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Early Childhood Teachers' Perspectives on Professional Development Activities

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Walden University
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Abstract

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MS, Columbia University, 1989

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Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

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Abstract

Early childhood teachers are an essential part of the education system in the United States, and professional development is a key means of ensuring that they have the required skills and education to meet the developmental needs of their young students. Although researchers have examined the professional development of kindergarten to Grade 12 teachers, they have not adequately explored early childhood practitioners' perspectives of professional development activities that support implementation of best practices. The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood educators' perspectives of professional development activities, using Knowles's adult learning theory(andragogy) as the theoretical framework. Ten early childhood educators who worked in privately owned childcare facilities participated in semistructured interviews. The data were manually analyzed, and NVivo qualitative software was utilized to organize and categorize the data and to identify the emerging themes. The key findings were that (a) participants viewed professional development as beneficial to their work, (b) they required administrative support to participate in professional development activities, (c) they wanted to learn new things in order to be better at their jobs, and (d) their work experience influenced their interest in learning. The study findings may contribute to positive social change by providing knowledge that decision-makers can use to design, plan, and implement professional development activities for early childhood educators. Additionally, access to professional development might help teachers to provide instruction that benefits students and improves learning outcomes.

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to my son, Brandon. You are always my gift.

Acknowledgments

Dr. Celeste Fenton, I would like to thank you for your knowledge, guidance, and patience with me. You never gave up on me, and you continued to provide me with encouragement and support over the years, despite all obstacles. Thank you, Dr. Emily Green, for joining my committee and assisting me with this study. I would like to thank the teachers who volunteered their time to take part in this study. I am grateful for the patience of, and support from, my family and friends. It took a long time for me to complete my doctoral journey. Many thanks.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The time in a person's life between birth and kindergarten is usually acknowledged as early childhood development. Early childhood teachers are an essential part of the education system in the United States. The holistic development of young children prepares them to acquire academic, emotional, and physical skills that affect their entire lives. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), approximately 1 million early childhood educators teach children ages newborn to 5 in early childhood programs across the United States. The 2019 National Survey of Early Child and Education (Datta et al., 2021) reported that more than 7.15 million children between birth and 5 years of age and not yet in kindergarten were served in over 121,000 center-based programs with 1.41 million early childhood teachers. A center-based program provides early care and education services to children birth-5; however, based on funding and service options, some programs may provide before, aftercare, and drop-in services to children as old as 13 years. Children over 5 years old participating in these programs are not included in the National Survey of Early Child and Education numbers. Children who attend Head Start and public school programs but have not entered kindergarten are included in these data. In this study, I focused on privately owned child care providers serving children aged birth to 5 and who may receive state funding for subsidized child care. Head Start programs and public schools were not included in this study.

With the high numbers of children participating in early childhood education programs in the United States, there is a need for well-trained and qualified early childhood teachers (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2021). However, standards are not the same

across all states. Officials in some states, such as Florida and Alabama, do not consider early childhood education essential until children reach the age of 5, whereas officials in other states, such as Pennsylvania and Washington, allow children to enter school for the first time at the age of 8 (Education Commission of the States, 2018). Early childhood services and teaching practices meet the needs of parents to have somewhere to leave their children while they work or go to school. Because early childhood education is not required or acknowledged as a public benefit, there is no guarantee that privately funded programs have the resources to provide high-quality services to all children and families. Hamre et al. (2017) acknowledged the importance of early childhood education in the lives of young children and asserted that it is important to consider essential strategies such as intentional and effective professional development activities geared toward supporting the building of skills and knowledge of early childhood educators that would reframe the understanding of early childhood development and ensure outcomes for children.

Professional development is defined as a series of teaching and learning experiences in which professionals acquire new skills and knowledge from intentional strategies, guided support, and practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Expanding the definition, Darling-Hammond et al. stated that professional development might be further defined as systematic professional learning that changes teacher knowledge and practices and improves student learning outcomes. Researchers have contended that there is a need for a greater understanding of professional development concepts, context, and design that supports practitioners' learning and development, and they have advised that

consideration must be given to how teachers learn new skills and techniques and design professional development activities (Warren & Ramminger, 2016). Professional development is vital to developing and expanding expert knowledge, understanding new trends, and learning new skills in a chosen career field or profession. Professional development ensures that early childhood professionals are intentionally trained and equipped with skills that facilitate improved outcomes for children (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Tarnanen et al., 2021;Warren & Ramminger, 2016). To this end, it is essential to provide professional development that is job-embedded and supportive of early childhood teachers and their work.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unique challenges for education. Educators were confronted with a need to adapt teaching and training to achieve continuity of learning for students of all ages (Reimers et al., 2020). Allen et al. (2020) explained that the pandemic necessitated a hasty move away from teacher professional development delivered in a face-to-face classroom or workshop environments to online asynchronous or synchronous formats. It is unknown whether the move away from face-to-face to online learning made a difference to early childhood teachers, as they maneuvered their way through technology to satisfy work and personal and professional development goals. Under normal circumstances (pre-COVID), early childhood teachers participated in professional development activities, which were predominantly face-to-face and interactive with authentic activities and strategies; the aim was to provide participants with the opportunity to return to the classroom to practice newly acquired skills (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). During COVID, the lack of technical skills and physical

interactions, along with unreliable technology, proved challenging to many early childhood teachers as they endeavored to improve their skills and abilities through online professional development (Jalongo, 2021).

Another issue is that, based on guidance from Every Student Succeeds Act of 2016, the leaders of early childhood programs are expected to hire and retain high-quality staff and provide continuing professional development in early childhood development through practice-based learning and mentorship, coaching, or other forms of professional development (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Raising the standards and expectations for early childhood teachers to become more qualified has strained the profession as administrators strive to plan professional development activities to meet local, state, and federal standards and mandates (Chong & Lu, 2019). The early childhood field has reached a point where professional development practice and knowledge require a more robust theoretical and empirical foundation to guide the planning and implementation of professional development activities that are currently needed.

Exploring the perspectives of early childhood teachers on professional development, including the activities, content or information, and mode of training; their overall experience; and their opportunities to reflect, practice, and ultimately identify positive outcomes for the children in their care, is crucial for future planning and implementation (Guskey, 2020). Understanding teachers' perspectives means engaging teachers' ideas, interests (Chong & Lu). As mandates to enhance and improve quality across the early childhood community increase, the expectations for the profession grow.

A highly skilled early education workforce may help professionalize the field and affect young children's academic and life outcomes (Guskey, 2020). Chapter 1 presents an overview of the study, and the gap in the research which supports its importance. It also identifies the research question and identifies the problem being explored. Chapter 1 also outlines the theoretical framework and how it relates to the research question.

Background

Professional development for teachers is essential for supporting the effective implementation of classroom practices and correlates to positive student outcomes (Darling-Hammond, 2017; Harding et al., 2019). Optimal activities and experiences during professional development play a role in how teachers apply best classroom practices to support student achievement (Harding et al., 2019). Many potential factors and inhibitors may influence professional development, such as socio-cultural and social cognitive factors (Huang, 2016) and how adults learn (Kelly, 2017). Huang (2016) proposed that teachers' perspectives of professional development influence how they see the world and their willingness and motivation to learn and embrace new knowledge and skills. Some professional activities, such as reflection, may be beneficial in supporting the professional development of early childhood teachers. The need for professional development focused on early childhood teaching practices is well established in the literature (Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, n.d.; Chong & Lu, 2019; Schachter, 2015; Sheridan et al., 2009).Less understood are early childhood teacher perspectives about professional development (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

With the development of COVID-19, another factor to examine while examining the viewpoints of early childhood educators was how they adjusted their professional development needs to this unprecedented situation. The impacts of the pandemic presented immediate and vast challenges for teachers to deepen their knowledge and skills through professional development. Leaders of school districts and systems developed new ways to deliver professional learning and support to teachers. Data from the Frontline Research and Learning Institute (2020) indicated that many teachers participated in online professional development opportunities and taught themselves how to use technology to support their teaching and learning. Online professional development activities in 2019 were low throughout the year, but there was a sharp increase in remote and online learning (Frontline Research and Learning Institute, 2020).

Some state county-level data on the numbers of early childhood professionals who participated in professional development exists. However, there was minimal information about what the early childhood teachers in the target county felt, believed, and perceived about professional development activities and experiences. Professional development provides crucial preparation for teachers to educate children, which contributes to the avoidance of the negative social implications of undereducated youth (Brigandi et al., 2019).This study may extend the work of previous researchers in clarifying the professional development needs of early childhood educators.

Problem Statement

Gardner et al. (2019) found in their research that skill, education, and work requirements for early childhood teachers who serve children from birth to age 5 vary

significantly across the United States, resulting in a flawed service delivery system. Additionally, there is a lack of data on early childhood educators' demographics, which impedes the development of high-quality professional development across all states. Gardner et al. (2019) suggested that in addition to streamlining requirements, state officials should implement appropriate preservice training for all early childhood teachers in addition to providing ongoing high quality professional development to support and maintain best practices in the field. The problem is that research and data exist about professional development for kindergarten through Grade 12 teachers, but there is minimal research on early childhood practitioners' perspectives of professional development activities that support classroom implementation of best practices (Hamre et al., 2017; Powell & Bodur, 2019). In this study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development activities that support classroom implementation of best practices in the early childhood classroom.

Purpose

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore early childhood practitioners' perspectives of professional development activities supporting classroom implementation of best practices. Based on the research, there is a need for a greater understanding of how professional development shapes practitioners' learning and development (Powell & Bodur, 2019b; Schachter et al., 2019). Although researchers have found that teachers gain new knowledge during professional development activities, the impact of these activities on teaching practice remains unclear. Further understanding of early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development is essential to identify

what elements and activities of professional development teachers feel they can use as they strive to improve their knowledge and skills.

Research Question

The purpose of the study's research question was to provide a foundation for the literature review, research design, and data collection and analysis. The research question was:

What are the perspectives of early childhood teachers from a southeastern county in a southern state in regard to professional development activities supporting their implementation of best practices in the classroom?

Theoretical Framework

In this study, I sought understanding of how early childhood educators perceive professional development. Adult and distance learning theories served as the framework for investigating teachers' perspectives on professional development activities. Adult learning theory informs the design and implementation of professional development (Mukhalalati & Taylor, 2019). Adult learning theory, or andragogy, discusses how adults learn differently than children (Knowles, 1980; Mews, 2020; Trotter, 2006;). Knowles's (1980), theory of andragogy, the "art and science of adult learning," offers a systematic approach to explain the process of how adults learn. Knowles’s five assumptions about adult learning are based on self-concept, adult learner experience, readiness to learn, orientation, and motivation to learn. Adult learning theory offers a framework for analyzing early childhood educators' views, influenced by their frame of reference, experience, and expertise.

Many adults desire to learn and ultimately learn via self-direction during their lives (Henry, 2011; Knowles,1973; Trotter, 2006). Knowle's theory provides a framework for understanding how early childhood teachers perceive their new learning based on their experience and interpretation. Meizrow's theory of transformational learning proposes that individuals use a "frame of reference" that includes habits, past experiences, and skills to assist them in recognizing the need to make changes in life and actions (Erickson, 2007; Kelly, 2017; Meizrow, 2000). Merriam and Bierema (2014) connected adult learning theory and professional development by recognizing the importance of adults' involvement in planning their learning, the relevance and impact of learning, the value of teacher experience as a foundation for the learning activity, and the importance of problem-centered learning experience. A primary assumption of adult learning is that adults are self-directed in their approach to learning.

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the move of teacher professional development in the target county to an online delivery format. For this reason, distance learning theory was a foundational support for this study. Advances in technology have increased the availability of online or distance learning professional development opportunities. In online professional development, teachers may be accessing, together or independently, either synchronously (at the same time) or asynchronously (at different times), instruction and training (Bragg, Heyeres, & Walsh, 2021). Some distance learning theories offer explanations and insights on how the design of the learning experience and interactions by participants affect learning acquisition. The critical elements of equivalency of learning experiences and appropriate applications to

support students and outcomes compared to face-to-face instruction are advocated in equivalency theory. The idea is that distance learning and face-to-face learning are fundamentally different, but learners can reach the same results if the mode of instruction is based on learners' needs (Schlosser et al., 2010). Implied in equivalency theory is the necessity to maintain traditional aspects of education, such as the interaction between instructor and learner, while leveraging available technologies.

To examine adult learners' ability to develop new skills and enhance their knowledge based on their autonomous learning through distance education, researchers have used Wedemeyer's theory of independent study (Diehl, 2015) and Moore's transactional distance theory (Lowe & Lin, 2015). Both Diehl (2015) and Lowe and Lin (2015) recognized the individualized aspect of online learning. Although Wedemeyer regarded distance learning as a benefit for the learner, Moore focused on the authority and responsibility of the instructor or learner. Professional development is considered essential for educators, but research is lacking on early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development (Hamre et al., 2017; Powell & Bodur, 2019). I explored early childhood teachers ' perspectives of professional development activities in a southeastern county of a southern state, using the adult learning theory framework to underpin the study.

Nature of the Study

To address the gap in the literature, I employed a basic qualitative approach featuring interviews to explore 10 early childhood practitioners' perspectives of professional development activities that support their implementation of teaching

practices. A basic qualitative approach is appropriate for capturing data that help the researcher to understand the human experience and identify themes to explain participants' lived experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this interview-based study, I endeavored to understand early childhood educators' thoughts about professional development activities and how those experiences are helpful in the implementation of best practices in the early childhood classroom. Exploring the meaning that people make of a social or human problem is a critical goal of qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam, 2011).

The primary data sources were semi structured, audiotaped interviews with 10 early childhood teachers in a southeastern county in a southern state. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling. I deemed purposive sampling the most appropriate sampling strategy for my study. Patton (2015) explained that purposive sampling allows for the selection of participants with experiences that can be examined to answer the research question.

Ethnographies, case studies, grounded theory, or phenomenology are commonly used qualitative methods; however, those methods were not appropriate for this study. Case study researchers highlight a specific occurrence by assembling data from various sources to fully understand what is conveyed (Burkholder et al., 2016). Although I aimed to delve deeply into educators' perspectives, I determined that a case study is not suited for this research because it would not have captured the breadth of information required. Grounded theory is used to generate theory from data and is considered an ongoing process of developing a hypothesis. For this study, I strove to explore early childhood

teachers' feelings and perspectives about professional development and not create a theory or hypothesis (Pezalla, 2016). Phenomenological researchers collect and analyze people's perspectives of a specific activity they have experienced. An individual's own words are used in phenomenology to describe a particular experience in greater depth (Burkholder et al., 2016). Even though a phenomenological technique could have been a reasonable choice for this investigation, it might not have yielded a full understanding of participants' perspectives of the relevance of the events being examined (see Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2013). Ethnographers focus on the social groups that constitute a culture, such as a language, beliefs, actions, and customs (Percy et al., 2015). I explored individual perspectives; I did not focus on cultural attitudes. The use of a basic qualitative approach allowed me to obtain a more profound understanding of the research phenomenon by gathering detailed information related to early childhood teachers' beliefs about professional development.

I recruited the participants through purposeful sampling based on the following specific criteria: The participant must be an early childhood teacher working with children birth to 5 years old with at least 3 years of teaching experience and recent professional development experience. I sent emails to preschool teachers at the target schools. The email described the study and asked individuals to respond to me if they were interested in participating in the study (see Appendix A). I did not have any supervisory or leadership role with any teachers who participated in the interviews. Recruitment of participants ended once the 10 teachers needed for the sample were identified. The interviews allowed the 10 early childhood teacher participants to share

their thoughts and perspectives about their professional development activities and experiences and how they believed those activities and experiences influenced their instructional practices.

The research question and frameworks informed the development of the interview questions. Jones and Donmoyer (2021) recommended that researchers use transparent strategies and interview protocols that allow participants to share their experiences and have their responses reported without prejudice or bias. Transferability refers to the extent to which the study enables the reader or other researchers to determine whether they can utilize the findings of this research in populations within their settings (Sultan, 2020). My focus was on understanding and identifying meaning from the participants' perspectives by gathering detailed and thick descriptions of their professional development experiences (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016).

Definitions

Asynchronous learning: Instruction for learning modules that is delivered on a web-based or virtual platform for the student to access at any time. Students can work at their own pace within set time frames. Asynchronous classes are flexible and available 24 hours, 7 days a week (Fabriz et al., 2021).

Early childhood education: The field of educational practice targeting children from birth to 8 years of age (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2019).

Early childhood teacher: An individual who has knowledge, skills, and understanding of how children learn and grow from birth to 8 years old and who builds

positive relationships and utilizes research-based and developmentally appropriate practices to plan for and support young children's growth and development (NAEYC, 2019).

Distance learning: A form of learning in which students access electronic learning materials through web-based applications. Access to learning materials occurs outside of the traditional classroom setting. Classroom instruction is provided and accessed either exclusively online or via a combination of online and in-person instruction. Instruction may involve a physically distant educator who provides live instruction. Students may also work at their own pace on activities or modules (Sahni et al., 2021).

Professional development: A learning process undertaken by early childhood teachers/educators to prepare them to work with young children and their families (NAEYC, n.d.).

Synchronous learning: Live virtual-based instruction or presentations that involves the instructor and students being in different spaces; both parties can communicate through web-based learning forums, including text messaging, video chatting, or other mediums (Martin et al., 2017).

Assumptions

With my experience as an early childhood educator and trainer, I endeavored not to make assumptions about the purpose and effectiveness of professional development as support for acquiring new and improved skills. I was open to participants' feelings about professional development, whether by choice or by mandate, and the relevance to the

individuals' preferences. I assumed that respondents were honest in their responses to the interview questions. I understood that there was the possibility that the professional development topics may not have been relevant or of interest to the participants and their work.

Scope and Delimitations

I explored the perspectives of early childhood practitioners about professional development activities that support classroom implementation of best practices for my study. The participants for this study were employed in a large county in a southern state. I selected this county because I was employed there and had a specific interest in understanding teachers' thoughts and feelings about their professional development activities. Participant insights regarding the value of professional development activities and the benefits and challenges of implementing best classroom practices can potentially enhance the community's understanding of county-level decision-making surrounding career readiness and workforce programs. Teachers with less than 3 years of teaching experience in early childhood programs were not recruited.

Limitations

I accepted that while conducting this study, I might encounter several limitations, challenges, and barriers. One challenge was identifying an appropriate sample size of practitioners who met the defined criteria and were willing to participate in the study. Data were gathered and analyzed from a small sample size of 10 teachers. Another challenge for this study was time constraints, as the data were collected within a short time frame. Due to my years of experience as an adult teacher, trainer, and coach, I

realized that I needed to guard against bias and maintain a constant vigilance to honor participants' views and perspectives, restricting my influence while collecting responses and analyzing the collected data. My role as a researcher required continuous and thoughtful self-reflections and critical analysis of my interpretation of the data. According to Yoon and Uliassi (2022), it is critical for the researcher to ensure the sincerity of the research, by acknowledging biases, beliefs, and values that maybe shaped by backgrounds and experiences.

Significance

Early childhood practitioners must be adequately prepared through practical, transferable professional development experiences to help their young students enter higher grade levels ready to learn, succeed in school, and participate in society as the next generation of workers and citizens (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2021; Hamre et al., 2017). Harding et al. (2019) reported that early childhood teachers may not always receive the proper professional development intervention or follow-up support needed to influence changes in the classroom implementation of their teaching practices. Understanding how adults learn and exploring their point of view regarding professional development activities that affect their teaching practice may provide insight into the value of professional development experiences currently implemented in the county. This study may contribute to the field by providing insight into professional development activities for early childhood educators. Understanding professional development from the practitioner's point of view regarding skills needed, learning styles, interests, application of concepts learned in professional development,

and perceived value of the professional development experience can be crucial in designing professional development that can produce meaningful change in early childhood professionals' skills, behaviors, and relationships with students. Teachers are recognized in most societies as agents of change (Guskey, 2020). The study can inform the planning and implementation of the professional support of early childhood teachers, which may improve teacher retention and knowledge expansion of the early childhood teacher workforce (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Summary

Little is understood about early childhood educators' perspectives of professional development activities and their impact on their teaching practices. Additionally, there is limited research regarding online professional development activities or experiences that early childhood teachers believe affect their work (Sheridan et al., (2009). More information is needed to understand early childhood practitioners' perspectives of online or face-to-face professional development activities that support classroom implementation of best practices. In this study, I explored the perspectives of early childhood teachers from a southeastern county in a southern state about professional development activities that support their implementation of best practices in the classroom.

In Chapter 2, I present literature related to professional development and adult learning theory. Various professional development models are explained, and challenges to professional growth are considered. Throughout Chapter 2, I draw out the associations between the study's adult learning theory and distance learning frameworks and concepts

of professional development and teaching practice.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

There is consistent evidence that targeted and intentional professional development activities are essential for early childhood teachers (Gunter & Reeves, 2017; Parsons et al., 2019). However, Parsons et al. (2019) contended that more research is needed to understand teachers' perspectives of professional development. Professional development activities are provided to teachers in person, such as seminars, workshops, and coaching. The inclusion of online or virtual professional development is especially significant in this study. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic spurred the reinvention of professional development activities for early childhood teachers globally (Bragg, Heyeres & Walsh, 2021).

Although experts have developed definitions of professional development, Buysse et al. (2009) suggested no consensus on a singular definition for the term. Buysse et al. justified this position by highlighting the overarching need for states and local and district organizations to meet accountability and statutory standards. Some commonalities exist within the recent research to support a generalized definition of professional development, such as individuals acquiring skills and knowledge but with caveats as to why there are challenges in defining the term. Hamre et al. (2017) described professional development as training, coursework, and coaching to support teacher development and practice. The NAEYC (n.d.), which sets the standards for early childhood education, defined professional development as a "continuum of learning and support activities designed to prepare individuals for work with and on behalf of young children and their

families" (para. 1). The National Professional Development Center on Inclusion (2008) defined professional development as "facilitated teaching and learning experiences that are transactional and designed to support the acquisition of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions and the application of this knowledge in practice" (p. 3). The organization's definition encompasses a comprehensive process of teaching and learning and application.

The period between birth and kindergarten is acknowledged as the early time period during which a child's brain is rapidly developing (Maier et al., 2020). Closely linked to this is the belief that early childhood programs should provide a quality learning environment to guide and support young children's development to be ready for school and life success. Early childhood professionals teach young children between birth and 5 years old and are held accountable for creating a quality environment. Early childhood teachers are an essential part of the education system in the United States. The holistic development of young children prepares them for acquiring emotional and physical skills that impact their entire lives. Although research and data exist about professional development for kindergarten through Grade 12 teachers, the problem is there is limited research on early childhood practitioners' perspectives about professional development activities that support classroom implementation of best practices (Hamre et al., 2017; Powell & Bodur, 2019). In this study, I sought to understand the perspectives of early childhood teachers from a southeastern county in a southern state about professional development activities that support their implementation of best practices in the classroom.

Literature Search Strategy

I used several databases and search terms to gather the most appropriate and relevant research for my study. My initial intent was to focus on face-to-face professional development activities; however, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the changes in the delivery of professional development activities, it was essential to include online professional development options in this study. I used the Walden University Library to access multiple databases such as EBSCO Open Access, SAGE, ERIC, and Education Source Combined. I subscribed to Academia.edu which stores academic articles. Based on the search criteria provided, I consistently received articles related to professional development as well as other subjects related to my review and reading history. I reviewed Dissertations and Thesis @ Walden University for dissertations and theses written by Walden students on my study topic. However, many studies on professional development were more specific to teachers in higher grades or topics such as behavior management, dual language, or math. These were not relevant to my research on early childhood teacher professional development.

Due to the nature of the study, I looked at different terms. I needed to maintain the integrity and focus of my research, using my focus question as my guide. I used specific search phrases such as *teachers' perspectives on professional development* or *early childhood teachers' perspectives on professional development*. I also performed searches using the names of theorists such as Malcolm Knowles, Lev Vygotsky, Jack Mezirow, and Benjamin Bloom. I also included *behaviorism*, *constructivism*, and *cognitivism*. I did not identify a significant amount of research on early childhood professionals and

focused on online learning and skill development perspectives. I used search terms such as *professional development, teacher's perspective on professional developmen*t, *adult learning theories*, and *adult online learning*. I subscribed to Google Scholar automated search service through Walden and received peer-reviewed articles weekly, which expanded my scope to look at other keywords relevant to this study. I also expanded my search to include *distance learning, professional learning*, *teacher education*, *Bloom's taxonomy of learning*, and *transformative learning theory*, including variables that affect professional development and adult learning. In addition, the references of current literature provided additional comprehensive and relevant literature for the scope of this study. Although the majority of the reviewed literature was published within the past 5 years, older references to researchers such as Malcolm Knowles and Thomas Guskey were included to provide a comprehensive overview and historical context of the evolution of professional development.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, I recognized that professional development for early childhood professionals is not always a voluntary choice. Participation in professional development activities is mandatory to meet local, state, and federal requirements. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 required that teachers receive professional development to meet the academic needs of students. The NCLB called for early childhood teachers to have the appropriate skills and knowledge to prepare young children for school and life success. Researchers such as Hyun (2003) and Guskey (2002)contended that many early childhood teachers entered the profession with limited skills and little incentives to

improve. Guskey also maintained the need to change the conversation around early childhood professionals' lack of skills and knowledge and look instead at how they are trained and supported to work with children. Early childhood teachers could not meet the NCLB guidelines without acquiring additional foundational understanding. There were several issues with the NCLB mandates for professional development that did not consider that the job requirements for early childhood professionals vary across states.

The diverse requirements by programs, licensing, and state and local mandates for specific skills and experiences affects professional development options. Qualifications to work in a privately owned childcare facility differ across states. For example, Florida requires that all childcare staff begin specified training within 90 days of employment in the childcare industry and complete all 45 hr within 1 year of the training start date (Florida Department of Children and Families, 2020). A preschool teacher in New York City must have a New York State teaching certificate or enroll in an approved study plan that leads to certification (Day Care Council of New York, 2021). In addition to training specific to early childhood growth and development, early childhood teachers are required to have other training and continuing education hours annually to comply with the state or county licensing regulations.

Early childhood teachers engaging in professional development are adults with busy lives and other responsibilities outside of their work. Besides meeting professional standards, licensing requirements, and other mandates, early childhood teachers participate in professional development activities for various reasons. Still, it is not necessarily because they enjoy or want to. Early childhood educators need the knowledge

or skills they seek; thus, understanding and planning appropriately for the adult learner is essential. Jackson (2021) suggested that it is necessary to develop professional development targeted at capturing the unique needs of individuals to make the connections for professional learning. The plethora of theories about adult learning and growth provides a theoretical framework for early childhood teachers' perception of their professional development experiences. Learning theories are not universally applicable to adults. The research from the last several years has produced a wide range of models, assumptions and principles, ideas, and explanations about adult learning which has served as the foundation for adult learning (Palis & Quiros, 2014). Edosomwan (2016) reviewed childhood and adult learning theories and compared them to pedagogy and andragogy, concluding that they build upon each other. Childhood development is based on interactions, and other developmental activities, while adult learning is derived from experiences, transformation and self-motivation. Knowles (1980) popularized the concept of andragogy ("the art and science of helping adults learn"), which he contrasted with pedagogy ("the art and science of teaching children"), to explain the differences between the ways adults and children learn. Knowles made 4 assumptions about the characteristics of adult learners (andragogy) that are different from the assumptions about child learners (pedagogy). In 1984, Knowles added the fifth assumption.

(1) Self-Concept - As a person matures, their self-concept moves from one of being a dependent personality toward one of being a self-directed human being.

(2) Adult Learner Experience - As a person matures, they accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning.

(3) Readiness to Learn - As a person matures, their readiness to learn becomes increasingly oriented to their social roles' developmental tasks.

(4) Orientation to Learning - As a person matures, their time perspective changes from one of postponed application of knowledge to immediacy of application. As a result, their orientation toward learning shifts from subject-centeredness to problem-centeredness.

(5) Motivation to Learn - As a person matures, the motivation to learn is internal (Knowles 1984).

Knowles (1980) also posited that inherent in the assumptions are core principles that can be applied to adult learning; these include:

(1) Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction.

(2) Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for the learning activities.

(3) Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact their job or personal life.

(4) Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-oriented (Kearsley, 2010).

Other learning theorists from different fields of practice have contributed to the conversations about adult learning. Suggested in some studies is the notion that adult learning embraces other processes of learning and development, depending on the individual's knowledge, skills, and motivation. According to Trotter (2006), age theorists contended that individuals continue to learn, no matter their age and stage theorists believe that the stage of life dictates how the individual will think. Trotter (2006) further

submitted that as individuals get older, they start making more informed decisions about their lives based on their stage of life. Although these are valid arguments for adult learning, they do not significantly contribute to this study.

To comprehensively engage in this study on professional development, specifically to understand teachers' perspectives, it was essential to consider the characteristics of adult learners and the concept of adult learning theory through different lenses. Baumgartner (2003) proposed that adults learn in one of two ways. First, learning occurs if an adult receives positive reinforcement after developing and practicing new behaviors. Baumgartner classified learning from this perspective as behaviorism. The second view of adult learning posits that learning is the search for meaning in every experience, suggesting that the learner is responsible for reflecting on the knowledge and applying it to their personal and work life.

It is crucial to keep adult learning theory at the forefront of this study to understand teachers' perspectives of professional development. Adult learners present differing skills, knowledge, and attitudes about learning, impacting their perception of professional development (Jackson, 2021). It is, therefore, essential to understand the characteristics of adult learning within the context of professional development models, activities, and challenges. The following sections describe professional development within adult learning theory to better understand how teachers perceive professional development, face-to-face or online.

Literature Review Related to Key Variables and/or Concepts

Conceptual Investigation of Professional Development

Throughout the literature, researchers have attempted to reach a consensus regarding a definition of professional development (Buysse et al., 2009; National Professional Development Center on Inclusion, 2008). The term is used to generalize a skill development process in many studies. Therefore, professional development for early childhood teachers is defined in some literature as an activity or activities that may provide support and guidance for improving teaching and learning experiences. Avidov-Ungar (2016) described professional development as a learning and skill development process. Buysse et al., stated that professional development is an intentional methodology, including professional standards and best practices, whereby teachers learn, gain increased knowledge, and are allowed to practice the skills to improve outcomes for children and their families.

In more recent research, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) defined professional development as systematized professional learning that changes teacher practices and gains in student learning outcomes. The caveat in the Darling-Hammond et al., study was to determine effective professional development. Highlighting "effective" professional development suggests that not all professional development models and activities are effective. Throughout the research, the common theme is that professional development is a teaching and learning process that should ultimately transfer new knowledge to the classroom and students (Hauge & Wan, 2019). Within the context of this study, professional development is a process of acquiring increased knowledge, learning new

skills, practicing, and reflecting on past or new practices leading to better outcomes for children.

Best Practices for Early Childhood Education

Providing children with a high-quality early childhood education experience significantly increases their academic and social performance. Additionally, research indicates that a child who completes a preschool program, advances approximately 20 weeks faster than a child who does not complete preschool. Qualified and experienced, well-trained teachers play a critical role in delivering high-quality early childhood education and care (Melhuish et al., 2016). Guskey (2020) recommended that communication, reflection, and practice are essential for best practices in a professional development model; otherwise, professional development will be ineffective. Guskey contended that if teachers' interests are not considered, they will lose interest, and no change will be realized. Teachers must see where they can effectively change their practice and recognize changes in the children for the model to be effective. For most instructors, improving their teaching implies improving student learning results. Through professional development, they will gain the skills and knowledge they need to enhance their effectiveness with the students (Guskey).

Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) reported that their extensive literature research and other studies revealed several vital concepts that constituted an effective professional development model. These commonalities include (a) is content-focused, (b) incorporates active learning, (c) supports collaboration, (d) uses models of effective practice, (e) provides expert coaching, (f) offers feedback and reflection, and (g) is of sustained

duration. These key concepts are highly supported in the works of Guskey. The belief that best practices for professional development should first consider the intended outcomes, geared toward student outcomes, is central in Guskey's work. Su et al. (2018) proposed that best practices for effective professional development should increase knowledge and improve practice. As the profession strives to identify the best practices for early childhood teachers, the need to include all the variables that impact teacher growth and development should be considered. Su et al. stated that a practice-based approach contextualizes the new learning as teachers return to the teaching environment to put their new knowledge into action. To change the trajectory, professional development must be self-directed to meet the learning needs of the teachers (Su et al., 2018b).

Professional Development Models

To understand early childhood teachers' perspectives on professional development, it is necessary to examine the available research on professional development structure, models, and activities. Professional development models and design has been reviewed in several studies (Boylan et al., 2018; Smith et al., 2020). These studies have shown that professional development models fall into various categories and are frequently tailored to the needs of specific groups. Boylan et al. (2018)conducted a study on five professional development models considering different elements within each model, such as the frameworks, similarities, differences, limitations, and weaknesses. Although each model had its strengths, the researchers concluded that some gaps or areas could be further researched. Ultimately, professional

development is dependent on the professional learning lens, and adopting a singular model may not be effective. As teachers engage in skill development and knowledge attainment, they will most likely participate in predesigned and imposed learning models based on organizational needs. Quality professional development options are not available to everyone in the field (Hamre et al., 2017). Some are enrolled in higher institutes working toward degrees. Others participate in professional development offered by their place of employment or similar organization. Still, others may enroll in certificate programs to seek learning opportunities to improve their skills and enhance knowledge and strive to perform their teaching roles and responsibilities effectively (Hamre et al.). As this study explores teachers' perspectives of professional development, it is critical to examine the modes of professional development. Professional development can be delivered in a variety of ways.

In the following subsections, I discuss two professional development modes, transmissive and transformative. Workshops, conferences, and short-term courses can all be used to spread transmissible types of professional development. Transformative professional development consists of activities and experiences that assist practitioners in reflecting on their practice, adopting new strategies, and overcoming implementation barriers (Warren & Ramminger, 2016).

Transmissive

Professional development continues to transition as early childhood education mandates, and policies change. This move indicates that the content, mode, and professional development model also change over time. Warren & Ramminger (2016)

posited that professional development occurs along a spectrum, starting with the transmissive mode. A transmissive approach to professional development is often short-term and provides basic information on a specific topic. Although the subject may be work-related, they are unrelated events delivered to teachers attending conferences, workshops, and one-time training activities (Warren & Ramminger). Teachers attending transmissive professional development are passive recipients of information and skills that they may use when they return to the classroom ((Warren & Ramminger; Zuzovsky et al., 2019). There is limited evidence of the effectiveness or success of transmissive professional development of teachers adapting and making changes in their practice after engaging in workshops, and seminar conference sessions, according to Warren & Ramminger. Transmissive professional development serves its purpose when used in sharing information but does not require follow-up or feedback from the teacher (Warren & Ramminger; Zuzovsky et al.).

Transformative

Jack Mezirow first introduced transformative learning in the early1990's and suggested that transformative learning involves a significant change in beliefs and practices through reflection and self-examination (Meijer et al., 2017). Transformative learning is at the other end of the spectrum and occurs over time and is planned with intentionality and purpose for the individual learner who is committed to the process and the anticipated learning outcomes (Christie et al., 2015). The overarching concept of transformative learning lays the foundation for transformative professional development directed to meet teacher learning needs and accommodate a change in practice.

Transformative professional development is intentional, targeted, and deliberately designed for the individual teacher (Warren & Ramminger, 2016; Zuzovsky et al., 2019). Embedded in transformative professional development are the concepts of change, collaboration, skill development, reflection, and professional growth (Warren & Ramminger; Zuzovsky et al.). Transmissive and transformative professional development has been embraced in various arguments throughout the literature as relevant to sharing information with teachers to improve practice and ensure positive learning outcomes for young children (Zuzovsky et al.). Each mode has its specific purpose of supporting teacher learning and development in different ways (Warren & Ramminger).

Professional Development as a Continuum of Practice

Warren and Ramminger (2016) proposed that professional development progresses on a spectrum. Transmissive professional development is at the lowest level, and transformative professional development is highest. The progression from the large group, generalized workshops, and conferences to individualized and targeted interventions, teachers consider their practices and examine strengths and challenges. This phase, known as the continuum of practice, is situated in the center of the spectrum, where there is a shift from standardized to more individualized and targeted professional development activities. Components of a practice continuum include reflection and collaboration with peers and coaches to interpret and implement new practices.

The Role of Leadership in Professional Development

Admiraal et al. (2021) concluded through that schools were learning institutions which lends itself to creating partnerships for teaching and learning for both the teachers

and students. For the teachers, professional development is a catalyst for leadership and change. For professional development efforts to be successful and for teachers to improve their practice and improve outcomes for children, the leadership must commit to serving as an example for the teachers and provide the necessary resources for their success (Warren & Ramminger, 2016; Simos & Smith, 2017). Revealed in the literature are several leadership styles that set the tone for sustainable professional development improve practice and support outcomes for children (Day et al., 2016). In earlier studies, Stamopoulos (2012) suggested that leaders within the early childhood environment must embrace two leadership styles. The pedagogical leader understands the importance of curriculum in planning and teaching young children, and is also engaged in learning, whereas the organizational leader provides the resources for the teachers to actively participate in professional learning. According to Sisson et al. (2021), early childhood leadership should be reconsidered because changes in skills and requirements necessitate rethinking how leaders should work to sustain and support teachers within their programs. Warren and Ramminger (2016) advised leadership and collaborative participation must be extended to the teachers for transformative professional development to become more realistic. Leadership is essential to the success of any endeavor and implementing professional development to ensure highly skilled and knowledgeable staff is necessary (Admiraal et al., 2021).

Evidence-Based Professional Development Models

Identifying evidence-based professional development models is critical to any effective and successful professional development program. Professional development

that is evidence-based teaches instructors and students skills that produce desired outcomes. Therefore, it is essential to consider identifying the outcomes for children and then plan accordingly (Warren & Ramminger, 2016). Warren & Ramminger contended that professional development should always consider the results for the children, which sets the tone for designing a professional development model. Based on the literature, most of the current professional development models may not be evidence-based, as there is limited literature to document their use (Hamre et al., 2017). Garet et al. (2001) found that many professional development activities lack high-quality components.

Although this study was conducted within the kindergarten through Grade 12 community, its findings may be applicable to the broader early childhood community. Creating activities with many high-quality elements is complex and needs a significant amount of lead time, planning, and money, which is a challenge for most programs struggling to survive. Evidence-based professional development is necessary to change behavior and leads to best practices from which the children will meet outcomes. Professional development models such as the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) utilize an evidence-based observation system to support and focus on teachers' practice (Hamre et al., 2017). To successfully implement an evidence-based professional development program, the program must provide the teachers with targeted training to improve and increase their knowledge and skills. The goal is for children to be ready for school and life success.

Structures of Professional Development

Professional development in early childhood education is usually a one-time workshop or training opportunity. Professional development is rarely long-term learning and teaching sustained over time. Guskey (2014),in early works, referred to professional development as gaining increased skill and knowledge with opportunities for practice, reflection, and peer interaction leading to outcomes for children. In more recent efforts, Guskey (2020) emphasized that professional development is a process of learning that leads to changes in teachers learning and outcomes for children. To change teachers' practices, professional development must be based on research and evidence. Teachers require assistance from their leaders, peers, and coach/mentor to ensure that improvement is viewed as an ongoing process. Unfortunately, one-time workshops and webinars may not adequately accomplish the long-term goals (Sheridan et al., 2009); therefore, it is essential to consider other forms and structures of professional development to ensure the desired outcomes. Sheridan et al. (2009) presented (a) formal education, (b) credentialing, (c) specialized on-the-job in-service training, (d) coaching or consultative interactions, and (e) communities of practice or study groups as forms of professional development.

Formal Education

Formal education in early childhood education is described as participation in a structured study that leads to a degree (Vu et al., 2008). In their research, Vu et al. described their study participants as teachers who had acquired either a Bachelor of Arts or an Associate of Arts degree (formal education) compared to others who had

credentials. Mehmood & Batool (2021a) later defined formal education as the study in a classroom environment where teaching and learning techniques are used to impart knowledge. Formal education incorporates audiovisual aids, lectures, group discussions, demonstrations, and question-and-answer sessions. Mehmood and Batool (2021) further referenced formal education as a progression of learning from primary through college and other higher education and vocational professional development. In this case, no reference is made to attaining degrees or certification, but more about acquiring knowledge. In its most simplistic way, Sheridan et al. (2009) described formal education as a course of study that results in a professional degree. Formal education is a higher degree of learning delivered either face-to-face or online resulting in a higher level of understanding. Historically, formal education developed via face-to-face encounters with knowledgeable professors who provided theoretical guidance and direction. Formal education in the face-to-face world was accessible to only a few early childhood educators, either due to a lack of time or financial resources to devote to the process (Melhuish et al., 2016). The advancement of technology, such as the use of media, webinars, emails, or group chats, increased professional development options and availability, opening opportunities for more individuals to engage in formal education, previously reserved for those who could access the face-to-face classroom environment (Mehmood & Batool, 2021b).

Credentialing and Specialized Training

Individuals who work in early childhood education are often required to participate in specialized training or attain specific credentials to meet program

requirements. Specialized activities are planned to address program needs and comprise short-term single offerings on topics. Depending on the market, experts conduct specialized training through face-to-face contact, online synchronous or asynchronous platforms, webinars, or using various tools and activities that allow for learning, and students can observe, practice, and later apply to their practice (Kim, 2020; Sheridan et al., 2009). Due to the advancements in technology, individuals can engage in learning at their convenience.

Specialized-on-the-Job In-Service Training

On-the-job or in-service training is integral for many roles in early childhood education, although not a form of formalized education. The overall purpose of on-the-job in-service training is to share information, highlight organization protocols, and provide insight into program expectations (Sheridan et al., 2009). In some instances, this training option takes the form of one-time encounters and may be as short as one hour or extended over several hours or days. Like specialized training and credentialing, on-the-job or in-service training is offered face-to-face and using the various forms of available technology. Unlike specialized training or credentialing, participants rarely have the opportunity for follow-up or feedback at the end of the allotted time. Additionally, the instructors for on-the-job training are usually experts or staff who have specialized responsibilities (Sheridan et al.).

Coaching or Consultative Interactions

Coaching has become a popular and respected addition to professional development options for early childhood teachers. As with other kinds of professional

development, coaching incorporates teaching and learning, with the unique aspect of customized support delivered by a skilled individual (Warren & Ramminger, 2016). According to the research findings conducted over several years, coaching enhances instructors' skills, which leads to better student results (Warren & Ramminger, 2016). Elek and Page (2019) studied the pertinent empirical literature to ascertain the critical components of effective coaching strategies for early childhood instructors. The findings suggested that effective coaching may give chances for early childhood educators to practice new abilities and foster reflection on their practice and the development of self-directed objectives. Elek and Page (2019) concluded that coaching is an approach for professional development that involves continuing assistance to educators to help them acquire and apply specific job-related skills necessary to promote children's learning. Smith et al. (2020) proposed the team teaching and learning model.

Building on Stewart's (2014) contentions that professional education should include activities to help reinforce and encourage group learning, Smith et al. (2020) used the Garet et al. (2001) framework of professional learning to conduct their research. The team teaching and learning framework is comprised of five characteristics—content knowledge, active understanding, coherence, collective participation, and duration—suggesting that teachers should work in teams to collaborate, plan, and implement lessons. Teachers should adjust their practice as needed, based on the critical feedback from peers, to improve learning outcomes both for themselves and the children. The teachers in this model were supported by coaches/mentors who worked with them in the

collaborative learning process to prepare them for the planning, peer feedback, and reflections (Smith et al., 2020).

Some targeted outcomes include collaborative interactions among the teachers, allowing for reflections and feedback, and practicing new skills to improve their practice. Smith et al. acknowledged a few limitations to the team teaching and learning model, primarily with logistics. The sample size proposed that teachers engaged in a professional learning community are critical components of professional growth and skill development. While coaching has long been recognized as a type of professional development and has traditionally been conducted in person, online coaching (virtual, remote) has developed a viable method of engaging individuals in learning and skill development. Crawford et al. (2021) compared face-to-face and online (virtual, remote) coaching professional development models in preschool classrooms. The findings indicated that including coaching in professional development showed improvements and changes in practice, ultimately impacting outcomes for children. Although there are challenges to implementing any coaching model to fidelity, coaching in an online or remote environment presents issues related to the skills and the use and availability of technology. Teachers could not record and upload videos and use the required platforms, resulting in coaches providing technical assistance rather than teaching and modeling new teaching skills to improve classroom practices.

Closely related to coaching is consultation, which according to Sheridan et al. (2009), supports an individual in developing professional skills. The consultant, classified as an "expert," works with the teacher to provide support and engage in problem-solving

and goal setting to reach immediate decisions on a specific concern. The significant difference between consultation and coaching is that a third individual is involved in forming a triad. Both consultation and coaching provide supportive and collaborative opportunities for professional development. Feedback and self-reflection may be gained from each method, allowing professional growth and development (Pianta et al., 2008).

Coaching and consultation are effective and necessary forms of professional development and face-to-face interactions that provide back and forth exchanges that support teaching and practice. COVID-19 has impacted professional development across all professions, but the early childhood community has been significantly impacted, creating a space for alternate options for professional learning. Early childhood practitioners have continued to work throughout the pandemic, and preschool programs have continued to maintain state and local mandates, inclusive of professional development. Teachers have shifted to online professional development options, including formal education, specialized training, coaching, self-study, and any forms that help support their professional growth and development.

Communities of Practice

Connecting with like-minded colleagues and exchanging ideas on effective tactics and barriers may be done through a community of practice for early childhood specialists. Wenger & Wenger-Trayner (2015)defined communities of practice as groups of practitioners who share a concern or a love for what they do and who learn how to do their jobs better by regular and more intentional exchanges. The participants share common interests and experiences and engaging in this process supports professional

growth and development. Wenger further suggested that learning is a social process, and people learn from each other. Therefore, communities of practice should be implemented in tandem with or independent of different forms of professional development. The understanding and definition of a community of practice have been consistent across the literature, emphasizing a group of teachers coming together to share and collaborate in their professional development journey (Lantz-Andersson et al., 2018). Sheridan et al. (2009) cites previous studies to define communities of practice as professionals with common interests who share their insights, interests, knowledge, and skills to improve their practice. The definitions emphasize individuals with shared interests and common goals. Like all other forms of professional development, communities of practice have embraced the online environment to continue business as usual.

Challenges and Limitations of Professional Development

Professional development for teachers is a critical part of the equation in ascertaining positive learning and life success outcomes for young children (Elek & Page, 2019). However, models and designs typically fail to deliver the desired results because they miss crucial parts of the participants' learning demands (Elek & Page, 2019). The planning process overlooks aspects that might influence results, jeopardizing the overall effectiveness of professional development models. Phillips et al. (2016) stated that issues arise due to variation in the agreement on what early childhood educators should know and study to achieve positive results for children. This argument bolstered Guskey's (2014) view that present forms of professional growth reflect backward planning. The literature emphasized the absence of data-driven solutions since data is inconsistent due

to periodic assessments that, if completed regularly, would give important information for making purposeful program and staff decisions (Guskey, 2014; Phillips et al., 2016). Professional development is vital to ensure that staff strengthen their skills to improve practice and implement changes to support outcomes for children. There are gaps throughout the literature that highlight the need for further research on what form of professional development is more effective or suitable for a specific group and what data is used to make decisions.

Professional development options have often been offered through face-to-face and short-term encounters and one-time occurrences with minimal or no follow-up with participants (Roberts et al., 2020). The single occurrences of professional development are often random workshops or seminar formats, with no connections to outcomes for students or teachers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). The acknowledgment of one-time workshops, seminars, conferences, and webinars was consistent throughout the literature but seen inadequate to meet quality professional development standards (Brown & Englehardt, 2016). Schachter et al. (2019) argued that the optimal learning conditions for early childhood teachers (adult learners) require participants receive the foundation or theory and connections to their practice. Short-term isolated sessions do not meet the need to ensure long-term sustenance. Professional development modules should include clear goals, use of current skills and knowledge, accommodates for practice within the classroom environment, reflection, coaching, ongoing professional development, and teachers given the opportunity to build relationships with each other (Schachter et al.).

Relevancy of Professional Development

Because the overarching intention of professional development for early childhood teachers is to increase knowledge, enhance skills and improve practice leading to outcomes for children, it is essential to design and execute appropriate models to meet learning needs (Bragg et al., 2021a; Schachter et al., 2019). Schachter et al. (2019) posited that for teachers to embrace and attain maximum professional learning, the activity must meet their needs and interests. Guskey (2002) contended that professional development includes skill-building relevant to teachers' interests and practice. Teachers should have the opportunity to return to the work environment where they practice the new knowledge and skill to improve outcomes for their students (Guskey, 2002). As teachers observe the classroom changes, their attitudes and beliefs will change, seeing differences in their students' outcomes. Therefore, professional development must be determined based on the individual's need and their assigned duties to provide targeted interventions that provide the opportunity for practice, feedback, and self-reflection.

Participant Learning Styles

Brown and Englehardt (2016) contended that professional development models fail to meet the learning styles and needs of the participants or the outcomes for students. Li et al. (2016) found that research on participant learning styles was dated, limited, and inconsistent. Other researchers stated that research on learning styles is flawed because it places boundaries on how much an individual can learn based on their auditory, visual, or kinesthetic learning styles (Boysen, 2021; Nancekivell et al., 2020). With these constraints, individuals are restricted by their learning styles, limiting their potential.

Boysen and Nancekivell argued that learning is a more distinct process that should be centered on how an individual recalls information regardless of how it is provided. On the other hand, recent research (Yeler & Ocak, 2021) indicated that instructors' learning styles and critical thinking abilities are strongly connected to improved learning experiences when activities are diversified, and materials, methods, and strategies are representative of all participants. In more dated research, Beck (2001) advocated using Learning Styles Inventory tools, whether customized or predesigned for planning purposes, to ascertain individual learning styles and the most conducive factors to satisfying defined objectives and results. Beck acknowledged many limitations to some tools but suggested that identifying learning styles is essential to teaching strategies. Many studies doubt the usefulness of learning styles because they haven't been well investigated on a broad scale. Regardless, they are helpful in many situations.

Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Professional Development

The research on COVID-19 is limited. The effect that the pandemic had on professional development continues to be studied. COVID-19 has significantly impacted how teachers, specifically early childhood educators, had to rethink their practices during the pandemic (Carillo & Flores, 2020;Phillips et al., 2021). Quickly changing teaching and learning practices online caused significant anxiety and stress on teachers accustomed to face-to-face modes to support their work and engage students (Carillo & Flores, 2020; Phillips et al., 2021). The mitigation strategies associated with COVID-19 called for early childhood teachers to make immediate changes to their teaching of students, including learning to use new technology and software and other materials

differently, redefining roles, and stretching their comfort levels. Radu et al. (2020) submitted most of these changes presented challenges to the teachers, and although some have been able to adapt, others needed support to be effective in their roles. Radu et al. contended that teachers and students were significantly affected by administrative changes and restrictions implemented due to the COVID-19 constraints.

The challenges and other social-emotional setbacks from the administrative changes impacted their abilities to perform their daily tasks. The overall impact remains to be realized as studies are in development. It is stated in the literature that COVID-19 may have long-term effects, and the adjustments made since COVID-19 may consequently be long-term as well (Allen et al., 2020). Highlighted in the review were common effects among teachers, with references made to teachers' abilities, personnel needs, and lack of access, including the challenges to COVID-19, which also impacted teachers' learning needs (Radu et al.,). Face-to-face learning options moved into online, virtual platforms. Administrative decisions influenced time, training topics, and other logistics to meet teachers increased professional development needs needed support. The contention, however, remains that with the unplanned and unintentional circumstances surrounding professional development, there continues to be a need to begin collaborating on alternate learning plans for teachers to feel confident and prepared to work within the new normal (Allen et al., 2020).

Online Delivery of Professional Development

The original focus of this study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of traditional delivery methods of professional development, i.e., face-to-

face activities. However, with the restrictions made by local, state, and federal guidelines in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, online platforms for professional development activities became integral to the study. I believe the study would be incomplete without exploring online, synchronous, and asynchronous professional development delivery. The individuals who volunteered for this study may likely have participated in professional development within the past year when all activities were virtual.

The most recent studies highlight the increased use of online platforms for teaching and learning, including the rapid global shift across the educational landscape and how students and teachers were forced to embrace alternate options (Bragg et al., 2021b). There was a shift to webinars and other virtual platforms from face-to-face contact with teaching professionals at centers in one county. Shortly after the pandemic was declared, webinars focused on best practices were prepared and delivered. Teachers in the county were offered financial incentives for participating in the webinars, which significantly increased the number of participants who entered the online forums. Although there were satisfaction surveys distributed, there is little data to understand teachers learning gains and whether they transferred the new learning into their practice. This is in line with the recent studies, which indicated that generic training content that is not job-specific is primarily ineffective and inadequate at best (Powell & Bodur, 2019).

Summary

The initial purpose of this study was to understand teachers' perspectives of professional development. Because of the administrative response to COVID -19, online professional development was incorporated into the study. Outlined in the literature are

the meaning of professional development, an exploration of adult learning, and adult learning theories to understand different concepts that impact how adults learn and grow. A detailed review of the various models, forms, and professional development structures were provided, and the limitations and challenges within the models and designs were presented. Some of the literature was dated but provided a historical context of this work's foundation and theoretical framework. The limited research focused on factors that impact early childhood teachers' practices and influence teachers' professional development to enhance children's development and learning. Most studies did not include information about the nature of the professional development activities, the teachers' experiences within these activities, the contexts in which the instructors operate, and the influence of professional development on teachers' ideas of instruction or professional development (Brown & Englehardt, 2016). More research is needed on professional development for early childhood teachers. Based on my research, there was a plethora of research on professional development, but most studies were focused on kindergarten through Grade 3 and higher. Insight into the early childhood teachers' perspectives about professional development is needed.

Online professional development before and during COVID-19 was examined in the review. Also highlighted were several critical concepts regarding how best to develop research-based and data-driven professional development plans geared toward outcomes for children. The gaps in the literature were significant and made a case for further research. Many of the studies did not have information about the nature of the professional development activity or the instructors' experiences in the professional

development activity (Brown & Englehardt, 2016). Results from this study add to the existing information on what early childhood teachers feel about professional development and how professional development assists in implementing best practices in the early childhood classroom.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

In this qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on professional development activities that support their implementation of best practices in the classroom. Although research on professional development has been undertaken for kindergarten through third grade, there are limited studies focused on early childhood teachers (birth through 5 years) and even fewer on their opinions about professional development (Sheridan et al., 2009). Because the early childhood profession has changed and will continue to change due to laws and regulations, early childhood teachers must learn and retain skills and knowledge to remain current and improve student outcomes. Professional development can favorably affect changes in practice, beliefs, and attitudes, affecting student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2020). Examining early childhood teachers' views provided insight into whether their practices and beliefs changed due to professional development. This insight and other results from the study has implications for the future planning of professional development models for early childhood educators.

This chapter has five sections. The study design and rationale, including the research question, core phenomena, and research technique, is encompassed in the first section. I review my position as a researcher in the data collection and analysis in the chapter’s second section. The third section, which centers on methodology, includes discussion of the data collection and analysis methods and the rationale for participant selection, equipment, and recruiting practices. Trustworthiness concerns and the concepts

of credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical behavior are discussed in the fourth section of this chapter. The chapter ends with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development activities supporting their implementation of best practices in the preschool classroom. Professional development increases the possibility that educators will develop a level of understanding that results in a shift in teaching practice, which also represents a shift away from detached and short-termed professional development experiences to more active ones, consistent, embedded in the classroom, and supported by peers in a professional learning community (Stewart, 2014). Professional development has been proposed to enhance the quality of education in schools. However, more research is needed to determine the links between teacher and student outcomes and professional development (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Guskey, 2020). A review of the available literature indicated a gap in the research associated with the early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development activities. The preponderance of literature was focused on kindergarten through eighth-grade professional development activities, with less attention paid to teachers working with young children ages newborn to 5 in privately owned early childhood development programs. In seeking to understand this phenomenon better, I explored the following research question:

What are early childhood teachers from a southeastern county in a southern state's perspectives of professional development activities supporting their implementation of best practices in the classroom?

Early childhood teachers are frequently viewed as passive recipients of professional development rather than active participants with little ability and minimal opportunity to articulate their educational objectives and say in their learning (Louws et al., 2017). Professional development is essential to skill development and new knowledge. Guskey (2020)contended that it is vital to collect research data from early childhood educators better to understand their experiences and perspectives of professional development activities. By encouraging participants to respond fully to the interview questions, I sought a more thorough understanding of their professional development experiences. A basic qualitative approach was appropriate to explore and understand how early childhood teachers make “sense of their lives and experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 24), in this case, their professional development experiences.

Use of a basic qualitative approach in this study allowed for a deeper understanding of the research phenomenon. The qualitative approach helped bring to light previously unknown or unexplored ideas of early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development (see Behar-Horenstein, 2018). Because little research has been undertaken with preschool teacher perspectives on professional development, I realized the importance of listening to participants and focusing on what they said and how they described their experiences (see Creswell, 2009). Qualitative findings may inform practice, education, and outcomes by clarifying teachers' views and shifts in their ideas and values that affect their work with young children. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), qualitative research allows for (a) understanding the processes by which

events and actions take place, (b) developing contextual understanding, (c) facilitating interactivity between researcher and participants, (d) adopting an interpretive stance, and (e) maintaining design flexibility. It was, therefore, best suited for this study. Using a basic qualitative study allows a researcher to understand how people "make sense of their lives and their worlds" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 25).

Quantitative research approaches founded on the positivist paradigm emphasize empirical investigation to gain a deeper knowledge of social processes (Leung & Shek, 2018). Deductive reasoning is employed in quantitative research. A researcher promotes a hypothesis by accumulating data to support or refute it. The data is evaluated to ascertain its accuracy (Creswell, 2009). When used in the study of social phenomena, quantitative research methods rely on gathering and analyzing numerical data. This methodology has been extensively employed in educational research. If academic research is performed using these methodologies, the findings should be interpretable, generalizable, and dependable (meaning that the methods and results are consistent and can be repeated). Additionally, the findings should be credible (Leung & Tan-lei Shek, 2018). Given that quantitative research methodologies focus on gathering and evaluating numerical data, I determined that a quantitative approach would be inappropriate for the intended purpose of this study. Qualitative research collects words rather than numerical data, and because this research aims to gain a complete understanding of professional development, qualitative research is more appropriate.

Role of the Researcher

For this basic qualitative study, I interviewed 10 early childhood educators about their perspectives of professional development. One of the distinguishing characteristics of qualitative research is that the researchers serve as the primary instrument for data gathering (McGregor, 2019). The researcher's role encompasses several responsibilities, the first of which is to conduct research in conformity with specified standards and procedures (Given, 2012). Congruent with this responsibility, I obtained approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB; approval no. 09-12-22-0505207) before recruiting any early childhood instructors to participate in the research study. Before submitting my proposal to the IRB, I prepared a request for approval from owners and/or directors of randomly selected privately owned early childhood centers in the county where this study took place. I provided details about my proposed research and asked permission to recruit and interview teachers for my study. Upon approval from IRB, I asked for recommendations and participant referrals from the centers and from my peers who also worked in the community. I sent emails inviting potential participants to take part in the study (see Appendix A).

Participants in this research worked at privately-owned early childhood preschool programs located around the county. For the past 12 years, my place of employment has provided coaching and technical assistance to these providers as the state contracts them to administer the school readiness funding for low-income families. I have worked for this organization for about 12 years in several capacities, but never as a supervisor of any centers (directors/staff). My current role as a coach commenced in February 2020, and

my center assignments began in September 2021 due to restrictions during the pandemic. My duty as a coach was to give coaching and technical assistance to teachers in privately owned programs that did not achieve the minimal criteria for contracting with the state for school readiness funds due to a state-required program evaluation (F.A.C- 6M-4.740). To continue to receive funding, the center's leaders agreed to participate in a quality improvement plan, which includes working with a coach. Recognizing that due to my background and positions within the organization I may have personal biases and preconceptions about professional development, I was candid and disclosed all my current and previous roles related to the research to participants at the time of consent and before the start of the interviews. Additionally, I kept a journal to record my thoughts, questions, and concerns throughout the data collection and analysis process. Neglecting to be transparent with the participants results in bias and jeopardizes the integrity of the study. Billups (2022a) advocated for researchers to use bracketing strategies, in which the researcher's judgments about the research and participants are set aside. By keeping a journal, I was able to separate my thoughts from those of the participants, allowing their perspectives to outweigh mine. It must be noted that teachers with whom I may have worked were not considered as participants for this study and I did not include any of the privately owned childcare providers where these teachers worked in the participant recruitment process.

Methodology

Qualitative research aims to comprehend and analyze individuals' lived experiences with a particular phenomenon and the meanings associated with these

experiences (McGregor, 2018). Qualitative data is an interpretive and descriptive process in which the researcher collects and groups data into categories or topics to garner generalizable statements through analysis and comparison (McGregor, 2019). This section contains a detailed data analysis strategy implemented when data gathering is completed. Each part contains adequate supporting material to equip the reader with the techniques and processes necessary to replicate or extend the study. Finally, this section discusses the study's trustworthiness difficulties and how they were addressed to assure credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Participant Selection Logic

Early childhood educators who worked in a state-contracted private (subsidized) preschool in a southeastern state of the United States were the focus of this study. Due to state mandates, the county is required and committed to providing professional development activities to the educators in the community. Teachers received individual or group training and/or coaching as well. Due to the restrictions of the pandemic, many participated in virtual activities. The education level to work in these programs ranges from a high school diploma to a bachelor's degree. For purposes of this study, education level was not a criterion for participant selection. The study participants were individuals who have worked in the county's early childhood community for at least 3 years and participated in professional development activities virtually or face-to-face.

Participants were not recruited from centers where I was assigned as a coach. Professional development activities are offered to all early childhood teachers in the county; however, some centers receive targeted professional development activities

because of their contractual obligations. The data was collected from interviews with 10 early childhood professionals through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling enabled me to pick participants representing the community under study based on my judgment (Carpenter, 2018). I chose to use purposive sampling based on participants' abilities and capacity to explain and reflect on their familiarity and experience with professional development. These individuals shared how professional development impacted their practice. The participants worked in a privately owned preschool program and participated in professional development activities face-to-face or virtually over the past 3 years. On receiving approval from IRB, I began the recruitment process by requesting a list of programs from other coaches that I could approach to leave flyers on their bulletin boards with my contact information so that teachers could contact me directly if they were interested in participating in the study. I visited the centers, requested, and was granted permission to post my recruitment flyers. The first 10 early childhood teachers who responded by email, met the criteria, and expressed interest in participating in the study were selected as study participants.

Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument for this study was participant interviews, as the study's objective was to elicit teachers' perspectives of a phenomenon. To assist with the interview process, an interview guide (see Appendix B) was prepared to streamline the interview process and ensure that all participants were asked the same questions and received the same information. The interview guide (protocol) was a series of semi structured questions used to direct the questions for the study participants. Other

mechanisms were applied to support the data gathering process, the consent form/email invitation to participants (see Appendix A), and finally, the semi structured one-on-one virtual interview technique. The interview protocol (see Appendix B) detailed the questions aligned to the research question, including follow-up and probing questions (Durdella, 2020). According to Crawford and Lynn (2016), the interview protocol ensures consistency, guides the interviewer, and details the questions and other information needed for the interview process.

I preferred interviews as an opportunity to talk with and interact with the participants and gather the information in their own words (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The study consisted of one research question; therefore, all the interview questions developed were focused on gathering detailed information from that question. A journal was used to document my thoughts and feelings as they arose during the data collection to ensure credibility. The journal was used to reflect on my values and experiences related to professional development. This process of reflexivity allowed me to acknowledge and be mindful of my biases so that they did not interfere with my gathering of the data (Behar-Horenstein, 2018). I engaged in peer debriefing with two of my peers to review the questions to ensure they aligned with the research question (Creswell, 2009). They offered input on the questions' suitability and validity for the research. Because this study investigated early childhood educators' perspectives on professional development, my primary source of data collection was semi structured individual interviews with early childhood educators who participated in professional development activities over the previous 3 years.

I conducted the interviews remotely for the teachers' convenience, but the instructors were also given the option of meeting in person at a mutually convenient location. Two of the interviews were conducted in-person and recorded. Interviews were scheduled to not interfere with the participants' work schedule and activities. The interviews were recorded on the Zoom platform and downloaded to my desktop at the end of each session. The interviews were scheduled for approximately one hour. Time was allotted to allow for further questioning. Individuals were encouraged to ask clarifying questions as needed throughout the interview. Following the conversations, I expressed gratitude to each volunteer for their participation. Each research participant was emailed a copy of their interview transcript as a member check and asked to check and clarify any inaccuracies (Creswell, 2009). To guarantee proper documentation of the interviews, the NVivo transcription software was utilized to support the process.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Recruitment commenced on clearance from the IRB. I physically visited centers and requested permission to post a recruitment flyer (invitation) which contained my contact information on the bulletin board. Individuals who were interested in participating in the study emailed me and expressed their interest. The invitation contained information about the research, the eligibility requirements, and their agreement to be contacted by phone or email. Individuals who matched the qualifying requirements were contacted and informed of the next steps. Before data collection began, a summary of the study and the consent form was reviewed with the participants. This included the role of the participants, including the processes, the estimated duration

of the interview, the sharing of the information, the importance of confidentiality, and how the audiotapes and transcripts would be preserved (Dudella, 2020). After receiving informed consent from the participants, the day, time, and location was decided, and the Zoom links were sent. No financial compensation was provided for participation in this study. With the participants' agreement, the individual interviews were recorded and performed through Zoom utilizing the semi structured interview guide (see Appendix B).

At the beginning of the interview the informed consent was reaffirmed and the participant's role in the interview was explained. Clarifying questions were asked as deemed necessary during the interview and, in some instances, probing inquiries were employed to elicit richer data. Each interview took approximately 60 min. Participants were asked for their consent to be contacted if more information is required. Participants were informed that they would receive a copy of the transcript for review and correction, allowing them to make any necessary corrections. Participants were also provided with my contact information. Finally, participants were emailed a copy of the Zoom audio/video recordings, which will be kept on my computer in a password-protected file. The audio was transcribed using NVivo transcription software for data analysis.

Data Analysis Plan

Exploring early childhood practitioners' perspectives of professional development activities supporting classroom implementation of best practices aligns with this study's qualitative nature and theoretical framework. The data collected from the early childhood teachers' perspectives of their professional development is informed by the adult learning and distance learning theories. To begin investigating and analyzing the data acquired

during data collection, a three-phase iterative data analysis approach was used to offer the clarity and direction necessary to synthesize and make sense of the data (Durdella, 2020).

The first phase was preliminary data analysis (Durdella, 2020). The primary purpose of this stage was to produce ideas in response to the themes discovered in the reviewed literature, pertinent research, and my research question (Durdella). This step involved transcribing the audio recordings and manually cross-checking the material contained on the audiotapes for correctness. This phase included synthesizing issues, identifying themes, and using my literature review to establish codes, such as words and phrases that appeared significant throughout the interviews. More data gathering and analysis questions were devised in response to the participant's replies. Additionally, participants were provided with transcripts for review and verification to ensure that the data truly reflected their experiences. The data was processed and transitioned in preparation for segmentation and reduction in the next stage (Durdella, 2020). During the second step, data was segmented or split down into smaller bits to enable me to discover critical themes (segmentation). Codes were identified to categorize and establish themes within the data to find linkages and similarities (Durdella). Each preliminary subject was extensively investigated, with corresponding codes developed to help better understand the backgrounds and experiences of early childhood educators. The transcripts were categorized according to the most often occurring themes, documenting repeats of particular words and phrases (Durdella). Once I began connecting the codes, organizing them, and creating pieces, patterns and conclusions will emerge from the data (Durdella, 2020).

The data interpretation step is the third phase. The extensive explanations provided an initial attempt to contextualize and comprehend early childhood educators' professional development perspectives (Durdella, 2020). More content analysis was conducted to elicit additional relevant connections and experiences, condensing it down to its essential themes and patterns, to conceive and theorize the issues and detect patterns in the data. Creswell (2009) suggested that if themes are generated by consolidating many data sources or viewpoints from participants, one may claim that this process increased the study's validity.

The data was processed with the assistance of NVivo, a computer-assisted data analysis software. The program assisted in the functional and effective management and maintenance of data and catalogs. It also helped in searching for, browsing, and retrieving necessary content, as well as in coding, identifying themes, and recognizing patterns to make pertinent connections (Durdella, 2020).

Issues of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is critical to the success and usefulness of any study since it determines whether other researchers can substantiate the findings. It, therefore, requires the researcher to ensure that specific procedures are in place to ensure trustworthiness is achieved (Behar-Horenstein, 2018). Morgan & Ravitch (2018) outlines trustworthiness as the foundation for research to guarantee that the findings are helpful to others and that the information acquired from participants accurately reflects their experiences. Trustworthiness is attained through implementing actions, such as credibility,

transferability, dependability, and confirmability, which is discussed in depth in the following sections.

Credibility

The term *credibility* refers to the assurance that reconstructions accurately represent the original data (Behar-Horenstein, 2018). This guarantees that participants are correctly identified and described and that the data and final study accurately represents the participants' actual experiences as documented throughout the interview process. Similarly, credibility is decided by how a researcher performs their investigation and instills confidence in the accuracy of the findings (Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). Behar-Horenstein (2018) advocated keeping a diary for (reflectivity), triangulation, and suitable techniques to maintain credibility. I used these tactics throughout the data collection process. A journal was a critical component of this process as it contained my reflections, ideas, worries, and questions. This assisted me in ensuring that I had visual aids to assist me in analyzing the facts without being influenced by my beliefs or prejudice(Creswell, 2009). The journalling process allowed me to take notes, chronicle thoughts and worries, submit questions, seek answers, and eventually reflect on the learning experience. During the virtual interview, I was able to observe participants' facial expressions and body language as they responded to interview questions. This gave an additional source of information to guarantee credibility.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research is how and to what extent the phenomenon described within the study context can be transferred to another context (Bloomberg &

Volpe, 2012; Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). I offered dense, detailed descriptions of the individuals, the settings, and the experiences of the participants, which created an authentic picture and context for the study. This researcher determined that based on the discovered and documented themes and patterns, others may be able to generalize the findings and duplicate the study under similar conditions, and to make a proposal in that regard (Behar-Horenstein, 2018). It is anticipated that other counties will be able to apply the contexts of this study to their counties.

Dependability

Dependability is the consistency within the findings to ensure that the study can be replicated with similar participants (Behar-Horenstein, 2018; Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). In other words, are the conclusions coherent and reliable considering the facts collected? As a result, it is critical to document procedures by noting the consistent coding methods employed in my journal. To ensure the dependability of this study, a strategy for conducting interviews, (the interview guide) was developed to keep the questions focused on the research question and the primary objective of the study. The research process was detailed and transparent. To ensure the triangulation and validity of the study, interviews were done utilizing several data sources, including interviews with multiple individuals.

Confirmability

Confirmability questions whether the study's findings are believable or not (Behar-Horenstein, 2018). According to (Morgan & Ravitch, 2018), the term "confirmability" refers to the ability to determine if the findings reflect the research or are

a product of the researcher's biases and subjectivity. Consistently and intentionally, I evaluated and reflected on my biases, beliefs, and values to ensure they were not reflected in the study. Separately, interviews with study participants were recorded and transcribed from the audio. I solicited peer review to assess whether another coder would use the same or a similar code for the identical sections based on the interviews and transcriptions (Creswell, 2009). As the researcher, I guarantee that I accurately reported the actual experiences of the participants. The audiotapes will be securely archived with the data sources.

Ethical Procedures

After gaining IRB permission, I undertook the recruitment of research volunteers. Durdella (2020) advised three guiding principles for ensuring study participant protection, which will be adhered to throughout this research project. The first premise is one of individual respect. Purposive sampling was used to choose participants. The informed consent form was included with the email invitation to participate in the research. The informed consent form consisted of detailed statements about the study's purpose, the request for participation, the risks and benefits associated with participation, the right to know, information about audio recording, confidentiality, the use of the data obtained, who has access to the data, and the participant's consent. Additionally, the informed consent process covered the participant's ability to withdraw from the research at any time during the process.

Durdella (2020, p. 14) specified beneficence as the second principle. The researcher should do a risk-benefit analysis and ensure that participants consenting to the

study will not suffer any damage due to their participation. The primary objective of this policy is confidentiality. All contact between myself and the responders was conducted using the Walden student email account. Emails to prospective volunteers were sent directly from that account. All invites were tagged, and personal information removed once the data coding process began to ensure anonymity. All transcriptions were shared with study participants. Any data collected has been saved on a secure external hard drive that will always remain in my control. As per Walden University policy, all data will be retained for 5 years, at which point a trustworthy business entity will shred it. Participants received a copy of the informed consent for their records, guaranteeing their privacy, with no identifiable information being shared or sold.

Durdella (2020) asserts that the third criterion guarantees that the sample of research participants represents the variety of the broader population they represent, and that the process's benefits and costs are dispersed equitably. As a coaching specialist in the county, my work does not entail overseeing any early childhood educators. The informed consent identified me as a Quality and Education Coaching Specialist (my job title) and highlighted that my function as a researcher is distinct and separate from my professional responsibilities. My role and position as a researcher were reiterated throughout the initial contact and data collecting phase. I had no relationships with any participants, and any centers with whom I have had previous contact were unable to participate in this study. No monetary or non-monetary inducements were offered to research participants, and no one pressured them to participate.

Summary

Chapter 3 included details on methodology undergirding this basic qualitative research. I explored how early childhood teachers from a southeastern county in a southern state perceive professional development activities that support their implementation of best practices in the classroom. The identified research gap supports the need for more study of teachers serving young children ages newborn to 5 and their views on professional development activities. In this chapter, I discussed the research design, methods, my role as the researcher', concerns of credibility, and ethical considerations. Ten early childhood educators were interviewed for this study's data collection. Chapter 4 includes an analysis of the data gathered and a summary of the study's findings.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

In this basic qualitative study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives on professional development activities that support their implementation of best practices in the classroom. This study was structured around one research question and framed by adult learning theory. Because the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, distance learning theory also served as a conceptual-framework. The research question was,

What are early childhood teachers from a southeastern county in a southern state's perspectives of professional development activities supporting their implementation of best practices in the classroom? In Chapter 4, I discuss the study setting, the participant pool, data collection, the approach to data collection, the data analysis process, and issues of trustworthiness. I also present the results before offering a summary of the chapter.

Setting

Recruitment for participants began in October 2022 and was completed in January 2023. I conducted my first two interviews on December 5th, 2022. To recruit participants for my study, I asked my coworkers, who were also educational coaches within the community, to recommend directors or owners of early childhood learning centers who might be willing to allow me to place flyers on their bulletin boards or walk into the centers and leave flyers. I initially received approval from five centers and contacted the owners and directors for permission to visit their schools. Two owners invited me to

come in and offered to allow staff to speak with me. The research recruitment flyer highlighted the following criteria for participation in the study:

- early childhood educators in the county
- worked in the field for more than 3 years.
- participated in professional development activities (training) within the last 3 years.

Although I received approval from two center directors to place the recruitment flyers in their centers, weather challenges, school closures, and schedule conflicts delayed my visits until after the Thanksgiving holiday in late November 2022. Once I had physical access to the centers, I was contacted by three interested individuals via email and text. Two of these individuals gave consent and participated in the study. A staff member from another center contacted me to share that two teachers were interested in participating; both gave consent, but one did not attend the scheduled Zoom call after giving consent. I visited another center, which resulted in eight potential participants; however, only six gave consent and participated in the interviews. Because I needed one more participant, I contacted two other centers. One teacher responded and gave consent and was included in the study. The 10 participants are employed in four different programs in the county.

I advised participants that they could be interviewed either virtually or in person. The two participants who opted for face-to-face interviews were conducted separately in private office spaces at the early childhood center as this was their preference. Both interviews were recorded on my phone and later downloaded onto my password-locked

laptop. I emailed the other volunteers after receiving notification of their interest. Each volunteer was sent an informed consent form for review. I asked them to consent by replying “I consent” to the email and to advise me of their availability. Individual Zoom interviews were scheduled upon receipt of the informed consent and availability. The interviews were conducted virtually.

Before beginning the formal interview process, I asked the participants for consent to record the interviews. All participants gave their consent to record the interviews. I reviewed the informed consent and inquired about any further questions or concerns. None of the participants had any questions. The approved interview protocol (see Appendix B), which included probing questions, was used to conduct the semi structured interviews. The first three questions related to basic demographics, including participants' teaching experience, age group, and whether they worked in family childcare (in their home with a small group) or center-based (large group). The interviews lasted an average of 40 min and illuminated my understanding of the early childhood teachers’ perspectives of professional development activities in which they participated.

At the end of each interview, I thanked the participants and advised them that I would send them a copy of their interview transcript for their review and clarification. Because the interviews were being recorded, I did not take any notes, as I aimed to be attentive to the participants’ words to probe deeper as needed. At the end of each interview, the recording was downloaded from Zoom. I used NVivo and Otter.ai transcription services to transcribe from audio to text and saved these documents on my password-protected computer, which is securely kept in my home.

Demographics

Ten early childhood educators from a southeastern county in a southern state were interviewed. They represented four center-based programs with early childhood teaching experience ranging from 9 to 30 years. Although my study was open to early childhood educators working with children from their birth to age 5, all respondents taught in the 3–5 age groups. Additionally, two respondents also served in dual roles as early childhood teachers and as an owner/director, which is very common in early childhood programs in the county. All participated in professional development activities virtually over the past 3 years, as in-person options were unavailable due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Table 1 illustrates the demographics of the participants.

Table 1

Demographics of Data Sample

Participant	Type of program	No. of years teaching	Age group taught	Position
1	Center based	30	Pre-K	Teacher/director
2	Center based	8	Pre-K	Teacher
3	Center based	25	Pre-K	Teacher/director
4	Center based	25	Pre-K	Teacher
5	Center based	20	Pre-K	Teacher
6	Center based	20	Pre-K	Teacher
7	Center based	25	Pre-K	Teacher
8	Center based	20	Pre-K	Teacher
9	Center based	7	Pre-K	Teacher
10	Center based	15	Pre-K	Teacher

Note. Pre-K = prekindergarten.

Data Collection

I collected data over 4 months. I began the recruitment process immediately after receiving IRB approval. However, setbacks such as center closures due to inclement

weather, holidays, and extended illnesses within the centers prevented me from visiting to leave fliers and recruit participants for my study. My first interviews were conducted in December 2022.

I intended to provide participants with face-to-face, phone, or Zoom interviews. Due to COVID-19, there were concerns about whether participants would be comfortable with the face-to-face option. Additionally, based on the participants' availability, conducting face-to-face was not a popular option. The first two interviews were in-person, in different spaces and times, and recorded on my phone. At the end of these interviews, downloading to my computer was challenging. I decided the best option to ensure I did not lose my data was to conduct the interviews via Zoom, which allowed me to maintain backup recordings (in the cloud). I used NVivo transcription services. The transcripts were available immediately, I spent much time cleansing them to ascertain that I would not lose the rich data provided by the educators. All participants had been advised at the beginning of the interviews and again during my closing remarks that a copy of the transcript would be sent to them for their review. Three participants indicated that sending a transcript of their interview would not be necessary. However, I sent each participant a copy of their interview transcript. Only one individual responded to the email with no comments attached.

Data Analysis

Creswell (2009)advised that data analysis is the process of making sense of collected data using a multi-level approach to identify common themes and perspectives. To comprehend the significance of the data, it is necessary to read, organize, and reflect

on the data. Managing the data entailed slicing the information into chunks and labeling these segments with common terms identified during the data organization process. I conducted individual, semi structured interviews with ten early childhood educators in a southeast county of a southern state. Before I collected any data, I received authorization from the IRB to use a flyer, a consent form, and an interview protocol. The interview protocol included three introductory questions and seven key questions. Each essential question was accompanied by probing questions designed to elicit richer, more detailed responses from the participants. Additionally, as the participants shared their experiences, I asked clarifying questions and often repeated what I heard for confirmation.

For my study, I assigned each participant a code as I began my data analysis process with an initial “cleansing” of the transcriptions from NVivo. By “cleansing,” I mean that the transcriptions included words and comments, double words, pauses, and statements that were not relevant or necessary within the study context. Therefore, removing these words, repetitions, and pauses from the transcriptions was necessary. Because I did not want to deviate from the participants' intended thoughts, feelings, and words, I removed words that would not change the context. This task allowed me to dissect the information and familiarize myself with the data by coding line-by-line. While cleaning the transcripts, I recognized commonalities and repetitions in the participants' responses when defining professional development. I took notes using resonating words and phrases that came to mind as I put the data into perspective. “Self-concept,” “self-direction,” “self,” and “autonomy” were some of my initial jottings. Creswell refers to this process as "coding" and defines it as the process of dissecting and organizing

information from various sources to identify significant and unique topics extracted from the data. According to Durdella (2020), the research questions should direct the interview questions, tying the data to the research framework. These initial words or phrases were relevant to the research question and within the context of the research study. Table 2 shows the words and phrases identified within the interview transcripts and the resulting codes, categories, and themes.

Table 2

Example Codes, Categories, and Themes

Example code	Category	Theme	Meaning
"To improve myself," "I felt ambitious," "I wanted to get it done," "self-learning," and "learn skills and things that they can take back to the classroom that will last."	Helps them to perform their responsibilities with their students	Orientation to learn	How do they feel about participating in professional development
"She gave us the time," "she's always on us for us to become more professional," "she's always sending us," "she's a great leader," "she will find a way to help me out," "I will support and encourage them and push them to go forward," and "we have to take 20-hr in-service hours throughout the year.	Support from owners/directors is essential.	The need to know	Participants see owners and directors as being supportive because they allow them to participate in professional development.
"It's a little bit helpful"; "I think for people that come into it in the beginning, it's very beneficial"; "and I think it becomes very repetitive after you have a few years of experience with children."	Is professional development helpful?	The role of the learner's experience	The teachers have a lot of knowledge, skills, and experience; therefore, training must be meaningful and provide new information.

Example code	Category	Theme	Meaning
"Just being better"; "take some type of training, some type of class"; "for us to be better teachers, you know, for us to grow mainly"; "to become more successful"; "teaches me how to perform with the children"; "is an opportunity to empower school staff to deliver higher-quality education to children"; and "I don't know how to."	Wanting to learn new things so that they can be better at their jobs	Readiness to learn	Knowing and embracing the need to upgrade and improve skills to better serve the children
"And all of these things are very valuable because as we get trained and learn about all of this differing new research, and we applied in the classroom with the children, we will be able to help them more in their world and their development academically, physically, socially, socially and in the different components that we tried to target" and "I am open to changes and which value the most."	Wanting to learn new things so that they can be better at their jobs	Readiness to learn	Knowing and embracing the need to upgrade and improve skills to better serve the children

Example code	Category	Theme	Meaning
"You don't sometimes have the money for it"; "it's just them going through a list of what it is, but they don't actually show you how to do it"; "can be improved a little bit"; "more incentives that are appealing to staff"; and "more resources, opportunities, hands-on experiences, modeling."	Challenges Concerns	Motivation	What will entice individuals to participate in professional development
"Just because there is human interaction, it is not just sitting in front of a computer"; "connecting is better than just sitting in front of a screen and just reading through it"; and "beneficial for teachers to have someone to come in and help them specifically and guide them."	I prefer face-to-face interaction, although being able to do courses when I want to is easier.		

Codes

The process of coding involves a continuous evaluation of the data (Saldana 2021). After reviewing each transcript, I highlighted and made marginal notes on the commonly repeated words. I categorized the information into what I considered to be common denominators, which I would break down into themes. Over one hundred keywords or phrases were repeated by the ten participants which represented their perspectives and thoughts on professional development.

I analyzed each transcript at least four times and reviewed some transcripts additional times for clarification and to ensure that everything was noticed. I next identified similarities, differences, and frequency of the words and phrases from the initial words using the NVivo software and a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. As I went through the transcripts, I also focused on the participants' thoughts concerning their experiences with professional development activities in the county. I recognized that many of the participants' responses were similar and related more specifically to the interview and research questions. This helped me organize the information systematically as I used the interview questions to help guide my thoughts in another coding phase to guide the development of the themes. Table 3 shows how I organized initial responses from four participants who indicated that their participation in professional development was because they had to meet the job requirements.

Table 3

Example Participant Reponses Regarding the Meaning of Professional Development

Participant	Initial response
3	"Most of the time, childcare licensing requires you to have 10 hr. And if you have 10 hr for the year, that's it."
9	"Every year, we have to do those 15 hr and are advised to read."
5	"I want to take it because I have to take 15 hr every year."
4	"We have to take 20-hr in-service hours throughout the year."

When asked to define "professional development," one participant did not have an immediate response, and another stated that as a teacher, she was "only doing what she needed to do to meet the requirements." I found it necessary to further explore possible themes around those responses. In examining the overall responses, however, one of the most common words to describe professional development was "training. Of interest to me was the focus on participating in the training to meet job requirements, but not around "self-efficacy or self-concept." I immediately developed a code for myself "something potentially interesting that I do not understand." I noticed two participants expressed thoughts and feelings that suggested a ready-to-learn mindset, as referenced in the literature on adult learning (Knowles et al., 2020). They used terms such as "to improve myself" and "I felt like ambitious I got that, you know,"

Categories

Theming of the data, as defined by Saldana (2016), involves systematically evaluating the patterns uncovered by the coding process. I used the interview questions to organize the data to identify the themes and clarify my thoughts. Then I set the answers for each participant based on the similarity of the major topics under the questions, which

helped me develop categories. Initially, I consolidated 30 themes into five after several iterations. However, I changed these themes several times. I also used the theoretical framework of Knowles's core adult learning principles to guide my thinking. As the themes developed, I categorized them based on these principles.

Moreover, I focused on the research and interview questions and used them to guide my final theme selections. Then, I classified, reduced the categories, and identified connections to the study's concepts. I anticipated that the categories would help me respond to the research question. Although I used NVivo to store the files and extract the data, I exported the data to an Excel workbook and developed several different sheets allowing me to see the data more clearly. In analyzing the data, I kept my research question as the focus. I used literature based on Knowles's core adult learning principles to finalize the categories and develop the final themes. These categories were self-concept, adult learner experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and motivation to learn.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Credibility

As indicated in Chapter 3, credibility is the assurance that the data are appropriately portrayed (Behar-Horenstein, 2018). This is achieved by ensuring the participant's experiences and data are conveyed accurately throughout the interview process. Behar-Horenstein recommended using a journal for reflections and keeping documentation that I could later return to as needed. I maintained a journal and kept notes electronically and informally on notepads. I also used it to note my "ah, ah" moments as I

conducted the data analysis. At the end of each interview, I informed each participant that I would email them a copy of the transcripts for their review, allowing them to correct or add information they might have missed sharing. Of the ten participants I sent transcripts to, 2 acknowledged receipts; however, none returned the transcripts with any questions or comments.

Transferability

Transferability is defined as the extent to which the study may be replicated or applied in another setting (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). To achieve this, I have supplied substantial detailed, thick, rich, and explicit details of the data gathering and analysis procedure, allowing other researchers to replicate this work in their own circumstances. The detailed way I discussed my process enables another researcher to replicate the study and search for similar themes in a different demographic, location, time period, time, or scenario (Behar-Horenstein, 2018).

Dependability

Researchers emphasized that when consistency and specificity are used to explain the findings and ensure that the research can be reproduced, the findings are dependable (Behar-Horenstein, 2018; Morgan & Ravitch, 2018). Additionally, dependability entails rigorous data collection processes that were adhered to and documented during the duration of the study. The documentation for this study discussed the recruitment procedure, data collection methods, and data analysis techniques exhaustively. My committee chair and methodologist were instrumental in ensuring that I designed and conducted a comprehensive, transparent, and replicable research study.

Confirmability

As stated in Chapter 3, confirmability questions the credibility of the study's findings (Behar-Horenstein, 2018). Morgan and Ravitch (2018) state that confirmability is the process of verifying that the researcher or participant biases do not influence the research's conclusions. When recruiting participants, I informed them of my role as an early childhood teacher, coach, and trainer in the community, which differed from my role as a Walden student. Another process I engaged in was documenting my thoughts, feelings, and questions or concerns after each interview and at other times as I interacted with this data. Confirmability also refers to the extent to which I repeated my analysis of the data and my coding technique. During the coding process, I checked and rechecked the data for accuracy and kept notes on why I made certain decisions while conducting the data analysis.

Ethical Procedures

According to Durdella (2020), the researcher must ensure that study participants are first respected and provided with information that will allow them to make informed decisions to participate in the study. Secondly, the participant's information and identity should be kept confidential, maintained, and disposed of in a manner that does not put the participant at risk. The third criterion is that participants are randomly selected and represent the population being studied. For this study, the informed consent was reviewed at the initial contact and provided to the participant via email. The participant was required to review and sign before the interview, and it was reviewed again before the beginning of the interview. Within the informed consent is a statement on confidentiality

and a statement of “risks and benefits of participating in this study.” All statements in the informed consent have been adhered to in this study.

Results

This research study was driven by one question: What are early childhood teachers from a southeastern county in a southern state’s perspectives of professional development activities supporting their implementation of best practices in the classroom? The themes identified throughout the data reflected andragogy's general principles of (a) the need to know, (b) self-directed learning, (c) prior experiences, (d) readiness to learn, and (e) orientation to learning and problem-solving. Although there was some evidence of these principles in this study, others did not appear as evident and did not provide significant data for in-depth discussion. These principles have been aligned with the themes and are discussed below.

Theme 1: Perception of Professional Development as Helpful in the Classroom (Orientation to Learn)

This study aimed to understand early childhood teachers’ perspectives on professional development. As I worked with the data, I used the theoretical framework of Knowles’s core adult learning principles and the assumptions on adult learning to guide my thinking. I categorized themes based on these core principles and assumptions as the themes developed. Orientation to learning as a core principle suggests that adult learners are in a problem-solving mode. Therefore, they are more driven to learn because it will benefit them in the classroom and make their work with young children more effective. All the participants described professional development as helpful to their work with the

children in the classroom. Participant 5, who has been in the field for over 30 years, said professional development is “for us to become more successful,” Participant 6, who has been in the field for over 20 years, said, "Teaches me how to perform with the children.” Participant 1 described professional development as "an opportunity to empower school staff to deliver higher-quality education to children." The participants recognized that learning was a part of the process of gaining increased knowledge and skill development; the responses highlighted that professional development would help them work better with the children in their care.

When participants were asked to define professional development, three responses were vague. Participant 2’s initial response was, “I don’t have an answer,” I continued to probe and returned to this question with Participant 2 later in the interview. The response was, “It’s about personal and professional learning,” "It is about learning so you can help the children.” Many early childhood professionals participate in many different forms of training (short-term, formal education, workshops, etc.) but do not recognize these activities as a part of an ongoing process; their responses reflected “stand-alone” occurrences to fulfill mandates, although some recognized that they were gaining new skills while engaged in professional development activities. Adult learning encompasses how adults gain new information, skills, and competence (Knowles et al., 2020). Throughout the interviews, it was necessary to redirect, clarify, probe deeper, or reword the question on professional development for seven of the ten participants.

A general understanding was that professional development would help them do their jobs better. Based on Knowles’s theories of andragogy and the assumptions of adult

learning, the participants have shifted their emphasis from the future use of newly acquired information to its immediate relevance to their current work with children (Knowles et al., 2020). For many of the participants, their focus on education appeared to be on the challenges they had to address in the classroom versus the topics that may have interested them. When participants were asked about what value professional development plays in their work, Participant 1 said, “Every training, every webinar, every Zoom, every one of these activities actually brings new ideas, new information to us.” Participant 4’s response was, “It is very important. It is very important.” I attempted to get further clarification on what Participant 4 meant as “important”; however, one-word or short answers were typical of this participant.

Theme 2: Support from Center Owners/Director a Key Factor in Professional Development Participation (the Need to Know)

Another principle of andragogy is grounded in the adult learner’s need to know, which means learners want to know and understand why, how, and what is involved in the learning; they also want to know how professional development will make a difference in their work. In the context of this study, when participants were asked questions relevant to why they participated in professional development, one of the first responses was that their director told them they had to attend, to meet licensing requirements or that they had to complete their “in-service hours.” For many in this pool of participants, the “need to know” was not focused on the content of the professional development activities or because they were interested in the planning or content of the activities. The mindset was more focused on the “Why do I have to engage in the

activities?" And for them, the "why" was to meet requirements from external forces instead of the thought that it would make them more effective in the classroom and with the children in their care. When asked about support from the director/owner, Participant 2's response was, "Let's say licensing is required, then it's okay, but if it is something else that we're interested in, then it's like, why don't you look at this?" Participant 9 responded, "Yes, she forwards us emails of training that we can do." Participant 9 also stated, "We have 15 hours of in-service that we have to do." Participant 10 declared, "They will do whatever is in their hands to help out."

What I found interesting about these responses was that the participants generally said that their owners/directors were supportive. Still, it was primarily to ensure that organizational needs were met. Participant 10 further said they would be reimbursed if they participated in professional development. However, almost all participated in professional development to meet the organizational needs and requirements versus their own learning needs and interests. Few participants alluded to being able to engage in activities of their choice, such as Participant 2, who completed her Child Development Associate (CDA) certification and shared, "The CDA thing, if it were up to me, I probably wouldn't have done it because it was a challenge and something I had to do." She went on to say, "but the Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) courses was more of a personal choice, something that interests me."

The fact that some of the teachers were aware that they were going through the motions to engage in activities that were not necessarily of interest to them suggested the absence of independence and the ability to provide input in a process that involved them.

Furthermore, from the responses, participants seemed to lack interest and motivation for learning beyond what was required. Throughout the interview, when probing questions were asked, Participant 9 would respond, “To be honest, I do not have an opinion on that; I don’t work from my personal opinion. It is what is being provided and what I need to do.” The need to know for Participant 9 was solely based on the director’s recommendation.

Although most of the participants agreed that their owners/directors supported professional development, it was evident that the choices were limited as they had to ensure that they completed the licensure requirements or other mandates. The participants in this study did not indicate they were given the opportunity to participate in the planning or provide input for the professional development programs they attended. Rarely were they allowed the chance to express their own interests. Furthermore, the choices they were given were geared toward providing information more so than skill development. Participants 2 and 9 reported they personally enrolled in activities outside of what was required by their functions and role in the organization, which motivated them because of their desires to increase their skills and be better able to work with the children in their care.

Theme 3: Desire to Learn New Things to Be Better at One's Job (Readiness to Learn)

Readiness to learn can be interpreted in different ways. The participants in many ways expressed that they wanted to be better at their jobs. Although they talked about significant inconveniences that impacted their willingness to participate in professional

development, such as the time-of-day opportunities offered, in addition to the cost (if they were to engage in formal and or paid), some participants shared that they were ready to learn if it would help them work with the children in their care. As benchmarks for children's projected success evolved, some participants acknowledged their desire to move and grow along with the children so they could adequately meet the children's learning needs. Participant 8 offered, "What I liked and needed was to help children with their emotional needs, to help them during the day to become a better child."

Participant 6 expressed her readiness to learn differently, "I learned to ask and then listen; that's something I did not know for kids at this age. That's something new for me." This participant clarified that before engaging in professional development, she would primarily give directions, but she learned more effective strategies through professional development. Later in the interview, Participant 6 referenced a requirement necessary to meet state standards and stated, "When you learn something, you have to adapt because it's not magic." Individuals may not realize that they are ready to learn and may need to be coerced or pushed into situations to which they must readily respond.

In contrast, others recognized that they must be proactive and embrace the opportunities when they come along. Participant 1 acknowledged her limitations "I believe it's necessary to work, you can genuinely love children and like to work with them, but we do need to be trained on how to work with them because they are all different. It's probably impossible for me or any teacher to learn how to deal with every single behavior in the classroom, so I feel it's necessary (professional development). Participant 7, supported this train of thought when stating that "if you don't take these

classes, and update your information, how can you know what you do for children?" "So, you have to take some type of training to continue." Individuals who are ready to learn recognize the need to gain new knowledge to support their work with the students and acknowledge the need to make changes (Knowles, Horton, Swanson & Robinson, 2020).

Theme 4: Influence of Work Experience on Interest in Learning (Prior Experiences of the Learner)

Based on the data, some participants expressed the importance of their experiences in their work. Knowles et al. (2020) posits that adult experience impacts learning and can either serve to challenge or solidify learning. Adult experience can fit into what the learner knows, enabling them to be more responsive to learning new things, or their experience may require them to change how they process the new knowledge. Although no specific questions were asked related to how participants past experiences influenced their perspectives on professional development, participants' comments and responses demonstrated the desire to build upon their existing experience, resulting in a theme for this study. Adult experience serves as the base or foundation and triggers the desire to learn more. Adults use their experiences to filter and build upon their prior knowledge and make sound decisions about how they implement their new learning (Knowles et al., 2020). Participant 3, in one comment, said, "Things are changing every day, and we are learning more things that's more relevant to the children now." Participant 3 further stated:

> The teacher is a teacher, who I will say has tools under their belt. So, how do we get these tools? It's when we get pushed through professional development, every

> training, every webinar, every Zoom, every one of these activities; they actually bring new ideas and new information to us as teachers as we grab these new ideas. We bring it to the classroom, it is helping us to be more effective teachers, and the more effective teachers we are then the outcomes for the children will definitely be better.

Participant 9 said,

> I didn't understand when I just came into the business, but over time, learning new things, receiving new resources, and my boss modeling for me, I now know where things go, and I have mastered how to identify children's needs.

Both participants expressed that as much as they may have worked for many years, their experience drove their teaching practices in ways that may have been less effective and saw the need to continue learning to provide the best learning for the children. Participant 1 had a differing view, "I think for people who come into it, in the beginning, it's very beneficial to learn a lot. But I think after you have a few years of experience with children, it kind of becomes very repetitive." Although there was an interest in professional development, there appeared to be some disinterest, as this participant's perspective was that the content in the professional development activities was not beneficial to practice. Participant 1 also said, "I feel that when you have the experience, you kind of skim through it, and it gets a bit boring because it is repetitive."

Participant 7 maintained that although she has been a teacher for many years, she was "pushed to go to a class to get a different view on how to teach math; it's different nowadays." She recognized that "some children are different from others, and you have

to teach them also like a regular child." Participant 7 also acknowledged that her experience and background allowed her to recognize that her existing knowledge would not adequately meet the needs of the children of "nowadays." Participants who identified the need for additional learning acknowledged that their previous knowledge and experience provided them with the foundation to support their students and recognized that they also needed to be engaged in continuous learning to be effective in their roles.

Research Question Addressed

This study was underpinned by one research question, which concerned whether early childhood teachers from a southeastern county in a southern state perceive professional development activities as supporting their implementation of best practices in the classroom. I addressed the question using Knowles's theory of adult learning (andragogy) to identify the themes within the study. The participants' responses revealed four emerging themes related to the learner (a) orientation to learn, (b) need to know, (c) readiness to learn, and (d) prior experiences. Each theme focused on the individual's openness and willingness to learn new material so that they could implement new and different learning in their classrooms.

Participants expressed that they did not initiate the desire to engage in professional development activities, but rather because of state and county mandates, they were required to. Participants 2 and 9 expressed interest in identifying ways to work better with the children. Therefore, they voluntarily enrolled in classes to support their implementation of best practices. Participants 1 and 3, who identified themselves as teachers/directors, disclosed that although they engage in professional development

activities and encourage their staff to participate, they only require them to participate in the activities to meet the mandates and to complete in-service training hours required by their licensing entity. Participant 1 appeared to question the value of these activities, especially for experienced early childhood teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives on professional development activities. Responses were similar in some instances, but many of the participants shared different perspectives on professional development and how their work with young children has been impacted.

Summary

I presented the data collected and analyzed with NVivo and an Excel spreadsheet in Chapter 4. The study focused on early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development activities and how they supported classroom implementation. The interviews with ten early childhood professionals were analyzed and resulted in four themes grounded within the framework of Knowles's theory of andragogy. Based on the data, early childhood teachers perceived professional development within several concepts. However, the most prevalent was aligned with the learner's orientation to learn, the learner's need to know, the learner's readiness to learn, and the learner's experience. The participants expressed that professional development was necessary to support their work with the children in the classroom. However, they did not always see the relevance of what they needed for their individual professional development. Chapter 5 is a discussion of my interpretation of the study's findings. I will also discuss some limitations and make suggestions for future research on early childhood teachers'

perspectives of professional development activities that may influence their classroom practice and the implications for social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

In this basic qualitative study, I conducted in-depth, semi structured interviews to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development activities in their classroom practices. I sought to gain a deeper understanding of early childhood educators' perspectives of professional development activities that would promote best classroom practices. Interviews were conducted via Zoom with 10 early childhood educators. I categorized and analyzed the rich data collected from the interviews to identify common themes among the participants and within the framework of Knowles's adult learning theory. Through the interviews and the data analysis, I understood how early childhood educators perceive professional development. I prioritized maintaining objectivity as I interacted with the interview participants and their responses to the interview questions. To ensure the validity of the study's findings, I provided interview transcripts to each participant for verification and kept an audit trail throughout data collection and analysis.

Four themes emerged from the data, orientation to learn, the need to know, readiness to learn and prior experiences of the learner. These themes revealed how teachers perceived their professional development activities, what motivated them to participate, their orientation to learn, their need to know the provided information, their readiness to learn the material, and how their experience influenced their desire to participate in professional development. In Chapter 5, I will discuss my interpretations of the study's findings in relation to the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 on professional

development and adult learning. I will further discuss the limitations of this study, offer recommendations for further research, and discuss the study's implications for social change. A conclusion to the study marks the end of the chapter.

Interpretations of the Findings

I identified four emergent themes that answered the research question and provided a deeper understanding of what early childhood teachers may find advantageous in their professional development experiences. Most participants found the activities useful for their work with young children. Professional development was defined within this study as a process of acquiring increased knowledge, learning new skills, practicing, and reflecting on past or new practices leading to better outcomes for children (see Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Hauge & Wan, 2019). This simplified definition provided the context for the interviews and data analysis. Although there is no one universal definition of professional development, Guskey (2020) suggested that professional development activities should result in changes in practice, teacher attitudes and beliefs, and learning outcomes for the children in their care. None of participants in this study reported significant changes in their classroom practices due to professional development activities. Guskey proposed that professional development should be deliberate and intentional so that individuals can return to their classrooms to implement new practices and reflect; however, based on the responses of the participants, they participated in one-time webinars, workshops, and training without follow-up. Participants 1, 2, and 4 stated that having the trainer follow up with them and collaborate with them would have been beneficial.

Interestingly, most participants did not discuss changes in their beliefs or practices due to professional development. When participants were asked to define professional development, eight of the 10 responded with descriptives such as “resources,” “improved skills,” and that professional development “helps teachers break down information to teach.” Participant 2 described it as “when you are going to a webinar or when you are going to a workshop.” Participant 4 said professional development is "anything that is going to be beneficial to you in your professional to help you grow.” There was little evidence of shifts in attitudes or behaviors to support participants' work with children in the classroom. Professional development has been shown to improve outcomes for children if teachers who participate in ongoing professional development consistently implement new strategies with coaching and opportunities to reflect upon their practices (Guskey, 2020; Powell & Bodur, 2019b).

Although I pressed the participants for clarification, they tended to discuss professional development in terms of activities that needed to be completed to satisfy requirements outlined by the childcare program or other licensing entity. I considered the learning of early childhood teachers within the framework of Knowles's theory of andragogy, which is the art and science of helping adults learn and grow (Kamsli & Ozonur, 2017). I surmised from the participants responses that it is necessary to consider what is essential for adults to strive and be successful in their work.

In Chapter 3, I discussed the five basic assumptions within the andragogy framework, as proposed by Knowles. These are the adult's (a) need to know, (b) self-concept, (c) experience, (d) readiness to learn, (e) orientation to learning and (f)

motivation (Knowles, 2005). Many participants' responses aligned with these basic assumptions of adult learning. Participants expressed that they wanted to increase their professional knowledge to become more efficient at their jobs to ensure better outcomes for the children (Participants 1, 3, 7, 8, 10). Some participants' responses indicated motivation and readiness to learn, such as those of Participants 2 and 9, who were engaged in learning activities outside of the requirements and registered and attended classes outside of mandatory requirements. Knowles's assumptions for andragogy include the role of the adult learners' experiences, in which the adult is recognized for their backgrounds, motivation, learning styles and needs, and skills and knowledge.

Knowles proposed that adults should ultimately see themselves as their best resource for learning skills and their experiences as a resource for their learning (Kamsli & Ozonur, 2017; Knowles, Holton, Swanson & Robinson, 2020). Another of Knowles's assumptions related to adult learning focuses on self-concept, in which adults believe they are responsible for their own lives and capable of making their own decisions. The belief that in learning, adults are self-directed and make their own decisions was the least evidenced principle in this study, as most participants responded that they engaged in professional development activities as prescribed by their administration. Participants admitted that they would not have engaged in professional development activities if a need or requirement did not exist.

Perspectives on Professional Development

In this study, I explored early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development. Early childhood teachers have been charged with meeting mandates versus

engaging in professional development activities that meet their individual learning needs or interest. Based on the literature, early childhood teachers participate in activities they recognize as essential for them to remain in their roles, but not because it provides the material in a manner that encourages their interest in learning (Avidov-Ungar, 2016). Although there were similarities among the participants' responses in this study, such as professional development being the way of meeting mandates and building their skills, participants' responses demonstrated differences and where they were positioned in Knowles's fundamental assumptions of adult learning theory or andragogy.

Revealed in the interview data was the concept that participants were motivated to learn because they wanted the knowledge and skills to ensure outcomes for the children in their care. But some participants (1 and 3) expressed that the professional development had become "repetitive and rote." Other participants indicated that they did not have the desire. Although their administrators may have offered them the chance to attend professional development sessions of their choosing, they were required to do so on their own time and at their own expense. The participants viewed attending professional development sessions outside of work hours and paying for the sessions as deterrents. The exceptions were the two participants who pursued their interests and professional development by enrolling in programs leading to professional degrees or courses of interest. The other eight participants were content with completing the one-time, short-term webinars or face-to-face options available for free. Participant 9 consistently said professional development was something she had to do, and she did not have any opinion about it; it was something she had to do so that she could do her job better. Different

perspectives exist among early childhood educators regarding professional development. For most participants in this study, professional development focused more on meeting job-related requirements than on skill development or their professional development and learning needs.

A review of the literature uncovered that teachers' perspectives on professional development are inconsistent and generally lack commitment. Powell & Bodur (2019) discovered that the implementation of best practices was questionable, despite the availability of alternative professional development options, such as online learning (which was utilized by all participants in this study). In this study, some participants' responses reflected an interest in acquiring new skills and knowledge, while others focused more on meeting requirements. Avidov-Ungar (2016) postulated that teachers' perspectives of their professional development fall into two categories based on whether they are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated or have lateral or vertical aspirations. Within the two categories of motivation or aspiration, Avidov-Ungar proposes classifying teachers' perspectives into four patterns: hierarchically ambitious or compelled or laterally ambitious or compelled. As teachers perceive professional development within these categories, professional development should be planned to meet their needs more effectively. The responses of the participants revealed that they were more motivated by their job requirements than by their desire for skill development. In this study, participants were not asked about their aspirations; therefore, no responses reflected lateral or vertical aspirations.

Limitations of the Study

There were several limitations identified. One limitation of the study was that participants were not given a standard definition for professional development. According to Guskey (2002), professional development is designed in most cases to ensure that individuals are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and support to ultimately ensure that teachers can implement practices to ensure outcomes for children. Early childhood teachers are expected to participate in professional development activities to ensure that the school remains in compliance with the required mandates. The participants acknowledged a general understanding of professional development, and some participants could readily define it as improving their skills or learning something new to work with the children. Others, however, struggled to explain professional development in greater detail, referring to it as meeting license requirements. It should also be noted that the definition of professional development throughout the literature review was fluid, and much of the research indicated continued efforts in developing a more cohesive definition (Avidov-Ungar, 2016). Upon reflection, I believe that if I had provided the study participants with a definition of professional development prior to the interviews, their responses may have been more comprehensive and incorporated other experiences besides meeting mandates.

A further limitation of this study was that the sample size of 10 was a small proportion of the total number of early childhood educators in the county where this research was conducted. Using a larger sample size might have resulted in a broader array perspective of professional development. Additionally, the participants represented

four different programs, engaging a larger number of programs could also provide impactful results to the planning and development of professional development options for early childhood teachers. Conducting the study over a short period of time rather than longitudinal was another limitation. Responses might have been more detailed if participants were targeted, had participated in specific professional development activities, and had been tracked over time. These limitations may make it challenging for future researchers to generalize the results.

Recommendations

This study was focused on exploring early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development activities to understand their experiences and perspectives of professional development. There are a few recommendations to consider for future research and for decision makers to consider. The first thought should be to include more teachers and more schools from across the county. It is important to get input from early childhood educators and to have them engage in the planning process and to get their input as to what motivates them to engage in professional development. I recommend that future research on early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development should include criteria on the level of education completed.

Many early childhood teachers are hired based on minimal educational requirements and may have challenges in pursuing ongoing professional development activities. Another recommendation is to focus the exploration entirely on what motivates early childhood teachers to engage in professional development. With the understanding that professional development is an ongoing process that leads to a change in practice

(Guskey, 2020), future researchers could also ask teacher participants to consider how professional development affects their practice. Finally, another recommendation would be to compare the perspectives and experience of teachers who receive ongoing intentional professional development geared at addressing individual learning needs, which includes (coaching visits, mentoring, and reflective practices) versus teachers who participate in one-time webinars, workshops, general conferences which do not focus on addressing individual needs.

Implications

The early childhood field has experienced many challenges over many years, including the inability to develop a comprehensive definition of professional development (Buysse et al., 2009). The early childhood profession continues to struggle for its place within the education community (Schachter et al., 2021). Early childhood teachers, in many cases, are seen as "babysitters," and so the job requirements and professional expectations have been minimal compared to other grade levels in the school system (Schachter et al., 2021). There are many studies conducted on teacher perspectives of professional development, but as identified in the literature review, there is a gap in the research as it relates to early childhood teachers' (those working with children from birth to 5 years old) perspectives.

Although this study has limitations, it also demonstrated that its implications can be beneficial to the early childhood workforce. Administrators and decision makers may use the findings of this study to develop professional development models that move away from the one-time workshop models and design ongoing and supportive

opportunities for teachers to intentionally work toward changing and improving their practice. Considering reviewing, redesigning, and offering professional development models that meet individual leaning needs will lead to teachers implementing new strategies and best practices in their classrooms. The participant's responses were varied but provided insight into professional development and the need to reconsider the design and how professional development is planned and implemented in communities. Furthermore, administrators should consider the messaging, the relevance to their work, and implications for practice when requiring teachers to participate in professional development activities. Participants in this study wanted to participate in activities that is of interest useful to their work with young children. This study contributes to the literature on early childhood teachers' perspectives on professional development and offers recommendations for future research as well as what practices may motivate teachers to want to participate professional development activities.

Conclusion

I gathered the data for this basic qualitative research study by conducting semi structured interviews with 10 early childhood professionals. There were many limitations to the study identified, highlighting the need for further research. Early childhood teachers reported that their primary professional development purpose was meeting mandates. Some reported that they learned new information that would assist them in working to support increased outcomes for children, but the primary focus of professional development was secondary to the requirements for early childhood centers to meet their licensing requirements. Adult learning theories based on Knowles's five assumptions of

adult learning were used as the basis for teachers' engagement in professional development. Although some participants embraced some of the assumptions, others were far removed and were in different places within the assumptions. The study provided increased knowledge on teachers' perspectives of professional development, but it also provided teachers' perception as to whether the professional development was relevant to their work.

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Appendix A: Email Recruitment Letter

Dear Early Childhood Educator,

I am writing to solicit your participation in a research study that I am doing on early childhood educators' perspectives of professional development programs in the county. I am a Ph.D. student at Walden University and work for the Early Learning Coalition of Broward County as a Quality and Education Coaching Specialist.

You are requested to participate in this study if you are an early childhood educator in the county, have worked in a center for more than three years, and have engaged in professional development activities (training) within the last three years. Your participation is entirely optional and confidential, and you are free to withdraw your consent and terminate participation at any time.

The general purpose of the study is to examine and explore teachers' perspectives on professional development. I expect to interview at least 10 volunteers. If you volunteer to participate in this study, I will first ask for some brief such as your name, phone number and email to prepare for our interviews. I would ask you to provide about 60 minutes of your free time for zoom or a face-to-face interview with your consent. The interview will consist of open-ended questions about your professional development experiences and views on what worked for you, what did not work, and if you could put the new training into practice. The interview will be scheduled at a time and place that is most convenient for you. If you are available, I may also get in touch with you to cover any follow-up questions, although you are free to decline at any stage of the research.

Other than potential discomfort in answering these questions, risks will be minimal, given these interviews are strictly voluntary and confidential and interview questions are open-ended. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please contact me at Gordia Ross @ [email address redacted] or [telephone number redacted]. I can also send you a copy of a consent form, which gives you more information on the study. If you are interested in participating, you may contact me directly or permit me to contact you by filling out the information below.

I greatly appreciate your help and look forward to meeting you.

Sincerely,

Gordia Ross

Please reply to this email if you are interested in participating and indicate your preferred contact method.

Telephone_____

Email_____

Appendix B: Semi structured Interview Guide

Title of Project: Early Childhood Teachers Perception of Professional Development

DATE: _____ TIME & PLACE: _____

INTERVIEWER: _____ INTERVIEWEE: _____

OTHER: _____

Pre interview Information, Procedures, and Introductions

My name is Gordia Ross, and I am a doctoral student at Walden University. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study.

Study Purpose and Applications

This study is about early childhood teachers' perspectives of professional development in this county. I hope that we will be able to use the findings to continue to plan professional development activities that meet the needs of our teachers in this county as well as other communities. At the end of the study, I will share the findings by providing you with a link to access a report summary.

Consent Forms and Approvals

Although you have consented to participate in the study, I will just take a moment to remind you of the informed consent and to highlight and assure you of the privacy and confidential nature of this interview. All identifying information will be removed from all documents, and all responses will be treated as anonymous. However, please note that the interview will be recorded to allow me to focus my attention and be engaged in the conversation. I will be able to listen to the recording later. Do you give me consent to record this interview?

Treatment of Data

Data will be kept secure by all applicable data security measures, including password protection, data encryption, codes in place of names, storing names (if necessary) separately from the data, and discarding names (when possible). Data will be kept for at least 5 years, as required by the university.

Other questions or concerns? Other issues are discussed before beginning the interview session.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Opening the Interview Session

Introductory Questions

These are fundamental questions for me to know more about your teaching experience.

Q1: Introductory Question: Do you work in a center-based or Family Child Care

Q2: Introductory Question: What role do you play in your center? Infant, Toddler or Pre-K

Q3: Introductory Question: How long have you been in this position?

Key Interview Questions

This portion of the interview consists of questions directly related to your experience with professional development.

Q3. Content: How would you define professional development?

Probes: When was the last time you participated in professional development? Either face to face or virtual

Probes: How many sessions did you attend in 2021?

Probes: Were the sessions in person or virtual?

Q4. Content: Based on your definition of professional development, in your opinion, what value does professional development play in the work you do with young children? What is the purpose of professional development?

Probes: Were your professional development activities workshops, webinars, modules, college classes, and one-on-one coaching?

Q5. Content: Do you believe the professional development you participated in was helpful for you and your work? To what extent do you feel that professional development met your learning needs?

Probes: If so, why? If not, why? What could have made it more helpful for you?

Probes: Did you gain any new skills? What new skills did you gain? How have you been able to practice or implement the new skills in your work?

Q6. Content: In your opinion, what kind of support or encouragement did you receive from your owner/director to attend professional development activities, whether in person or virtually.

Probes: Were you able to choose what you wanted to do? Were professional development activities selected for you it selected for you?

Probes**:** In your opinion, do you believe that professional development is necessary to do your job?

Concluding the Interview

Q7. Concluding Question: To obtain your final thoughts, is there anything else you would like to tell me or share with me regarding today's topic?

_____

_____

Thank You and Follow-Up Reminder Researcher Script

Thank you for your time and your insights on professional development. I will follow up with you in a few days to (1) ask you to complete a reflective questionnaire, (2) complete a member-checking exercise to verify my notes, or (3) ask you a few questions for clarification.

Adapted from (Billups 2022a)