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**By**

**Stephen Matthew Warford**

**December 2013**

**TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

**A Dissertation Presented to the  
Faculty of the College of Education  
University of Houston**

**In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree**

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December 2013

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### Abstract

This qualitative study examines practicing educators' views and perceptions on effective professional development. The researcher explores the experiences of five educators at various points on the experience continuum and questions what constitutes a meaningful learning experience for each one. The framework of this study follows the protocols outlined by Connelly and Clandinin (1990) for experienced based research through narrative. The foundation for this research rests of four theoretical pillars: Adult Learning Theory (Houle, 1972), Motivational Theory (Maslow, 1943), Reflective Practices (Schon, 1987), and Teacher Knowledge (Cochran & Lytle, 1999).

After an extensive review of the current literature, noticeable omissions from the current understanding of professional development for teachers were found that set the stage for the following research questions guiding this study: 1) What elements of professional development do practicing teachers find effective and beneficial? 2) Do teachers at different points in their career report needing the same or different qualities in their learning experiences? 3) What might the researcher come to understand through narrative case studies of the participants and their insights on effective professional development?

The need for this study to address these questions is that annually millions of dollars are spent on teacher professional development in order to improve teacher pedagogy in hopes of improving student achievement; however, achievement scores remain stagnant and there is little evidence that the current system of professional

development is working. Though there are a plethora of studies that provide quantitative data regarding certain elements of professional development (e.g. time needed, curriculum design), those studies provide no context from the teachers to help others reproduce the results. This study allowed teachers to provide a context through narrative based on their experiences.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapters	Page
I. Introduction	1
My Story	1
Research Questions	9
II. Review of the Literature	11
Introduction	11
The Need for the Study	13
Theoretical Framework	16
Adult Learning Theory	16
Teacher Knowledge	18
Reflective Practices	19
Motivation Theory	20
Historical Review of Literature	22
Balance Individual and Organization Goals	23
Balance Long-Term and Short-Term Goals	24
Team Involvement in Staff Development	26
Opportunities for Feedback and Reflection	27
Vehicles for Ongoing Assessment and Support	29
Integration of New Staff Development with Old	32
Conclusion	33
III. Methodology	34
Introduction	34
Research Approach	34
Procedures and Interpretive Tools	36
Context of the Research	37
Participants	38
Data Collection	38
Interviews	38
Focus Groups	39
Reflective Journals	40
Summary	40
IV. Interview, Focus groups, Reflective journals	42
Alma' Story	42
Prologue	42
Educational history	42
Teaching and professional development	45

Inquirer's connection	48
Alan's story	49
Prologue	49
Educational history	49
Teaching and professional development	51
Inquirer's connection	55
Christy's story	56
Prologue	56
Educational history	56
Teaching and professional development	58
Inquirer's connection	66
Pam's story	67
Prologue	67
Educational history	68
Teaching and professional development	69
Inquirer's connection	74
Marcia's story	75
Prologue	75
Educational history	75
Teaching and professional development	77
Inquirer's connection	84
Focus group	84
Prologue	84
Focus group's thoughts on professional development	85
Reflective journals	93
Alma's reflections	93
Alan's reflections	95
Christy's reflections	96
Pam's reflections	97
Marcia's reflections	100
Inquirer's connection	105
V. Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion	106
Implications of the research	108
Implications for professional development	108
Implications for teachers	111
Implications for campus administrators	111
Implications for additional research	112
Implications of the narratives	112
Implications for the inquirer	113

Conclusion	114
References	116

## Chapter I – Introduction

### My Story

My journey into the education field was not the traditional route. Unlike many educators that answer that they knew teaching was their calling from a young age, I was not planning to become a teacher. It was not until after I graduated from college and was waiting to hear from graduate programs that I even had my first experience with teaching. With nothing better to do, I signed up to be a substitute teacher. My first job was in a third grade classroom. Nothing I had done prepared me for that experience. The kids were challenging, engaging, funny, interesting, and above all else, inspiring. It was then that I knew I wanted and needed to be a teacher. As such, I promptly enrolled in an alternative certification program and began my pre-service education.

Since that day as a substitute teacher, I have earned two master's degrees in education, have certifications to be a superintendent, principal, and teacher at multiple levels and in multiple settings. In the course of this progression, I have taken numerous forms of professional development opportunities that have shaped my story as a teacher. Each experience has molded my views on what I find beneficial when trying to expand my teacher knowledge. In the last ten years, I have kept a portfolio of each formal training opportunity that I have had, and it is through a reflective exercise that I garner my thoughts on what I view as constructive professional development.

As an alternatively certified teacher, my pre-service training was less than that of a traditional certified teacher – that is, it was minimal. My training consisted of a couple classes a week and a workshop each Saturday for a semester. To say that was sufficient preparation would be a lie. Regardless, I was determined and was fortunate enough to

get a teaching assignment by the end of the semester. I began my teaching tenure as a fourth grade teacher. As to be expected, every day was both a challenge and a joy. For me, the art of teaching was more than a profession, it was a moral imperative (Fullan, 1992).

Now, being young and naive, I was confident in my abilities – that is, I believed I was intelligent and engaging enough that I could teach a group of ten year olds. It did not take me long to realize that teaching required much more than just intelligence and charisma; rather, it required other types of knowledge that would combine my skill sets with the required curriculum (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990). As an avid learner, I realized that it was necessary for me to grow my practical knowledge through personal professional development. I was eager and signed up for whatever opportunities I could through the regional service center, my teacher organizations, and I even began working on my master's degree.

The reality of the situation was that at that time, I had no idea what specifically I needed to improve upon. Because I was an energetic educator, my administrators were pleased with my classroom performance, so they did not offer a lot of guidance. Their philosophy was more of the “as long as they pass the TAKS test, their parents do not complain, and you do not send them to the office, then all was good” type of administrators. In lieu of constructive guidance, I attempted to take cues from my students. I would sign up for any types of trainings that related to areas they were struggling with: reading comprehension, writing, vocabulary, etc. To say that the catalog of professional development sessions I went through at this time was uneven would be an understatement.

In looking through my album of earliest workshop certificates, very few stand out as memorable; as such, it is not a far leap to assume that they did not shape my teacher development much. Within my first semester of teaching, I was trained in general reading strategies, working with special education students and the legal requirements, gifted and talented strategies, and bullying. Of those, only two of those experiences resonate as having been meaningful: the thirty hour gifted and talented training and the twenty-four hour Texas Reading Academy. Even a decade later, those particular learning experiences stand out because they offered me an opportunity to explore the content because there was time, provided me a purpose as to how the information would benefit my students, and actively involved my prior knowledge to enhance my knowledgebase. Though I did not know it at the time, those experiences helped shape the manner in which I would continue my professional growth.

As noted, my teaching career began in a unique way in that I started in the middle of the school year. My second year of teaching was my first actual experience with starting a school year. Commonly, school districts utilize the week prior to school starting to train teachers. Without looking at the certificates I collected that week, I would not be able to tell you what I learned or the manner in which it was presented. What I do recall was the feeling of being overwhelmed that week and the stress of preparing for the first day when students return. In my opinion, the timing of those trainings was flawed – that is, the contexts made the situation lose its value. There was not enough time to fully investigate the subjects, nor was there a connection to how it would improve the learning for the students that I had not yet met. Interestingly, the certificates from that first week were the only ones I have for that year; in other words,

those few days were the only formal learning opportunities that my district and school offered me. When reflecting on that reality, I realize that I was offered very little opportunities to grow as a professional during this time frame, which logically would have been the time I needed it the most as a new teacher.

Though I was not receiving formal training from the district I was employed, I was concurrently working on my Master's degree at the University of Houston-Victoria in school administration. Though new to the classroom, I hoped that by undertaking these courses, I would get a better understanding of quality instruction. I can honestly say that this was the smartest decision I made at the time: the courses I took offered me a rich opportunity to better understand quality pedagogy, learning theory, and best practices for working with students. The first few courses I took consisted of Instructional Leadership, Curriculum Theory, and Life-Span and Development, all of which directly shaped my personal knowledge of teaching. My instructional leadership course examined the instructional approaches that administrators should look for and practices that could be used to improve teaching performances. Naturally, this information was a great tool for me to use on my own teaching. I wanted to be a great teacher for my students, and this helped shape the lens I used when evaluating my own performance. At the same time, my Curriculum Theory course introduced me to the various philosophical approaches to student learning; although I did not know it at the time, this was the beginning of my transition as a curriculum implementer to a curriculum maker (Clandinin and Connelly, 1995). I would argue that these learning opportunities, those that allowed me to fully learn content, while practicing my pedagogy and using the

knowledge I was concurrently gaining were the most valuable in terms of shaping my practical teacher knowledge and me professionally.

Although obvious that my teaching career thus far was definitely not the norm, my third year in the profession took me even further off a “traditional path.” After my principal announced that she was retiring, I decided that I wanted to look into moving to the district that I lived in and had attended as a student. I applied and was fortunate enough to be given a teaching assignment at the very elementary school I matriculated as a fourth grade teacher. Upon signing my contract, my new principal asked if I would attend trainings over the summer to prepare (of course I said yes). Interestingly, she asked that I attend the Texas Reading Academy again. Once again, I attended the four-day reading institute. In reflecting on this experience, I can honestly say that it was different from the original time. Knowing the basic information, the second time allowed me to better understand more complex ideas and retain more specific details. Although I recall it being a very long week, I remember the feeling that it was a great refresher and learning opportunity. Again, I believe the academy format that allowed multiple learning opportunities was a good vessel for me to professionally grow. At this time, I was also completing my master's and working on my principal internship, and to assist with this my administrator allowed me to shadow her in her job, interview her, and attend trainings with her. These real-world learning opportunities were incredibly beneficial. Having an opportunity to hear an established educator reflect on best practices, coach me through scenarios, and share her insights on education left a memorable impression on my personal knowledge base.

But yet again, midway through this year an opportunity arrived that altered my journey: I was promoted to a mid-management position at a different school, thus taking me out of the classroom. In my new role, I was a support to classroom teachers and a parent educator. I was charged with creating adult learning experiences to help the parents of our school become partners with the teachers and better assist their child at home. This was a remarkable time in my professional growth because it required a whole different approach to my teaching: I had to shift from creating learning experiences for young children to adults. At the time, my knowledge of adult learning theory was nil; I had no idea what would be effective workshops for parents. Moreover, I also needed a greater understanding of the curriculum vertically – that is, my experience thus far had been limited to one grade, but now my responsibilities involved working with students from across multiple levels. To remedy this, I spent the bulk of my free time visiting classrooms to observe master teachers, talking with them, and working with them to create meaningful learning experiences for our parents. Undoubtedly, I learned more from these experiences than from any workshop I had taken, or any class I had attended. Seeing master teachers in action and watching how students responded to their instruction profoundly shaped my practical knowledge and it helped me understand how a teacher could be a curriculum maker, not just a curriculum implementer (Clandinin and Connelly, 1992).

The end of that school year brought yet another change to my story: I was promoted to be an elementary school assistant principal. In this capacity, I was no longer seeking to grow my personal knowledge base to enhance a classroom; rather, I needed to expand my knowledge so that I could be a resource to teachers across a campus. It was at

this same time that I began my journey through the University of Houston doctoral program. Combining the course work that I was taking with the practical knowledge I was learning by visiting classrooms gave me a wealth of new knowledge and shaped my view on what was effective for professionally growing. It was a mixture of learning the theory and strategies combined with seeing master teachers implement those concepts in action that enhanced my understanding of good teaching.

Even though I was using my personal experiences to grow professionally, as a campus and district representative, I still attended the traditional development sessions. Prior to even beginning the school year, twenty of the school's staff members and I attended a three-day conference called Capturing Kids' Hearts, which focused on creating a positive classroom experience for students. By attending this conference, we as a group established our own quasi-professional learning community by having a shared experience that we collectively could navigate. This was the first time I understood the value in creating cohorts and learning communities (though I did not know that was the terminology) when implementing new initiatives. As a group, we were able to support each other as we internalized the new information and processed how it could be implemented together. Later that summer, we had a similar session from Search Institute entitled the 40 Developmental Assets, which would become the cornerstone for my philosophical approach towards working with children. Once again, we trained this as a cohort and learning community, thus allowing us to have a shared learning opportunity and support as we added this new learning to our already established teacher knowledge.

For the next four years, I served as an assistant principal at two campuses. In reviewing my binder during this time and reflecting on the learning experiences I was

given, an immediate observation that stands out is that most of those experiences can be identified as content trainings. Topics ranged from each of the major contents (reading, writing, science and math) and the information shared helped me better coach teachers toward content implementation. Remarkably, very few are memorable. Examining each certificate, the ones that I would identify as meaningful were the ones that introduced me to a new framework for understanding information and allowed me opportunities to work with the information and revisit it, such as Margaret Kilgo's data analysis training, or were done as a learning community with other staff members.

After four years as an assistant principal, I was honored to be named as a principal in my district. Even without looking at my album, I can tell you this was a turning point in my views on professional development, what made them effective, and what shaped my perceptions regarding them. Part of the reason for this was that my purpose now shifted; no longer was I working on merely improving my practical knowledge or that of an individual teacher, now I was working on improving systems campus wide. Interestingly, the types of development opportunities that were afforded to me as a principal were also different because now I was able to attend conferences. Though I did not know it at the time, the conference format was great for me as a learner because it gave me options and allowed for scaffolding of information. As a principal, some of the conferences that have truly shaped my professional knowledge base include: Marzano's engaging schools three-day conference, DuFour's creating professional learning communities three-day conference, Texas Association of Supervisors for Curriculum and Development's three-day conference, and Search Institute's developmental assets three-

day conference. Each of these provided me with rich learning opportunities presented by true experts that guided me to how I could use the information with my staff.

In reviewing my professional development binder, I recorded over 800 hours of professional learning opportunities over a ten year period and in four roles (teacher, lead teacher, assistant principal, and principal). It was interesting to highlight those opportunities that resonated the most with me. As I recalled my story and reflected upon each of those experiences, the common threads that I found effective for professional development occurred when sessions: 1) offered me new information that added to my understanding; 2) were presented by the guru or an authority of that subject; 3) occurred over time – that is, over multiple days and allowed opportunities for me to revisit the material; and 4) occurred in a cohort with other learners in a learning community.

Clandinin's and Connelly's (2000) research and writings about narrative inquiry explained that each person has a story and that story and context affects each experience. My story shows an eclectic spectrum of trainings and experiences that have shaped my perceptions on professional development, but is it similar to others? Do teachers from a traditional certification track view professional development opportunities the same as I do? I'm now in my tenth year as an educator and feel that there is still a great deal to learn, but what about a twenty year veteran teacher: does she still grow professionally in the same manner and way I do – that is, do we value the same things in professional development opportunities?

### **Research Questions**

This study examines teachers' perceptions of what makes professional development opportunities effective across a variety of stages in careers. To do so, I will use the protocols of experienced based researchers like Clandinin, Connelly, and Craig to provide a vehicle for me to examine my experiences and those of other educators in this study. By utilizing the practices outlined in those scholars' established works, the research in this dissertation hopes to provide guidance as to how teachers develop their teacher knowledge through personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1986), as well as how we hone our skills as the curriculum-maker (Clandinin & Connelly, 1992; Craig & Ross, 2008) as told from their point of view – that is, what methods, approaches, contents and designs do teachers believe best allows them to improve their pedagogy and knowledge base so that they are better curriculum implementers and educators.

## Chapter II – Review of the Literature

### Introduction

In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education released their report, “A Nation at Risk,” decrying the state of the American education system and providing data that suggested that unless major reforms were implemented to our structure, the United States would fall behind her foreign counterparts in several areas (commerce, science, industry, and technological innovation). The report, written as an “open letter to the American people,” focused on four areas: content, expectations, time and teaching (NCEE, 1983). Within all categories, the focus on the quality of teaching and instruction was stressed, most notably focusing on the need to have highly trained and competent teachers in all classrooms. Though the report has since been criticized by educational scholars (Berliner & Biddle, 1995; Peterson 2003), it did bring necessary attention to the importance of teaching quality and professional development.

To that end, a slew of legislation followed (e.g., *No Child Left Behind* and *Race to the Top*) with a plethora of initiatives focusing on improving the American education system. The backbone of many of these pieces of legislation was teacher professional development. The idea being that if we improved the quality of our teachers, this in turn would improve the quality of their instruction and the degree to which students learn. Within the various statutes, the specifics of what constitutes high quality professional development remains ambiguous and nonspecific; instead, they focus on the intent of “altering the professional practices, beliefs, and understanding of school persons toward an articulated end” (Griffin, 1983, p. 2). As a result, the gambit of what constitutes professional development is vast and leaves much to chance.

Congress further complicated matters when they wrote into *No Child Left Behind* (U.S. Congress, 2001) mandates that teachers only utilize strategies and methods “proven effective by the standards of scientifically based research” and that they be measured based on student learning. As if that was not a high enough standard, it added that “scientific, researched-based programs” must be 1) grounded in theory; 2) evaluated by third parties; 3) published in peer-reviewed journals; 4) sustainable; 5) replicable in schools with diverse settings; and 6) able to demonstrate evidence of effectiveness (U.S. Congress, 2001). For all of those specifics, the legislation does not provide any guidance for how teacher development should follow such a high standard, thus leaving it to professional developers to design their own framework. In previous studies of professional development, it was determined that few were researched-based and measureable (Guskey, 1996), thus creating the conundrum of meeting this high level of instructional and pedagogical rigor without the same specificity for teacher training being available.

There are several reasons why legislatures are apt to avoid defining specific requirements for professional development and teacher training. One of the challenges is that it is not easily measureable – that is, there is not a simple way to quantify the effect of it due to the numerous confounding variables that must be considered. A second reason why specifics remain vague is that there are a variety of formats and designs for professional development, each with strengths and weaknesses; therefore, the make-up is better left up to the organization or individual to decide which would be the most appropriate. A third reason that specifics are avoided is that professional development is better when it is focused on needs, either at an organizational level or a personal level, so

it needs to be designed and initiated internally. For all of these reasons and more, professional development legislation remains ambiguous.

In the absence of legislative direction, professional developers instead must turn to research to devise their approaches. Unfortunately, though professional development is universally supported, it is remarkably lacking in cohesiveness and clarity. Within the body of work, there are contradictions about the effectiveness of design, approaches, requirements and styles. One significant problem that causes much of the confusion is the design of many studies relating to professional development. In a review of the literature, much of the research used methodologies to gather quantifiable data (e.g., student achievement scores, teacher surveys), which gives data that is beneficial, but does not give the people it affects the most a true voice: the teachers; this design leaves developers and planners to use limited information which causes them to guess as to what would be the best way to support teachers to improve their instruction. Accordingly, professional development runs a spectrum in terms of approach, content, design, and most importantly, effectiveness.

### **The Need for the Study**

Each year, millions of dollars are spent on teacher development in the hopes that it will improve teacher pedagogy and content knowledge, thus improving student achievement. Professional development for teachers is a required component of most legislative action and teacher certification now because it is universally understood that it is needed; however, what is less clear is what is yielded from these mandates and expenditures. Though it has been a common practice for teachers to receive in-service

training, student achievement scores have not dramatically risen (Dufour, Dufour, Eaker & Many, 2006). Moreover, professional development for teachers should make them feel more competent in their profession, but the exodus of new teachers – that is, teachers with less than five years experience, remains above fifty percent, and many cite the challenges of the classroom (e.g., classroom management, effectively engaging students, meeting the academic expectations placed on them) as their reason for quitting (Ingersol, 2001). Clearly, there is a problem that the current model is not correcting.

In an effort to understand this problem, researchers and educational scholars have examined the role professional development plays in the educational process for years, most commonly through surveys and correlating student achievement data to professional development. Although this process has provided some data, upon review, the findings are contradictory, confusing, and one-dimensional in many instances (Guskey, 1995). While some studies focus on adult learning theories as their basis for what makes for effective professional development, this angle ignores the implementation – that is, though it gives guidance as to how adults learn, it does not indicate as to what motivates adults to implement the new learning into their teaching assignments (Guskey, 2005); others take the opposite approach and use motivational theory to explain what entices teachers to implement new learning gleaned from professional development, but this ignores how to help teachers understand their pedagogy or content better (Darling-Hammond, 2005). In either case, too often, the research on professional development focuses on a “silver bullet” – that is, trying to find a single answer to address a big problem (Guskey, 1995), which greatly over simplifies the complicated process of improving teachers. In short, scholars, policy makers, teachers, and professional

developers know more about what is not effective in terms of professional development than they do as to what is effective. In the absence of this clarity, professional development remains a required fixture without any guidelines.

After a review of the literature, one of the most glaring omissions from the findings is how few opportunities teachers have had to share their opinions about what is effective for them. On the occasions that they have been allowed to give input, the data was collected in such a way that it did not allow them to fully articulate their thoughts (Darling-Hammond, 2006). Given that it is the teaching community that professional development is meant to improve, it makes sense to allow them ample opportunities to share what aspects of professional learning they feel is most valuable, beneficial, and helpful.

As such, the intentions of this study is to utilize qualitative research methods to interview teachers to inquire and determine the most beneficial way for teachers to experience professional development and learning. In order for the American school system to improve the quality of student learning, it is imperative that we understand what helps to improve the quality of teachers. In fact, Marzano et al. (2001) found that the teacher is the single most important variable in student learning; therefore, it is a necessity that each teacher is as prepared and knowledgeable in best practices and their content to ensure that all students learn.

Although using interviews as a research methodology has some limitations, Darling-Hammond et al.'s research suggests that there is a significant relationship between teacher perceptions of staff development and student learning, which means that it is important to fully understand teachers' thinking about professional development if

we are to meet their learning needs (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002).

Further evidence for the need for this research comes from another study of Darling-Hammond (2005), who argues that interviews with teachers about staff development are important for the areas of: (1) increased effectiveness when working with struggling students; (2) greater sophistication in curriculum planning, particularly in identifying and matching long-term objectives and assessment; (3) greater appreciation for collaborative teaching and ability to nurture collegial support; (4) structured opportunities for feedback and reflection on teaching practice; and (5) development of theoretical frameworks to support teaching skills and vision.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A review of the literature suggests the following theoretical topics are relevant to this study: adult learning theory, teacher knowledge, reflective practices, and motivational theory. A brief overview of these theoretical frameworks will be provided followed by sections detailing their application into the current knowledgebase and research on professional development.

**Adult learning theory.** Professional development is designed to improve the pedagogy and knowledge base of educators. In the current dialogue of education, it is important to understand that research shows that adult learning is different from younger students' learning. Adult learning theory as a body of research is a fairly young field. Dr. Cyril Houle was the driving force behind making it an independent research field. His book *The Design of Education* (1972, 1996) was the first to outline a specific

platform for the best approach to educating adults. He argued that there were nine assumptions that adult educators needed to understand about the process of teaching adult learners:

- 1) learning occurs in specific situations;
- 2) education planning should be based on realities of human experiences;
- 3) education is a practical art;
- 4) education is a cooperative rather than an operative art;
- 5) the planning of an educational activity is usually framed within a time period (episode, acts, series);
- 6) the planning of an educational activity can be initiated by an educator, learner, analyst, or a combination of all;
- 7) education design should not be viewed as a logical sequence of events, but rather a complex of interacting elements;
- 8) a generalized educator design (format) should only be used to strengthen the activity;
- and 9) a program design should be based on decision points, not sequential prescriptions.

(1996)

Houle added to his assumptions by explaining that learning for adults occurred in specific contexts, and that it was necessary for planners to know these in order to best meet the needs of the adult learner. He suggested that there are eleven scenarios in which adults undertake a new learning opportunity and it occurs either at the individual, group, institution, or mass level:

- 1) individual initiates;
- 2) an individual or group plans for another individual (such as a supervisor on behalf of the employee);
- 3) group initiates (with or without a supervisor);
- 4) a leader/teacher or a group of teachers design activities for groups;
- 5) a committee designs an activity for a larger group;
- 6) two or more groups design an activity that enhances their combined program they serve;
- 7) a new

institution is designed; 8) an institution designs an activity in a new format; 9) an institution designs an activity in an established format; 10) two or more institutions design an activity that enhances their program; and 11) an individual, group, or institution designs an activity for a mass audience. (1996)

In 1990, Malcolm Knowles's research expanded the literature by adding that adults learn differently from children and adolescents in the following ways: they are self-directed and goal orientated; they require that their learning be relevant and connect to their lives; and they must be treated with respect and dignity. In this context, professional development sessions must be designed to allow participation, leadership opportunities, and be relevant to their current position.

**Teacher knowledge.** Cochran and Lytle (1999) determined that teacher knowledge is comprised of three constituent elements: (1) knowledge-for-practice, (2) knowledge-in-practice, and (3) knowledge-of-practice. Knowledge-for-practice, more commonly referred to as content knowledge, is that which is learned at university to prepare teachers for the subject area they intend to teach (Cochran & Lytle, 1999). Math teachers take courses in mathematics; English teachers take courses in English, etc. This type of knowledge is imperative to ensure that curriculum is adequately understood. Knowledge-in-practice, more commonly referred to as pedagogy, is knowledge of instruction (Cochran & Lytle, 1999). Even the most erudite scholars will struggle in the classroom if they are not able to convey the material to students in a cogent, meaningful way. Finally, the third type of teacher knowledge is knowledge-of-practice (Cochran & Lytle, 1999). This type is less a mastery of discourse and more an application that

combines knowledge-for-practice and knowledge-in-practice. It involves continual inquiry in the classroom and school setting to “theorize and construct their work and to connect it to larger social, cultural, and political issues” (Cochran & Lytle, 1999, p. 250).

**Reflective practices.** Reflective practice is a strategy that requires teachers to think about their pedagogy and practices and how they impact student learning. Though reflective practices was brought into the cannon for educational discourse by Schon in 1987, the theoretical principles of reflective practices originates from the research of Jung and Piaget and their human learning and development models.

According to Schon (1987), there are three components of reflective practices for teachers: knowledge in action, reflection in action, and reflection on action. He explained that knowledge in action refers to unconscious actions while a behavior is occurring; these behaviors are carried out spontaneously and do not have to be thought about prior to or while doing them (Schon, 1987). His second type of reflective practice, reflection in action, is a conscious decision to adjust or improvise based on the data presented (Schon, 1987). Lastly, reflection on action takes place after an action has occurred and the practitioner considers the implications of his/her choices (Schon, 1987).

The nature of reflective practices in professional development will be expanded upon in a subsequent section, but the jest is that it is vital to use reflective practices when implementing and sustaining professional development efforts to ensure their continued success or make necessary adjustments.

**Motivation theory.** Motivational theory explains the reasons why people behave as they do. It is most often used in the field of psychology, but the theory has much broader implications that reach into education, business, and sociology. In 1943, Dr. Maslow introduced his “Hierarchy of Needs,” which creates a needs-based framework. His work explains that people are motivated to fulfill needs, and that the most basic of needs must be met first (Maslow, 1943). His hierarchy is stratified as follows: physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). Maslow’s theory can be applied to teachers and professional development. First, teachers must not feel threatened when implementing ideas gleaned at professional development sessions. If they do feel threatened, they are less likely to attempt new learning/strategies/techniques that may ultimately fail because they fear for job security. Second, teachers need an opportunity for belonging – that is, teachers need to be able to discuss and interact with each other about their new learning so that they can feel comfortable in their application. Third, teachers need to be recognized for their efforts (esteem) in attempting new learning and ideas. Only after moving through these levels, can someone reach self-actualization, which can be characterized as teachers feeling comfortable enough to independently implement new learning from professional development for the betterment of their students.

In terms of professional development, Maslow’s hierarchy provides a guide toward improving teachers while scaffolding that learning. As noted, it is imperative that adult learners have a safe environment in which to undertake the new learning. Rose’s and Medway’s (1981) research supported the importance of providing teachers safety in professional development in the work setting. Their research suggests that this comes in

the form of support, feedback and relearning opportunities; only in this capacity are teachers willing to step out of their comfort zone without the fear of failing. Teachers, however, do not operate in a vacuum – that is, each teacher has a personal life outside of the classroom, and the basic tenant of safety must be in place in that realm as well. Teachers need to know that they have job security and have all of their basic living needs met before they can have the capacity to undergo a new challenge.

After successfully navigating through the two lowest levels of Maslow's pyramid, the next rung is social needs. An often used cliché about schools is that they are a building full of one-room school houses – that is, teachers operate independently of each other. Maslow suggests that this is counterintuitive to self-actualization. It is in our nature to be social and we need support in order to be successful. There is a plethora of modern research that reiterates this assertion (Gutskey, 1995; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Fullan, 1991; Caldwell & Wood, 1988). Though each study focused on different elements of teacher development, they all arrived at the same conclusion: teachers needed support in order to be successful. Social networks provide the channels toward rising to the esteem level. Once social channels are established, forums for ongoing dialogue and feedback are established, which provide opportunities for others to acknowledge their peers and recognize their efforts. Lastly, once an individual feels valued by the team, he or she is ready to challenge him/herself and undertake initiatives independently. Understanding motivation theory and the process an individual goes through when taking risks is important to understand in the body of professional development, and Maslow's hierarchy is an appropriate model.

### **Historical Review of the Literature**

The canon of professional development is vast and complicated. Though there is a plethora of research for the need for professional development (Epstein, Lockard, & Dauber, 1988; Griffin, 1983; Guskey, 1986; Joyce & Showers, 1988; Lieberman & Miller, 1979; Orlich, 1989; Wood & Thompson, 1993), less research clearly articulates the proper formula for effective professional development (Guskey, 1995). Often times, the research is contradictory in nature, which means without both sides of the argument, professional development cannot effectively be designed. After a careful review of the literature, the best outcomes for professional development occur when it:

- 1) balances individual and organizational goals (Doyle & Ponder, 1977; Fullan, 1982; Mann, 1978; McLaughlin, 1991; Hall & Loucks, 1978);

- 2) balances long-term and short-term goals (Doyle & Ponder, 1977; Fullan, 1982; Mann, 1978);

- 3) involves the team when planning, implementing, and evaluating (Huberman & Miles, 1984; Fullan, 1991; Caldwell & Wood, 1988);

- 4) provides opportunities for feedback and reflection (Bredeson, Fruth, Kasten, 1983; Guskey, 1989; Huberman, 1992);

- 5) provides vehicles for ongoing support and evaluation (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Joyce and Showers, 1980); and

- 6) works to integrate old professional development learning with the new (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Latham, 1988; Doyle, 1992; Sarason, 1990).

**Balance individual and organization goals.** At its core, professional development is a vehicle to improve teacher pedagogy and content knowledge. Traditionally, there are two modes for which professional development is initiated: 1) selected by the individual teacher, or 2) selected by an administrator on behalf of the individual (Guskey, 1991). Though both approaches have strengths, they also have limitations. For instance, when a teacher self-selects professional development, the individual makes the choice based on what he/she feels would be most beneficial for him/her; however, his/her selection may not be in sync with the organization's goals (Guskey, 1991). Reciprocally, when an administrator selects for the teacher, the organization's goals would be represented, but it might not be what is most beneficial for the individual (McLaughlin, 1991).

Successful professional development programs blend goals – that is, they must rely on a mix of individualized and organizational goals (Guskey, 1991). The success of the program depends on balancing the training of individual teachers and promoting organizational development, not prioritizing one at the expense of another. The degree to which staff development should focus on individual or organizational goals needs to be based on the magnitude of change required (Doyle & Ponder, 1977; Fullan, 1982; Mann, 1978).

There is a common expression whose origins date by to the 1700's: "A chain is only as strong at its weakest link." Metaphorically speaking, schools are similar to chains, and each teacher represents a link of that chain. In this manner, it is essential that efforts to improve instructional practices include a focus on the individual teacher (McLaughlin, 1991). After all, each classroom is taught by one teacher, which requires

that instructor to be the most effective as can be, thus it is important that he/she receives whatever training is needed to help students learn. In fact, research has found that unless the training is relevant to the specific needs and concerns of the teacher receiving it, the training is not likely to be implemented in the classroom (Hall & Loucks, 1978; Weatherley & Lipsky, 1977). At the same time, allowing teachers to select their own professional development opportunities is better for administrators as research has shown that when individual teachers are assigned training, this is often viewed as an attack on their professionalism (Pejouhy, 1990). To this end, it is important that we recognize the need to focus on the individual teacher when selecting professional growth/development opportunities.

Though there is obvious support for allowing teachers to select their own targeted professional development, there is also ample evidence that this is not a perfect solution. One concern prevalent in the research is that when teachers undergo professional development trainings or initiatives individually, they do not feel supported and their fear of failure increases. Consequently, teachers are less likely to implement new strategies or ideas. The data shows that individual initiatives are unsuccessful without organizational support (Berman, 1978; Clift, Holland, & Veal, 1990; Deal, 1987; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977; Parker, 1980).

It is imperative that staff development programs rely on a mix of individualized and organizational goals. The most successful professional development opportunities contextualize each training based on the needs of the campus.

**Balance long-term and short-term goals.** Organizational change is a whole research field of its own. In this area, researchers examine the best formats or structures to implement change successfully at a large level. Professional development is in essence a form of organizational change because it seeks to improve upon the quality of the organization by improving each unit within it. One consistent trend the research on organizational change has definitely shown is that change is a gradual process and efforts to make change happen too quickly are sure to fail (Guskey, 1991). Putting it in that context then, successful professional development requires a balance of long-term and short-term goals. Although substantial change may be desired in an organization, the transition must be slow and incremental in order to be effective.

Unlike most areas of research on professional development in which messages are mixed as to what is effective, the notion that change must be gradual is constant throughout the literature. In fact, several studies found that the likelihood of the success of a professional development program is inversely proportional to the degree of change required for implementation (Doyle & Ponder, 1977; Fullan, 1982; Mann, 1978). In other words, if an initiative requires dramatic changes of a teacher too quickly, it will not be implemented or effectively utilized. Studies further stipulate that if a new program does require major changes be made, it is best to ease into its use rather than expect comprehensive implementation at once (Fullan, 1985).

The research on professional development is also clear about the fact that professional development initiatives and trainings should not require a complete overhaul of a teacher's pedagogy or teaching, nor should it add a great deal of work on the part of the teacher. Planning should consider ways to demonstrate how the new practices are

efficient and will not cause extra work (Sparks, 1983). It should be noted, however, that the research does not indicate that initiatives only be small in time implementation; rather, it suggests that ideal professional development is not so cumbersome that it requires teachers to develop a coping system, but does require sustained effort (Crandall, Eisemann & Louis, 1986). To that end, implementation planning should involve a clear vision with incremental goals over duration of time (Fullan, 1992; Louis & Miles, 1990). In this manner, teachers can make small or moderate adjustments that they are comfortable with, and then scaffold in more as they progress and get more comfortable with it. Therefore, it is imperative that staff development programs rely on a mix of short and long term goals.

**Team involvement in staff development.** As noted, organizational change is a field rich with research and data. Another area in which this research is beneficial to professional development planners is that it clearly supports the need to include team participation in the various stages of professional development design. Putting it in context, successful professional development involves multiple stakeholders in the process. As teams become involved, they should include multiple stakeholders, such as teachers, non-instructional staff, and administrators (Caldwell & Wood, 1988). While participation may be limited in the planning stages, it is essential that teachers, staff, and administrators be involved in the implementation and review stages.

In the best design, stakeholders are included from the beginning. The need to include teachers from the onset is that it increases buy-in and helps to ensure that the initiative will not fail from the beginning. As the nature of professional development is

to seek solutions for prevalent problems, the more input teachers have in the mode to which this happens dramatically increases the likelihood of its success (Fullan, Bennett, & Rolheiser-Bennett, 1989; Little, 1982).

Planning teams should be designed to provide representation and input, but not so large that nothing gets accomplished. Research has found that including too large a group can be counterproductive (Huberman & Miles, 1984). Another element to consider about the initial stages is to ensure that the planning stage is not too prolonged. It has been documented that often times, planning periods are too labor-intensive, which has the unintended effect of depleting the energy of the team and the programs (Fullan, 1991).

As the process progresses into subsequent stages, it is essential that all stakeholders continue to have a voice in the implementation and evaluation stages. One of the potential downfalls to professional development initiatives is an expectation that the change will happen without continued support (Rosenholtz, 1987). Consequently, it is necessary that stakeholders meet at set intervals to review the progress of the group and make modifications as necessary. Collaboration results in better results because educators can problem solve potential problems and find solutions (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Rosenholtz, 1987; Stevenson, 1987). In short, while team involvement is essential to successful staff development, it must be integrated at the right stage in the implementation process.

**Opportunities for feedback and reflection.** Howey and Vaughan's research (1983) indicated that staff development is often fragmented, not frequently engaged in on a continuing basis by practitioners, not regarded very highly as it is practiced, and rarely

assessed in terms of teacher behavior and student learning outcomes. Their findings succinctly explain why most professional development initiatives fail, namely that they are disjointed and have no plans to sustain it. Accordingly, it is essential that plans include ways to monitor the implementation, provide feedback on it, and to reflect on its successes and failures.

As professional development is a process that requires buy-in from educators in order to be successful, one of the most straightforward methods of ensuring this is to provide varied opportunities for feedback and reflection. Opportunities for feedback are especially important for teachers who rely heavily on their ability to affect student achievement (Bredeson, Fruth, Kasten, 1983; Guskey, 1989; Huberman, 1992). Providing opportunities for feedback for recognition of successes or improvement is needed. In fact, research has shown that the greater a teacher's confidence in his or her ability, the more likely he or she is to be open to new ideas and instructional innovation (Rose & Medway, 1981; Smylie, 1988).

Feedback can be derived from a variety of ways and includes numerous ways for collecting data. One common way would be to observe a teacher and then provide feedback based on what was seen. Another way for a teacher to get feedback is from his or her students through formative assessment (Bloom, Madaus, & Hastings, 1981). Regular checks on student learning demonstrate student strengths and weaknesses that can be used to guide the instructional process (Guskey, 1985). The use of new instructional practices have been documented to increase student engagement, self-confidence, and self-worth (Dolan, 1980; Stallings, 1980). Interestingly, research has shown that teachers change their perception about professional development programs

after experiencing some success with it in the classroom, not before as many models suggest (Guskey, 1984b). Informal assessments provide teachers a vehicle to evaluate and reflect upon the effectiveness of the newly implemented instructional technique (Fiedler, 1975; Green, 1983; Smylie, 1988).

Given teachers only commit to programs once they see success in the classroom, and teachers do not see success in the classroom until they commit to a program, the success of staff development is often fraught with difficulty unless targeted feedback and reflection are included in the process (Guskey, 1985d, 1986a). Of course, timing is critical in determining when to allow feedback and reflection. If it occurs too early, then it can undermine the effectiveness of the program (Loucks-Horsley, Harding, Arbuckle, Murray, Dubea & Williams, 1987); however, planned effectively, feedback and reflection encourages teacher involvement in the process and provides invaluable data.

**Vehicles for ongoing assessment and support.** It is a rare occurrence for a person to experience something and become a master of it after one try. Professional development opportunities are no exception, which means that they require ongoing assessment and continual improvement in order to be effective. As with anything, you must practice at something to get better at it. Naturally, problems will necessarily arise during implementation, and teachers need many vehicles and resources in order to approach them efficiently and effectively. In order to be auspicious, professional development efforts must be looked at as a continuous process (Loucks-Horsley et al., 1987; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978). Change that is likely to increase teacher competence and improve organizational strength is likely to be slow (Huberman & Miles, 1984).

As would be expected, the most significant problems in implementation will occur at the beginning of implementation (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Berman & McLaughlin, 1978; Joyce and Showers, 1980). Studies have found that the primary reason teachers resist staff development is for fear of failure (Lortie, 1975); therefore, to be successful, there needs to be opportunities for experimentation in the classroom for teachers to find a way to make new initiatives work without the fear of repercussions (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Joyce & Showers, 1980, 1982; Smith & Keith, 1971). Many of the early problems that arise are unexpected, and as experimentation occurs to work out the “kinks,” plans must include ways for discussion and support from peers and supervisors, particularly from the lead teachers on a campus. Master teachers are the most likely to adopt new instructional improvement programs; unfortunately, these are the ones who need the programs the least (Mann, 1986), but their involvement is key because the remaining teachers are much more likely to adopt a program if the master teachers on the campus do so (Guskey, 1988). Taking the time to examine these early issues is crucial as research suggests that the biggest determinant of program success may be the capacity to deal with problems promptly and effectively (Miles & Louis, 1990). Ongoing assessment and support are essential to ensuring that necessary adaptations are made and corrected (Baldrige & Deal, 1975; Fullan, 1991; Parker, 1980; Waugh & Punch, 1987; Berman, 1978; Fullan & Pomfret, 1977).

A common component found in change efforts is that there will be those that resist implementation. As noted before, teachers change their perception about staff development programs after experiencing some success with it in the classroom, not before as many models suggest (Guskey, 1984b). Sadly, there will be those who will

make no attempt at trying the new learning, thus never having an opportunity to adjust their perceptions about the program. Unfortunately, pressure may be required to implement change, especially when problems arise (Airasian, 1987; Huberman & Crandall, 1983; Mann, 1986; Leiter & Cooper, 1978).

In order for new learning to take hold in the infrastructure, the new process must become part of the normal structure and practices of the organization – that is, it needs to become habit (Fullan & Mies, 1992; Miles & Louis, 1987). Teachers that never attempt or only half-heartedly implement the program will never attain this level. To move beyond this obstacle, local resource personnel should be available as problems arise (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978). Other research suggests that coaching – providing teachers with gradual feedback and guiding procedures, is the most effective ongoing tool (Joyce & Showers, 1988). Teacher collaboration and giving professionals opportunities to interact also provides valuable review of programs (Massarella, 1980; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978). With all of these structures in place, reluctant, novice, and master teachers all have support as they move through the process of implementation.

Clearly, this stage of the process is the most difficult; however, it is crucial to prioritize student learning over personal preferences in professional development (Buchmann, 1986). Though it is a journey, it should be remembered that professional development is a continuous process that does not end after training. In order to be effective, there must be designs that allows for review and adaptation of the program.

**Integration of new staff development with old.** Professional development in education has been characterized as “the flavor of the month” approach to improving

teachers. This stigma stems from the fact that it is often thrown at teachers as a silver bullet approach to fixing problems, with little or no connection to prior training. As such, many educators have little faith that professional development initiatives are necessary.

To rectify this, professional development programs should not be implemented in isolation. Programs existed before the implementation, and in order to ensure success, educators must understand how the new system functions in coordination with the old. Without integrating new staff development programs with old ones, the result will be fragmented and uncoordinated instruction (Fullan & Miles, 1992). Fullan goes on to argue that it is imperative to create opportunities to find patterns of coherence in order to help the organization steer through challenges and solve problems (2005). Many programs are viewed simply as fads because there is not a concerted effort to connect them with systems that are already in place (Latham, 1988). Fullan (1992) stresses that educators do not manage single innovations; rather, they deal with many simultaneously. Professional development should be viewed as a piece in the program that already exists in the organization; it should not be completely at odds with what is already in place, and teachers should know how the programs function together.

### **Conclusion**

The research on professional development is indeed vast; however, it is often times contradictory or misleading. As the above framework showed, there is often a balance that must be established in order for it to take root and be effective. Though the established framework might seem obvious or common practice, it is in fact not the norm to the process of providing teachers with new learning. All of this confusion and

complication as to what helps us improve our craft is simultaneously occurring as policy makers are raising standards and what educators are required to do.

The many research studies detailed explain the complexities involved in preparing effective professional development. By reviewing the literature and compiling what has been established as best practice, there is a clearer picture as to what design makes for effective professional development. That being said, the body of research has noticeable omissions of teacher interviews, in spite of the fact that leading scholars in the field have recommended this for future studies.

### **Chapter III – Methodology**

#### **Introduction**

The goal of this research is to determine what aspects of professional development teachers feel are beneficial through a qualitative research model. To that end, this investigation utilizes a narrative inquiry approach in order to give teachers a true voice in the discussion. In chapter 1 of this dissertation, I detailed my professional development history and how it led me to this research project. Chapter 2 utilized a historical and theoretical framework to identify the relevant literature already in the field, and to show how this study and approach will add to the knowledge on effective professional development. Now in Chapter 3 I will present the research approach and methodology, justify its use while explaining how validity and reliability will be present, show how the tools used will allow me to collect and analyze the data, and lastly, give the research a context for its exploration.

#### **Research Approach**

Qualitative research methods allow the inquirer to be both participant and data collector, all the while allowing the participant to be both subject and contributor. Unlike strictly quantitative studies, a narrative inquiry approach gives both a voice as they weave their collective stories together to identify pillars across contexts. In this context, narrative inquiry affords me the opportunity to involve myself in the thinking and execution of daily teaching and learning and understand how professional development is a part of that process, all the while trying to connect the two by looking at it across a spectrum of stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Connelly (2000)

explained that humans are naturally storied beings that live storied lives; as such, narrative inquiry gives a forum to understand the “grand narrative” (p. xxv). In short, their research demonstrated the validity in using stories as a data collection method. Clandinin and Connelly built their narrative framework based on the work of educational pioneer John Dewey (1938): he argued that humans are not empty slates; rather, they bring with them experiences which are continually shaped by new experiences. When viewing research through this lens, it provides a foundation to collect data in a manner that allows participants to fully navigate those experiences and reflect upon the effect they had on their perceptions.

This study utilizes Clandinin's and Connelly's (1990, 2000, 2006) framework of a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, entry and exit points of the research field, and data collections techniques. When speaking of space, Clandinin and Connelly elaborated on Dewey's ideas and established the following principles: personal and social dimensions (axis of interactions), continuity (past, present, and future temporal frames), and situation (the physical location of the events); in each of these cases, the goal of narrative inquiry is to understand how these influence an individual's story. Further, Clandinin and Connelly established the guiding principle that upon entering a research endeavor such as this that it is understood that the inquirer's role would shift with the landscape of the study (2000). Elbaz (1991) succinctly explained the value of using stories as a data collection method when she wrote:

Story is the substance of teaching as it provides the landscape within which we live as teachers and researchers, and within which the work of teachers can be seen as making sense. This is not merely a claim about the aesthetic or

demonstrative notion of story with our innate understanding of teaching, but an epistemological claim that teachers' knowledge in its own terms is ordered by story and can best be understood that way (p. 3).

### **Procedures and Interpretive Tools**

As the narrator of this story, I collected data through an assortment of field texts, which can be described as "records made in field research" (Connelly, Clandinin, and He, 1997, p. 667). The most common forms of field texts include observations, field notes, conversations, journaling, interviews, autobiographies, letter writing, histories, annals, oral stories, or artifacts. When used appropriately, each of these qualitative vessels are equally as valid a quantitative, empirical data (Connelly, Clandinin, and He, 1997). Within their bodies of work, Connelly and Clandinin (1990) established the protocols of broadening, burrowing, storying, restorying, and fictionalization that provide the analytical tools to narrative inquiry; as such, utilizing their structures allowed me to take the field texts that were collected and transform them into research.

To better understand the value of this research approach, it is imperative to understand what Connelly's and Clandinin's (1990) methods required. Broadening, as they explain it, means to provide as much context to the story as possible in as rich as detail as can be given. Burrowing, in essence, provides the schematics of events by reconstructing them as perceived by the participants. Storying and restorying go hand-in-hand and allows the researcher to bring sense-making to the research. This is a necessary step for validity purposes because it ensures that both parties' – that is, researcher and

participant – stories are being told. Finally, fictionalization allows anonymity to the participants, which is permissible in this form of research (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

Through the structures that Connelly and Clandinin (1990) outlined, I was able to collect various forms of data and then manipulate them into their final research forms (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This process allowed me to use my story (as outlined in Chapter 1) as a backdrop for understanding the qualities of effective professional development, but also allowed that baseline to expand and be modified as it was interwoven with the research subjects. Indeed, my story, like those of the participants, should be viewed as narrative truths. Though my story was the catalysts to conducting this research, it was the process of combining my experiences with others that shaped the final product. Ultimately, the goal was to seamlessly unite my story with that of the participants to create a new narrative that outlines the best possible approaches to teacher growth and development. To be clear, this model of narrative research was not trying to present any conclusions as certainties, but rather as “well grounded” and “supportable” pillars that represent a spectrum of human experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 4).

### **Context of the research**

**Participants.** The participants of this narrative are five teachers from one district in a large suburban school district in southeast Texas. The selection of these teachers stems from a pragmatic place. Pragmatically, these teachers were selected because I have previous work experience with each of them and they each fit the criteria I needed for the research. Each teacher represents a different point in terms of their years of experience:

Alma (first year teacher), Alan (teacher with 1-5 years experience), Christy (10-15 years experience), Pam (15-20 years experience), and Marcia (20 plus years experience).

**Data collection.** For this inquiry into teachers' perceptions of effective professional development, the source of data collection came from semi-structured interviews. The backdrop of this study comes from lived experiences of both the inquirer and the participants as recounted through personal interviews. The forum of personal interviews allowed the researcher and participants to relive and restore past experiences and reflect on how they have shaped the present conditions. These interviews were both recorded and transcribed to ensure their accuracy and to give all parties opportunities to refine their stories throughout the process, thus making it a fluid and constant exchange of experiences.

**Interviews.** The design of the interviews utilized open-ended questions to allow the participants opportunities to reconstruct their experiences. The interview flow followed Seidman's (1998) three-layer approach to interviewing. According to his framework, the first layer of the interview is to ascertain the participant's life history in order to get a context for the experiences in which the inquiry is regarding. The second layer of Seidman's framework is to probe those experiences to get details. Lastly, the third layer is a time for reflection for the participant and for her or him to postulate the implications of those experiences.

Seidman's (1998) framework helps construct a narrative approach to research because it gives guidance how to navigate through the various participants' stories. The

first layer provides the context, or the milieu if you will, for the inquirer to utilize as he probes the experiences described. Though there were certain questions that guided the interviews, Seidman's understanding that there is not a set "recipe" (Seidman, 1998, p. 77) for designing effective questions provide the construct to allow the inquiry to follow their stories – that is, natural questions arose as the stories unfolded, which in turn allowed the stories to become fuller and richer. As Seidman (1998) explains of the interviewer and of question design:

The truly effective question flows from an interviewer's concentrated listening, engaged interest in what is being said, and purpose in moving forward. Effective questioning is so context-bound, such a reflection of the relationship that has developed between the interviewer and the participant, that to define it further runs the risk of making a human process mechanical (pp. 77-78).

In summation, though there was a protocol in place to each interview, the narrative approach in methodology – that is, an approach focusing on human stories to collect data rather than other "mechanical" approaches – encouraged delineations in each interview to allow the stories to be unpacked and broadened. In so doing, it allowed each participant an opportunity to deeply reflect upon his or her experiences and bring meaning to the implications within.

**Focus groups.** Individual sessions were valuable because it allowed each participant an opportunity to voice his or her story and articulate his or her perceptions on professional development. But equally important to me was to have each participant dialogue with each other and share their stories collectively. After completing the

individual sessions, I united pillars to provide conversation points. By bringing the participants together, they were able to explore each topic at a richer level (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Hatch (2002) explained that utilizing focus groups provides reliability because it can triangulate the data, allows the researcher to collect a larger quantity of data in a shorter period of time, and get concentrated data on the subject.

**Reflective journals.** Though interviews and focus groups formed the primary basis of data collection for this research study, participants were also asked to keep a reflective journal of their thoughts in between interview sessions until the conclusion of the study. As noted by Clandinin and Connelly's research, the process of narrative inquiry is fluid – that is, participants delve into and out of their experiences constantly reshaping them (2000). In this capacity, as participants reflected upon their professional development experiences, the interview itself, and then revisited their memories of professional development, it is natural that the context would influence their views. The reflective journals allowed participants to continue to revisit their stories and add to them, thus increasing the data pool for this study.

### **Summary**

This proposed narrative study utilizes qualitative research tools outlined by Clandinin and Connelly's research including interviews, focus groups, and reflective journaling (2000). To bring reliability to the study, triangulation methods were employed – that is, multiple data sources were used. As indicated in Chapter 1, the following research questions guide this study and the data collection methodology:

- 1) What methods, approaches, contents and designs do teachers believe best allows them to improve their pedagogy and knowledge base so that they are better curriculum implementers and educators?
- 2) What factors influences a teacher's perception on the effectiveness of a professional development opportunity?
- 3) How does a teacher's experience history shape a professional development opportunity?
- 4) Does year of experience influence a teacher's perception on what is effective?

By utilizing a narrative approach to this research, teachers have an opportunity to provide a context to each of these questions and provide a guiding point for teacher developers.

Chapter 4 will outline the findings.

**Chapter IV – Interviews, Focus Group, and Reflective Journals**

**Alma's Story**

**Prologue.** Alma is a first-year, first grade bilingual teacher at a suburban, Title I school. She currently has twenty-four students, all of which are learning English as a second language. Though teaching a challenge group like this is a daunting task for even the most skilled of teachers, Alma has taken to the challenge with grace and poise, confident that she can make a difference with these students. Alma's passion for her job stems from her back story; she was also an English-language learner in elementary school and grew up in a very similar situation as her students. She uses the context of her narrative to help teach her students, as well as to make plans for her professional growth. To say it would be difficult to believe Alma is a first-year teacher would be an understatement; however, understanding her story gives insight into how she has become the teacher she already is. Equally important, Alma's participation in this research provides a different perspective on first-year teachers and the way that we nurture them and groom them into the profession.

**Educational history.** Alma came to the United States when she was six years old. Prior to that, she lived in Mexico and that is where her experiences with schooling began. As a student in her native country, she did very well. Her first school experience in the US was in the second grade, and it was not a healthy one. As a child unable to speak the language of her peers, she was essentially left to her own devices during the school day. Her parents

were true believers in the importance of education, but because of their own language issues, they were unable to assist much. Alma's siblings banded together and created a mini-study group, helping each other to complete their school tasks as best as they could. Though education was a family priority, survival was the focus. As Alma explains it, her family was a true representative of one living in poverty. She recalls evenings spent in the dark because the electricity had been cut off, as well as days where the only meals they ate were at school. At this point, Alma quickly connected this to her current students: "I know where they are coming from. I know what they deal with, and I feel like that gives me a better understanding of how to help them and work with them. It also makes me want to work harder for them" (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

Alma's third grade year was a turning point for her, and one that she credits for her success in schools and her inspiration as a teacher. This positive experience was the result of an amazing teacher that truly believed she could succeed. She also recalls that he reached out to her family and encouraged them to become active participants. As a Spanish speaker, he was able to communicate with them. He invited them to the school and told them that their hardships should not discourage them from coming to meet with him. As a result of his efforts, Alma's motivation increased dramatically, and that school year saw her truly transition to the English-language.

In spite of her success with the language, Alma remained shy throughout elementary school. It was not until she reached junior high that she became more social and engaged with others. She continued to focus on her academics at her parents' urging and remained an excellent student. She notes her high school experience to be similar.

Her public school years can be summed up as a time that she loved because she loved learning; it was an escape from the hardships at home, and a place where she did well.

After her high school graduation, Alma enrolled at Lee College in order to pursue studies in publishing, marketing, and journalism. In two year's time she earned her associate's degree and began working for a local magazine. Meanwhile, she volunteered her time helping Spanish speaking adults learn English and become literate. Though she loved the publishing world, she admits hating her job: "I was really unhappy. It was very unfulfilling and I felt like work was really bringing me down. But whenever I worked with my adult students, I loved it and felt like I had a purpose" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). Alma explains that this pattern lasted for seven years before she finally decided she needed a change. She realized her passion was helping others learn, and she knew she wanted to be just like her third grade teacher. As such, she went back to school, starting at Lee College and then transferring to the University of Houston – Clear Lake.

In discussing her pre-service experience, she believes that UHCL did a good job in preparing her to take a classroom, but she also qualifies this by saying her years in the business sector and her own experiences influenced her feelings. In Alma's views, the courses that required observations and reflections were the most valuable: "I loved visiting classrooms, working with teachers, and reflecting upon what I saw and did. This has impacted my teaching in many ways" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). When asked what areas pre-service schools should improve upon as someone that just graduated, she immediately said classroom management training:

We were required to take a course on classroom management, and there were some aspects of it that were really great. It discussed the value of positive praise, using sticks for questioning and picking students, and how to arrange things, but it was not real. It is also unfortunate that my first semester of internship I was only on campus one day per week, so I really missed seeing the teacher lay the foundation for her classroom management. My mentor was such a pro that by the time I came, everything was established. It would have been very helpful to have been present during that. (personal communication, November 7, 2013)

In listening to Alma's personal narrative, it is obvious to see the connections to her past that have and continue to influence her as an educator, as well as her needs for personal growth.

**Teaching and professional development.** Alma has now completed twelve weeks as the teacher of record for her first grade bilingual class. Upon entering her classroom, the positive, warm, inviting environment is immediately felt. Student work covers the walls and it is clear that her students take a lot of ownership of it. As noted, her goal is to create a classroom like she had in third grade: "I wrote my third grade teacher when I was offered this job to tell him. I have written him many letters about how important he was to me. I want to be that type of influence for my students" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). After Alma said this, I asked her if she thought of herself as a typical first-year teacher, which she quickly responded "no." When pressed for a reason, she explained how connected she felt to her students: "I want to know my kids. I want to know about their lives, how they learn, what they enjoy. I

think most first-year teachers are just trying to establish themselves, but I'm all about my kids because I know where they come from" (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

Clearly, Alma has a drive to be the best teacher she can be, and she goes to any length necessary to reach her students. When we began talking about professional development, she smiled and explained that she still feels like a girl in school loving to learn new things. I asked her about the types of professional development sessions that she had attended thus far in her career, and she was able to generate a lengthy list from memory: gifted and talented training, Spanish intervention training, guided reading trainings, Fred Jones, PDAS, rigor and relevance, and she had the opportunity to observe a master teacher first hand. As the inquirer, I was curious based on her comment about not considering herself a typical first-year teacher how she felt when she was assigned to attend trainings with other first-year teachers:

Most of the time, I do not feel they are relevant to me. Of course I can pick up a few ideas from every session, but I'm looking for more concrete ways to meet my students' needs, and most of the trainings they require me to attend as a first-year teacher are repetitive. The ones that I have selected have been much more beneficial, and the best training I received was observing a master teacher's classroom and seeing how she operated. (personal communication, November 7, 2013)

According to Alma, the classroom observation was the most beneficial type of professional development she has received because it allowed her to see strategies, ideas, and approaches to working with students like hers. Ideally, she would like more

opportunities to have additional observations and feels that would be the best type of induction program for new teachers: "I am looking for very specific ideas, and I want to know how to do it. Watching teachers gives me that opportunity. I need to see it in action and see how it will work with my students" (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

After discussing classroom observations, Alma and I conversed about traditional professional development sessions that she has attended. The first one she wanted to discuss with the five-day gifted and talented training because it was a positive experience for her. She expressed that she liked that it went in-depth with the subject area, allowed her time to go home each evening and reflect and generate questions based on what was learned, and then there was an opportunity to get clarification the next day. Alma also expressed that the presenter was especially effective because she kept the group moving, collaborating, and active throughout the entire process. As she mentioned presenters, it was a natural transition to her views on them. Insightfully, Alma articulated that presenters are indeed important variables in terms of the quality of the professional development opportunity:

The presenter may be the most brilliant genius in the world about his content area, but if he doesn't know my kids or my school, I do not feel it is as valuable. It is also important how much the presenter involves the audience and gives us an opportunity to be involved in the learning. I do not believe that lectures are beneficial to learning instructional ideas." (personal communication, November 7, 2013)

Alma continued her experienced based reflection about presenters and professional development and discussed trainings that she believed would be beneficial for first-year teachers. Alma expressed that it would be beneficial for new teachers to have TEKS analysis training like Kilgo provides (her campus did campus based training using her model): “As a new teacher, the TEKS were new to me. The Kilgo model gave me a better understanding how to read them because it was such an overwhelming experience at first. I would like to have gone through that sooner” (personal communication, November 7, 2013). Not surprisingly, classroom management, instructional strategies, and organizational ideas were other areas that Alma stressed would be valuable pieces for new teachers to have more training with prior to entering the classroom. She did caution, however, that back-to-school week was not an opportune time to embed all of these items. Alma stated, “Back to school week is very overwhelming. My focus was really on preparing my classroom and getting ready for the first day, so much of what is shared is not put into practice” (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

**Inquirer's connection.** As the inquirer, it was difficult listening to Alma's story without comparing it to my experience as a first-year teacher. Without question, Alma has a better handle on teaching and learning, classroom management, and overall organization than I did when I was at the same point in my career. Throughout the interview, Alma's personal story constantly and consistently interwove with her current position, and it was both enjoyable and interesting to see the parallels. Including Alma and allowing her to provide insight into teaching professional development of a first-year

teacher highlighted the importance of providing them with explicit ideas and strategies (especially for classroom management), opportunities to see master teachers often, and time to work with the TEKS and the curriculum.

### **Alan's Story**

**Prologue.** Alan did not plan on being a teacher. When he graduated and started college, his dream was to be a radiologist. It was not until he took an education course as an elective that he realized he had any interest in it at all, but the more he learned about the subject, the more he came to know that this was his calling. As he put it, "The more I learned about teaching, the more I knew I could do it and wanted to do it" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). To that end, he changed his degree plan and began his trek toward becoming a teacher. Alan's story – that is, his educational history, his choices, and his philosophies – clearly shape his views on teaching and professional development. It is the context of Alan's story that is instrumental to understanding Alan's narrative. Through the process of storying, burrowing, restorying and reflective thinking, several linked findings relating to successful teaching and effective professional development emerged.

**Educational history.** Growing up, Alan always valued his education. When asked about his earliest memories of schooling, he quickly smiled and began discussing memories from elementary school. According to him, "I was always a good student. I worked hard because I wanted to please my parents. Elementary school was fun for me and I did well" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). He remembered vividly

his second grade classes and how his teachers worked, the materials they used, and the material they covered. He notes, "If I was to compare myself to any teachers I had, it would have to be my second grade teacher" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). Alan continues his story by recalling talent shows, participating in choir, and remembers elementary school as a joyous period of his life. It was his experiences in elementary school that ultimately shaped his views on teaching and his role as an educator.

Middle school, however, was a changing point for Alan (as is the case for so many adolescents). It was at this age that Alan first began participating in sports, band, and extracurricular activities. He explains, "My studies became my secondary focus. I really enjoyed getting to play sports and participate in band" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). Though he maintained satisfactory grades, Alan was not as invested in his studies as he had been in elementary school. This trajectory continued until he reached high school, where his parents made him prioritize his classes over electives. When reflecting on how his junior high and high school years impacted his life, he notes it helps him to better understand his kids that are pulled in lots of different directions, while also reminding him that students need to be active learners in the classroom.

After graduating, Alan enrolled at San Jacinto Community College fully intent on fulfilling his plans to become a radiologist. He believed his love of x-rays would fuel him through school, but he found himself struggling with the material because it was not exactly what he thought it was. Realizing that a change was necessary, he transferred to Lee College the next year. Given he needed an elective, he opted to enroll in an education course. Alan says he fell in love with the field of education on the first day of

class. After completing his basics, he transferred to the University of Houston-Clear Lake. It was at this time that Alan really enjoyed college because all of his courses were focused on education: "I always knew that I tended to be more focused when I was interested in the subject, and my time at UHCL proved that. This is even true today" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). He noted here that he feels the same about professional development – that is, if he gets to select the session and is interested in the content, he is much more likely to be engaged in the training and implement the ideas gleaned. As Alan reflected on his coursework, he stated he felt that the university did a good job of preparing them in terms of content, but it was his real world experiences as a substitute teacher and summer internship that prepared him to manage a classroom. Alan added about his time at UHCL, "School really helped me understand how to plan for teaching, but it did not really do anything as far as preparing me to manage a class or even how to deliver a lesson" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). He acknowledged that pre-service preparation leaves the real world application much to be desired, and programs should consider how to adjust this for future teachers.

**Teaching and professional development.** Alan is a third-year kindergarten teacher in a Title I, racially diverse suburban school. It is evident in discussions with him that the context of his journey has truly shaped his narrative as a teacher. Prior to assuming his current role, Alan was a substitute teacher while he completed his degree. Alan explained of his subbing experience, "Subbing was very helpful for me because it allowed me to test things out. I tried teaching all grades, and realized what worked for me and what did not" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). He came to realize

through these opportunities that he preferred working with elementary aged students, so he focused on that area for his program. Although he wanted to begin teaching as soon as he graduated, he struggled with passing the state certification exam (which he readily admits was due to the fact that he is not a good test taker). In order to start working in schools, he took a job as a technology specialist for a campus, which he credit with being the best type of professional training he has participated in thus far:

Working as a campus technology specialist allowed me to see campus systems in action. I got to visit master teachers' classrooms all of the time and see how they operated. I had discussions with them and asked a lot of questions. It made all of those theoretical courses real, and I got to see firsthand what works and what doesn't. (personal communication, November 7, 2013)

Alan credits his success in the first years of teaching from this experience: "I know there can't be a requirement, but schools of education would really help their students if they would restructure observations to make them more of a partnership with schools" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). After serving in this role for one year, he was able to secure a position as a kindergarten teacher.

In order to best understand Alan's views on effective professional development, I wanted to get a baseline for what he perceived of his teaching ability, so I started by asking him if he felt he was a typical, third-year teacher. Reddening and blushing, he coyly responded that he felt he was a strong teacher and again reiterated it was because of his subbing background and his time working as a CTS. This was a nice segue way into professional development and opened the door for me to ask him about what he looks for in professional development based on where he is at in his career:

I look for sessions that give me ideas of how to work with all learners. The phonics training I went to earlier this year [Project Read] was great because it showed me different ideas I can use to help with phonics instruction and students. Another good one was the special education training at Region IV [BISI Universal Design] because it gave me ideas about how to work with students with disabilities and different needs. I like trainings now that help me teach and reach all of my kids. (personal communication, November 7, 2013)

When Alan was responding, his demeanor changed and his mannerism became much more animated; he was clearly very excited and passionate about this type of learning. I asked him if it would be safe to summarize that at this point in his career he is looking for trainings that offer him strategies to work with all students and he responded in the affirmative. He explained, "I feel like I have classroom management in control, and I know the basics of instruction, but now I'm looking for ideas about differentiating and alternative approaches" (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

Next, I asked Alan to discuss what designs of professional development he found effective – that is, formats, presenters, and co-participants. Smiling, Alan responded quickly that he hates after school and Saturday sessions because he is not mentally alert during those times: "I need my downtime, and I need my time to recharge and reflect on what I'm doing" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). He explained that trainings that occur during regular work-hours are most beneficial for him, but he was quick to qualify this by saying that they should not occur too often because he did not want to be out of the classroom. According to Alan, trainings that are six hours are too long and he mentally strays after approximately an hour and a half: "I would rather

have mini-trainings that last about an hour and a half. Then give me time to go back my class and try it. After a month or so, let's regroup and discuss it, then add new pieces" (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

As Alan talked, I reflected on the common workshops that we have attended. The first one that came to my mind were the trainings the district required during "back-to-school" week for teachers, so I asked Alan what his opinions of those were. "Too much, too fast, and totally not what my focus is at that point," Alan responded (personal communication, November 7, 2013). He elaborated by explaining that he and his team want that time to prepare for classes, and that little actually impacts their teaching. It needs to be meaningful and applicable, and at that time, it does not relate. Alan added that he felt that time would be better spent if it was used to discuss curriculum changes for the upcoming school year since that directly impacts teaching. Interestingly, Alan started laughing at this point. When questioned about it, he said he was remembering what it was like when he was a brand new teacher and had to attend eight days worth of training before school: "That was totally overwhelming. I was mentally and physically exhausted, and the real work hadn't even started. That needs to be changed" (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

I next asked Alan to consider presenters and presentation styles and his thoughts on what was effective in those cases. Without hesitation, Alan explained that he hates when presenters read PowerPoint presentations too him because "it is a waste of time. I can read; just give me the handout" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). He also was clear that it is better to have someone familiar with his district, his school, and/or his classroom than to have a guru without knowledge of the context presenting to

him. In his opinion, knowing the school and students he works with is important because it means the material would be more applicable to their needs.

**Inquirer's connection.** From personal knowledge, I can attest that Alan is a gifted teacher, especially for one at the beginning of his career. He has an amazing presence in the classroom, students love him and respond well to him, and he has a knack for raising the rigor of instruction. His selection was deliberate because his journey into the field and to his current position was not typical – that is, he brought experiences with him when he started that were unique and influential in his development. As the inquirer, I was curious how these events affected his view points on professional growth. Another question of Alan that I had is what he felt he needed as a professional to continue his growth as a teacher. This process was interesting for me as the researcher, observer, and inquirer given I have seen him develop first hand. During the interview process, I found myself flowing in and out of my own experiences and gaining a different perspective on common experiences.

In the course of interviewing Alan, it became abundantly clear how much his narrative directly impacted his work as a teacher and his views on professional development. Alan acknowledged that his views would be vastly different had he not had the benefits of working as a campus technology specialist and a substitute teacher. Likewise, his conscious awareness of how he learns influences how effective he perceives professional development sessions to be. His responses highlighted the following important points regarding professional development: the need to revisit pre-service teaching and experiences, the importance that format and design of professional

development plays in how effective they are to participants, and the value when teachers have the ability to self-select professional development opportunities.

### **Christy's Story**

**Prologue.** Christy's personal narrative of teaching and professional development is quite a collection; she has worked in two states, three districts, and four schools -- all at different grade levels and contents. The story that she crafts interweaves her educational history, teaching path, influences of administrators and districts, and how all of these variables have impacted her. In using reflective practices, Christy narrates a journey that required self-discipline, innovation, and self-reflection in order to continuously adapt and improve. As it were, Christy's story and mine as the inquirer mirrored each other in some unique ways, so having her inclusion as a participant validated assumptions that I believed would emerge for someone with a similar career background. It was evident throughout the interview cycle that Christy is a very linear and analytical thinker; to that end, her reflections were sequential in nature.

**Educational history.** Christy always wanted to be a teacher. As a child, she subjected her siblings and friends to countless games of "school." As their "teacher," she would assign homework, detention, and regurgitate the lessons she had learned that day to them. Her love for school was evident in how she reminisced about her elementary experience. She describes herself as the constant "teacher's pet," always the teacher's favorite in the classroom for her compliance and her diligence toward making excellent grades. Junior high was similar for her in that she still did well, but it was at this age that

she really developed her love for specific content areas. She notes that she loved to read, but hated the grammar section of language arts; math, however, was her real passion.

It was in seventh grade that a teacher challenged her and pushed her in math. She credits this teacher as a change agent for her whole life: "I knew I wanted to be a teacher like him. I wanted to uncover kids' strengths and push them as far as they could go, just like he did for me. My entire educational experience changed after that" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). Indeed, she reported that high school was an extension of middle school. Interestingly, Christy explained that it was her experience in middle school that gave her insight into the type of learner she is, and it is in that manner that she still learns as an adult with professional development: "I learn best when I'm interested in the subject, when I get to pace it, and when it is relevant. As a teacher, this is what I look for in professional development" (personal communication, November 7, 2013).

After graduating high school, Christy enrolled at McNeese State University to pursue her education degree and certification. College was an expectation from her family, not a choice, and she believes that mentality was a huge influence on her. Though she loved learning, she was not a fan of the core courses she had to take. Christy enjoyed her education courses and believed they were very beneficial (especially methods courses that taught her how to plan), but in hindsight she thinks they lacked in preparing her for classroom management. After earning her bachelor's degree, she began her teaching career, but later returned to school to work towards a master's degree at Texas A & M University in curriculum and instruction (with a math and science focus).

She credits this experience as one of the best professional development opportunities she has experienced:

In earning my master's degree, I learned more about curriculum and instruction than I ever had before. And what I loved most about it was that it was all applicable for me at that moment. I was able to incorporate new ideas and I had a better understanding of the content, which I know improved my teaching. I was lucky that my district provided a stipend for us to take classes and a pay increase once we earned the degree. I think more districts should offer this because they will have a better teaching staff if they do. (personal communication, November 7, 2013)

**Teaching and professional development.** Christy is completing her fourteenth year in education. Immediately after earning her bachelor's degree, she moved to Texas and began working in a small district in the Houston area at a Title I campus. She was hired on as a fourth grade self-contained teacher. Christy recalls her first year of teaching being a whirlwind of information; however, she felt much of it was not in sync with her needs. Orientation week (back-to-school week) was particularly ineffective in her opinion because it was too much information, much of which was not pressing and needed for school to actually begin. Preferably, Christy would have been offered more guidance with classroom management and specific organizational strategies that would have made it easier: "My first five years of teaching offered very little in terms of professional development. We all received the same training, regardless if it was applicable. It was particularly hard my first year" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). Her

experiences during that first year involved trainings that did not apply to her students directly or were not applicable at the time the information was shared. Though she made it through the year successfully in her mind, she believed that a more connected, focused professional development plan would have made it easier.

Christy spent the next five years at the same campus. As noted, the trainings offered to her were all standardized across the campus. This design was especially frustrating for her as it often did not apply to her content assignment: "My partner and I team taught. I was the only teacher on campus that only taught math and science. All of the trainings were reading based, yet I had to sit through them all. I felt it was not respectful of my time" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). One particularly frustrating training she attended was a five-day reading institute that her principal required her to attend. Not only was the content irrelevant to her teaching assignment, the presenters bothered her because "they treated us like children. They assigned us seats, lectured to us, and made us feel like we were incompetent practitioners" (personal communication, November 7, 2013). Christy adamantly asserts that the manner in which the presenter interacts with his or her audience sets the tone for the whole experience. She summed up her experiences on professional development at this point in her career as mostly disappointing and useless.

After five years at the same school, Christy moved to a larger district. Her new district offered her an entirely different experience and reshaped her views on professional development. The professional development philosophy of her new district (at that time at least) was to individualize it based on participant's needs. Each employee was given a catalog of professional development opportunities covering each content

area, a variety of instructional strategies, and ideas to broaden other knowledge bases (such as technology). Principals met with their new hires and helped set up a professional development plan prior to assuming the new teaching position. This approach was novel to Christy and definitely something she advocates. As noted earlier, Christy learned early in life that she is more receptive to information that she is interested in, and this professional development design catered to that fact. She enjoyed having the opportunity to self-select and reports that those sessions were more meaningful.

As she was reflecting on the trainings she attended at this point in her career, her thoughts shifted to the design of the trainings – that is, format and length. In her opinion, too often training sessions have flaws in their design because they are too long and do not allow adequate time to process the amount of information provided. She feels that trainings that extend beyond three hours lose their effectiveness. Ideally, she would like to have a design that provides information in chunks, then a process that allows participants to try out their new information, and then return to debrief what worked. To help clarify, Christy used the analogy of how teachers provide students information in chunks and give them time for guided practice, reteach, and then proceed to the next step; she feels teachers should be developed in the same capacity.

After one year, Christy received a promotion to a math coach position at a different campus. Her new campus, however, was in a reforming period after consecutive years as an underperforming school. There was a new administrative team (principal and assistant principal) assigned to the school charged with the task of improving student achievement. Christy was hired in order to help create an alignment with the campus's math program and work with teachers to improve their math

instruction. This position afforded her a different perspective of professional development as she now was also required to be a presenter, not merely a participant:

Being a math coach gave me a different view point on professional development.

I was responsible for improving teachers, so I tried to use every minute I was allotted sharing ideas and helping them better understand the content. Of course I remembered how overwhelming experiences like this were, but I also knew I had limited time and a big task in improving some dismal math achievement scores.

(personal communication, November 7, 2013)

Being at the new campus also gave Christy a different perspective on administrative assigned trainings. She explained that the new campus principal was charged with turning around a very unsuccessful school that had deficits in a lot of areas: “It was not just the scores that had problems; the teachers had the wrong attitude about students too. The new principal had to build capacity in them about developing relationships and classroom discipline as well” (personal communication, November 7, 2013). Of course, Christy had to participate in these sessions too as a member of the campus, even though she was new; however, her outlook on these mandated trainings were different for a couple of reasons: 1) she had a clear understanding of why the campus needed them – that is, her principal provided her and the team the rationale and purpose for their learning, which made them more receptive to the concepts presented; and 2) the trainings she offered were specifically targeted toward working with kids and building relationships, which she feels are beneficial topics at any point in one’s career. She summed up this thought with the following statement:

It made a big difference for us during mandated trainings when we were explained the reason why we were going through it. It gave us a purpose for our learning, which I believe made us more receptive. Yes, some of the information was repetitive and things I knew, but my attitude was more agreeable. Not all of the teachers were on board because some felt like the trainings weren't needed for them, but more of us were because of how it was presented. I also think topics like building relationships that speak to the heart are more effective for whole group presentations. The information was relatable and applicable to all kids, so we were connected to the information on a different level. (personal communication, November 7, 2013)

Over the course of the next three years, Christy and her team participated in a variety of targeted professional development, and the campus went from being on the Texas PEG list (unacceptable) to an exemplary campus.

Christy's life changed when she married and moved to Louisiana, which she described as a vastly different educational culture than Texas. Though she was a veteran teacher at this point with ten years classroom experience, moving made her feel like a brand new teacher all over again. Thankfully, unlike most new teachers, she felt her classroom management was sound, so it was mainly just learning a new curriculum. Again, she notes that the pre-service preparation the district provided was not effective or conducive to her needs; instead, she wished she had been afforded opportunities to delve into the content and received training on what was expected of her teaching. Christy cited this as a perfect example where administrators and districts group all teachers,

regardless of backgrounds, together for training, which ignores what each individual needs.

Flowing from her thoughts on moving to her fourth school, Christy's thoughts shifted to a discussion about administrative influences on professional development. As previously noted, her first principal's philosophy on professional development was a "one size fits all" approach to building capacity – that is, all teachers attended the same trainings that the principal selected. Christy repeated that this was not a conducive approach to growing teachers in her opinion, and required her to be a self-directed learner independently seeking out new ideas that were beneficial to her. She added that she felt this created a culture of isolated teachers, each working in their own little school. There was no alignment in what strategies or instructional approaches were used because each teacher had different backgrounds and in-service experiences. After moving districts, her second principal allowed a lot of freedom in selecting professional development, which she credits him for and notes was beneficial to her growth. Her third principal focused on creating an aligned professional development plan across teachers, but also allowed them to select sessions that would be personally beneficial for the individual. Lastly, her fourth principal (at this point) was very hands off about professional development: she neither encouraged it nor provided it. Of all of these models, Christy believed her third principal had it right – that is, the model that sought to create a streamlined professional development plan for the campus, but also allowed for individual variation and personalization. Christy is, however, quick to point out that not everyone was receptive and it required a tremendous amount of work from all, especially the campus principal.

Christy's tenure in the Louisiana's school system was not a positive experience for her, both in terms of teaching and professional development. She cites her campus administrator as a big factor for shaping her story in this manner. One professional development experience she recalls included an especially poignant message for all administrators. Christy was asked to be the campus's team leader for their positive behavior support initiative. Her district sent her to a three-day institute out of town to receive training. The conference was very beneficial and effective: sessions lasted between sixty to ninety minutes and allowed them to choose which they attended. She credited the presenters as being both knowledgeable and engaging. Happily, she left the conference excited and full of ideas to bring back to her campus team for implementation; unfortunately, as she presented, her campus principal repeatedly dismissed her ideas and plans. The principal's rationale was that those ideas would never work at their campus. This episode frustrated Christy because it left her feeling insignificant; she felt if the principal had no intentions of implementing any ideas from the conference, then she should never have gone because it was a waste of her personal time. It also created a distrusting relationship for her with the principal in that she no longer accepted her statements at face value. The message administrators should take from Christy's experience is twofold: 1) if you require teachers to use their personal time for professional development, it is important that it is meaningful and beneficial to them; and 2) if you suggest to teachers they will have a voice in the process, especially if it involves professional development, then it is critical to follow-through on that agreement.

After three years in that setting, Christy felt it was best for her to return to Texas. Fittingly, she returned to a previous school she was employed at, though this time for a

different administrator. She once again assumed a position as a math coach. Her return to Texas, though, did not mean a simple return to what she already knew. During her absence, Texas's standards for math had been revamped and were about to change. As such, it was important to her to learn as much about the changes as she could as quickly as possible. Naturally, that required professional development. The trainings that she underwent to learn the new standards were mixed in terms of quality; some offered her a lot in terms of understanding the new requirements, but many simply regurgitated previous sessions or had them simply reading the new TEKS. In reconciling these experiences with previous parts of her story, Christy compared it to being a new teacher. In this case, everyone in Texas was starting from scratch, so she believed districts should have used this as an opportunity to develop competencies in reading the standards and aligning instruction to the student expectations with teachers.

Meanwhile, another adjustment Christy faced when she returned to Texas was that her campus was in the early stages of developing its professional learning community. Within this context, teams met to collaborate, attend training, and focus on student learning. As part of their efforts, content teams met weekly to plan for instruction and student intervention. In effect, this created an opportunity for weekly, job-embedded professional development. This allowed Christy as a math coach to work with individual or groups of teachers based on their specific needs in an on-going manner. It also allowed the campus to provide guidance/training on campus needs and initiatives in small doses. Christy views this as the most beneficial model for professional development because it is relevant, allows for new ideas to be constantly and incrementally presented

and implemented, and is done collaboratively. Christy summed up her professional development narrative in the following manner:

As someone who has always loved learning, I'm an avid professional development taker. My experiences haven't always been great, but I always try to take away at least one new thing from session I attend. Over the years, I have come to realize what works best for me, and I think I see it in most of my colleagues. Training needs to be relevant to my current class or job, it needs to be shown to me exactly how it should be done, and it shouldn't require me to throw everything else I do out the window. I think teachers often view professional development as a waste of time because I do not think it is always presented in a way that shows the benefit to them. At least, that's how I feel – tell me why it matters, how to do it, and let me try it. (personal communication, November 7, 2013)

**Inquirer's connection.** Christy's involvement with this study was very intentional, and my personal narrative overlaps with her story in a significant way: Christy was my mentor when I first began teaching and my team partner. For a number of years, she and I shared the same type of experiences with professional development as our career paths mirrored each other's. That being said, we often had differing views on the professional development attended. She team taught with me as the math and science teacher while I was responsible for the reading, language arts, and social studies; therefore, the reading trainings that she felt were not beneficial were actually good for

me. It was interesting as the inquirer juxtaposing my experiences with hers, especially after all of the time that elapsed since they occurred.

Christy's discussion about administrators and their influences was also interesting for me as the inquirer because I found myself shifting hats frequently while she talked. Given she and I shared many of the same experiences, some of the conversation had me wearing my teacher hat; other times, I wore my principal hat. Nevertheless, Christy's inclusion in this study highlighted the following relevant points: 1) administrators have a tremendous influence over participants' perceptions of professional development; 2) experience is an important variable in the benefit of professional development opportunities; and 3) in-service opportunities should be relevant and designed more effectively in order for it to yield the greatest results.

### **Pam's Story**

**Prologue.** Pam is held in the highest regards across the district she works for her exceptional teaching talent. No matter what group of students she is assigned, in the end, they have more value-added to their education than any other group. The cornerstone of her classroom is the high expectations that she sets for her students, all the while creating a safe environment for all of them to take academic risks. Students, parents, and administrators alike all value Pam's efforts. She constantly has visitors in her classroom as others come to observe what she does with students. As the inquirer, it was important for me to have Pam included in this study because she is the type of teacher we all should aspire to become. As Pam unfolds her narrative, it is clear how each experience has played a key role in her development and growth.

**Educational history.** Pam's parents joke with her that she knew she would be a teacher since she was able to talk. Not surprisingly, Pam loved school and was an excellent student. According to her, she did not have a choice as her parents expected her to earn high academic marks and maintain excellent citizenship. Without shame, she describes herself as a "mama's girl" and someone always wanting to please her parents, so she worked hard to ensure she met their expectations. As would be expected, her teachers loved having Pam in their class – indeed, she was the ideal student. She recalls elementary school as a happy period and a time that she enjoyed. Curiously, Pam does not report any teachers at this level that truly stand out, but she notes that she loved them all and still is in contact with many of them. Middle school was a similar experience for Pam. She continued making high marks, but also invested time in sports, including volleyball, tennis, and track.

As Pam shifted to high school, a smile immediately appeared on her face. Though she still would have been considered a teacher's pet by all of her teachers, it was her high school algebra teacher that really shaped her story as a teacher. Pam felt her strength was language arts, and math was her weaker subject. According to her, she had to work harder in her math classes to make high grades. As a result, her attitude toward math was not positive – that is, until she enrolled in her algebra class. Her teacher understood that math was not her strength, but he taught in a manner that made it understandable. He explained to the class that he struggled as a student in math, which gave him an appreciation for it and a desire to help others learn it. He told them he worked extra hard preparing his lessons because it was not his strength. Pam internalized

this mantra. As a teacher, she feels she is a better math teacher because she works harder at teaching it since she struggled with it, just as her algebra teacher did with her. She ended up graduating high in her class and received a scholarship to college.

After high school, Pam enrolled at Lamar University to pursue the teaching degree she always wanted. College was an enjoyable experience for her and she did very well. Her favorite courses, naturally, were her education courses. In her opinion, the program did a good job at teaching her the theoretical fundamentals, but lacked in the practical training (though she did not know it at the time). The required methods courses helped her better understand how to prepare lessons, but it was her internship that really helped her prepare for teaching. In hindsight, she would have preferred it if her program offered her more opportunities to observe in actual classrooms, particularly at the beginning of the school year as teachers set the procedures for their classroom. Nevertheless, Pam quickly was able to take the knowledge she learned at school and apply it in her own classroom as she immediately was hired for a position after graduation.

**Teaching and professional development.** Pam's first teaching assignment was as a first grade teacher at a small private school in southeast Texas. The school enrolled approximately 400 students in grades kindergarten through eighth grade with a very heterogeneously mixed student body in terms of both ethnicity and socio-economic status. Pam was reluctant to accept this position, but it was the vision the principal shared with her for student success that ultimately convinced her that this was the right school to begin her career, "The principal of the school told me at my interview that her

goal was to take every child to his fullest potential...and for the record, it has nothing to do with state testing” (personal communication, November 8, 2013).

Given it was a small private school, professional development opportunities were limited. Unlike large districts, back-to-school week consisted mainly of campus orientation. As such, Pam's initial experience with formal in-service training was nil. Instead, her campus focused on collaboration and peer observation as its main source of capacity building, which Pam explains was truly beneficial:

This campus was full of master teachers with lots of experience. Most of the veteran teachers had been employed in large, public school districts before, so they had lots of training and brought it with them. They were incredibly supportive and nurturing of me as a beginning teacher. It was also an expectation of our principal that we observe other teachers during our conference period.

Those observations showed me everything I needed to know. I got to see what they were saying in action. (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

Pam viewed each opportunity to visit a colleague's classroom as the best form of training. Between the active dialogue she engaged with them and the observations, she felt her development during this time was stellar.

On rare occasions, however, her school did contract consultants to train the campus on different initiatives. She remembers staff development related to guided reading and phonics, classroom management, and teaching math. It needs to be understood that Pam has difficulty saying a negative comment about anything, so her comments in response to those experiences represents as close as she comes to doing that, “The presenters were all very sweet and smart. I do not really remember any major

concepts they shared that were new or career changing. My team and I tried to find at least one idea to add though each time” (personal communication, November 8, 2013). Essentially, these opportunities were not beneficial for her or her team. She reiterated again that working closely with her colleagues was more beneficial and yielded better results for her as a professional and adding skills or knowledge to her teaching.

After nine years at the same school, Pam made the difficult decision to leave her campus because of the commute. She obtained employment at a struggling, Title I school in a large suburban school district. The school was in a unique transition period when Pam joined the staff. It was under the direction of a new principal who was charged with improving test scores. The school recently experienced a population change and was ill-equipped to handle the needs of a diverse student body; as such, it was not performing up to par in some achievement areas.

Although the principal was new to the campus, she was not a new principal. When she hired Pam, she explained what the current situation was (including the needs), and what her plan for it would be over the next three years. Pam recalls feeling confident in her new principal's abilities to make the necessary changes for the campus. At the onset, her new principal asked her to attend some trainings over the course of the summer. Always agreeable, Pam of course said she would attend. Pam recalls the trainings well, but not because of the quality of the information or presenters, but because it was a new experience for her to attend in-service with teachers she was unfamiliar with. She describes the scene as very lonely and disengaging, “Not having peers to exchange ideas with and a context to place the information made the training hard. It seemed very superficial” (personal communication, November 8, 2013).

As part of the campus's improvement plan, many other trainings were required of the teachers as the school year progressed. Pam reports that much of what she attended presented information she already knew and did not add much to her teaching. Although she understood the principal's rationale for those sessions, her experiences were not particularly beneficial. As she reflected on this juncture of time, Pam summed up her thinking in the following manner:

At that time, we were required to attend a lot of sessions at once. The principal did that so no one could say they did not know how. My thoughts on that, however, differed in that though we were presented information, there was no guarantee anyone learned anything. It was a lot of information at one time, and much of it was done in isolation. I do not recall any of those giving us time to plan or create anything, so we basically were in a bunch of sit-and-get workshops. I think the time would have been better for each of us if the required workshops were targeted for specific needs of the teacher rather than based on a presumed deficit for the entire campus (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

Up until this point in our interview, Pam was following a linear timeline in her discussion, but at this point in the interview she began to diverge from this path and discussed her thoughts on the format, design, and presentation of professional development in a more scattered manner. In her opinion, the traditional six-hour workshop format yields very little for teachers because it is overwhelming and mentally exhausting. That line of thinking led her to next discuss the design of the day – that is, it is counterproductive, in her view, to have so much sit-and-get time when working with teachers given that is exactly the opposite way we want to teach our students. Lastly, this

gave her the opportunity to touch upon presenters, “One approach that is not as effective with me that some presenters use is to lecture to me. I know they are very knowledgeable and have a lot to share, but this is not the best way to teach me” (personal communication, November 8, 2013).

With those thoughts expressed, Pam returned to her timeline to continue her narrative. The next shift in her career and new reference point for professional development occurred three years later when she became a literacy coach on her campus. In this role, she was responsible for helping develop pedagogical and instructional skills in teachers related to literacy. This new position also altered her purpose when she attended professional development as now she was responsible for becoming the expert in that area and sharing it with her colleagues. Pam's new position offered her a new perspective on the need for professional development: it was the first time she had the opportunity to really visit classrooms on campus and she saw the areas of need firsthand:

I think most teachers assume that other classrooms are similar to theirs. It is not until you have the opportunity to visit multiple classrooms at random periods of time that you get a sense of how different everyone is – good or not so good. It was in doing this that I realized I have a lot of ideas that I wanted to share with teachers, but I knew it needed to be provided in the right manner for it to be received appropriately. (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

As part of the coaching model, Pam attended a multiday coaching institute. She reports enjoying this training and found it beneficial in two ways: 1) it contained some theoretical principles, but focused mainly on the application of them; and 2) it was information that directly influenced her current position (relevance). Afterwards, she was

immediately able to take ideas she gleaned and implement them in her new role. Her experiences with coaching teachers have been positive, but slow moving, "It takes a lot of time to truly change a teacher's habits. And I have to take it one teacher at a time" (personal communication, November 8, 2013). Pam views coaching as one piece of the professional development puzzle that when put together properly yields wonderful results for teachers and students.

**Inquirer's connection.** Pam and I worked together on the same campus for four years (she was a teacher and I was an assistant principal). In this capacity, there were elements of her story that overlapped with mine. Without question, Pam is in the top echelon of teachers that I have encountered in my career: she is student-centered, warm, caring, and knowledgeable; as such, it was important to me that her story and thoughts be included in this study because I was curious how master teachers internalize and perceive professional development.

I noted several times in Pam's section about her positive nature and how she always finds the "diamond in the ruff" in anything. To that end, it was not in the least bit surprising that she always presented the positives in her experiences with professional development. Fortunately, her passion for education and working with teachers superseded her nature to only speak the positive and she provided some very frank commentary on professional development. Ultimately, the following relevant ideas were gleaned from Pam's participation in this research: 1) a teacher's personal and professional experiences are extremely influential in her perceptions of staff development; 2) mandated professional development is perceived negatively by master

teachers because it is wasteful of their time; and 3) traditional in-service strategies need to be part of a balanced approach to professional development (including coaching, observation, and collaboration) to yield the best results.

### **Marcia's Story**

**Prologue.** Marcia is completing her twenty-ninth year in education. As one can imagine, a career that has spanned almost three decades spawns a collective narrative with vast experiences. Without question, the story that Marcia shares illustrates how her history has impacted her current narrative. Her reflections reveal that it was the people involved in her life that have left the largest impression and had the biggest effect on her – her father's high expectations, inspirational teachers, impressionable friends, knowledgeable mentors, and colleagues – are all intricate parts of the tale she weaves. Without knowing the full context, it would be impossible to understand how her past, present, and future all tie together to create the teacher that she is today.

**Educational history.** To understand Marcia's educational history, one must first understand her family as it was an essential element of her development. Her father was one of the first engineers hired at NASA. He was a lead designer on the creation of the original space shuttle and was a supervisor at mission control for every major space mission from the onset of the program. Having a dad that was actually a rocket scientist was amazing for her growing up. She cites him as the greatest teacher she ever had: "He taught me how to think. My dad believed that any problem had a solution and he taught my brothers and me to find it. It is a skill that carried me all the way through school"

(personal communication, November 8, 2013). To say that her father's expectations for his children's academics was high would be an understatement; she explains that he wanted his children to excel so that they could continue his legacy of "pushing the boundaries of what man is capable of" (personal communication, November 8, 2013).

Marcia's memories of her school days are all positive, though she did not divulge much about them during the course of the interview. She began by noting that she was an excellent student, but she would not classify herself as the teacher's favorite. Not surprisingly, she was a very inquisitive child and asked a lot of questions (she blames her father for this), a habit her teachers did not always find amusing. Nevertheless, she received high academic marks throughout grade school in all subject areas. While in elementary school, she was an avid reader, but it was in math and science that she truly excelled: "I knew early on that I loved numbers, and I always knew that I would end up working in a math related field" (personal communication, November 8, 2013). To get Marcia to share more, I asked her to share any special memories she had of teachers, which elicited a smile from her, but she needed to share the full story:

The first half of my first grade year in school was awful. I had a teacher that was grumpy and angry all the time. But after Christmas break, she did not come back, so they replaced her. Our new teacher was happy and positive. She had high expectations of us and did not compromise them, but she was fun and energetic. She ended up being my sixth, seventh, and eighth grade math teacher and my biggest inspiration at school. (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

Other than that, Marcia's only other remarks about her public school experience was that she felt her high school years were more of a social experience. She summed them up as

a time between middle school and going to college, which she knew she had to do because of her dad.

After graduation, Marcia enrolled at Texas A & M University. Given her love of math, her plan was to pursue a degree in business, but she found the classes unfulfilling. At the time, one of her roommates was working toward her teaching degree, and Marcia noticed that she was always happy. Curious, she decided to audit one of her friend's education courses and immediately feel in love. In that instant, she decided she wanted to be a teacher just like the one she had in first grade; accordingly, she switched her major. Marcia loved the courses she took there and feels the school did a great job preparing her for the classroom (especially the student teaching experiences she had with the A & M Consolidated school district), but added that she does not feel the program would have the same effect today. Once she had her degree, Marcia returned to her hometown and acquired a teaching position.

**Teaching and professional development.** Unlike other participants, Marcia did not present her perspectives on professional development in a linear fashion – that is, using the timeline of her narrative to present what she felt was beneficial or needed. As she explained it, “At this point in my teaching career, each year blends in with the rest. I remember people and emotions, not time. It's the people that matter” (personal communication, November 8, 2013). Instead, Marcia categorized her thoughts based on topic and shared anecdotes to extend her thinking. To generate the themes she wanted to talk about, Marcia brought to the interview a portfolio of certificates from professional development sessions/opportunities that she had attended over the course of her long

career. According to her, after I asked her to be part of this research effort, she located the folder and began reflecting on the memories it invoked. During the course of the interview, her thoughts seemed random and sporadic, jumping from one point to the next, but after she elaborated by providing an example or answering a guided question from me, her points always came back to this initial thought about “the people” mattering most.

The first topic we discussed was the self-selection of professional development. Marcia was adamant that it is much more beneficial for teachers to choose what professional development sessions they attend over being directed to by supervisors. Over the years, she has experienced both situations on multiple occasions, and her belief is that the sessions, workshops, or trainings she picked were more beneficial to her because of a variety of reasons. For starters, her interests are different than other, and she makes no secret of the fact that she is receptive to information that she is interested in learning more about (which she believes her colleagues share her opinion on). In looking at the certificates, she easily identified those that were ones from trainings she selected because they shared a common thread – they tended to be about motivation and human behavior. Her analysis of her own predilection to this area is humorous:

I love quirky kids. I love to be the teacher that is successful with students that no one else is, and in order to do it, I need to know what makes them tick. So over the years, I have attended a lot of trainings about why we do what we do. Also, since my upbringing was different than the students I work with, I want to know about their lives and why they do what they do. (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

As she said this, a sense of the moral imperative she feels toward teaching was evident in her demeanor. To illustrate the types of trainings that were meaningful to her, she named two trainings that she selected to attend -- Capturing Kids' Hearts and Ruby Payne's Poverty Training, both of which she described as emotional and about "people." Even though Marcia participated in both of these workshops over ten years ago, she remembers the feelings they elicited, the people who attended with her, and the kids that she taught at the time. On the flip side, even as Marcia looked at certificates from trainings that she know an administrator assigned her, she could not recall much about what was presented or shared -- though she does say she knows she "got something from a few of them" (personal communication, November 8, 2013). Without any prompting from me, Marcia touched about a central theme of this research with her next comment:

Another reason mandated professional development doesn't work as well is because I have different needs than my colleagues do because of my experience. I have been teaching a long, long time and have been exposed to most ideas. They tend to happen in cycles, so a lot of the ideas that maybe new to a first-year teacher are old habit for me. For it to really be beneficial, professional development needs to be based on my needs. (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

Marcia's next discussed the design of professional development, which encompasses length, presentation, frequency, and occurrences. While looking through her certificates, we calculated together that over the course of twenty-nine years, she had attended over a thousand hours of professional development. Both of us were staggered by that number. When she heard that it was such a large number, it was evident she tried

to process what they all could have been about or when they occurred. The first comment she made afterwards was, "I'm sure during a lot of that time I was sitting in a workshop what I actually was thinking about what I could have been doing if I was in my classroom" (personal communication, November 8, 2013). She contends that most in-service opportunities occur at inopportune times, such as at back-to-school week for teachers, during school hours, or during off-hours. As the inquirer and audience for this comment, I laughed at hearing it and asked her what the alternative was if all of those options were bad. Marcia brilliantly explained that I was accepting the premise of the status quo by asking that question – that is, she suggested that by altering the design of professional development we could alleviate the problem altogether.

As an example of her point, Marcia elaborated by first sharing her qualms with back-to-school week. Her major contention with this model is that it is counterproductive to what needs to be done at the time, which in her mind is preparing lessons and classrooms for students. Given that most teachers are focused on doing that, she believes the majority of the information shared at the time is lost. Instead, she suggested using other mediums to share ideas, such as web-based trainings. Recently, she participated in an online course and felt it was very valuable and had many benefits, such as flexibility in time and location. The other point Marcia made on this topic was that information presented at the wrong time is also meaningless (e.g., strategies about how to teach concepts they have already presented or procedures they have already established). For new ideas to truly be implemented and of value, they need to be scheduled timely so that they can be used appropriately.

At this juncture of the conversation, her comments drifted more to a discussion of her concerns with the traditional model of professional development in which teachers attend six-hour workshops. Marcia's first issue with this plan is that it usually is a one-shot opportunity. Citing a training that she had recently attended, she noted that it takes twenty-one repetitions in order to retain information; to that end, information needs to be presented in an on-going manner, instead of as a "crash course." Moreover, the idea that any one person can attend to a given task for six hours at a time and be expected to master the content and transition it into practice is not realistic to her. Whereas Marcia notes that any duration of time less than three hours is not enough to invest in new learning, six hours at one sitting is overkill. In her experience, trainings that are brief and specific have the best opportunity to appear in her practice. To that end, she would like to see concepts broken up into multiday sessions of approximately an hour and thirty minutes to three hours (but not consecutive days). This format would allow information to be presented in small enough doses that teachers can retain it and then immediately execute.

Formalizing her thoughts on length and timing brought Marcia to her next topic of presenters. From the onset, it was evident this was an area in which she was very opinionated because it connected to her belief that it is about "people." Without question, for professional development to be effective for her, she has to have some form of a connection with the presenter:

If I am going to embrace what I'm hearing, I need to know that the presenter understands me and what I do. That usually means I am most receptive to information if I am hearing it from someone that knows me, my school, my

classroom, and most importantly, my kids. Rarely has a guru from outside wowed me and really changed my teaching. Even the best of them only teach me a few things I did not know before they swept into town. Those that know my kids, however, and can directly show me how a new idea, strategy, or technique will help them can get me to do anything. (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

It was at this point that Marcia said the most significant comment of the entire interview:

The best presenters are the teachers in the same building and the best workshops are those that occur when you simply observe their classes. That's when you see firsthand how a new idea works and how it effects the kids. Over the years, I have learned more by sitting in a master teacher's classroom for one hour than I have in any formal workshop. (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

She summed this subtopic by repeating that presenters that are not really invested in her success are not worth the time and money districts often spend on them given they have true experts at their disposal in their teachers. Finally, Marcia circled the conversation back to "the people" in the last topic she wanted to discuss concerning teacher collaboration. In her twenty-nine years, she honestly believes that it was the conversations with her peers that grew her the most pedagogically and in terms of content knowledge. It is her contention that systems need to be put in place that makes this a common, natural occurrence in schools.

At this point of the interview, it was clear that Marcia felt that she addressed each topic she wanted to discuss. As the inquirer of the study, I asked her what she felt a teacher of her experience could offer a novice teacher. Coyly, Marcia hedged around her

answer by saying that she “liked to think she had ideas to offer,” but that she would never “force her ideas onto someone” (personal communication, November 8, 2013). In a true example of the inquirer effecting the subject’s narrative, I commented that I felt it was a shame that when she retired in the next few years, all of the wisdom that she gained over the course of career and all of the money and time the district invested in her through training would walk out of the district with her. This comment resonated with her and left her speechless for a few moments before she finally replied by saying:

Now that I think about it, I do have a lot I would love to share. I have learned a lot from experiences, and thinking about what I could share with others before they encountered those obstacles so they know what to do could really help keep our new and young teachers in the profession. Teaching is the hardest job in the world, but it is also the greatest. I would love to work with novice teachers and help them problem solve so that they can become the best they can be. (personal communication, November 8, 2013)

**Inquirer’s connection.** Marcia’s story is another that overlaps with mine in a unique way: she was my third grade science teacher. She also was a member of the same team as my sister was when she was a teacher. As the inquirer, it was interesting having these connections with Marcia because it gave me a context in which to compare my stories against. For someone with far less experience than she has, she was the most difficult participant for me to relate to on a professional level; indeed, categorizing her reflections and using sense making to bring twenty-nine years worth of memories into focus proved challenging. That being said, combining what I know of Marcia’s reputation

and her story proved to be incredibly insightful in terms of better understanding teacher development throughout a long career. As a result of her participation, the following relevant strands were identified: 1) the importance of making trainings relevant to practicing teachers' assignments; 2) the significant role that administrator's have on teachers' growth and development; and 3) the need for veteran teachers to be allowed time to collaborate with their colleagues in order to learn new ideas and share their experiences.

### **Focus Group**

**Prologue.** After a week transpired from the last interview, I reunited with each participant as a focus group. As the inquirer, I had no previous experiences leading a focus group, and I was unsure how such an eclectic group of individuals would relate with each other. Having met with each of them, I could personally attest that they were all vastly different personalities: Alma is quiet and proper, Alan is playful and confident, Christy is straightforward and very linear, Pam is modest and sincerely nice, and Marcia is both opinionated and open-minded at the same time.

Prior to the meeting, I reviewed my notes and identified strands that I wanted to touch upon during the course of the meeting, including: administrative and colleague support in relationship to professional development, accountability and professional development, and scheduling professional development opportunities. From the moment the session started to the end, the group was lively, engaging, and very in tune with each other's ideas. As the inquirer, this was the hardest session for me to strictly wear my researcher hat because the group constantly challenged my own assumptions and ideas,

but the free flowing conversation generated several meaningful and relevant strands. Indeed, it was also difficult as the researcher to allow for a free exchange of ideas as often times the group bounced quickly from one subject to the next. Part of me wanted them to feel free to share what they were thinking on any topic, but the other part wanted to keep it in a more linear transgression of thoughts in order to help piece together this section. For the sake of dialogue, I opted to allow the group to determine the course of the discussion. In the end, the group laughed about the final generalizations each exchanged and shared with me that they enjoyed the opportunity to reflect with a group, share their thoughts, and have a voice in terms of what is beneficial to them as professionals.

**Focus group's thoughts on professional development.** At the start of the focus group, each participant began by sharing who they are, how many years experience they have in education, and what their current assignment is in the district. Though it is a large district, each participant had some familiarity with the other members of the group from various joint meetings, so there was a feeling of comradery between the participants from the start.

The first question I asked the group pertained to administrators and professional development. The veteran teachers were the only participants that touched upon the subject in their interviews, and all three were very passionate about the point while speaking about it. My thought was the others would also have an opinion on the matter. Marcia was quick to respond by saying that in order for administrators to effectively connect professional development with their teachers they need to explain why it is

relevant and matters. She added that in the best case, there is a way to see the new information in application. While she spoke, I observed the other participants nodding and agreeing with her statements. Christy inserted, though, that videos do not count in this context. In order for it to be beneficial, the group felt that it needed to be observed in action in their climate (i.e., their classrooms). She referenced an occasion where an administrator made her watch a series of videos on professional development. In her opinion, this was a waste of her time for two reasons: 1) it came at the wrong point in her career (she had been a teacher for several years already and had a solid foundation with classroom management); and 2) it was not relevant because the classroom was not like hers (the videos were of a secondary class while she taught at the elementary level). Oddly, each of the participants shared an occasion of having a similar experience – that is, being required to watch a video during the course of a professional development opportunity. No matter the topic (classroom management, vocabulary, balanced literacy), the group all agreed that videos are ineffective mediums in professional development.

In an effort to bring it back on point, Alma interjected that it is important for administrators to control the timing of professional development sessions. She provided two examples to the group to illustrate her point. The first involved a classroom management training that she was required to attend as a first-year teacher. It was scheduled for the twelfth week of school. Her contention with it was that the timing of it was ineffective for that point of the year. If it was something the district believed would be valuable for new teachers to help them manage their classrooms, she felt it should have been held prior to school. Another example she shared involved a science training she attended. During the course of the session, the presenter discussed the TEKS for the

upcoming period; however, it was something that she and her team had already done.

Alma stressed that as a first-year teacher, timing is crucial as she tries to juggle all of the responsibilities of teaching.

Alan concurred with Alma's assertion about the significance of timing. He noted that every year he has taught, back-to-school week for teachers has been problematic for him; to this point, everyone in the room agreed. Alan explained that the information provided during this time by administrators is overwhelming and too much to absorb. Instead, the group believed a better use of this time would be to allow them to truly prepare for the start of school, both in terms of preparing for students and preparing for the lessons they will teach. The group felt this would be an ideal time to discuss the standards and look at resources.

After the group concluded their discussion on back-to-school week, Christy returned the conversation to administrative support by explaining that the best situation for including new ideas from professional development occurs when a teacher knows she has the support of the principal for that initiative – that is, the administrator understands what it is and how it fits into the classroom. Also, the administrator needs to understand that the new learning might not be successful on the first attempt. Marcia and Pam both agreed with this statement. Marcia explained that having worked under five different principals in twenty-nine years, she knew which of those she felt comfortable taking risks in her teaching while employed. Pam, too, agreed that not all administrators create an environment that makes teachers feel it is okay to try something and fail at it; as such, there have been occasions when she has not tried some ideas that she felt were good because she worried what might happen with her boss.

Administrative support for new initiatives was only one area I was curious how the group would respond to; the other part had to do with collegial support. I asked the group to share their thoughts on how important having the support of their colleagues was to them when implementing or undergoing professional development. Unequivocally, the group voiced that support of fellow teachers is essential for success. Alma began by saying that as a first-year teacher, she desired to know her fellow colleagues better, but those that she has formed relationships with have made a world of difference for her. One note she makes, though, is that in terms of new ideas, she finds her fellow new teachers are the best ones to go to for support: "New teachers seem to me to be more open to trying new ideas because to us, everything is new. Some of the more experienced teachers I work with seem very uncomfortable with trying out new ideas" (personal communication, November 15, 2013). Pam and Christy both agreed with Alma. As coaches, both of them have been on both sides of professional development – presenters and participants – and more often than not in their experiences it is newer teachers that are willing to experiment first.

As the veterans in the group, I asked Pam, Christy, and Marcia to elaborate on what it takes to get veteran teachers to implement new concepts, techniques, or strategies learned at professional development. Jokingly, Christy responded "candy," but then added that often times the main variable is how much does the new approach require them to adjust what they are already doing (personal communication, November 15, 2013). Collectively, the three of them have sixty years of experience. In that time, they each provided examples of what Marcia calls "the flavor of the month" approach to professional development – that is, a new idea that is supposedly the proverbial "silver

bullet” to solving all of the problems in education (personal communication, November 15, 2013). Pam summed it by saying that the techniques she has used with her students for over fifteen years have proven successful, so it makes no sense to disregard it all; instead, she looks for ways to infuse her current practices with the new ideas. Marcia brought the conversation back to collegial support by saying this occurs best when they are given opportunities to share ideas and collaborate on issues just as Pam described (incorporating new ideas with current practices).

Having discussed administrative and collegial support, I was curious how the group would respond to campus goals and accountability. Each made it abundantly clear in their interviews that self-selection of professional development was very important to them, but as an administrator, I knew they were not always going to be given that option. Alan answered first saying that usually he implemented campus goals at the lowest level he could if he believed it did not fit with his classroom (meaning he would not fully and faithfully implement ideas from professional developments attended as a result of a campus goal). Admittedly, I was surprised by Alan's response and curious if the rest of the group felt the same way. It certainly questioned certain practices schools commonly have in place (e.g., campus improvement plans). As much as I tried to mask my surprise, Marcia noticed my puzzled look and explained that though campus goals are important for systems, classrooms should be viewed as systems, too. In her experience, often times the two do not match. In cases like this, she believes most classroom teachers are going to continue using the practices that work for them.

Christy and Pam presented alternative views on the topic. Christy began by stating that campus goals and trainings that stem from them are important because they

help create alignment. She referenced her campus and two school-wide initiatives they have in place (one is vocabulary and the other is interactive notebooks). Her narrative of the implementation of those two pieces was bumpy to be sure according to her, but her administrator maintained his resolve and expectations. Though the initial rollout was met with resistance, there were some teachers that immediately began using those tools. After they exhibited some success and her administrator tied the initiatives to walk-through evaluations, others slowly began incorporating. Christy admits that it is still early, but feels that it was a good decision for the campus.

Likewise, Pam agreed that professional development opportunities related to campus goals are important and can be very beneficial for a campus, but feels the way administrators approach it is important. She referenced a point Marcia made earlier about the importance of administrators explaining the “why” or rationale behind mandates and how the training and new ideas will benefit the teachers and students. Additionally, Pam encouraged administrators to hold teachers accountable: “It is very frustrating for a teacher who is working really hard trying something new to know that her peers are getting away with not doing it. I want my principal to hold them accountable” (personal communication, November 15, 2013). To help illustrate her point, Pam used a story from her teaching narrative around the implementation of balanced literacy at a campus she worked. In her case, the school was required to implement guided reading; however, there were certain teachers that stubbornly refused. Not only did it irritate her that they were allowed not to follow through on the goal, Pam was also upset because it affected the campus alignment. Pam’s experience highlighted for her the importance of everyone

contributing to the school by implementing common practices for the betterment of students.

While Pam and Christy spoke, Marcia, Alan, and Alma listened attentively. It was interesting to watch them process what they heard because it was evident they understood their points, but they did not know how to apply it to their thinking.

Appropriately, Marcia responded by saying, "It is a fine line that administrators have to walk. On the one hand, alignment is important, but accountability measures often times cause teachers to shut down" (personal communication, November 15, 2013). As a compromise, Christy inserted that a balance would be the most beneficial and it could be struck simply by choosing campus based initiatives that could be differentiated for teachers at multiple grade levels, which the group felt was a good solution and plan of action.

To accomplish the goal of incorporating new concepts, strategies, or ideas from professional development into current practices, the group felt that coaching, modeling, and observations were also necessary ingredients and should be included in the plan. Alma explained that as a new teacher, she wants "to see how to teach it" and to be given feedback on how she is doing. Alan agreed with her comments and added that he believes newer teachers benefit from coaching. On the opposite side of the spectrum, Marcia does not need someone to always show her how to do it, but wants time to collaborate with peers and coaches to problem solve and plan; she cautions, however, that coaches not become quasi-administrators looking to catch teachers failing because that destroys the entire process (something she has seen firsthand in her experience). In the

best scenarios, participants felt the best coach would be campus based because they know the infrastructure of the school and the personality dynamics.

As we began to end the focus group session, each participant shared a final thought on professional development. Not surprisingly, their responses highlighted the ideas they emphasized during their individual interviews: 1) Alma stressed that teacher observations were the most beneficial form of professional development she has experienced; 2) Alan repeated that the most valuable professional development is related to his interest and his specific kids; 3) Christy's final comments focused on the need for professional development to be broken into small chunks and slowly implemented; 4) Pam shared that it is important to consider her knowledge and experience when planning for professional development; and lastly, 5) Marcia reinforced her feelings that colleagues are the best source of professional development and that it is time for our systems to change to make professional development experiences meaningful.

### **Reflective Journals**

After conducting the focus group, the five participants returned their reflective journals to me. With a quick glance, it was evident that some of the participants utilized the exercise more effectively than others. Reading each one certainly validated this point. As the inquirer, my task to effectively categorize them and consolidate them was daunting; though there were some common threads, the vastly different styles and detail suggested to me that it would be more enlightening and beneficial to present them as independent additions to the interviews. As such, each participant is allotted their own section for this purpose.

**Alma's reflection.** Alma is a very linear and analytical thinker. She likes lists and plans of action. As such, it was no surprise to see that she structured her reflective journal in a very systematic way. For each entry, she began by posing a question to herself. Though she discussed some of these topics in her interview, her thoughts in her journal extended them and really highlight her way of thinking.

The first question Alma reflected on was "Do all first-year teachers need the same PD?" As was the case in the interview, she categorically said no: "We might all be first-year teachers, but we all have different needs. Although I am a first-year teacher, I bring with me my past experience...our personal and professional experiences affect who we are in the classroom" (personal communication, November 15, 2013). The strength in Alma's response is that it reinforces the primary need to study professional development in the narrative as this research does: teachers' experiences are important variables in terms of their need and should be considered in their professional growth.

The next question Alma poses to herself was "Is PD during new teacher orientation effective?" Unfortunately, she did not view her new teacher orientation as effective in terms of improving her as a teacher. Though they received training in classroom management and PDAS, these trainings were very general and not helpful at that juncture in time. Instead, Alma would rather have had content specific training related to the curriculum and resources they were going to be required to use. She noted that if the district felt more generalized training was needed, topics like organization skills, grading, or lesson planning would have been more beneficial.

Alma's next journal entry focused on specific professional development for bilingual teachers. During the course of the focus group, Alma noted that she felt as a bilingual teacher she had different professional development needs than a general education teacher would have, so it was not surprising to see this in her reflections. Ideally, training would be offered to bilingual teachers in transitioning students from Spanish to English, specific phonics teaching for primary bilingual teachers, and guided reading for bilingual classes. The entry that follows extends this thinking and adds that the best professional development opportunities (in her opinion) are those that allow the participant to practice what is being learned. She compares it to her classroom and says, "PD that caters to all learning styles is the most beneficial. Just like our students, we all learn in different ways" (personal communication, November 15, 2013).

The ideas presented in Alma's journal reinforce the premise that teachers are more than curriculum implementers; rather, they are curriculum makers. Providing teachers individualized and differentiated training based on their needs and their students' needs will enhance the quality of teaching for all.

**Alan's reflection.** Alan expressed in his interview how he feels about professional development impeding on his personal life and the fact that he likes to keep them separate, so I was unsure of how beneficial the reflective journal would be for him. Not surprisingly, his notebook had the least comments of the group. His notebook focused on professional development sessions that he felt were beneficial. He structured each entry by discussing the elements and qualities of those in-service opportunities.

On the whole, each session he discussed focused on meeting the needs of all learners in his classroom. The first training he reported on was the five day gifted and talented institute. Alan found these sessions beneficial because they gave him tangible strategies to work with students with differing ability levels. His next entry discussed a classroom management training he attended early during his first year of teaching. This training was meaningful to him because it focused on establishing relationships with students while still maintaining boundaries. Alan's last entry discussed a brain-based research training he attended, which he found beneficial because it explained to him how to teach effectively so that information is retained. As the inquirer, I made the connection with Alan's journal entries to his interview of the importance he finds in trainings that offer him ways to reach all learners in his class.

**Christy's reflection.** Reading Christy's reflective journal for the first time was definitely the biggest surprise for me as the inquirer. Knowing her well, I expected a very organized, linear journal filled with opinions. In actuality, her journal seemed to be more of a stream of conscience experience featuring several unconnected thoughts. She began her reflections by discussing Ruby Payne's framework for understanding poverty training, which she has attended several times. In Christy's opinion, this training is especially beneficial because it connects to teachers personally and speaks to the students they work with daily in her district. The training was unique in that it balanced facts and research, but also personal anecdotes that made it applicable.

The next topic Christy discussed was in-service training provided by universities – that is, professional development sponsored by universities and trained by university

staff. Christy was part of two grant initiatives that allowed her to take professional development courses at a university. Without question, the presenters were incredibly knowledgeable she reports, but one experience was more enriching for her because it focused on how to apply the information in the appropriate classroom.

The last journal entry was entitled, “Most frustrating feeling...” Her notes under this entry were very straightforward and simple: “Being sent to a mandatory training knowing I won’t be able to use what I learn” (personal communication, November 15, 2013). She provides a context for this statement through an example of a time she had to attend training for three days when she knew her principal was not going to allow her to implement what was being presented.

Christy’s reflections reinforce much of what was presented during the interview sections. Teachers are most positive about professional development that connects with them emotionally and pertain to the kids they work with on a daily basis. Likewise, it was expressed by other participants that simply being a knowledgeable presenter is not sufficient enough to make a session valuable; instead, it also needs to pertain to their current assignment and be replicable in the classroom.

**Pam’s reflection.** Of all of the participants, Pam is the strongest supporter in the power of professional development, particularly if it is designed effectively, and her reflective journal is a testament to that fact. As noted in Pam’s interview, she feels that every learning opportunity is professional development, even small moments such as a discussion with a teacher or a quick observation in another class. Essentially, Pam is always looking for ideas to reach all students and help them to succeed. With such an

expansive view on professional development, I was curious how Pam would categorize her thoughts in her reflective journal. Similar to Alma's journal, Pam organized her thoughts around one central question: what aspects does she value the most in professional development?

Pam's first entry into her journal focused on professional development that allows teachers to create products while at training for their classrooms. This issue is twofold for her: 1) she believes trainings that are practical and not just theoretical are the most beneficial; and 2) trainings that provide teachers with tangible instructional artifacts are the easiest to implement and the information is the most memorable. Her first point she makes is pretty straight forward: teachers do not want to hear theory; rather, they want to know how the information is practical, fits in with what they are already doing, and can be done without a lot of time. Her second point is tied back to Pam's nature – that is, she always finds a piece of new information or strategy that she can incorporate from any in-service opportunity; the problem she has, however, is that she often does not have the time to create all of the pieces immediately to implement the ideas in the classroom because of time constraints. She generalizes this view as a problem most teachers experience when she says, “Too often, teachers lack the time to prepare all of the materials necessary to implement the new ideas. It is great when you have some time to make-and-take it when there are components to assemble” (personal communication, November 15, 2013).

The next section of Pam's journal discusses professional development that allows teachers to collaborate and share ideas. Pam truly believes the best ideas come directly from colleagues; as such, the most beneficial type of professional development she

experiences occurs when she has time to discuss with her peers. More importantly, when she is at professional development, Pam believes the best outcomes happen when teachers have time to dialogue about what was presented. In this capacity, teachers can problem solve ideas, extend activities, and really apply the information to the campus in which they work. A common problem she sees is that teachers reach a mental breaking point where they cannot negotiate the new learning with current practices; as such, they “shut down.” In her experience, teachers that reach this point never implement the information or strategies they were taught. To remedy this, Pam explains that it needs to be built into the professional development design:

I have read that research shows that teachers do not go back and use staff development. It is very helpful and my peers have always been more willing to try what we learned if we have an opportunity to talk about specific ways to implement it while at the session. This allows us to problem solve, plan, and talk through potential disasters. It also usually means we understand it better if we can explain it to each other and come up with our plans of action. (personal communication, November 15, 2013)

In the third entry of her journal, Pam discussed the benefit of professional development that is designed not only to meet all of the teachers' learning styles, but also their teaching styles. Pam explains that in her seventeen years of experience, she has never met a teacher that instructs just as she does in her classroom:

I am a very nuanced teacher. I have very specific behaviors and strategies that are mine alone. I have never walked into another room and thought it was identical. In fact, I can be teaching the exact same lesson and using the exact same words as

a teammate and it will be completely different because my personality and experiences are part of my presentation. (personal communication, November 15, 2013)

To that end, Pam believes that the best in-service opportunities recognizes this fact and presents ideas that can be utilized in all classrooms: "There are times that the presenter is so different than I am that it is difficult to imagine how I will use the material they are showing. The best and most useful professional development is broad enough to allow for different teaching styles" (personal communication, November 15, 2013).

Lastly, Pam's final section reflected on professional development opportunities that differentiate for current teaching assignments (i.e., grade levels). Within this section, it was clear that Pam was conflicted in how to best express her thoughts because she always tries to find the positives, but it was evident that she felt trainings that grouped all grade levels did not yield the most effective results:

As a first grade teacher, I work with six year olds. The needs of a six year old are very specific for that age. I have sat in trainings before that were for K-12 teachers. Even without having taught at the high school level, I know that working with a teenager is vastly different than working with a six year old. I believe that professional development that divides out age groups is the most beneficial. High school issues are not the same ones I confront in a first grade classroom. I even believe that is the case within the elementary grades. Most of the time fifth grade needs are different than first grade. (personal communication, November 15, 2013)

Pam's thoughts here reiterated what all of the participants said and validated the notions presented in the adult learning theory section: professional development must be directly related to the current assignment for it to be the most beneficial.

**Marcia's reflections.** Marcia told me ahead of time that she journals daily and reflects on each lesson. It is a practice that she has utilized for years, so this task was one she was excited to engage in. Her first entry actually references her thinking prior to when we met for the interview. She explains that in preparing for our meeting, she found a folder of her workshop certificates. Her initial thought was that she was amazed about how much was in it – that is, the number of trainings that she had attended over the years. The earliest certificates she found dated back to the 80s, which was the start of her career. As she reflected on each one, it was not the training that she remembered, but the people she shared in the training with: “Seeing these certificates brought back many memories, not about the development meetings, but more of the people that signed them...I remember the people, not the session. It's always about the people (personal communication, November 15, 2013).

Marcia's second entry reflected upon our interview session. The first statement she made was “his questions provoked many thoughts and memories...99% which were positive” (personal communication, November 15, 2013). It was my first example as the inquirer of me influencing the subject; the other occasions were of the subjects influencing my thoughts as they shared their stories. During the interview, she perceived my guiding questions as hints that I understood that often times professional development sessions were “useless” and “a waste of time;” in so doing, she felt validated that as an

administrator I am aware of this fact. Her stream of conscience led her to a discussion about a situation she had with a student that day, which she connected to professional development by noting that the skills she used came from the three day Capturing Kids' Hearts training she attended. That training in particular was especially meaningful for Marcia because it invoked strong emotions and was directly related to interpersonal competencies, not just content.

The third entry in Marcia's reflective journal focused on a portion of our conversation during the guided interview. During the course of our session, we calculated that at a minimum, Marcia attended over 1,000 hours of professional development during the course of her twenty-nine years as a teacher. The language I choose at the time was that this was "an investment the district made in her over the years" (personal communication, November 15, 2013). According to her journal entry, she had never considered professional development in this manner (that is, as a district investment); instead, she often viewed it as mandated and wasteful of time and money. It was a positive paradigm shift for her. She records in her journal that when she retires, the district's investment retires with her, which seems wasteful. She noted several master/mentor teachers she has known that retired, and what a shame it was that they never had the opportunity to impart the knowledge they had acquired over the years onto novice teachers.

Marcia's journal entries then shift to thoughts about topics that she is interested in at this junction of her career for professional development. As noted in her interview, her predilection for training sessions usually revolve around topics about motivational theory (e.g., Ruby Payne, Capturing Kids' Hearts, Dealing with Difficult Kids). She reiterated

these trainings are meaningful to her because they are emotional. In her opinion, a teacher never receives too much training in this area. In terms of content, Marcia noted that she would like to be provided training on the use of interactive journals, but she adds that she would prefer it to be time to truly create one, not be told why they are useful. As a veteran teacher, Marcia has reiterated that she finds tangible ideas to be the most valuable; she does not need training on principles at this juncture in her career. Marcia's reflections also extend her thoughts on presenters of in-service training. She resents presenters that treat her like a child: "When a presenter talks to us as though we are children in a condescending voice, I resent that person and quite frankly quit listening" (personal communication, November 15, 2013). Her thoughts reinforce the concepts of Houle and Knowles outlined in the review of the literature section.

The final entries in Marcia's reflective journal discuss what she believes would be beneficial professional development for all teachers across the experience continuum. Notably, she feels that novice teachers would benefit from exchanging ideas with veteran teachers in semi-structured conversations and observations. Too often, in her opinion, induction programs are minimal and are limited to a one-on-one relationship, whereas she feels that a group would be more helpful.

During the course of our interview, we discussed the value that veteran teachers have to share with novice teachers, and she notes in her journal that this was indeed true but often ignored:

I'd like to think I bring my knowledge and wisdom to the table. Unfortunately, not much gets shared because the school environment is not set up for it...veteran teachers can often step in with a tried and true solution, which cuts down on

wasted time. We bring experience and successful strategies everywhere we go – but we do not try and shove our ways onto others. That said, I have never met a veteran teacher that is not willing to help another teacher – not just our new teachers – all teachers. (personal communication, November 15, 2013)

Marcia makes a point that the structures of schools is not the only hindrance to sharing, new teachers sometimes are unreceptive as well. She blames their reaction to assistance on the system, though, because it is not a required and natural part of the profession – that is, it is not a regular occurrence to share ideas and discuss what truly works. In her opinion, on-going roundtable discussions with teachers of varying experience would be ideal to start the dialogue. Marcia suggests this would be “career changing” and beneficial for all: “I know that I do have a lot to offer younger teachers, but that is a two way street, and they have so much to offer me too” (personal communication, November 15, 2013).

Interestingly, Marcia emailed me after the focus group her reflections on that experience and I believe it deserves a place in this discussion. The email began by thanking me for the focus group experience: “Thanks for putting such a diverse group together and giving us a platform to share. That is a unique experience in my twenty-nine years” (personal communication, November 15, 2013). She goes on to say that she thought the group meeting was both “difficult and amazing,” a contradiction she readily admits as strange, but she feels it is akin to the nature of professional development:

The whole concept of staff development is difficult. Educators, in my own experience, are complex people with some very basic needs. That complexity makes it difficult to provide a development session/system that pleases the

masses. In my experience, many educators are fearful and afraid of change even though we teach others to take risks and make change. We want and even crave change, yet we are hesitant to take that first step required to begin change.

(personal communication, November 15, 2013)

Marcia continues by saying that she loved hearing from the new teachers in the group because it made her feel connected and reinvigorated. She encourages professional development designers and administrators to create systems that allow for honest dialogue:

I do think that being able to share what we do, think and feel in a non-threatening environment makes all of us feel better and will lead us to being better in the classroom. So, perhaps somewhere in that lies the key to staff development...just taking time to talk and reflect with other teachers is inspiring. (personal communication, November 15, 2013)

**Inquirer's connection.** The value of the journals proved to be mixed amongst the participants. Those that commonly journal and use reflective practices on a daily basis felt it was very cathartic and valuable; others, however, that do not engage in this type of activity on their own fruition did not believe it to be an enriching activity. Indeed, this was obvious in the amount each utilized the journals. Not surprisingly, the veteran teachers (Christy, Pam, and Marcia) used the tool more intentionally and in such a way that extended the thoughts they shared in their interviews. Alma and Alan offered less in their reflective journals and noted to me that they felt they amply shared their views during their interview. Curiously, it was at this point that I truly understood how

much my story was connected to the research and influential on its development. In reading each of their reflections, it reshaped my views on the interviews I shared with them, particularly Marcia's. As a whole, this exercise added the following to the research: 1) reflective journals demonstrate the interconnectiveness of the inquirer and the participants in narrative inquiry; 2) veteran teachers have a plethora of information to share, and allowing them time to gather their thoughts helps them self-categorize; and 3) teachers value open conversations with colleagues as the best form of professional development.

**Chapter V – Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion**

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explained that “narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of continual reformation of an inquiry than it does a sense of problem, definition, and solution.” To that end, the use of narrative inquiry in this study attempted to interweave elements from my story (or personal narrative), the relevant writings of the subject of professional development from both a theoretical and historical vantage, and the stories from practicing educators in such a way that common threads could be identified and new understandings of the intricacies of professional development could be understood at a deeper level to reform our current knowledgebase and practices. The guiding questions that drove this study included:

1. What methods, approaches, contents and designs do teachers believe best allows them to improve their pedagogy and knowledge base so that they are better curriculum implementers and educators?

The biggest variable in how participants responded to this question was years of experience. Teachers earlier in their careers reported that workshop approaches that taught them simple strategies or deepened their content knowledge was beneficial, especially if it aided in their management (i.e., improved student discipline or required less prep time). Teachers with at least ten years of experience felt sessions that were more focused on intervention design directly related to student improvement was the most beneficial. More importantly, exchanging ideas in a collaborative format was the only program design reported that they felt truly shaped them as curriculum makers or curriculum implementers.

2. What factors influences a teacher's perception on the effectiveness of a professional development opportunity?

Participants reported a variety of factors that directly influenced the quality of professional development opportunities, including: how much time the training was allotted, the make-up of the group that attended in the professional development, who presented the new information, and how much the new information reconciled with strategies/concepts/approaches that have proven successful in the classroom.

3. How does a teacher's experience history shape a professional development opportunity?

Each teacher's personal narrative clearly impacted how effective professional development was received; as such, packaged or standardized professional development does not yield as strong of results.

4. Does year of experience influence a teacher's perception on what is effective?

Yes, years of experience directly impacted the participant's viewpoints on professional development. In short, newer teachers are looking for more strategy specific ideas and trainings that teach them skills that can be implemented immediately and easily. Veteran teachers look for alternative approaches that will help them meet the needs of all learners. For sessions to be truly effective for veteran teachers, they need to be more collaborative and allow master teachers to share their knowledge.

The data that was collected based on these driving research questions adds much to the current literature on professional development in that it expands our understanding of

how important years of experience is as a variable in terms of professional development, which will be explored in the following section on implications of the research.

### **Implications of the Research**

The implications for this section are beneficial for all stakeholders in the education field: teachers, administrators, professional development designers, and even pre-service programs (e.g., universities and alternative certification programs). The implications have been framed around the premise that teachers are curriculum makers – that is, that there is more than simple implementation involved when teaching. It is necessary for teachers to embed their stories inside of the curriculum for it to reach full fruition; as such, the goal of professional development is to meet the needs of the participants at their ability level to help them grow. It should also be understood that I feel the narratives collected here serve as valid and reliable sources of data to determine these implications and should not be viewed as mere silhouettes; putting this data into context with the larger theoretical and historical research on professional development gives us as educators a better understanding of how we can improve and better teach in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Implications for Professional Development**

For professional development to be most effective, design of and selection of said opportunity must consider the experience of the teacher. Just as a student has different skill levels at each grade that we build upon – novice, intermediate, experienced, or master – teachers also bring with them an array of talents that stems from their

experiences. Novice teachers need more tangible and strategy based professional development so that they can easily add to their repertoire. Teachers in the midrange (6-10 years of experience) still need some additional content and pedagogy training, but are at the threshold of needing more enriching professional development selections that allows them to expand their understanding as curriculum makers (not merely curriculum implementers). Lastly, master/veteran teachers need opportunities to exchange ideas and share their knowledge with others. Based on this tiered framework, principals, C & I directors, and professional development planners need to move away from the one-dimensional approach of workshops for all. Equally important, they should be aware that mandated professional development rarely yields any positive experiences from practicing teachers at any stage of their career. In the best design, school administrators engage in a dialogue with teachers about shared experiences so that both can contribute to the context of the professional development and support can be given as needed.

Interestingly, there were several common threads that emerged from the participants that were consistent across the interviews (i.e., regardless of years of experience). Teachers at all levels reported the importance of support when trying to incorporate new learning in to their practice, though the degree varied. Newer teachers described the support they needed as more guided, from administrators and colleagues, while veteran/master teachers reported needing a more collaborative approach. In both cases, the level of support applied to selection, implementation, and follow-up. Simply put, mandated professional development and change from administrators was viewed negatively across the board by participants.

Time was also a common thread central to each participant. Each consistently shared that the traditional six-hour session of professional development did little in terms of improving their pedagogy. Newer teachers reported that this format was overwhelming and did not give them opportunities to practice the skills they were being taught, while veteran teachers found this model tedious and unengaging. In the best design, professional development is presented in chunks and across time. The participating teachers all emphasized the value in having time to practice new ideas and then add. Models that provide explicit direction for implementation should last approximately sixty-minutes and then adjourn. At that point, teachers need time to immediately implement the first phase of the new learning and practice it. After a period of two-to-three weeks, teachers should reconvene to discuss and exchange ideas about what worked or what needs to be refined. After this, teachers should be given additional time to practice again. Finally, after approximately a month, they want to know the next phase and so another small (sixty-minute training) should be provided. This process should continue until all phases have been included. In this model, learning is scaffolded, supported, and incremental.

Another common thread shared by all participants was the value in having a presenter that is familiar with the participants' school and kids. All five teachers felt the same that presenters that were unfamiliar with the actual situation in which they worked were ineffective; rather, they wanted developers that knew the students and could help with specific ideas that were beneficial to their needs. This is an important concept for districts and administrators to consider as they design their professional development

model and allocate funds; often times, the money currently spent is wasteful in this context.

Hopefully, professional development designers and administrators find the stories shared within insightful and influence them to adjust current, archaic practices.

### **Implications for Teachers**

During the focus group, Alma made a remark that during the first few weeks of school, she was incredibly overwhelmed with all of the new information and expectations, and Marcia joked back with her that even at twenty-nine years she still has moments like that. On the surface this was a light hearted moment to make Alma feel better knowing that all teachers feel that sense of being overwhelmed, but on a larger scale, it represented the value this study has for all teachers – that is, it gives them a comparison and baseline to reference in terms of their own narratives. As a profession, teaching is very solitary; indeed, schools have been described as buildings full of one-room school houses. However, as the group of teachers discussed their thoughts, the common experiences linked them in a unique way. This was prevalent throughout their joint discussion and was evident in their validations of each other's assertions and the constant nodding I observed during its course.

### **Implications for Campus Administrators**

As noted extensively in the review of the literature, there is ample research detailing the important role that administrators plays before, during, and after professional development sessions that impact its effectiveness. In the best scenarios,

leaders provide teachers support, time, and resources so that they have everything they need to implement the new learning from professional development. The stories within reiterate these same important points about administrators, but also expanded our understanding of how much direction they provide. It is crucial to understand that teachers at varying points in their professional growth have different needs, and too often administrators ignore this vital variable. Ideally, the narratives within will help administrators see the importance of differentiating professional development for teachers just as they ask them to do with their students.

### **Implications for Additional Research**

The use of narrative inquiry afforded me the opportunity to serve as a voice for practicing educators and allow them to express full, complex, and developed thoughts about their development. Through weaving together the five cases studies provided, this research was able to examine teacher learning from a context as teacher as curriculum makers. Additional research is recommended to continue this collective story of practicing teachers in order to confirm and extend the findings from this inquiry. It would be beneficial to sample more teachers with similar years of experience as those that participated in this study and capture their thoughts on professional development to continue to refine the manner in which we as educators design, implement, engage, and reflect in professional growth. It would also be valuable for additional research to be conducted in which this study is replicated but with secondary teachers and post-secondary (college level) professors. The participants within this inquiry were all

employed at the elementary level, and it would be useful to know if teachers at different levels report the same perceptions about effective professional development.

### **Implications of the Narratives**

The narrative stories contained within were woven together with the intent of expanding the knowledgebase on teacher professional development via the context of five practicing teachers stemming from one district. Through reflective practices, these teachers used their narratives to articulate what they believed to be true based on their experiences and to make sense of how those shaped their perceptions (Schwab, 1983). In so doing, a framework was established for future models, both in terms of others using narrative inquiry to explore their own understanding of their professional development needs, as well as a guide for stakeholders to design professional development opportunities for practicing teachers. By following this framework, educational stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, central office staff, and professional development providers have a starting place and an understanding of how to overcome barriers in designing professional development that more accurately meets their needs. My hope is that these stories provide an entry point for others to compare their own practices and restore their understanding of professional development.

### **Implications for the Inquirer**

It was previously noted that one of the hopes of this inquiry would be that it would broaden practicing administrators' understanding of how to improve teachers through professional development. I can say with absolute certainty that this experience

did just that for me as the inquirer. In being an active participant with the research subjects, my story was constantly present and compared to theirs. Given my most recent role is as an administrator, this role remained particularly close to the surface. As I listened to each share their stories and views, I was casting my own against theirs. At times (actually frequently with some topics), I wanted to take off my “researcher hat” and wear my “principal hat” to counter points they made. I wanted to help them better understand the rationale for why things were done by administrators, but in order to preserve the authenticity of their participation, I refrained. Though it was challenging, in so doing, it did allow me to be a better receiver of the information, which in turn allowed me to internalize their thoughts and reshape my practices. For example, I am a guilty of using back-to-school week as a vehicle for implementation of new initiatives, but as a result of this study, I have a better understanding of what is most effective for practicing teachers. Moreover, the manner in which I support teachers and hold them accountable has been refined. Whereas in the past I have approached my role as the administrator as a hammer there to enforce, now my practice is more “walk softly and carry a big stick,” which allows me to better support teachers instead of serving as a quasi-enforcer. It is my hope that other practicing administrators will switch hats as I did and use the narrative inquiry method or these stories contained within to refine their practices.

### **Conclusion**

In the design of narrative inquiry, the researcher remains a participant throughout the process, thus exploring his/her story as much as the research subjects' narratives. This process creates a continual cycle of storying and restorying as we constantly

reconstruct the narrative with the new information. As the process unfolded, I found myself changing the lenses in which I was involved. In some instances, I felt myself revert back to my days as a classroom teacher, fully understanding the ideas flowing from the research subjects, while in others moments I felt my administrative lenses changing focus as I wove the stories together with mine and reexamined my approaches. In other cases, however, I had no basis to form a connection with the participant, thus making it difficult to articulate the narrative as clearly as I wanted. In the end, this process expanded my horizons and altered my story as I reconciled all of the various viewpoints I was allowed to navigate. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that:

Our principle interest in experience is the growth and transformation in the life story that we as researchers and our participants author. Therefore, difficult as it may be to tell a story, the more difficult but important task is the retelling of the stories that allow for growth and change. We imagine, therefore, that in the construction of narratives of experience, there is a reflexive relationship between living a life story, telling a life story, retelling a life story, and reliving a life story.  
(p. 71)

Ideally, these stories will have the same impact on the reader as they did on me – that is, it will provide him or her with a new understanding and allow growth through reflection and shared experiences. Thomas Jefferson once wrote in a letter, “I was bold in the pursuit of knowledge, never fearing to follow truth and reason to whatever results they led.” Here too, I feel like I was bold in undertaking this journey of experienced based research, following the truth as shared by the participants, and honest in the portrait the

data created, hopefully bringing about change that positively shapes and reshapes those that participated and those yet to come.

## TEACHER'S PERCEPTIONS OF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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