture, to provide teachers with quality professional development, and to build teachers as agents of change. As one example, Mandy describes how she and the principal would discuss Mandy's professional development experience. Mandy appreciates that the principal would inquire if the experience was worthwhile. She notes,

The present administration is phenomenal. If there was a course offered that I thought was worthwhile that I was very excited about, not only would she sit down and listen to me, she would really make sure I was very passionate about attending this. She would sign off, but I know this is the type of person. She would come back and say, "Okay, you were all hyped out about it. Was it worth it? Is it something that you think we could be using?"

Teachers also appreciate that leadership was observing classroom activities and were familiar with student growth. Teachers feel supportive when leaders understand
what was really happening in the classroom. They felt that leadership really understood classroom activities by making many classroom visits on a regular basis.

As a final component within this theme regarding the importance of leadership, Subtheme 3.4d the results reveal that teachers value leaders who promote the growth of teachers’ knowledge and acts as a role model. Promoting growth and having vision were two concepts that teachers deemed important qualities for leadership. Teachers believed that leadership promotes growth by valuing continuous learning from staff and themselves. They also believed that to support a school learning culture, leadership must be forward thinking to future goals. For example, Jean explains how she felt that a former superintendent was a forward thinker. She notes,

Our superintendent from three superintendents ago was the one who wanted multi-age. He wanted us to try it, and he had done a lot of research on developmentally appropriate practices, and wanted to bring that in. And the teachers kind of kept saying, “No, no.” And he didn’t force it on [us] because he thought he knew that if you want to do it, you’re going to make it work better than if you’re told, “all right, you’re going to do that.” And [waited until] a couple of teachers were ready to take the leap. It was very supportive, but always forward thinking in how we would do things and the things we would bring in.

In a similar manner, teachers desire their leaders to understand classroom activities; they need leadership to act as coach and role model. Teachers feel it is important that leadership remember what it was like to be a teacher and be familiar with the new skills or knowledge that was being applied to the classroom. Kasey believed the principal understood what she was experiencing as an elementary teacher. Kasey stated, “Our principal was an elementary teacher. I think she’s been there. She’s done that. She understands.”

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Theme 3.5. In reference to “coaching,” teachers desire an internal coach as a readily available, trustworthy classroom resource. Teachers believe that coaches are needed when applying new learning. They appreciate coaches as resources for their availability, and trustworthiness. Teachers comment that internal coaches provide a model for new learning and help in fine-tuning teachers’ skills. Teachers indicate that a great benefit of an internal coach is having availability when teachers need support. Internal coaches are informally available, because a coach is a colleague located conveniently in the building. Teachers feel that coaches are most helpful when they provide teachers with personal instruction, increase familiarity with the program, or adjust the program for struggling students. Teachers feel that, in some cases, external coaches lack validity when supporting teachers if they do not have teaching experiences or practical solutions. As one example, Lobster illustrates these feelings as she describes her willingness to apply new learning if a familiar person is providing information, by recalling when the new math program was being implemented. Her internal coach’s name was Julie. Lobster said,

I think it’s the person doing the training or the person running the session that makes a big difference, because we knew Julie was into it. Julie found value in it, so when she presented it to us, that was almost one plus already. Julie said this will work. Julie said we can do it, so let’s get going.

Theme 3.6. In reference to professional development planning, teachers desire input into the planning that allows for individual and district needs. Collaboration, allow for individual and district needs, and cohesiveness of the plan are descriptions that teachers used to describe their attitudes and beliefs regarding professional development
plans. Teachers believe that the planning process must be a joint effort with administration. For example, Pia believes that teachers should communicate with administration regarding their teaching needs and have the district create annual plans to maintain a current knowledge of curriculum and assessment. She explains,

"The ideal role of a teacher in a district professional plan would be the teacher’s needs being communicated to the administration. Teachers know what they are accountable for and also are aware of what is needed to improve their everyday teaching. [No Child Left Behind] and the frameworks have added a great deal of curriculum and assessment that needs to be covered each year. In an ideal district, the teachers would have a say on how the grade-level framework tasks could be met with the least amount of programs that are expected to be covered.

In addition, teachers feel that meeting the needs of a wide-range of teaching experiences from the novice teacher to the veteran teacher are a necessary part of effective professional development. They believe that individual and district plans should be synchronized to create annual plans that maintain current knowledge of curriculum and assessment. Included in all professional development plans should be a timeline that provided adequate time to prepare and apply new learning. Teachers reject the professional development experiences that they label one-size-fits-all because it does not account for individual needs based on teaching experiences.

Comparison of Learning Community-Related Findings to Current Research

The findings of this study suggest that teachers value informal and formal communication. Being able to communicate was an important element to supporting a learning community. Good et al. (2003) and Lauer and Dean (2004) support findings from this study by suggesting that communication was an essential activity to begin and maintain learning communities."
Sharing materials, being supportive, and feeling comfortable to share ideas among teachers are important for collaboration among colleagues. In accord, the National Partnership for Excellence and Accountability in Teaching (2003) suggested that professional learning communities are based on a culture of sharing, trust, and support. Team work cultivates the desire to work together and be responsible for student learning. The findings of this study are also supported by Boardman and Woodruff (2004) who suggested that teachers who are vested in their learning and supporting each other impact the successfulness of applying new learning.

In comparison of leadership findings to current research, this study suggests that teachers need leadership to be supportive, to build collaboration among staff and administrators, and to listen to teachers' concerns or ideas. Zemelman et al. (2005) also identified supportive leadership as key to promoting growth. Teachers relied on school leaders to support them by making decisions regarding professional development experiences, by possessing a clear vision of the school’s mission, by cultivating a positive school culture, and by acting as a coach and role model.

The results from my study propose that leadership must be familiar with new knowledge and skills being applied to the classroom and that teachers and administrators collectively delineate worthwhile professional development. In agreement, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1995) and Ganser (2000) found that leaders need to share in the continuous learning from professional development. My findings are also supported by Reid (2005), who wrote, “A principal’s leadership style is directly related to teachers’ perceptions of whether their needs were met by required professional development” (p. 113).
My findings also suggest that teachers prefer the support and guidance from internal coaches rather than external coaches. Teachers unanimously averred that internal coaches were preferred. Current research supports the need for a coach as a necessary element in the application of new learning for modeling learning and mentors, although they do not differentiate between external or internal coaches (Birman et al., 2000; Grant, 2005; Justin, 2005; Rasmussen et al., 2004; Reid, 2005). The finding of this study specifically identifies that teachers prefer an internal coach for support.

In comparing the findings of teachers’ perceptions on coaching to current research, the findings of my study suggest that teachers want the support from coaches to be a source of practical information and provide advice on fine-tuning skills. In support of these findings, Grant (2005) proposed that coaches collaborate with teachers to provide ongoing support and guidance, and as a result, teachers will continue to want to improve their teaching practices.

Interestingly, my study did not find that teachers took time to reflect on new knowledge or skills due to coaching support. Yet, Cooter’s (2003) study suggested that support from a coach, who has expertise in the content area of professional development, increases the likelihood that a teacher will take the time to reflect on new knowledge or skills.

The findings of my study also indicate that teachers desired greater input into professional development plans. In support, Speck and Kniepe (2006) proposed that teachers need to be a part of the planning process on a regular basis. As a possible result of lack of input, teachers may not commit to professional development goals.
One implication from my results is that plans should be written not only for district needs but also for individual needs. These findings contradict with Hirsch (2004) who suggested that plans focus on “the system as a whole and individuals must change to achieve the districts’ goals” (p. 12). On the other hand, Good et al. (2003) supported this study’s findings by proposing that teachers want to be empowered to develop individual professional plans.

Teachers in my study expressed the need for professional development plans to include adequate time to prepare and apply new learning as perceived. Teachers need time to reflect on the new learning and work with colleagues to gather needed materials. Although previous research supports the need for time to prepare and apply new learning (Cooter, 2003; Cranton & King, 2003) there was no specific indication as to these needs as part of a professional development plan.

My study found that the professional development plans for these teachers did not include direct links to student outcomes (at least as perceived by the teachers). Findings indicate that teachers’ concerns centered on teacher learning and not student outcomes. In support of this finding, Cohen and Hill (1998) found that “teachers typically engage in a variety of short-term activities that fulfill state or local requirements for professional learning, but which are rarely deeply rooted in the school curriculum or in thoughtful plans to improve teaching and learning” (p. 11).

Research Question 4

Summary of Findings

Research Question 4 states “What barriers, if any, do committed teachers encounter when attempting to implement ideas from their professional development
experiences to impact student learning in their classrooms, and how do teachers overcome such barriers, if at all?” Five themes encompass teachers’ attitudes and beliefs regarding barriers they encounter in the classroom. Emergent themes are *time, beliefs and attitudes, lack of support, not meeting student needs, and inadequate program and materials for teaching* (see Table 6).

Table 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Barriers to Applying New Learning</th>
<th>Sara Lillian</th>
<th>Jean</th>
<th>Pia</th>
<th>Lori Lobster</th>
<th>Mandy</th>
<th>Kasey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4.1 - Lack of Time</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
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<td>4.2 - Content was Contrary to Teachers’ Beliefs and Attitudes</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>4.3 - Lack of Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.4 - Not Meeting Student Needs</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<td>4.5 - Inadequate Program and Materials for Teaching</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Theme 4.1. All teachers indicate that time is the most common barrier that impacts teachers as well as students. They indicate that the *lack of time*, time needed *to do a lot of legwork* in preparing to apply new learning, feeling that the lack of time has *spread teachers so thin*, and the resentment of having to *give up personal time* were barriers teachers confronted when applying new learning. For example, Kasey explains a situation where the district offered a new computer package designed to identify students’ weaknesses in a core content area and create a tutorial to improve these weak skills. Kasey and the computer teacher were excited to apply this new tool, but could not find the needed time during the week. She felt that with lunch, recess, and specials (art, music, physical education, etc.) that there was no spare time. She explained,

Yeah, let’s do it.” Then I’m like, “That makes more sense to me,” but we didn’t end up doing it, because there’s just a time thing. There’s so much to do from 9 to 3, let alone lunch, recess, and their special. So I don’t
know. Maybe I’ll still open to considering. It’s almost like our computer
teacher had it set up. We could just walk in and do it almost. But we had
our computer teacher leave in the middle of the year. I think I would still
be interested in doing it, but it’s just one of those things, that making the
time.

Teachers describe how time is also a barrier for students. Teachers found it
difficult when applying new learning to plan an adequate amount of time needed for
students to build skills or for all students to complete an assignment. Because teachers
found it difficult to plan for enough time, some students may be forced to rush through
assignments to keep pace with the class. In contrast, some teachers assigned extra work to
keep students who finished early busy as they waited for the rest of the class to complete
the assignment. As a result of rushing to keep students busy, teachers felt that students
did not have time to completely finish work thus creating a feeling of piling it on. To
illustrate this point, Pia feels that rushing and piling it on are barriers. She explains,

This year we especially all felt that frustration of having to rush, get this
done. All right. Get this done. No time to breathe. There’s no fun. I’m not
saying they don’t have a good time, and I’m not saying that, but you do
need to keep them busy every minute because [if] you don’t keep them
busy every minute then you have issues.

Theme 4.2. Teachers specify beliefs and attitudes as barriers to applying new
learning. Teachers feel that they lacked buy-in to a new program, that colleagues were
not committed to applying new learning, and that the application of new learning had no
benefit to teachers. Teachers’ attitudes became a barrier when teachers develop a
negative preconceived notion or would resist applying new learning because they feel
they were just creatures of habit. Sara explains how the lack of buy-in causes her to not
totally accept a new classroom management program. She recalls,
That is something to me that is not favorable. I don’t personally buy into the (Baldridge) concept in public schools, although I do see pieces of it that probably could. I just feel like the (Baldridge) concept is a business concept and we’re just kind of losing that whole humanistic piece of our school environment, the nurturing piece. It’s just something I personally did not buy into. I went to the training and I attempted to incorporate piece of it into my classroom, and I still do, but it’s something that I just haven’t latched onto.

_Theme 4.3._ Teachers indicate that the lack of support is a barrier when applying new learning. _Lack of discussion with colleagues_ of ideas or problem solving are barriers for some teachers. They feel frustrated when they feel they _lack knowledge_ or do not have _enough training_. Jean is frustrated by not having proper training before applying new learning. She states,

Another frustration might be not having enough—I hate to say—training because we sound like animals, but support before you begin something. That is a frustration. Being just dropped in the middle of it, and say, “Do it.” That’s a frustration. I have a real positive attitude of “Okay, let’s go, let’s get it, and let’s get it done. Let’s do it. We’ll figure it out.” And if something’s not going right, you read, talk about it, think about it, and shift gears a little bit. So I think the biggest frustration is not being as prepared as you could be.

_Theme 4.4._ Teachers indicate that not meeting student needs is a barrier when applying new learning. Teachers find that when applying new learning, students’ learning rates differed greatly, creating inconsistency in students’ outcomes. In addition to learning needs, teachers become frustrated when students stop the learning process _when their social and emotional needs are not met_. Lillian feels that before she addresses a child’s academic needs, she has to work to address a child’s emotional or social needs. Lillian explains,
Kids come to school, as individuals, and they have their needs, and where I might look at a child and see my primary purpose is their academic needs, I need to take care of the social and emotional, because those impact their learning so much, that sometimes, until you get past their emotional and their social needs, to get to the academic is very difficult. Or to allow them to achieve academically while dealing with their emotional and social issues is a barrier.

Theme 4.5. Teachers indicate that inadequate program and materials for teaching are barriers when applying new learning. Teachers describe these barriers as the lack of resources or having materials that were not helpful to applying new learning. Teachers face barriers when the program did not account for deviation from the script due to an unpredicted student response. In some situations, teachers read from a scripted program by reading the bold print from the teacher’s manual and waiting for a predicted response, but were frustrated when they do not know how react to unpredictable, student response. In presenting the same program to meet all students’ learning needs, cumbersome programs are barriers when teachers create multiple groups of learners. Teachers would teach the same lesson multiple times and adjust for individual learning needs. Jean feels that programs are too cumbersome, and therefore, she cannot apply the program as designed. She recalls,

I just found that cumbersome. That was something that, I don’t know whether it’s because I’ve been doing it a long time, but I can look at a kid’s name and kind of, I don’t know whether I just put it in my brain or what, and I will write notes down, but not in the formal detailed, it was just way too cumbersome for the time that I was spending doing it.

Comparison of Current Research to the Barriers to Applying New Learning Findings

The finding of this study suggests that teachers contend with barriers that impede the application of new learning. Teachers’ attitudes and beliefs, time restraints, and
challenges managing a classroom are examples of these barriers. The findings of the study concur with those of Justin (2005), who suggested that teachers experience personal, professional, and institutional barriers. Personal barriers that interfere with the successful implementation of a professional development plan make it hard to find time during the day to try out a new strategy. Professional barriers are the result of development experiences that do not meet the needs of the teachers. Teachers perceived these workshops as valueless. Institutional barriers, such as school culture, support, funding, communication, and time, existed when colleagues or administration did not support professional development experiences.

**Overall Summary of Key Findings as Connected to Previous Research**

In summary, the findings of this study attempt to answer four research questions regarding teachers’ perceptions of professional development experiences. Seventeen themes were revealed, several with subthemes. As appropriate, connections for each of these themes was discussed following each of the previous research question sections.

What follows here is a summary of my key findings, which I believe have the greatest implications for practitioners and future researchers. These are depicted in Table 7, as are several research studies that address these findings.
Table 7

Summary Comparison of Key Findings to Previous Research

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous Research</th>
<th>Nugent (2007) Key Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No previous study found.</td>
<td>Most teachers did not recognize other sources of professional other than mandated in-service days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No previous study found.</td>
<td>Few teachers connect their learning from professional development experiences to student outcomes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coaching is a necessary element in the application of new learning for modeling learning and mentors (Birman et al., 2000; Grant, 2005; Justin, 2005; Rasmussen et al., 2004; Reid, 2005).</td>
<td>Adding more detail to previous research, teachers prefer the support and guidance from internal coaches rather than external coaches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers need a follow-up workshop to review concerns and successes of the application of new learning along with students’ assessments (Kubitskey &amp; Fishman, 2007).</td>
<td>Adding more detail, teachers indicated a need for ongoing support not just with colleagues, but also with coaches and administration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leaders need to share in the continuous learning from professional development (Darling-Hammond &amp; McLaughlin, 1995; Ganser, 2000).</td>
<td>Enhancing previous research, leaders need to be familiar with new knowledge and skills being applied to the classroom and that teachers and administrators collectively delineate worthwhile professional development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reform-type of professional development increases the likelihood of a successful experience when reviewing participation and duration (Garet et al., 2001).</td>
<td>In contrast to previous research, teachers had no preference relating to the types of professional development experiences, and yet actively participated in most opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional development plans focus on district needs and that individual teachers need to change to meet these goals (McMunn et al., 2003).</td>
<td>In support of previous research, teachers indicate a need to have both individual and district needs as part of a professional development plan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers, who focus on a better understanding of subject content matter, shift to a more balanced approach to teaching by gaining a deeper understanding of content and how students learn these subjects (Garet et al., 2001; Sparks, 2002).</td>
<td>Similar to previous research, teachers value professional development experiences when the content is aimed to improve teaching strategies, knowledge, and practical knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy-in, knowledge, and confidence influence teacher behavior when applying new learning gained from a professional development experience (Kubitskey &amp; Fishman, 2007).</td>
<td>In a similar vain, teachers’ attitudes toward professional development experiences are based on knowledge support for learning culture, and beliefs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Teachers need to be a part of planning process on a regular basis. As a possible result of lack of input, teachers may not commit to professional development goals (Speck & Knipe, 2005).

Similar to previous research, teachers desire greater input into professional development plans.

Teachers experience personal, professional, and institutional barriers (Justin, 2005)

Confirming previous research, teachers contend with their attitudes and beliefs, time restrictions, and classroom management barriers.

Open communication is an essential activity to begin and maintain learning communities (Good et al., 2003; Lauer & Dean, 2004).

Similar to previous research, Teachers value informal and formal communication as an important element to supporting a learning community.

Implications

Although a single study with a small population cannot be generalized to the larger population, this study regarding teachers’ perceptions of their professional development experiences and the connections they make or do not make to improve students’ outcomes has practical and theoretical importance.

Theoretical Implications

Eight first-grade and second-grade teachers recalled their perceptions of professional development experiences and their impact on student outcomes. Each of them identified influences that shaped their ability to gain new learning and apply this new learning to improve student outcomes. All teachers perceived themselves as learners. Such a learning process can be illustrated by using the teacher learning model created by Kubitskey and Fishman (2007), as previously described in chapter II. My study’s findings indicate that teachers’ attitudes toward professional development experiences are based on content of the experience, dynamic and informed presenters, and the opportunity to work with colleagues. Kubitskey and Fishman proposed three filters that influence teaching practices: buy-in, knowledge, and confidence. Indeed, each of these major
categories was a theme for the professional development experiences that teachers in this study valued.

The findings of this study suggested that when applying new learning in the classroom, teachers were most likely to experience teacher-related barriers. Some teachers did not feel ownership of new learning whereas others did not feel they gained enough knowledge to apply new learning in the exact way the program was designed. Teachers decided to pick and choose “pieces” of the new learning, and therefore did not always realize the full benefits of the new programs. In most cases, there was no follow-up by either administrators or teachers to determine the effects on student outcomes or how effectively teachers were applying new learning. Kubitskey and Fishman (2007) supported the need for a follow-up workshop to review concerns and successes of the application of new learning and to review student assessments. They found that the follow-up workshop was a key element to long-term support. Clearly, teachers in this study echoed the need for this type of follow-up. Perhaps the lack of follow-up accounts in part for the inability of many of the teachers in this study to draw the connection between their practices and student outcomes.

What was missing from the Kubitskey and Fishman (2007) model were some of the other influences on teacher practices reflected in the narratives of the 8 teachers in this study. The findings from this study indicated that teachers desired more time with colleagues to conduct ongoing and informal dialogue to support their application of new learning. Findings suggested that colleagues, coaches, administrators, and the professional development plan influenced teacher practices. Therefore, those influences also had an indirect impact on student responses.
**Practical Implications**

Teachers provided insight into their perceptions of professional development experiences. Based on the findings of this study, there are seven practical implications (especially for teachers similar to the first and second-grade teachers in this study).

1. Teachers define professional development experiences to include only district mandated in-service days. This finding suggests that teachers limit what they consider to be professional development experiences and that they need to develop a broader definition to include experiences that are outside of the district’s in-service days. Without this broader definition, teachers miss the value of professional development experiences that occur beyond mandated in-service days by not attending meetings or participating on committees.

2. Teachers used their observational skills rather than formal assessment to evaluate the impact of new learning. This suggests first-grade and second-grade teachers should receive more training and be held accountable for administrating more formal evaluation to provide more precise and consistent feedback, informing their practice as well as identifying potential needs for instructional adaptations and professional development design.

3. Some teachers do not make the connection between teaching professional development experience and student outcomes. This finding suggested that more follow-up is needed to connect student data with a new program’s intended outcomes to increase teachers’ focus in student outcome as feedback for the success of their instruction.
4. Teachers prefer internal coaches for support as they apply new learning because they admired colleagues who provided advice and practical information.

5. Teachers value professional development experiences that improve their teaching strategies, practical knowledge, or boost their confidence.

6. Teachers desire more time with colleagues to conduct ongoing and informal dialogue to support their application of new learning.

7. Teachers desire greater input in developing a professional development plan at the individual and district level.

8. Teachers experience barriers related to lack of time, and sense of ownership, preconceived notions, insufficient training, and management of noncompliant student behaviors. Teachers should receive additional support when applying new learning to overcome these barriers.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the theoretical and practical implications of this study, the following are recommendations for future research:

1. Replicate this study with a different profile of teachers, such as those randomly selected from staff rather than purposely selected committed teachers or teachers who perceive professional development as a waste of time.
2. Conduct a study with teachers who feel the stress of standardized testing at the middle-school and high-school levels.

3. Conduct a study to evaluate ways teachers could contribute to the professional development planning process.

4. Conduct a study to look for ways to strengthen teachers’ connections of professional development experiences to student outcomes.

5. Study the influences of colleagues, coaches, and leadership and professional development planning on Kubitskey and Fishman’s (2007) model of teacher practices and student outcomes.

Conclusion

In this narrative inquiry, 8 first grade and second grade teachers, identified as committed to a life-long love of learning and the application of such new knowledge or skills gained from professional development experiences into their classrooms, shared their perceptions of professional development experiences. These teachers reflected on the experiences they valued, how they applied their learning to support student-learning outcomes, the types of support they received and the barriers they encountered when applying the learning from professional development experiences. The findings of this study suggest that first-grade and second-grade teachers desire greater input into professional development planning.

These teachers valued professional development experiences that improved their teaching strategies, practical knowledge, and confidence. To be successful, these teachers needed more time to conduct ongoing informal dialogue with colleagues as they applied
new learning. In addition to support from colleagues, teachers benefited from the additional support of internal coaches. Teachers experienced barriers related to lack of time and sense of ownership, preconceived notions, insufficient training, and management of noncompliant student behaviors. To overcome these barriers, additional support should be provided.

These first-grade and second-grade teachers used their observational skills rather than formal assessments to evaluate the impact of new learning on student outcomes. Most teachers did not make the connection between participating in professional development experiences and student outcomes. These findings have important implications for the kind of support and follow-up needed in planning professional development opportunities.

Although there were only eight suburban area teachers in this study, this was one of the first studies to add voice and richness to increase understanding into the insight of teachers’ professional development experiences. In an era of accountability that holds teachers accountable for all students in their classrooms, my study revealed that some teachers are still not connecting professional development experiences as a means to improve their students’ outcomes. Teachers need to be supported throughout this process by all stakeholders, and professional development plans should account for individual as well as district needs. If we simply follow Lillian’s advice, teachers and leaders will make great gains toward improving student outcomes. According to Lillian professional development needs to be about “what’s going to help this child learn best.”
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Interview Protocol

| Time of Interview | Date | Place | Interviewee Number |

Greeting:

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this research study. There is no right or wrong responses to the questions that I am going to ask you. I am very interested in your opinions, feelings, and experiences regarding the topic of professional development. Your responses will not be associated with your name. I will use a pseudonym to maintain records. I will be recording your responses electronically to maintain accuracy and will be taking written notes. Your responses will be kept very confidential. Your taped responses will be destroyed after they are transcribed. None of your information will be shared with your district.

This interview should last approximately an hour and a half. I will be following up this interview with another session to review your comments for accuracy and I will be asking you to journal your reflections after this interview. I will contact you to schedule this follow up meeting in the next few weeks.

If at any time you need to get a drink or take care of any personal needs, please feel free to do so.

Do you have any questions for me before we get started?

Description of Project:

The information gained from these interviews will increase understanding of teachers' perceptions regarding professional development. Researchers, policy makers or decision makers could apply the findings of this research to help set district policy, deepen the understanding of the impact of professional development, or aid those who develop professional development plans.

In this study, professional development will be defined as those processes and activities designed to enhance the professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes of educators so that they must in turn, improve the learning of students. *Professional development experiences* processes are activities that heighten awareness of new ideas, reflection, coaching, and sharing.
RQ1. What types of professional development experiences are being offered for teachers, and of these experiences, which do committed teachers find the most valuable in terms of improving students’ outcomes and why?

IQ1. Think back from the beginning of your career until now, and tell me about the professional development experiences that have been the most and least valuable in terms of affecting student outcomes in your classroom. Please describe the difference between these experiences.

RQ2. To what extent and how are committed teachers able to apply what they learn from professional development experiences within their classrooms to support students?

IQ2. Please describe several examples of what you learned from professional development experiences and how you applied these learnings in your classroom as well as several examples of learnings that you were not able to apply. Why were you able to successfully apply learnings in some situations and not in others?

RQ3. How, if at all, do (a) the learning culture of a school and/or district and (b) teachers’ contributions (the formative input teachers have in constructing the districts professional development plans) affect the application of learnings from professional development experiences within the classroom?

IQ3. How have you been involved in contributing to your school’s professional development plan? How do you think your involvement or uninvolve in
creating the school professional development plan affects how professional
development activities are applied in the classroom?

IQ3. How have following factors impacted your ability to apply professional
development learnings in the classroom:

• Collaboration with colleagues
• Administrative leadership
• Internal coaching
• External coaching
• Open communication

RQ4. How do highly committed teachers overcome the key barriers when
attempting to implement learnings from professional development
experiences within their classrooms?

IQ4. What are the various kinds of frustrations you have experienced when applying
learnings or skills from professional development experiences to improve
student outcomes? Please describe how you were able to overcome these
frustrations or barriers.

Thank you for participating in this study. I know how valuable your time is and
appreciate that you were able to meet with me. As mentioned before, there will be
a follow-up interview to check for accuracy. I want to assure you that all responses
will be kept confidential and secure.

Note: RQ means research question, and IQ means face-to-face interview question.
APPENDIX B

LETTER REQUESTING PARTICIPATION
Date

Dear Teacher,

My name is Terry Nugent and I am the principal of Sutton Elementary School in Sutton, Massachusetts. In addition to my administrative duties, I am also a doctoral student at Western Michigan University (in Kalamazoo, MI). I am writing to ask you to be part of a qualitative research study on teachers’ perceptions of professional development. This is part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership. Your building principal recommended you for this study because of your life-long love of learning and willingness to participate in other school-related activities.

Participating in this study will include:

- An initial face-to-face interview conversation that should last approximately an hour and a half and that will be conducted after school hours in a private location in your school building. This conversation will be recorded by a tape recorder, and I will also be taking written notes,
- Your written reflections on your professional development experiences,
- A follow-up meeting that will last approximately one hour and will allow me to check for accuracy of my notes and to ask any follow up questions I had after reviewing the transcripts of our first meeting.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and there is no penalty for not participating or for withdrawing from the study. If you agree to participate in this study, your identity will be kept strictly confidential. Your name and school will not appear in the study. Your stories will be referenced by a pseudonym. All transcripts will be kept on a CD-ROM in a secured office in the researcher’s home.

If you are interested in learning more about the study, please contact me by replying by email to nugentt@suttonschools.net or by mail to 28 Rockwood Drive, Ashland, MA, 01720. Or you may feel free to contact me by phone at (508) 309-3282.

Sincerely,

Terry Nugent
Western Michigan University
Department of Educational Leadership, Research and Technology
Principal Investigator: Dr. Louann Bierlein Palmer
Student Investigator: Theresa Nugent

You have been invited to participate in a research project entitled “A Narrative Inquiry of Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding Their Professional Development Experiences.” This research is intended to gain understanding on teachers’ perceptions of in the various aspects of professional development. This project is Theresa Nugent’s dissertation project. Your building principal recommended you for this study, because of your lifelong love of learning and willingness to participate in other school-related activities.

You will be asked to attend two private interview sessions with Theresa Nugent. The first session will involve an hour and a half face-to-face interview regarding your professional development experiences over the course of your teaching career. You will also be asked to write your responses to four reflective questions. The second session will involve any follow up questions and a review of the first session transcript. This session will last approximately one hour.

As in all research, there may be unforeseen inconveniences for participating, namely the time required for the interviews and reflective writing. There will not be compensation for participation in this study.

One way in which you may benefit from this activity is having the experience to talk and reflect upon your professional development experiences. Professional development planners and other school officials may benefit from the knowledge that is gained from a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of their professional development experiences.

All of the information collected from you is confidential. The tapes will be reviewed only by the researcher and a professional transcriber who agrees to keep your information confidential. The interview transcripts will be coded, and Theresa Nugent will keep a separate master list with the names of participants and the corresponding code numbers. Once the data are collected and analyzed, the master list will be destroyed. The interview tapes will be destroyed after they are transcribed and transcripts will be saved to a CD-ROM and retained for at least three years in a locked file in the principal investigator’s office.

You may refuse to participate or quit at any time during the study, without prejudice or penalty. If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you may contact either Theresa Nugent at 508-309-3282 or Dr. Louann Bierlein-Palmer at 269-387-3596. You may also contact the chair of Human Subjects Institutional Review Board at 269-387-8293 or the vice president for research at 269-387-8298 with any concerns that you have.

This consent document has been approved for use for one year by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board as indicated by the stamped date and signature of the board chair in the upper right corner. Do not participate in this study if the stamped date is more than one year old.
Your signature below indicates that you have read and/or had explained to you the purpose and requirements of the study and that you agree to participate.

Participant Signature ___________________________ Date ____________

Consent obtained by ___________________________ Date ____________

Initials of researcher
Reflective Journal Questions

It was a pleasure to meet you and talk about your professional development experiences. The next step in the study is for you to respond to the reflective questions below. There are no right or wrong responses to the following questions. Please reflect on these questions and send your written responses back to me within one week from today. You may email your reflections to me (ranugent@comcast.net) or send them by mail in the stamped envelope that has been provided. If you should have questions or need additional time to complete this request, please feel free to contact me at (508) 309-3282.

Be assured that your information will remain highly confidential. If you will be emailing me your response, please place your pseudonym in the subject name for the email. If you are mailing, please be sure to include your pseudonym at the end of your responses. Thank you so much for taking time to reflect on your experiences.

Questions:

1. Make a list of all professional development workshops and other experiences that you remember from the last 5 years. Identify the most memorable and explain why you consider these experience most memorable?

2. Please reflect upon the various types of professional development experiences you have participated in over the years. Of these types, which are the most valuable in terms of classroom application?

3. Please reflect upon all your professional development experiences. What do you believe is the cumulative impact of those experiences on your
classroom teaching? Specifically, how have your professional
development experiences helped your students' outcomes?

4. How do you successfully apply knowledge and skills from professional
development experiences? Please reflect upon the elements you needed to
make those applications successful.

5. What do you think is the ideal role of teachers' contributions to a district
professional development plan? To what extent has this been in place for
you? How do you see such contributions benefiting student outcomes?
APPENDIX E

TRANSCRIPTIONIST CONFIDENTIALITY FORM
Confidentiality Agreement

Transcriptionist Services

I, __________________________, transcriptionist, agree to maintain full confidentiality in regards to any and all audiotapes and documentation received from ___ related to her doctoral study on _______. Furthermore, I agree:

1. To hold in strictest confidence the identification of any individual that may be inadvertently revealed during the transcription of audiotaped interviews, or in any associated documents;

2. To not make copies of any audiotapes or computerized files of the transcribed interview texts, unless specifically requested to do so by ______;

3. To store all study-related audiotapes and materials in a safe, secure location as long as they are in my possession;

4. To return all audiotapes and study-related documents to ______ in a complete and timely manner.

I am aware that I can be held legally liable for any breach of this confidentiality agreement, and for any harm incurred by individuals if I disclose identifiable information contained in the audiotapes and/or files to which I will have access.

_________________________________________  __________
Signature                                      Date
Date: May 4, 2007

To: Louanne Bierlein-Palmer, Principal Investigator
Theresa Nugent, Student Investigator for dissertation

From: Amy Naugle, Ph.D., Chair

Re: HSIRB Project Number: 07-04-10

This letter will serve as confirmation that your research project entitled “A Narrative Inquiry of Teachers’ Perceptions Regarding their Professional Development Experiences” has been approved under the expedited category of review by the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board. The conditions and duration of this approval are specified in the Policies of Western Michigan University. You may now begin to implement the research as described in the application.

Please note that you may only conduct this research exactly in the form it was approved. You must seek specific board approval for any changes in this project. You must also seek reapproval if the project extends beyond the termination date noted below. In addition if there are any unanticipated adverse reactions or unanticipated events associated with the conduct of this research, you should immediately suspend the project and contact the Chair of the HSIRB for consultation.

The Board wishes you success in the pursuit of your research goals.

Approval Termination: May 4, 2008