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Middle Level Teachers' Perceptions of Quality Professional Development

Justin Turner
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Walden University

College of Education

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Justin Turner

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2020

Abstract

Middle Level Teachers' Perceptions of Quality Professional Development

by

Justin Turner

MS, Walden University, 2010

BS, Capital University, 2006

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Education

Walden University

February 2020

Abstract

Professional development is a learning process that continues throughout the career of an educator providing opportunities for teachers to fine tune their teaching and improve classroom practices. The middle level teachers at Middle School A believe they are lacking in effective professional development. The purpose of the project study was to determine what the perceptions of middle level teachers are regarding effective professional development. The ability for teachers to transfer their learning into the classroom is vital to the success of the students at this Central Ohio middle school. Mezirow's transformative learning theory of adult learning, which states that adults use previous experiences to reconstruct new learning experiences by comparing to what they already know allowing for a quicker assimilation of new material, guided the study. The research question focused on teachers' perceptions of what they perceive effective professional development to be. A general qualitative study design was used to collect data from 8 teachers using interviews at the local middle school. Data were analyzed and coded based on common themes. Member checking and triangulation of the data were used to ensure accuracy and credibility. The findings of the study showed that teachers at the study site believe effective professional development is focused around teacher choice, differentiation, and relevance and applicability to the classroom. The findings of this study also show that a policy paper is needed to enlighten district stakeholders to the problem with the current provided professional development program. This project may influence social change by spurring administrators to provide professional development experiences that offer teachers choice to the teachers and is differentiated to meet the teachers' needs.

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Dedication

This doctoral journey is dedicated to my family. My daughter, Addison, who has inspired me to be a better person and educator since the day she was born. Addison, I apologize to you for the time this process stole from you; however, I want you to always remember that you can really do anything you put your mind to. Work hard, try harder, and never ever quit. My wife, Mollie, who has supported me throughout this process and has always wished for the best for me. I would like to say thank you to both my parents for their parenting, support, and their significance in my life. To my father, I would like to say thank you for helping me to realize that anything is possible and for making time to show me what a good father is and to re-enforce the idea that I could do anything if I really wanted it bad enough. Dad thank you for always being a calming voice in my moments of panic and frustration. To my sister, Jenna, who is never more than a phone a call away to encourage me through some of the tough times. And to my mother-in-law, Judi, who is always willing to help and always there to offer and give support. The support of my family goes unmatched, thank you.

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Section 1: The Problem

Introduction

The purpose of professional development is to provide opportunities for educators to expand their knowledge base and improve teaching strategies. Avidov-Ungar (2016) defined professional development as “the constant development of knowledge and professional skills throughout ones’ career in education” (p. 654). Professional development is intended to facilitate teachers as their individual teacher identities are formed; it should be a time when learned content translates into useable content for the classroom. Professional development is the connection or bridge between current practice and improvement. It needs to align with what teachers are doing daily and must transfer to the classroom easily if it is to be effective (Collopy, 2015). Teachers require specialized training to teach subjects such as mathematics, science, English, history, art, and music; it follows that professional development needs to connect to each of these subjects as well.

Teachers’ professional identities are shaped by their beliefs and habits within the profession. Meijer, Kuijpers, Boei, Vrieling, and Geijsel (2017) defined professional development as experiences which facilitate changes in “beliefs and behaviors related to personal growth at a professional identity level” (p. 821). For true and meaningful change to occur professional development needs to be sustained over time allowing educators time for honest reflection and continued exposure to new ideas. As Mbowane, Rian de Villers, and Braun (2017) explained, a teacher’s professional identity is forged over time

and it will take sustained professional development time for teachers to consider changing their professional identity.

Kennedy (2016) stated that what teachers need to learn during professional development experiences is directly connected to what teachers do in all aspects of the profession and defining what teachers do is not a simple task. Effective professional development must be purposeful, last long enough to engage adult learners, but not so long as to lose their interest; there must be collective participation and must focus on active learning and content specific knowledge. Additionally, the content being learned must be transferable to the classroom in a relative short period of time. Administrators and district professional development designers need to understand what teachers need and want, and what they consider important and engaging in order to design active and meaningful learning.

Often professional development is planned by administrative personnel who approach professional development training much like teachers approach their classrooms. Williford et al. (2017) suggested that effective professional development is sustainable, intense, designed around active learning, is classroom focused, and contains a pedagogical component to address all aspects of the profession. Professional development containing a pedagogical component helps educators to design classroom procedures that develop social competencies and people skills within students of all grade levels (Tynjala, Virtanen, Klemola, Kostiainen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2016). Professional development containing pedagogy provides the much-needed opportunity for educators to gain insight into the world the students live and the frames of reference through which

they view the world; this translates to classroom experiences that are more meaningful (Hynds et al., 2016).

For teachers to accept professional development, there must be a connection between prior and current professional development experiences. Kennedy (2016) showed that change is affected when professional development is grounded in content specific applications and teaching strategies which can be applied to the classroom within a short time period of the experience. Through active participation of professional development teachers reflect on and evaluate their individual practices through collaboration, planning, and active learning with an end goal of facilitating change within themselves and their teaching practices.

High quality professional development is required if the desire is to ensure effective teachers in academic fields (Holm & Kajander, 2015). Professional development that is most likely to affect classroom teaching is sustained over time, is focused on specific instructional strategies or content areas, involves teachers collectively rather than individually, is coherent, and uses active learning (Avidov-Ungar, 2016; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Suk Yoon, 2001; Hynds et. al., 2016). Professional development that connects to the individual subjects of study while allowing for collaboration between teachers demonstrate higher levels of effectiveness for transference into the classroom (Holm & Kajander, 2015). The teachers at Middle School A have expressed in department meetings and grade level meetings that the district provided professional development does not align with the common core standards and does not provide skills that transfer to the classroom.

The Local Problem

Middle School A is one of five middle schools in a Central Ohio school district; professional development is held once a quarter in the building's cafeteria and is focused on the theme of the year, which is selected by central office personnel. In past years the themes have included transparency, assessment, collaboration; what does good work look like; and how to use assessment data. The current theme is social-emotional well-being of our students. The teachers have explained during grade level meetings that they do not feel that useful information is being shared and they are not returning to their classrooms with a sense of invigoration and excitement to implement new ideas. Teachers want choice regarding where to place their time when it comes to professional development. These decisions often depend on content area or class size or a change in the curriculum; however, the district offers a one-size fits all program that does not meet the needs of the teachers (personal communication from English department chair/literacy support personnel, March 2017). A survey conducted by the building leadership team (BLT) corroborated the above sentiments.

The principal of Middle school A and the English department chair have given permission and provided the BLT survey data that apply to professional development. BLT conducted a survey at the conclusion of the 2017-2018 school year, the survey was focused on overall building improvement; however, several questions were directed at professional development. The first question asked, "What type of professional development do we need to start offering?" The answers to this question demonstrate staff dissatisfaction in district provided professional development; as the request for

choice and more content focused professional development were the overwhelming answers. The second question addressing professional development asked, “What do we need to stop doing during professional development days?” Most of the answers to this question addressed the need for district personnel to stop designing professional development days in a one size fits all format. The results of this survey support the identification of the problem at Middle School A, that teachers are not receiving effective professional development from the district.

Middle School A has experienced a decline on the Ohio State Test (OST) performance index over the past few years. The State of Ohio defines the performance index as a measurement of the test results of every student, including those who score proficient and higher and those who score below proficient (*Ohio Department of Education*, 2018). In 2014 Middle School A scored a 109.6, and in the 2 years prior the school earned scores of 107.5 and 108, consecutively. According to the state report card for Middle School A in the 2014 school year the performance indicator had not climbed beyond 107.5 and has remained below 104 for the past 3 years (*Ohio Department of Education*, 2017). In 2015, the State of Ohio changed the OST to an application-based test requiring a greater amount of critical thinking and problem-solving skills from the students. The test years following the change in format have demonstrated through lower performance scores that students need to increase their ability to think independently and solve problems. Professional development provides an opportunity for teachers to reflect on current practices and make needed changes to the classroom approach (Kennedy, 2014).

Coburn, Hill, and Spillane (2016) explained that Common Core State Standards (CCSS) were designed to hold both teachers and schools accountable with the end goal of raising students' achievement through a change in teaching practice and a better understanding of how students learn. Coburn et al. continued with the concept of professional development sessions that drive teaching instruction to retrain or reinforce teachers' planning and classroom strategies through a better understanding of how students learn in the classroom and through self-reflection aimed at improvement. They explained that low test scores or decreasing test scores are a result of weak accountability placed on the teachers by administrators and poor alignment of classroom practices and CCSS (Coburn et al., 2016). Polikoff and Porter (2014) found similar results stating that there is a definite benefit to aligning classroom practices to the CCSS; they explained that when this goal is accomplished students perform better on OSTs than when this goal is not accomplished. They continued to explain that this alignment of classroom practices and CCSS should occur throughout the year in sustained professional development coupled with active learning experiences (Polikoff & Porter, 2014). When state standards change and expectations increase, professional development should focus on assisting educators to understand the changes and the implications these changes have on their teaching.

The teachers at Middle School A have expressed concern regarding the district-provided professional development. The teachers have expressed on several occasions that the provided professional development does not meet their needs. This sentiment has been shared through surveys and department/grade level meetings. The problem, as

explained by the teachers, is that as state standards and curriculum change the district is not aligning the professional development sessions to align with the needs of the teachers.

Rationale

21st century and problem-solving skills address creativity, innovation and critical thinking within students; teachers need to learn how to adjust teaching strategies to assure these skills are being taught in the classroom. This needed adjustment is evident when looking at the state report card and seeing a decrease in OST test scores over the past several years. Background and experience are the foundation of an educator's teaching style. To change the thought process and learned patterns of a professional, effective professional development is needed (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, Gardner, & Espinoza, 2017). Change in teaching style is grounded in a change in belief in what is best for students; this type of change takes time, which is provided when professional development is consistent and focused. Traditional *sit and get* professional development does not provide the needed or wanted attitude and behavior changes among teachers; long term consistent professional development yields more effective results (Nishimura, 2014). The alignment between subject matter, engagement, and active learning must be prevalent throughout the entire professional development experience to facilitate learning (Korthagen, 2017).

Stakeholders, administration, and professional development designers need to understand what teachers consider to be effective and engaging learning so that the active learning experiences are designed in a manner which facilitates change and growth for the content teachers. Change is enabled through active learning experiences and

collaboration allowing teachers the opportunity to formulate new ideas and approaches to their classroom practices. Professional development at Middle School A is not effectively providing 21st century teaching skills. This is evident as the Ohio State school report card reflects a building grade of an “F” for yearly progress. Yearly growth is the benchmark for student growth over the course of the year in comparison to where the student was the previous year. Conversations during grade level meetings have brought to light the fact that district provided professional development

sessions are not focused on key skills such as critical thinking and problem solving (personal communication gifted expert math/science, September 2017) which is reflected on the OST.

The alignment of professional development sessions to the changing needs of the teachers will expose teachers to new ideas, teaching strategies, and planning methods. By focusing professional development on the needs of the teachers, at all levels, the time spent in these sessions becomes beneficial to the students, teachers, and district stakeholders. The students benefit as the teachers change their approaches and strategies to infuse the learning of 21st century skills into the classroom. Students benefit by gaining the problem solving and critical thinking skills which they currently lack. Teachers benefit as they become more comfortable with CCSS and plan more challenging, higher order thinking, and lessons that engage students. The district stakeholders will benefit as OST scores improve, students are more prepared for future educational endeavors, and teachers continue to develop challenging curricula.

An understanding of teacher perceptions of professional development may be used to improve current professional development practices, increasing teacher learning as well as student learning (DuFour, 2015). Gamrat, Toomey Zimmerman, Dudek, and Peck (2014) identified the lack of directed focus in professional development that seemed to do little to increase teacher and student learning. Hökkä and Eteläpelto (2014) observed a lack of resources, poor professional identity, and lack of teacher leaders as obstacles for effective and meaningful professional development. My study could serve to generate an understanding of the teachers' perceptions of professional development. The results may allow the teachers' needs to be addressed through professional learning experiences by providing rich data on how to implement professional development that is meaningful to the teachers.

Definition of Terms

Collaboration: A philosophy of communication where individuals interact with others cooperatively to achieve a goal in a way that respects abilities and contributions of all involved (Nokes-Malach, Richey, & Gadgil, 2015; Pinho-Lopes & Macedo, 2016).

Effective professional development: Effective professional development equips teachers with knowledge and strategies to meet the learning needs of students. (Gulamhussein, 2013; Mezill, 2010).

Middle school: A school that serves preadolescent and young adolescent students between Grades 5 and 9, with most in the Grade 6-8 range. Middle schools in the upper grade range (7-9) are sometimes referred to as junior high schools. (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

Pedagogy: The instruction of youth to connect learned and background knowledge, experiences, discussion, and critical thinking to constructive action (Dewey, 1997; Freire, 2000).

Professional development: The comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers' and principals' effectiveness in raising student achievement (Learning Forward, 2015)

Significance of the Study

This study addresses an under researched area of middle level professional development which is the perceptions of middle level teachers. The results of this study may shed light on the needs of middle level classroom teachers and provide direction for professional development experiences. Results may be used to address discrepancies between district provided concepts of professional development and actual practices used in the classroom (Gemedá, Fiorucci, & Catarci, 2014). Results may be used to develop strategies for increasing the effectiveness of professional development based on teacher needs and professional identities.

Professional development should be designed to immerse teachers in their content area, design quality lessons plans that engage their students, and develop their communication skills to communicate goals, expectations, and knowledge effectively. The ability to develop quality professional development lies in the understanding of what teachers need from professional development. The findings from this study will inform the stakeholders, consisting of district and building administrators, community members, student parents, and board of education members, of what teachers in the building

perceive as effective professional development and what the teachers need from district-offered professional development. This information will afford the board members and district administrators the opportunity to make much needed changes in the presentation and information included in the district provided professional development. The benefit of the study for the teachers in the district is that the professional development experience will become more grade level appropriate. It will be focused on content and provide true learning experiences for the teachers, so they can translate their learning to the classroom.

Effective professional development translates to the classroom in several ways. Teachers learn to approach curricula using new methods and strategies designed to engage and challenge students. The students benefit from a more rigorous learning environment with increased expectations and greater challenges. Zaragoza (2017) explained that the classroom is a limited environment and that in order to engage and challenge students lesson plans and activities must be authentic and connected to the world the students live in. Learning to challenge themselves, think critically, problem solve, and to work toward goals is a direct result of a curriculum designed around critical thinking and problem solving. Sandilos, Rimm-Kaufman, and Cohen's (2017) study showed that when students perceive their teachers as more challenging and having higher expectations, the students performed at a higher level "showing greater growth on high and low stakes testing" (p. 1330). The stakeholders benefit through the increase in student OST scores resulting in higher state report card ratings. When the teachers are current on new curriculum, advanced teaching and classroom strategies, and gain a

deeper understanding of assessment data, the end result will be increased OST scores and higher report card ratings.

This study will contribute to the literature by addressing teacher perceptions of professional development. The potential findings of this study reflect that when teachers participate in the planning of professional development and engage in shared leadership decisions regarding teacher professional development and learning, professional development becomes more effective.

Research Questions

There is an extensive amount of research that has been conducted on professional development, its benefits, and approaches. Previous researchers stated that effective professional development requires active learning and needs to be consistent over extended periods of time. There is little research on how middle level teachers perceive professional development, which when understood would serve to facilitate the design of effective professional development. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of middle level teachers regarding effective professional development. This study was guided by the following research questions:

The overarching research question is *What are the middle level teachers' perceptions of effective professional development?*

Subquestions include:

1. What do middle school teachers perceive as effective professional development elements that help them to develop their classroom application of content knowledge?

2. How do middle school teachers experiences with professional development influence their practice?
3. What improvements to professional development do teachers suggest will enhance their ability to apply content knowledge to their classrooms?

Review of the Literature

I explored teacher perceptions of professional development with the goal of drawing connections between teacher perceptions and research-based effective professional development. Previous research has addressed professional development and adult learning; however, there is not a large body of research based in teacher perceptions of professional development. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore middle school teachers' perceptions of professional development at one Central Ohio middle school.

This literature review is organized in six sections: (a) conceptual framework, (b) purpose of professional development, (c) elements of effective professional development, (d) impact of professional development on teacher learning, (e) changes in teacher behaviors resulting from professional development, (f) teacher perceptions of professional development. I examined the literature as it relates to middle school teachers' perceptions of professional development and how developing a better understanding of what the teachers need will help in the design of more effective professional development experiences. The following key words were used for searching: *professional development, professional development for teachers, adult learners, teacher perceptions of professional development, instructional strategies, professional learning*

communities, self-efficacy, androgyny, adult learning for middle school teachers, middle school professional development, effective professional development, in-service training, implications of professional development, poor professional development, types of professional development, and professional development strategies. This literature review includes searches from the following databases: SAGE premier, ProQuest Central, Education Research Complete, and Eric. I examined peer-reviewed articles published between 2013 – 2018. In order to attain saturation, research was conducted until common themes became repetitive.

Conceptual Framework

The transformative learning theory developed by Mezirow in 1978 functioned as the framework for this study. The transformative learning theory is often defined as “the transformation of the learners’ meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind” (Illeris, 2014, p. 148). Transformative learning is a process of change that involves transforming frames of reference with the end goal of transforming the actions and behaviors of an individual based on a new perspective. If the purpose of professional development is to transform the perceptions of teachers with the intent of becoming better educators, then it is important to understand that the process of professional development began when teachers were students themselves (Korkko, Kyro-Ammala, & Turunen, 2016). As students learning to teach, they begin to form a professional identity based on what the individual believes is important regarding how to educate adolescents. Hsieh (2015) conducted a comparative case study on new teachers and the formation of professional identities and found that new teachers align their professional identities with

a teaching style based on their individual success as students. These initial beliefs are difficult to change. Izadinia's (2015) qualitative case study corroborates Hsieh's findings adding that in-classroom student teaching experiences solidify the initial identity a new teacher enters the classroom with. Transformative learning seeks to change these initial beliefs and habits as the teacher continues to develop professionally (Korkko et. al, 2016). The process of transformative learning is grounded in reflection: as new insights are gained; old ideas or perspectives are adjusted with the intent of improving the art of classroom teaching.

Professional development is attended by educators with the intent to improve and hone their craft. Meijer et al. (2017) conducted a qualitative case study on the connection between transformative learning and professional development; the results showed that when professional development is grounded in transformative learning, educators change their beliefs and behaviors. Professional development grounded in transformative learning provides opportunity for reflection on personal practice, learning from peers, and pedagogical learning focused on specific content areas (Meijer et al., 2017). Transformative learning seeks to invoke change for the better. Professional development designed through this lens is based around the concept that the classroom is an ecosystem within the ecosystem of the school building within the ecosystem of the community. Professional development that addresses current concerns and problems and is designed with the idea of community, school, and classroom is more relevant to the parents, students, and teachers. This type of professional development will provide teachers with the skills and tools to meet the needs of their students (Baran & Correia, 2014).

Transformative professional development shapes the professional identity of educators (Wald, 2015). Through the process of reflection educators dissect their professional practice and pedagogy and often adjust their thinking and practice.

Professional development is, by nature, an ongoing and everchanging process of improvement. Christie, Carey, Robertson, and Grainger (2015) explained that when adult students are given the time, space, and opportunity to confront, challenge, and change their assumptions, they stand to become lifelong learners and continue to seek improvement and understanding. The foundation of Mezirow's transformative learning theory resides in critical reflection to promote change, improve, and grow as both a professional and an individual. Carrington, Mercer, Iyer, and Selva (2014) clarified that if the expectation is for critical thinking, problem solving and reflection, then the professional development needs to model what is expected of the teachers in the classroom; transformative learning provides active learning experiences that present opportunity for critical reflection. Transformational change is a process, not a single event, and professional development needs to be approached in such a manner that allows teachers the opportunity to reflect and adjust their thought processes and perspectives (Livingston & Hutchinson, 2017). As teachers advance in their individual careers, they will need more tailored learning experiences. Professional development needs to be able to be presented to a large group while meeting the needs of everyone.

Purpose of Professional Development

Professional development in the educational field serves many purposes. It is not limited to improving student learning, helping to retain teachers, facilitating changes in

classroom procedures, and supporting new teachers (Mizell, 2010). Professional development is a learning process that stretches throughout the career of an educator providing opportunities and experiences that allow teachers to fine tune their teaching to better meet the needs of the student (Bayar, 2014). Professional development is the foundation that forms an individual's professional identity, it is about much more than teaching. Professional development generates change, helps teachers become better teachers, improves student learning and is part of the lifelong learning process.

Pedagogy is the art of teaching the skills needed to educate students. Effective professional development “helps teachers master content, hone teaching skills, evaluate their own and their students’ performance, and address changes needed in teaching and learning in their schools” (Patton, Parker, & Tanehill, 2015, p. 33). Patton et al. (2015) continued to explain that effective professional development engages teachers in the concrete tasks of teaching and that these tasks provide meaningful learning that is related to their daily work as teachers. For professional development to be effective it must be designed with an understanding of what is already occurring in the classroom, and educational sessions must be designed in such a way that will add to the background knowledge of the teacher (Allen & Penuel, 2015). When this occurs, teachers improve.

Student growth is the derivative of effective professional development. Teachers attend professional development sessions with the hopes of learning new strategies to help improve student learning. Effective professional development promotes an increase in student growth, academic accountability, collaborative learning, understanding, and application (Gleason & Gerzon, 2014; Pehmer, Groschner, & Seidel, 2015). It is the

expectation of those involved in education (teachers, administrators, and parents) that good teaching prepares students for college and that teachers have the resources to prepare students properly.

Effective professional development helps school districts to retain quality teachers over time. Turnover and attrition are normal occurrences in any school building; however, losing teachers generates a loss of instructional, financial, and organizational costs that tend to destabilize learning communities and directly affect student growth and learning (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Teacher shortages are the result of new teachers leaving the field and experienced teachers retiring early (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Zijlstra, & Volman, 2015). Gaikhorst et.al. (2015) presented that educators who were regularly provided professional development remained in the field longer than teachers who were not provided yearly or quarterly professional development. Professional development has been shown to improve not only student growth and learning outcomes, but also teacher retention; however, the professional development experience must be sustained, and content focused (Allen, 2013; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Allen (2013) clarified that keeping new teachers in the profession is not the same as helping them develop into good teachers and that developing young teachers into good teachers parlays into the teachers remaining in the classroom longer. Effective professional development translates into better teachers in the classrooms and an increase in student learning.

Elements of Effective Professional Development

The elements that make professional development effective are a teacher focused approach, active learning, a focus on teacher content knowledge and their ability to

present the content, pedagogy, and time for reflection. Effective professional development addresses the issues teachers are dealing with in their classrooms at the time of the learning experience. Professional development should reflect a connection between what the teachers need and what the administrators want the teachers to take away from the experience. Principals want to see their teachers using skills learned in professional development; therefore, administrators must acknowledge that adult learners desire personalized professional learning and provide them with choices (Colwell et al., 2014; Farooq, Zeshan, Hafeez, & Ul Hassan, 2015; Janssen, Kreijns, Bastiaens, Stijnen, & Vermeulen, 2013). Bayar (2014) explained that effective professional development is comprised of activities that are based on the needs of the teachers at the time of the professional development and the length of time the professional development is provided. When professional learning is based around the needs of teachers it prioritizes the development of that teacher. Teacher-focused learning occurs when teachers are provided time to collaborate and plan with colleagues. Teacher-focused experiences create an active agent of educational change within the school building and school district (Louws, van Veen, Meirink, & van Driel, 2017). When professional development is teacher focused, classroom focused, collaborative and sustained it becomes effective and teachers are able to parlay the experiences learned into their classrooms.

When professional development is not teacher focused the learning experience is usually designed in line with current school demands and popular trends, as opposed to a sustained and well-thought-out learning plan for the teachers (Louws et al., 2017). Teacher-focused learning consists of both formal and informal learning opportunities

providing teachers the opportunity to select the experiences that relate to them as professionals and will enhance their professional competencies (Cheng, 2017). Providing teacher-focused professional development creates an environment that teachers thrive in. Professional development allows teachers the opportunity to change for the better through well-thought-out and well-planned learning experiences which address the needs of the teachers in a timely manner. Kennedy (2016) explained that two of the most important components of effective professional development are content focused and teacher focused learning experiences. Teachers gain the most from professional development when there is choice provided as to what to learn about and when the learning is focused on what the teacher needs at the time.

Louws et al. (2017) shed light on the problem of professional development explaining that “teacher learning experiences are not geared toward the teachers’ years of teaching experience and they are often not designed to build on a teacher’s previous experiences” (pg. 488). Teacher change and improvement start with the teacher, it only makes sense then that professional development begins with the teacher’s needs (Loughran, 2014). Professional development that is teacher focused begins with choice; providing choice allows teachers to select learning experiences appropriate for their individual experience. Bayar 2014 revealed that teachers feel that the activities presented during professional development sessions need to meet the needs that exist in the classrooms at the time of the professional development. These findings echo those presented by Goodall, Day, Lindsay, Muijs, and Harris (2005) who found that professional development activities that meet the individual needs of the teachers are

most effective. Professional development, like classroom activities, need to be relevant to the learner to create an interest and a desire to learn or change.

Lin (2015) supported the idea that relevancy is a vital component to teacher engagement. Professional development should be planned to address the needs of the teachers in the environment which they work, and it should be classroom related to allow for efficient implementation (Lin, 2015). Teacher focused learning is the idea that professional development is planned in line with the needs of the school district as well as the needs of the teachers with the goal of providing learning opportunities that the teachers are interested in generating a sense of ownership over the learning that ensues.

Effective professional development revolves around active learning for the educators. The rapidly changing needs of the students occurs so quickly and so often the teachers need to be placed in a learning experience that provides them the opportunity to learn by doing. This process of active learning will increase classroom proficiencies and teacher effectiveness (Niemi & Nevgi, 2014). Teachers of all levels of experience need to be lifelong learners to remain current and relevant in the classroom. Experienced teachers have different needs than early career teachers; however, the process of active learning provides effective learning for all levels as opposed to “observations of expert teachers with experienced classes” (Girvan, Conneely & Tangrey, 2016, p. 130). The exposure to active learning allows younger teachers to learn how to reflect and improve teaching practices and experienced teachers the opportunity to reflect on years of practice and make subtle, yet highly effective changes to their practice (Girvan et. al., 2016). Change is only effective when teachers change their classroom approach to match what is best for

students. Unfortunately, many teachers take away new ideas and understandings [from professional development] of what is considered best practices; however, changing what a teacher knows or believes is not merely enough, teachers need to change their practices as well (Girvan et. al., 2016). Active learning provides opportunity for teachers to participate in the learning process allowing them to see how students would benefit in the classroom.

Teacher content knowledge and understanding coupled with the teacher's ability to present the information to the students is vital to student performance. Bigsby and Firestone (2017) found that effective professional development that is focused on the content the teachers teach and does so in a manner that facilitates the teachers making connections to how they teach in the classroom equates to improved teaching practices. Professional development with a content focus leads to an increased understanding of content and it can potentially lead to changes in teacher practice (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015). It then stands to reason that professional development which lacks a connection to content has been found to be ineffective in changing teacher practices (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015). Professional development needs to be designed to amplify or deepen the existing knowledge base teachers have prior to attending the development session, forcing teachers to work backward prior to gaining or building on existing knowledge has proven counterproductive (Borko, 2004). Effective professional development should be designed around existing knowledge with the intent to help teachers develop pedagogical and content knowledge further, while providing insight on how to apply the learned material to their daily practices (Wilkinson et al., 2017). Effective professional

development is needs based, sustained, tied to curriculum, connected to pedagogy, and includes strategies which can be used in the classrooms almost immediately.

Engaging teacher learners through specific content that is relevant to the classroom is an effective method to engage adult learners. If teachers are to make connections between professional development training and pedagogy the length of the professional development needs to be sustained and on-going. Development does not occur in isolation, time needs to be provided for teachers to process information, reflect on personal practice, and decide how and when to try new strategies or methods in their classrooms. A study conducted by Dixon, Yssel, McConnell, & Hardin (2014) revealed that multiple professional development sessions on the same material provide opportunities for teachers to learn at their own pace and become comfortable with new strategies and theories. Time or sustainability of the learning experience and focus on the teacher or needs of the teacher are the keys to professional development that equates to change in teaching practice.

Impact of Professional Development on Teacher Learning

Effective professional development provides opportunity to reflect and refine the practices a teacher is employing in his or her classroom, with the intent of improving (Allen & Penuel, 2015). Continuous teacher growth aids in informing practices and changing classroom behaviors. As educators engage in practical professional development, pedagogical practices change, teacher behaviors change within the classroom and outside the classroom creating life-long learners (Beaty-O'Ferrall & Johnson, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2014; Gameda et al., 2014; Haug & Sands, 2013).

Koellner and Jacobs (2015) explained that content focused professional development provides teachers the chance to grow their knowledge base for the subject they teach providing opportunity for pedagogical growth as confidence increases. The fundamental assumption is that by holding schools and teachers accountable, student performance will increase. By building school and district capacity the goal is to increase teacher motivation to attend professional development. Professional development provides opportunity for teachers to discuss methods of classroom management, lesson planning, student engagement and many other topics with an open mind and the objective of improving one's own practice (Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen & Pianta, 2014). Effective professional development promotes change in teacher practices while addressing a shared vision and promoting teacher leadership (Evans, 2014; Sturmer, Konings, & Seidel, 2013). Increasing teacher leadership often results in an increase in collaboration and long-term change in teacher professional and personal practices.

Reflection is the bases of change, professional development needs to provide active reflection in an environment that is not threatening, which allows conversations to occur between teachers that shed light on inadequacies and lead to answers, explanations, debates, and eventually a change in belief in practice (Korkko et al., 2016). Jacob, Hill, and Corey (2017) found that sustained professional development impacts teachers depth of content knowledge through reflective practices and the ability to transfer the content to the classroom, resulting in a greater student success rate. An educator's identity is refined through the reflective practices of professional development (Beauchamp, 2014; Korkko et al., 2016). As teachers develop and grow within the profession they develop an identity

that defines them as educators, reflection and professional development both play a large part in the development of this professional identity.

Changes in Teacher Behavior Resulting from Professional Development

The purpose of professional development is to build school and district capacity, motivation, and accountability (Smylie, 2014). The fundamental assumption is that by holding schools and teachers accountable, student performance will increase. By building school and district capacity the goal is to increase teacher motivation to attend professional development. Teacher motivation is often increased when teachers are part of a learning community. “Learning communities should meet regularly to engage in inquiry, reflection, and evaluation” (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012, p. 7). Learning communities provide a collaborative and continuous learning environment with the intention of improvement (Gemedá et al., 2013) and opportunities for teachers to “come together to engage in open dialogue...around common interests and projects” (Qablan, Mansour, Alshamrani, Aldahmash, & Sabbah, 2015, p. 627). Lieberman and Miller (2016) believe learning communities are more than just a place for teachers to collaborate, they believe learning communities have the potential to: reform schools, improve and professionalize teaching, and advance learning for all students. Learning communities provide a safe forum for educators to begin the process of changing behavior.

Effective professional development promotes the changes of teacher behavior and promotes change in pedagogical practices (Learning Forward, 2015; Loughran, 2014; Mizell, 2010). Effective and targeted professional development facilitates the development of shared goals, a shared vision, and an increase in teacher leadership

(Evans, 2014). Increasing teacher leadership provides schools with opportunities for an increase in collaboration and provides teachers the opportunity to improve their personal and professional practices. An acquired shared vision encourages teachers to expand their roles to become leaders outside of the classroom and increasing the knowledge and skills of other adults (Pinho & Andrade, 2015). When effective professional development is provided, a shared vision exists, and teacher leaders develop; purposeful, practical and engaging professional development exists within every experience of instruction (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2013; Evans, 2014). Effective professional development reflects a purposeful use of the teachers time, increasing engagement and the desire to improve as a teacher.

Teacher Perceptions of Professional Development

Teacher perspectives regarding professional development are essential for planning effective, engaging, and productive learning experiences. Through the incorporation of teacher perspectives collaboration is increased, and the needs of the teachers are listened to and addressed, a culture of learning is encouraged, and the promotion of teacher leadership is fortified.

Teachers want to know that their concerns and issues matter and are heard by administrators. Becoming knowledgeable of teacher perceptions of professional development is important in ensuring that adult learning is meaningful and relevant to the daily lives of both teachers and students (Colwell, MacIsaac, Tichenor, Heins, & Piechura, 2014; Qablan et al., 2015). Few studies exist that are focused on the value of teacher perceptions regarding professional development. Christensen and Turner (2014)

conducted a quantitative study at a professional development retreat focused on transformative learning. The quantitative results from their study were compared to qualitative results from previous studies resulting in the explanation that there are essentially three categories of teachers regarding professional development; the enthusiastic teacher, the concerned teacher, and the uninterested teacher. Christensen and Turner continued to explain that enthusiastic teachers are interested in implementing new policies and strategies regardless of the time and effort it will take, concerned teachers are interested in change and improvement; however, they harbor reservations about the effort it will take, and the uninterested teacher is not invested in implementing any changes. For change to occur the investment and willingness of the teachers needs to be understood and accounted for during the planning of professional development sessions (Colwell et al., 2014). Effective professional development can only be planned when the needs of the teachers are understood and addressed.

Educators want to feel as if they have a choice in their professional learning experiences. Motivated learners experience a greater level of success; if principals want to see professional development experiences translate into the teachers' classrooms they need to provide the teachers with the opportunity to select professional development experiences. If principals want to see their teachers using skills learned in professional development; then administrators must acknowledge that adult learners desire personalized professional learning and provide them with choices (Colwell et al., 2014; Janssen, Kreijns, Bastiaens, Stijnen, & Vermeulen, 2013). When choice is provided to teachers they take ownership over their learning, resulting in a greater motivation to

attend professional development and a more successful transfer of skills into their classrooms.

Effective professional development includes choice and teacher motivation to attend; when this occurs, the result is change for the better. Effective professional development is focused on the teacher and is prepared based on the needs of the teachers at the time of learning. Additionally, teachers are more motivated to attend professional learning experiences when they are provided choice and have the opportunity to participate in the planning. Teacher perceptions of professional development can enhance or limit the learning experience depending on whether these perceptions are positive or negative.

Implications

The purpose of this general qualitative study was to examine the perceptions of middle level teachers in regard to effective professional development. I used interviews to ascertain teachers' perceptions of district offered professional development. Effective professional development is designed in a manner that allows educators to reflect, collaborate, and grow as professionals while providing opportunity to add knowledge and strategies that can be utilized in the classroom (Dixon et al., 2014, Irby, Lynch, Boswell, & Kappler-Hewitt, 2017; and Stewart, 2014). This study revealed a gap between what middle level teachers perceive effective professional development to be and what the provided professional development from the district is. The results of this study aim to define effective professional development from the perspective of the teachers. This information would be presented to the district administrators in the form of a Policy

Paper with the intent to inform them on what is needed by the middle level teachers so that future professional development sessions are more aligned with learning that is considered effective.

Summary

Section 1 examined the local problem at Middle School A pertaining to teachers' perceptions of effective professional development compared to the district offered professional development. The section included the rationale for the study, a definition of terms used, the study's significance, and the research questions that will guide the study. Included here I also presented a detailed look at the conceptual framework that guided this study along with a literature review of research articles that helped identify the key issues associated with the topic. Section two of this proposal includes information about the processes I employed to collect and analyze the data and report the findings.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

Professional development is required by the State of Ohio and most Ohio school districts. The purpose of professional development is to ensure that Ohio teachers are current on teaching strategies and are given the chance to collaborate with colleagues. Bayar (2014) and Pinho and Andrade (2015) have determined through research what district leadership defines as effective professional development; however, teacher voices are not being heard. I conducted this study to gain insight into the perceptions of middle level teachers regarding effective professional development. The purpose of this general qualitative study was to describe the perceptions of middle school teachers regarding their professional development experiences in a suburban school district located in Central Ohio.

A general qualitative study was selected over ethnographic, phenomenological, narrative, or action research for several reasons. Lodico, Spaulding, and Voegtle (2010) explained that ethnographic research tends “to investigate people in their native settings, culture, and how their interactions in a cultural group are influenced by society (p, 39). Ethnographic research does not apply in this situation because there is not a native setting or culture that applies to this group. Phenomenological research was not selected because the aim of this type of research is to gain a greater understanding of a phenomenon, in this case professional development, through the immersed experience of the researcher (see Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015). A phenomenological approach would have been more prone to bias being that I am a teacher and the researcher and have opinions on

professional development. Lodico et. al explained that narrative research is focused on informing through descriptive storytelling, professional development experiences do not fit well into descriptive storytelling; therefore, case study research was selected over narrative research. Action research is focused on improving an experience through active practice (Sagor, 2000); this type of research takes an extended amount of time and does not fit into the time frame of this study.

A general qualitative study was the research design for this study. Creswell (2009) explained that general qualitative studies are used when the findings are generalized to the specific individuals and sites under study. In this study one middle school within a central Ohio school district was examined to identify what teachers perceive as effective professional development. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) explained that one purpose of qualitative research is to objectively observe and study the subjective states and beliefs of others.

This general qualitative study focused on the perceptions of middle level teachers regarding their experiences with district provided professional development. Creswell (2012) explained that a case study approach is used to focus on a program or event. Since this study was focused on the needs and perceptions of middle level teachers and the professional learning program of one central Ohio school district case study research was a good fit. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explained that qualitative research is “the search for meaning and understanding with the researcher as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (p. 37). As the researcher for this study I conducted interviews on the professional development process of the school district.

Participants

Participants were selected using homogeneous purposeful sampling.

Homogeneous purposeful sampling is defined as “a selected sample focused on a particular subgroup, to reduce variation, and facilitate interviewing” (Palinkas et al., 2015, p. 535). Purposeful sampling in qualitative research allows the researcher to select “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 156). Purposeful sampling allowed me to select the teachers that would be able to provide the most relevant data about how middle level teachers perceive professional development. “A typical purposeful sample would be one that is selected because it reflects the average person, situation, or instance of the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 97). Purposeful sampling was a better fit for this study than random sampling because this is a general qualitative study, not a quantitative study. Random sampling is more applicable when the researcher is involved in quantitative data collection and looking to generalize the findings (Palinkas et al., 2015). The use of homogeneous purposeful sampling, common to qualitative case studies, allowed for the collection of rich data focused on the central phenomena of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). The qualitative nature of this study provided the opportunity for the collection of detail rich data through the interview process.

Criteria for Selecting Participants

The criteria for participant inclusion was any middle school teacher, teaching Grades 6-8, all years of experience welcome, teachers with a bachelors, masters or a

doctorate were included. Additionally, the participating teachers needed to have participated in a professional development experience within the past 18 months; the time frame was established to keep the data collected from the participants recent.

To recruit teacher participants for this study a letter of invitation was distributed to all teaching members of Middle School A's staff. Along with the invitation, I included my name and contact information, a willingness to participate form, a summary and purpose of the study, and confidentiality procedures. I anticipated needing eight people to complete the study and reach data saturation, this represents a quarter of the building teaching population, which is 32 total teachers. Qualitative research often uses a smaller sample to allow for in-depth data collection and saturation of the data is reached when additional participants do not add new insights to the data being collected (Creswell, 2012; Lodicio et al., 2010). A larger sample size would make it difficult to collect in-depth information from each participant as well as potentially increasing the margin for error within the study (Kaplan, Chambers, & Glasgow, 2014). A larger sample size was not needed because the results of qualitative case studies are usually not meant to be generalized (Baskarada, 2014). The teachers who were willing to participate denoted willingness by submitting the willingness to participate form to my mailbox or via email. A follow up notice was sent to the teachers willing to participate, this notice did include my contact information, a summary and purpose of the study, and confidentiality procedures.. If more than eight teachers had expressed interest in participating then the first eight participants would have been selected for the study. If less than eight teachers were willing to participate I would have sent a second email requesting participation and

I had planned to host an informational meeting to answer any questions that might have been affecting the decision to participate. If the goal of 8 participants was not met following these additional requests, I would have extended my search to the other middle schools in the district. There are five middle schools in this school district.

Initially 9 teachers had agreed to participate. I accepted the first 8 to respond and explained to the ninth participant that if, for any reason a participant needed to or wanted to withdraw from the study I would ask that they fill the spot. A few weeks into the interview process 1 participant requested to withdraw from the study as they had accepted a new position placing them in an administrative role and felt there may be a conflict of interest. At this time, I thanked them for their initial willingness to participate and contacted the ninth teacher to fill in the vacant participant position. The extra participant was willing to and did accept the final interview spot for the study.

Access to Participants

Written permission was obtained from the district superintendent and building principal. The permission did include the use of building staff mailboxes to disseminate any information and request participation from teaching staff, and district email for communication purposes. I have checked with my local teacher association president to confirm with them that my study would not be in violation of any formal or informal regulations. I sought approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Walden University. Walden University approved the study and provided the following IRB #01-14-19-0083083.

Researcher – Participant Working Relationship

The site for my study was the middle school in which I teach. Middle School A had 32 teaching members at the time of the study (Assistant Principal, Staff Meeting, May 22, 2018). I have been teaching within the district for the past 13 years and I have been a teaching member of Middle School A, where this study occurred, for the past 9 years. At the time of the study I was teaching eighth grade science, there was one other full-time teaching member in my department, we did discuss lessons and plans on a weekly basis; however, I did not have a personal relationship with the other seven science teachers in the building. I did not work directly with the remaining 24 possible participants of this study in a collaborative manner. At the time of the study I did not work in a supervisory position within the district, so there was not a conflict there. I did not have any students who are children of other teachers at Middle School A, nor did I have children at Middle School A. There was one other person at Middle School A who was conducting research; however, their research was focused on curriculum development and there was no conflict with potential participants for either study.

Establishing Expectations and Ethical Protections

Following initial contact and the email with consent form, I offered to meet with each teacher individually prior to the onset of the study in order to clarify information and answer any questions. During the meeting I reviewed the details of the study and reminded teachers that participation in the study was completely voluntary with no compensation offered and that they could remove themselves from the study at any time. I revealed my own researcher bias at this time in the meeting, which was that I believed

effective professional development is based around teacher choice and connections to the classroom. This was the only bias that I was aware of at the time. I provided a written copy of the information discussed at the meeting. If the signed consent form had not yet been received, I asked that they return it within a 24-hour period or I would move on to the next teacher on the list. I did make myself available to all participants through email, telephone and in person throughout the study.

I reiterated to the participating teachers that the results of the study would not be shared with members of the Middle School A, including the principle and assistant principle, or with any members of the school district, including all central office personal and the superintendent. I have kept the identity of all parties involved in the study confidential by not discussing the study in front of others and by not meeting with participants during the school day. I did remind them that participation was voluntary and that if they were not comfortable with the topic of professional development, they could choose not to participate at any time without feelings of resentment.

In order to provide anonymity for all participants I used personal email to communicate instead of district email after initial contact. Each teacher was assigned a letter and a number for the purposes of confidentiality and anonymity. For example, any data collected from or about Teacher Three was labeled T3. A list identifying the individual participants has been stored at my home office. All electronic data collections materials, communications, and written or recorded interviews have been saved on my personal computer and external hard drive, also stored at my home office. Both the computer and external drive remain password protected. I will shred all paper documents

relating to the study once 5 years from the study completion date have passed and I will delete all electronic information related to the study as well.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred through interviews. Interviewing, as explained by Bogdan and Biklen (2007), serves to develop a clear understanding of what the interviewee thinks regarding the topic or focus of the study. The interviews were conducted individually at an off-site location chosen by the interviewee from several options provided. Allowing the participant, the option of selecting the location helped to establish comfort and trust between the participant and researcher. The use of an offsite location and the alphabetical coding of participants will protect the individuals so that district officials and administration cannot determine who participated. Although the interview should feel like a conversation, I included specific questions and worded them in a way to elicit the participants understandings and experiences with the topic (see Rosenthal, 2016). The one-on-one interview sessions were scheduled for 45-minute time blocks and were recorded with the permission of the participant. The interview process needed to be organized to be effective. An interview protocol form (Appendix C) served to focus the interview on the research question and often lists the intended interview questions as well as subquestions and probes (see Creswell, 2012).

I did conduct the interviews in a manner that allowed for focused discussion (see Creswell, 2012). The interview protocol guide included a mix of questions allowing for the interview to be conducted in a conversational manner. The questions were open-ended and singular in focus and worded in a clear manner (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2016;

Rosenthal, 2016). I did collect similar data in each interview; however, the process flowed more like a conversation and less like a question and answer session.

The eight individual interviews were conducted over a 6-week period. I audio recorded the interviews and transcribed them within 3 days of each interview. I used an Echo Smart Pen to help with the recording and note-taking process during the interviews and the Voice Typing option in Google Docs to help with interview transcription. I did not plan for additional formal interviews; however, I did request permission to follow up if clarification is necessary. This clarification would not have been a formal member check but will be clarification for meaning or information to assure my understanding of the data collected.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, I analyzed the data collected from the one-on-one interviews throughout the data collection process. I read the transcriptions of the interviews and listened to the recordings of each interview session. I then reread the overarching research question and subquestions to confirm that the participants response aligned with the research questions. I analyzed the data, using NVivo software, to look for reoccurring themes. According to Creswell (2012), reoccurring themes express an idea that can be used to develop meaning and understanding. I coded the themes that emerged to facilitate the categorization of the data. The patterns that emerged did help to summarize the information.

The data analysis process began with the transcription of the interview recordings and notes which was completed within 3 days of the interview to allow for the capture of

impressions and important ideas noted during the interview process. Developing a coding system is a process; initially, the notes need to be read through and searched for reoccurring themes or main ideas. These main ideas or commonly used phrases become the coding categories (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative data analysis is a complex process. Creswell (2012) suggested six steps for analyzing the data and indicates that the sequence is not set: (a) preparing for data analysis, (b) initial examination and coding of the material, (c) developing themes to give a bigger picture of the data, (d) creating visuals and narratives to represent and report the findings, (e) reflecting on findings and comparing them to literature, (f) validating the accuracy of the findings.

The process of preparing for data analysis began with transcribing the interview recordings and notes. Field notes are commonly used to compliment interview recordings, field notes allow the researcher to comment upon impressions, environmental contexts, behaviors, and nonverbal cues that may not be captured through the audio-recording (Sutton & Austin, 2015). Field notes were used to allow for reflection on the interview, reflection is crucial to making meaning out of the interviews. Through reflection of the interview process and observations during the interview I was able to develop a deeper understanding of the information collected, this did help me to better develop and identify emergent themes. As the interviews were being transcribed I continued to work to establish descriptive categories through coding with the aid of NVivo to guide the transcription review. Additionally, I used an Echo Smart Pen to help with notetaking and voice recording as well as the voice typing option in Google Docs on my personal computer and personal Google Drive to allow for a quicker transcription

process of the interviews. I was able to gain a greater familiarity with the data collected by transcribing the interviews myself, as opposed to using a professional service (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although I used NVivo data analysis software to help organize the data collected and I did use technology to record and transcribe the data, it was my responsibility as the researcher to analyze and interpret the findings.

The initial open coding process began by reading through the interviews multiple times. I then browsed the transcripts initially making notes about first impressions. I then followed up by reading each transcript individually, line by line, looking for common themes or statements. Step two of the open coding process focused on identifying common pieces found within the transcripts. I then generated labels based on common actions, concepts, differences, and opinions from the interviews. These initial codes did focus on ideas that are repeated, concepts or statements that surprised me and things the interviewee directly states as being important. Step three of the data analysis process was focused on deciding which codes are most important and creating categories based on these codes. Thematic analysis is appropriate when conducting qualitative research because it allows for the researcher to interpret data as opposed to merely reporting the facts (Namey, Guest, McKenna & Chen, 2016). This process consisted of reading through all the codes that have been created and then creating new ones by combining two or more existing codes, keeping the codes that are most important. The NVivo software was also used throughout this process to help identify key words, reoccurring themes and concepts. I expected to initially have many themes and worked to limit the number to between five and seven as recommended by Creswell (2012). I expected to

have many themes initially because the interviewees may reference similar ideas in different manners or because I was looking for all commonalities within the transcriptions. Themes I expected to find are those relating to teacher choice and connections to teaching.

At the onset of step four the axial coding process began and was focused on labeling the themes that have been identified. I sought to describe the connections between categories. Axial coding consists of identifying relationships between the open codes (Zamawe, 2015). These categories should consist of the main results of the study. The final step of data analysis was the interpretation of the categories, how they connect to each other and how the categories I found connect to those found in other studies.

I summarized my results and translated the findings into visuals and narratives that can be shared with others. I was sure to summarize my findings including dialogues that share the voices of the participants and their words in a manner that protects their anonymity. I did include any conflicting findings and limitations following reflection on my findings and a comparison to current literature.

Evidence of Quality

Qualitative research requires the researcher to interpret the data, my data collection was reflective, and I did make every attempt to keep personal biases out of the findings; however, additional methods will be necessary to produce credibility (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative and quantitative research are so different by nature that authorities use the terms *credibility and trustworthiness* in the place of *rigor and validity* (Cope, 2014). To assure that my study was credible the transcription of the interview

recordings was checked by me continuously to ensure the transcription process was accurate. Member checking the interview data by providing the opportunity for participants to read, correct or verify the synthesized data did add to credibility of the study (Yilmaz, 2013). I did provide all participants a summary of their interview and ask that they read through it to verify that I have portrayed their thoughts and ideas correctly and accurately. This method did facilitate the finding of any biases or misunderstandings included in my reporting (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability is desirable for any research study. Transferability is provided when a researcher provides evidence that the results can be applied to other contexts, times, situations and populations, this is accomplished when an in-depth description of the setting, sample, and content of the study is reported (Yilmaz, 2013). Transferability was achieved by providing a detailed description of the people, places, and topics associated with my study.

I did triangulate my data collection by collecting various sources from multiple individuals and different times throughout the study (Creswell, 2013). Utilizing semi-structured interviews provided access to data which was collected over a period of several months. Including numerous teachers who represent grades 6-8 and various content areas added to the credibility of the study's findings.

Member Checking

Member checking is a method used by many qualitative studies to improve trustworthiness and credibility and to avoid researcher bias. Member checking refers to the checking of the interview data by the participants from whom the interviews were initially obtained (Hadi & Closs, 2016). Member checking is considered by many to be

controversial and ineffective method used by qualitative case study researchers to increase rigor and trustworthiness of the study findings (Given, 2008). However, Hadi and Closs indicated that member checking is often the “single most important method to ensure a studies credibility” (p. 643). Member checking can include complete interview transcripts, or the researchers interpreted and synthesized data (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell & Walter, 2016). I did send each participant a summary of my preliminary findings. By supplying synthesized data to the participants, they were able to recognize their voice in the findings. I did request that the participants review and correct and confirm, to the best of their ability, that I have captured the essence of their contributions or that they make suggestions to better represent their input (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This process helped to increase consistency of collected data and to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings (Goodell, Stage & Cooke, 2016). Member checking adds a layer of accountability to the data collection and credibility to the data analysis.

Limitations

Limitations are the potential weaknesses built into a study (Creswell, 2013). This case study addressing middle level teacher perceptions of professional development had three potential limitations. The first limitation was the location of the study. Data collection is limited to one middle school in a large Central Ohio school district; further studies would need to be conducted to increase the generalizability of the study. The second limitation of this study was the sample size; bound by time, location, and available participants the study explored data collected throughout one school year, limiting the length of the study. Additionally, the study was focused on one middle

school and the perceptions of 8 teachers limiting the data collected to a specific location. Potential researcher bias was the third limitation. I am an employee of the school district and the middle school where the study will take place. The dichotomous role of researcher and teacher could have influenced my interpretation of results. To reduce bias, I worked to triangulate data from the interviews.

Data Analysis Results

Data for this study were gathered by conducting one-on-one interview sessions with each participant. The data were recorded using a Livescribe 3 pen and transcribed in a journal for accuracy. The data were then examined to identify reoccurring themes. The feedback provided by the participants provided information that was used to address the overarching research question: What are the middle level teachers' perceptions of effective professional development? This question was addressed using three sub-questions. The researcher designed interview guide (see Appendix C) was created to gather data for SQ1, SQ2, and SQ3 during the one-on-one interviews. To facilitate effective data analysis, specific interview questions relate to targeted research questions. The matrix below identifies how the research questions align to the data collection methods. The resulting coding and analysis of data are reported following the matrix.

Table 1
Research Questions and Data Collection Correlation

RQ1: What are the middle level teachers' perceptions of effective professional development?

SQ1: What do middle school teachers perceive as effective professional development elements that help them to develop their classroom application of content knowledge?

- Interview Question 3: Tell me what your concept of professional development is?
- Interview Question 6: Tell me what you perceive as the qualities of effective and meaningful professional development?
- Interview Question 7: What are your expectations of professional development?
- Interview Question 10: Have you received professional development that you have experienced as effective and meaningful? Please explain.

SQ2: How do middle school teachers experiences with professional development influence their practice?

- Interview Question 4: During the last 12 months did you participate in any of the following professional development activities, and if yes how many days did they last?
 - Subject matter or methods-based course or workshop
 - Education conference or seminar
 - Observations to other schools or within this school
 - In service training
 - Degree program
 - Individual or collaborative research on a topic of interest to you
 - Mentoring or peer observation as part of a formal school arrangement
 - Participation in a network of teachers formed for the purpose of the professional development of teachers
- Interview Question 5: Did the professional development activities you participated in during the last 12 months cover any of the following topics? If so what positive impact did these have on your teaching?
 - Knowledge and understanding of subject field?
 - Pedagogical competencies in the teaching of your subject?
 - Knowledge of curriculum?
 - Student evaluation and assessment practices?
 - Informational and communication technology skills for teaching?

- Interview Question 8: How do students react when you implement strategies you have learned from professional development?
- Interview Question 11: Explain how the qualities you described as effective and meaningful professional development address gaps or strengthen your professional practice.

SQ 3: What improvements to professional development do teachers suggest will enhance their ability to apply content knowledge to their classrooms?

- Interview Question 6: Tell me what you perceive as qualities of effective and meaningful professional development?
 - Interview Question 10: Have you received professional development that you have experienced as effective and meaningful?
 - Interview Question 13: What barriers exist regarding professional development for you, regarding participation in professional development?
-

Once all 8 interviews were reduced to open codes I was able to create parent nodes with child nodes assigned to each sub question. Several nodes were repeated under more than one question. Initially, I identified 20 terms or concepts through open coding that could be linked to SQ1. Utilizing axial coding, I was able to group those findings into 6 temporary themes. By identifying stronger relationships, I saw that four themes develop highlighting the factors middle level teachers perceive as the factors of effective professional development that lead to improved application of content knowledge in their classrooms. Below is the detailed description of the findings with supporting interview excerpts from the participants used to answer SQ1.

Table 2.

Coding Progression

SQ1: What do middle school teachers perceive as effective professional development elements that help them to develop their classroom application of content knowledge?

Open Coding	Axial Coding
Applicable	
Choice	
Engaging	
Motivating	Choice
Non-District Provided	
Relevance	
Self-Improvement	
Collaboration	Differentiated
Differentiated	
Thoughtful	Dropped (not used)
Timely	

SQ2: How do middle school teachers experiences with professional development influence their practice?

Open Coding	Axial Coding
Mentoring & Peer Observation	
Member of a Network of Teachers for Professional Development	
Participate in a Conference	
Participate in a Degree Program	
Participate in an In-Service Training	Choice
Participate in Observations	
Participate in Research of Personal Interest	
Participate in a Workshop	
Pedagogy	
Respected as a Professional	
Technology	
Open Coding	Axial Coding
Participate in a Conference	
Student Evaluation and Assessment	Positive Student
Student Excitement	Reactions
Technology	

Teacher Experience	
Student Frustration	
Professional Development Focused on Knowledge and Understanding of Subject	Dropped (not used)
Professional Development Focused on Curriculum	

SQ 3: What improvements to professional development do teachers suggest will enhance their ability to apply content knowledge to their classrooms?

Open Coding	Axial Coding
Applicable and Relevant Choice	Choice
Differentiated Engaging	Differentiated
Choice Master Presenter	Master Presenter
Money as a Barrier Lack of Support as a Barrier	Lack of Support
Lack of Interest as a Barrier Relevance Time	Interest

Research Subquestion 1

What do middle school teachers perceive as effective professional development elements that help them to develop their classroom application of content knowledge?

Findings for SQ1. The middle level teachers at the school under study mentioned differentiation, choice, and relevance and applicability as elements that help to improve classroom application of content knowledge. The teachers also mentioned that the current sit-and-get style of professional development provided by the district is not effective. T4 said “you have to have some type of engagement, it can’t be sit-and-get. In some way you have to be able to engage and you have to have something you can take

with you.” T3 and T8 explained that the current sit-and-get style of professional development does not work because it breeds nepotism to some extent because your only getting the perspectives of the same people that you reach with, the district that you teach within, and the world is much larger than that.

T1 believed professional development needs to be differentiated for each teacher’s needs. When differentiation occurs, professional development becomes individualized and teachers learn and improve. T1 shared the following experience:

I went to a middle school conference about 2- 3 years ago that had a lot of different choices obviously as a conference would and I took more away from that than I think I have the entire 10 years I have taught middle school because I think it was differentiated through choice and by far was the most meaningful and I did take things away.

Differentiated professional development can be accomplished by providing choices to teachers.

T3 also addressed the importance of professional development being differentiated or individualized to what each teacher needs. “Effective professional development is going to be tailored to where I need to be and where I need to move forward to; it is going to be global in nature, as far as touching multiple areas and multiple bases.” When professional development meets the individual teachers where they are it allows for each teacher to grow and improve; it makes professional development relevant to each individual teacher. When learning is tiered or differentiated, and choice is provided the learning becomes relevant to the needs of the

teacher. T3 explains that “Learning that enhances and enriches your profession, helps you become better equipped to move forward - it drives your work, makes you think outside the box. Expands your learning.” T3 was very focused on the holistic approach to teaching and learning and believes these two things are tied closely together and one cannot occur without the other. T3 explained that in her mind professional development needs to meet her needs on three levels “it is going to feed me intellectually, it is going to feed me pedagogically, it is going to feed me emotionally” when this occurs she believed true learning for teachers will follow.

T4 approaches professional development through a slightly different lens; T4 is a math expert and learning coach and helps to create much of the building and district provided professional development experiences. T4 shared that for professional development to be considered effective it must be differentiated and meet the teachers where they are so that they are able to take something back to the classroom that helps them. “Every teacher should walk out of a professional development day and say this is something I can use in my classroom or it is something I could use; however, I just don't like it - but an experience that gives them the opportunity to use something.” T4 also expressed the concern that often district provided professional development experiences have the feeling of a waste of time “It is not a waste of time and I am going to get something out of it, it is going to appeal to me, too often professional development is a complete waste of time” when professional development is differentiated there is something to interest all levels of experience and all teachers can leave feeling their time was well spent.

T7 shared that professional development needs to meet her where she is at in her teaching, “it does me no good when the meetings are so fast and I don’t even see how to apply it in my classroom and I don’t think we expect our kids to do things that quickly. I think there are a lot of great ideas out there, but I need time to practice and I need repetition.” T7 continued explaining that when professional development meets her at her level she takes more away from the experience and is able to implement various strategies being learned in her classroom effectively. “When I am not provided with ample time to process and ask questions and then I try the strategy in my classroom it is often a failure; however, when I am developed in the realm of what I need I often see success upon return to my classroom.”

T8 explained her view on differentiation and the problems that arise when professional development is not differentiated.

Yes, I do believe there are times when it could be groups, I see nothing wrong with districts having initiatives and wanting everybody to receive some form of professional development based on an initiative because then you can try to ensure that everyone is on the same page; but that should only go so far. I think in my opinion the biggest problem of professional development is that they take that to an extreme and they don’t do what we are asked to do in the classroom, they don’t differentiate. You reach a point where you don’t need that, I don’t need to sit in a room with a 5th year or 3rd year teacher learning about tier 1 and 2 vocabulary when I have 32 years of experience; it is incredibly frustrating to have your time wasted.

Based on the interviews conducted the teachers have expressed the importance of differentiation in provided professional development; however, they feel that the much-needed differentiation is lacking. Through differentiation the teachers believe that their ability to share knowledge with students will increase, that teachers will remain engaged during professional development and would be more motivated to attend professional development sessions.

The teachers also stated that when choice is provided differentiation is achieved. Choice is the second theme that developed through the interview process as many of the teachers interviewed referred to the ability to self-select or choose which and what professional development events to attend. T1 stated that “differentiated professional development can be accomplished by providing choices to teachers.” T1 continued to explain that teachers know what they want and what they need to learn based on what they are doing in their classrooms. Teachers when provided choices and options will seek out learning that improves their craft. T1 shared the following professional development experience as it represents what she was saying about the power of choice:

I went to a middle school conference about 2-3 years ago that had a lot of different choices, obviously, as a conference would. I took more away from that conference than I think I have in the entire 10 years I have taught middle school, because I had the choice to select what sessions I attended.

T3 strongly believed that choice provides the greatest opportunity for growth through professional development. When provided choice about where, when and what to attend professional development becomes more meaningful because it is selected for the

purpose of professional growth and improvement. T3 continued by sharing her opinion as to why choice is so vital to effective professional development:

I think there should be choice and maybe this is just me talking because I have so much experience outside of this district doing multiple things. I think there needs to be an option for teachers to go outside the district for professional development, this is extremely important; otherwise it breeds nepotism to some extent. I say this because you're only getting the perspectives of the same people that you teach with, the district that you teach within, and the world is much larger than that.

The above feeling is one that has been expressed by T1, T3, T4, T6, T7, and T8 as to why they disliked district provided professional development. When professional development is limited to only what is provided within a district it limits exposure to other ideas and methods. T3 continued by explaining that when she attended outside district professional development experiences she has gained insights from others and took away small pieces from each and combined them with her own beliefs to improve herself as an educator. T3 stated that "by being allowed to choose and by attending non-district provided professional development is going to allow me to meet with educators who may have different perspectives than the perspective that we have here. This is important for individual growth."

T4 echoed the sentiment that choice is essential for effective professional development with the following statement: "Too often we [the teachers] are all crowded into the school café and fed the same exact message; it does not expose teachers to new

ideas or methods. When given choice in professional development it exposes teachers to new ideas and keeps teaching interesting, allows teachers to engage students through different approaches within the classroom.” T4 shared this recent experience:

The most recent professional learning experience would be the one I attended for ALEKS, an online math program. I recently took the supervisor of curriculum with me to a professional development day and he fell in love with the program as well and is now purchasing ALEKS for the middle schools for the upcoming school year and subsequent 2 years. If not for choice, I would have never had the opportunity to learn about this amazing program that will benefit all our students.

T4 continued by expressing his belief that attending professional development that is outside the district allows teachers to grow and develop, to learn and be challenged as well as to bring new ideas back to the district which could potentially benefit students beyond one classroom, and it all comes back to teachers having the choice and opportunity to attend professional development that they want.

T6 shared that in her opinion adults know how they learn best and when provided the opportunity to choose professional development they [teachers] will choose experiences with the intent of learning. T6 also stated that when given options to select professional development to attend leads to authentic learning for teachers, which then translates to better experiences in the classroom for students. T6 continued by sharing this personal experience” when given the choice I choose to attend professional development experiences lead by other teachers because it is a real-life teacher showing what they have done and often a resource bank is provided which is very helpful.”

T7 simply stated that when the opportunity to choose which professional development experience to attend, this choice provides teachers with the opportunity to make long term changes to their teaching practices. This thought was echoed by T8 who expressed the opinion that as professionals, teachers must be able to choose how and what they attend for professional development. “We know what areas we need to improve better than anyone, we need to be trusted to seek out those learning opportunities that will allow us to improve.” T8 continued by sharing how by choosing her professional development experiences over the years has changed her teaching philosophy.

Professional development needs to be led by someone who has mastered their craft or mastered whatever they are presenting. I think professional development is personal, it needs to be off-campus, not district provided, or district focused, you need to go somewhere different then your school building. When you are in your building your job is there as a constant reminder of all the “stuff” that needs doing. When you go somewhere else you are completely free of your daily responsibilities and can truly focus on why you are there. Years ago, I opted to attend a professional development seminar presented by Chris Tovani, this was probably the best learning experience I can remember and as a result of this one experience my teaching philosophy evolved and changed.

T8 believes that teachers will always seek out opportunities to improve themselves, it is what life-long learners do. T8 says “If teachers are provided with choices for professional

development then more will return to the classroom with something they can use or at least try in an effort to improve their teaching.”

The third theme that was presented as a result of sub-question 1 was that professional development needs to be relevant and applicable to what is occurring in the classroom at the time of the learning experience. T1 explained that applicable professional development includes feedback on the implementation of the skill that is being learned. “Feedback from someone I respect on the implementation of the skill that I am learning-professional development should not just be about learning the skill, there has to be follow-up so that I know I am doing things correctly.” T1 continued by explaining that feedback provides much needed support to improve the newly learned skill as it is being implemented. T1 raised an excellent point “Teachers provide feedback to their students, so it makes sense that teachers receive feedback when learning a new teaching skill.”

T2 felt that one of the most important elements of effective professional development is that the learning experience is relevant to what the teacher is currently teaching or doing in the classroom and the applicability of the new skill to the classroom. T2 is quoted as stating professional development needs to be “something that is pertinent or something that is relative to what I or we are currently doing, and it must be applicable to our daily lives as teachers.”

T3 connects professional development for her by explaining that when provided choice in her learning experiences she will always select experiences that are individualized and differentiated to her needs and focused on the area(s) she is seeking to

improve. T3 continues by explaining that when the first two occur her learning experiences are always applicable to what she is doing in the classroom and relative to the problems or issue she or her students are facing at the time. T3 stated that “when choice, differentiation, and relevance occur in connection with the same professional development experience true learning occurs and teachers almost always leave happy and motivated to return to the classroom.” T4 supported T3 by explaining that if teachers leave professional development experiences with a new skill or strategy that will help them in the classroom it is then applicable. T4 explained that in order for professional development to be relevant it needs to help teachers in one of three ways: classroom management, assessment, or engagement; “if this is accomplished then professional learning is accomplished and the teachers are better for it.”

T5 believes that professional development needs to provide “tricks of the trade” or be applicable ideas that can benefit teachers in the classroom almost immediately. T5 explained that professional development needs to be geared toward working with students in the classroom today and not focused on theories that are at such a higher level than the students that what is learned by the teachers becomes irrelevant...T5 shared the following: “when I think of professional development I think of tricks of the trade, I do not think of it as these big general one size fits all meetings. I hope to pick up and be able to use 2 maybe 3 things, not just one big idea that is just too big to fathom and fit into my day to day routine.” All the interviewees agreed that professional development needs to be focused on day to day teaching rather than on a big idea of how to make students learn.

T6 shared that when she is able to take what is learned during professional development and use it in her classroom with confidence because it has worked for other teachers in other middle school classrooms is a huge benefit. T6 continued explaining that collaboration time with colleagues leads to learning that is relevant and lessons that are ready to be implemented in the classroom. “Collaborating with colleagues, finding out what works well with different kids, different ideas, different strategies, to working with different students, units that have been shared that I do not have to spend time recreating is the true definition of applicable professional development.” T7 had similar sentiments about applicable learning and how it translates back to the classroom.

T7 believes that if the purpose of professional development is to remain current and to learn then professional development needs to be engaging and applicable to the classroom. T7 continued by explaining that she attends professional development experiences that share strategies with her that she can take back and apply to her classroom immediately. “Professional development should provide me with something I can walk away with, something I can put into practice quickly because it is relevant and ready to be used.” T8 supported the findings as well, she explained that when she attends professional development her expectation is that she will return with something that she is able to try in her classroom. “I expect that I will learn something that I can put to use immediately, something that is relevant to what I am teaching and applicable to my classroom today.” All 8 teachers interviewed agreed that relevance to what they are teaching, and applicability of the learned skill is very important if professional development is to be effective.

Summary of findings for SQ1. Seven of eight participants mentioned choice as an element of professional development most critical when addressing effectiveness. T1, T2, T3, T4, T6, T7, and T8 all agreed that choice in professional development experiences is vital to the transfer of content knowledge to the classroom. T1 said “that when I am able to choose my professional development often I will seek out sessions that meet a need or fill a gap in my practice, helping to improve my ability to share content with my students.” Five of the eight participants declared that differentiation is an essential element of effective professional development explaining that not all teachers need the same thing. T1, T3, T4, T7, and T8 agreed that when professional development is differentiated it meets teachers where they are keeping them engaged and motivated to learn. Relevance and applicability were also deemed key to effective professional development by all eight participants. T1-T8 agreed that the ability to take something away from professional development that has been proven to work in similar classrooms and is ready to implement is an expectation, it allows teachers to quickly try newly learned strategies and skills.

Research Subquestion 2

How do middle school teachers experiences with professional development influence their practice?

Findings for SQ 2. The participants at this Central Ohio Middle School disclosed that if the teachers were afforded the opportunity to attend off-site professional development there was a positive impact to their practice. Additionally, the participants believe there is a positive reaction from their students when a strategy from professional

development is utilized in the classroom. Lastly, the teachers who participated in this study feel choice in professional development has one of the greatest impacts on their classroom practices.

T1 shared that she was able to observe two teachers from two different middle schools, both part of the same district as the school she teaches at. T1 explained that the observations were very effective and beneficial to her as a professional. “I was able to observe a sixth-grade science teacher and an eighth-grade science teacher, I walked away with many great ideas and was able to see different approaches to some of the same material I teach. This was an eye-opening experience.” T1 went on to explain that the result of the observations had a positive impact on her teaching; “leaving my building and watching others do what I do, others who have great test scores and hold the respect of their colleagues, opened my eyes to other ways of doing what I do.” T1 continued to explain that she brought back several ideas to her classroom and a few new teaching strategies as a result of the observations.

T2 attended mostly in-service trainings that pertain to her role as an intervention specialist. She attended Orton-Gillingham training, Individualized Education Plan training, CPI or crisis prevention training, and Aimsweb training; T2 explained that a majority of these trainings are required as review each year and did very little to improve her classroom practices or teaching. T2 continued to state that “IEP training is a good refresher every year, not so much for working with the kids, but for the paper work side of the job – I do not learn anything new, just get reminded of what needs to be done and how to do it.” Overall, T2 expressed the concern that she is not growing as a teacher as a

result of professional development. “I would say they (professional development experiences) had little impact as a whole, but not a huge impact; like district professional development for example, there are pieces that I take away, but it is not necessarily relevant to what I do. I have to try and make it fit my job.”

T3 experienced a vastly different professional development. She attended an outside the district history conference focused on the cultural teaching of history. T3 shared that the experience was one that “challenged and drove perception in the teaching of the concept of slavery in today’s world and today’s society. It made me understand the depth and longevity of the concept of enslaved people not just African American people, but all people throughout time.” T3 continued by explaining that this experience allowed her to return to her classroom with a deeper understanding and a new level of empathy and compassion that she was able to share with her students. T3 stated that this professional development experience has changed how she writes test questions and verbalizes discussions adding a new level of sensitivity that she did not believe she had before. Additionally, T3 is a contributing position holder for both Ohio Middle Level Association (OMLA) and Association for Middle Level Education (AMLE), through these two associations T3 is a participating member of a shared teacher network designed to share professional development experiences that have positively affected the art of teaching. T3 shared that “I have shared many experiences and learned much from colleagues through the act of presenting and talking with teachers from around the country.” T3 clearly expressed that in her opinion non-district provided professional development exposes teachers to other educators whose ideas and strategies are different

allowing teachers to take what is needed, liked, and wanted back to their rooms and add them in to create their individual style of teaching.

T4 as a math specialist had a very different professional development experience than the other 7 participants. T4 explained that he attended nearly 35-40 days of professional development outside the district this year alone. T4 stated “The purpose of me going outside the district is to experience other ideas, to see what is working, and to determine what I can bring back and share with our district math teachers.” T4 experienced professional development hosted by other school districts, attended math focused conferences, technology conferences, middle level education conferences, relationship building workshops, and presented math focused professional development for other districts. T4 stated that he “brought back to his math department ideas and strategies to help reach the hard to reach kids or those that are just getting by in class.” This he said makes them better teachers, this works because he actually goes into their classrooms and teaches a class so the teachers can observe the strategies as well as explaining the strategy. He continued by explaining how the state conference helped him as well as the other math teachers “I went to the state conference and they bring the people who write the standards and they break the standards down and walk you through the things that change so that you can better help the people in your department.” T4 explained that this allows for all math teachers to be on the same page when it comes to understanding what needs to be taught at each grade level.

T7 explained that she attended the Regional Education Services Agencies (RESA) Foreign Language Conference and walked away with a clear understanding of what her

state standards are. “The RESA conference clarified the state standards and gave focus to what needed to be covered. The standards are usually very vague and we spend a tremendous amount of time trying to figure out what exactly needs to be taught, by attending this conference it became very clear what I needed to teach and I was given several strategies and tech ideas to help cover the material.” T7 expressed the concern that in her opinion the state standards for all subjects are vague and all teachers could benefit from a clarification of the standards.

Almost all the participating teachers agreed that when they bring something back from a professional development experience and try it in the classroom the students tend to react in a positive manner. Not all participants attended professional development prior to the interviews; however, all were very quick to recall an experience they have had in recent years. T1 shared “Most of the time the students enjoy it because if I implemented anything that I've learned in a professional development I have bought-in and if I have bought-in then I am excited about it and therefore they feed on my excitement and are excited as well.” T2 explained that students like when there is a little change in the routine, it keeps the class from getting boring. “I did a vocabulary strategy I learned, and they liked it, students like the change in pace, but I mean it is not often that we learn something in district professional development that I can bring back to my classroom and use.” T2 followed with the explanation that vocabulary tends to be a weakness for her students, and that any variety helps them learn the material better. T2 disclosed that she shared this vocabulary strategy with several colleagues who also found great success

while using it. T3 said “They pick up on it, they react really well.” T3 continued by explaining her student’s reaction as being much more engaged.

They are driving their instruction as opposed to you driving their instruction.

When you look at real world skills as opposed to just content skills and

knowledge they can take what they learn and apply it outside the classroom.

T4 who has the most professional development exposure disclosed that students love the strategies that teachers bring back because they bring back only the material that they as teachers like ; “we only bring back the stuff that we like so that it is not like we are making stuff up and bringing back crappy ideas to class, we are bringing the best stuff we can possibly find.” T4 clarified this by explaining that he believes it is not so much the strategy that the kids enjoy; however, they are feeding off the teachers’ excitement, which in turn reveals itself as a manner of heightened engagement by the students. T5 did not have any specific examples to share; however, T5 commented in a similar manner to T4 that the students get excited when the teachers are excited and that is usually when something new is happening that the teachers are motivated to try. T8 shared a similar response stating that it is usually her excitement about trying something she learned that gets the kids excited. “Usually when I implement things I learned from professional development I am super excited about it; I usually share my excitement with the kids and so in general their excited too.” T8 finished with the idea that a teacher’s excitement is a motivating event in the classroom.

T7 feels that intrinsic motivation in this district is hard to come by and that the lack of interest in general weighs heavily on the classroom; “if I am not excited about

what I am doing then neither are my students.” The fact that the students are taking a high school level language class in middle school complicates this as well because if it gets too hard they simply drop the class, and because of this T7 is always looking for ways to excite and engage her students. The results are almost always positive “Students react positively for the most part, tweaking the ideas with formative and summative assessment, they like the immediate feedback of the formative assessments, the feedback helps them realize strengths and weaknesses as well as what to study.” T7 justified this response with the fact that since she has learned and become efficient at formative and summative assessment her students perform better.

Choice appeared again as a common theme from all participants when asked about professional development and positive impacts on teaching. T1 shared that when given the opportunity to, she selects to attend professional development that address a weakness in her practice. T1 stated:

If professional development were individualized and differentiated and I got choice in it, then I would select experiences that would address the gaps I may have because I would choose areas for professional development that make me better, it would fill the gaps. I must be responsible and respected as a professional to make those choices.

T1 shared that she prefers her students to use paper and pencil for lab reports and there just really is not any professional development provided by the district that meets these needs, “everything is technology based.” T2 shared similar concerns stating that “district provided professional development is focused on the district agenda, not on the needs of

the classroom teacher;” explaining that specialists are usually pulled out of school for additional training reducing time with her students.

T2 explained that professional development geared toward her position would need to be highly focused and specialized and does not fit with all classroom teachers.

I think if it is meaningful than it is something I need right now, and I am going to use right now. I know the district professional development is based on district focuses, but if it was something geared toward what I needed at that time I would be more likely to use it. If it is a tool I am missing or I need right now, I think it would make me a better teacher. For example, organizing OG I could use some help with that, if I went to a meeting and I learned how to do what I needed to do I could come back and use it right away and that is something that would last.

T2 mentioned that choices during professional development would allow teachers to gain the information the district wants everyone to know and then to select sessions that focus on a specific skill or subject.

T3 supports T1 and T2 explaining that professional development needs to offer choices to teachers, because not all teachers need the same thing. T3 stated:

Well I think for me teaching isn't just about pedagogy it has always been about practice. I think there is an art to teaching you become practiced at your art, and along those lines that is when the pedagogy comes in and the content. You don't just graduate and become an expert in history and be able to communicate it. Just because you're an expert and I truly do not believe there is any such thing as an expert - Just because you feel that you are well read in a subject does not mean

you are able to communicate it. When I say professional development needs to feed you, if you don't go out and look for things that are going to compliment you, you don't improve. If I go to one in-service it may not click with me., if I go to another one and I go oh that's a different way of saying it, that's my style I can then build it into my teaching.

T3 disclosed that in her opinion it is the lack of diversity and choice in district provided professional development that has created the problem of lack of interest and a lack of teacher development. T3 stated:

I think the problem with young teachers is they don't have that experience base yet to say that I am going to take a little bit of this person and a little bit of this person and a little of this person and that becomes part of my craft. So when you go and get fed by different people in different arenas then that fills that gap - because that is what makes you a really good teacher, instead they sit through the same district provided professional development and get only what the district provides.

T3 finished by stating that a lack of motivation to attend professional development is cultivated when professional growth does not occur, "it simply feels like a waste of time."

T4 also stated that district professional development can feel like a waste of time, "that is the biggest problem with district professional development, teachers perceive it as a waste of time." T4 explained that "most all teachers know what they need to work on, they know what their strengths and weaknesses are." He continued on this topic

explaining that professional development needs to provide teachers with opportunities or choices to address the weaknesses.

T5 shared “I would like to work on assessment and a good professional development would help me see how the questions I use to assess my students will reaffirm or make me change what I do.” T5 followed with the fact that this is not the district focus so he would need to go outside for professional development and does not believe he should have to incur the cost for it. He continued that choice at district professional development would help facilitate the professional learning many teachers desire.

T6 and T7 spoke to the importance of collaboration and time for collaboration with other teachers of their subject or grade level. T6 spoke to the importance of finding out what works and what doesn't work from teachers that have tried a specific strategy or skill is invaluable. T7 stated that collaborative time with colleagues “can give me one more thing for my toolbox and maybe I can reach one more kid in a different way – you don't want your teaching to get to stale.” T7 remarked that she is not sure why the district cannot meet the requests of the teachers for professional development; “it would be easy to build collaboration time into professional development, not sure why this doesn't happen.”

T8 believes there should be choice and options for professional development. She explained that good teachers know and understand what they need to learn and grow but need to be provided the opportunities for this to occur. T8 feels “there is nothing better than going to someone who is really good at what they do and learning from that person

it is the way they present the professional development usually, they give you the strategies and everything – you walk away fully understanding what your taking back to your classroom.” T8 believed this is the best form of professional development available; however, teachers need to be provided the choice to select these experiences.

Summary for findings for SQ2. The participating teachers all stressed that there are different experiences that influence their professional practice and shared that student reactions are a good identifier of how affective a strategy is. T1, T2, T3, T4, and T7 all agreed that the most effective professional development is that which is held off-site or not in the building which they work. They also agreed that the reason for this is that it allows you to focus without thinking about your classroom and all the work it holds, that these experiences are usually presented by masters in their field, and that as a teacher you leave with ready to use strategies and resources.

Almost all participants, except one clearly stated that students usually have a favorable reaction to new ideas and strategies brought back from professional development experiences. T1, T2, T3, T4, T5, T7, and T8 all agreed that one of the main reasons the students react in the manner they do is because of the excitement the teacher has about the new strategy, T1 explaining that “the students feed off my energy, when I am excited they are excited, when I am disengaged so are they.” T7 explained that her students react in such a positive manner to strategies brought back from professional development because they see the benefit to themselves and understand how it helps them prepare for assessments and the rest of the class.

All eight participants agreed that one of the most effective factors to professional development having a positive impact on their classroom practices is the ability to choose the professional development to be attended. Several of the teachers stated that teachers know what they need to improve and understand what they want to do in the classroom but needed to be trusted and respected as professionals to select the best learning opportunities for this to occur. Additionally, many of the participants stated that the opportunity to choose what learning sessions to attend increases motivation and interest in professional development.

Research Subquestion 3:

What improvements to professional development do teachers suggest will enhance their ability to apply content knowledge to their classrooms?

Findings for SQ 3. T1, T3, T4, T5, and T8 agreed that improvements that could be made to professional development that will enhance their ability to apply content knowledge in their classrooms would be to present professional development in a differentiated fashion and offer choices on what to learn. T5 stated that “when professional development meets me where I am at in my teaching it is more engaging to me and I gain much more from the experience when it is differentiated and applicable “it gets me motivated to improve my teaching methods, it gets me excited about coming to school, and this is when content knowledge is really applied in the classroom – excited teacher equals engaged students.” T3 explained that with differentiation comes choice and with choice comes engagement. T3 stated that effective professional development must consider the level of the teachers in the room. It makes absolutely no sense to force

an experienced teacher of 15, 20 or even 32 years of experience to learn about basic vocabulary skills or the importance of building relationships with their students, they already know this. Professional development needs to provide teachers with options and choices, it needs to be tiered based on the experience level of the teacher and what they believe their individual needs are.

T3 continued with the idea that when teachers are provided choices as to where to spend their professional development time they become much more motivated to attend because it is now about them as an individual. "Time is one of the most valuable commodities of a teacher" T3 explained and when time is considered by those designing learning experiences "teachers notice and are more willing to invest it (their time)." T3 finished by sharing her thoughts on how professional development should be designed. T3 believed that teachers should be asked what they need or want and then sessions should be created to meet the common needs, this allows for choice and places value on the teachers time, creating motivation to attend and teachers will remain engaged because they chose which session to attend.

T4 and T5 believed that for professional development to truly be successful and effective teachers need to leave with something they can utilize immediately. T5 stated "I know I did not waste my time when I learn a new 'trick of the trade'" explaining that these are small things teachers can do to make the classroom run more smoothly or they are big ideas such as teaching strategies, either way they can be implemented almost immediately. T4 explained that professional development needs to be engaging "teachers need to be hooked to get them to buy in" T4 continued "simply forcing or telling a

teacher to attend does not equal them learning anything, they have to want to be there to learn.” T4 also stated that professional development is typically boring which makes it feel like a waste of time, it needs to be engaging, “teachers engage when they are interested, they are interested when they are learning something that they need or want” this engagement to learning occurs when differentiation and choice are built into the learning experience.

T8 explained that effective professional development revolves around choice. T8 believes that if choice is provided then engagement, differentiation, applicability, and relevance will all fall into place.

The ability to self-select a professional learning experience validates teachers as professionals, there is a sense of pride in being an educator, it is a calling; however, we are not treated like professionals, we are told when and where to attend professional development and we are told what we need to learn, this does not make us feel like a professional.

T8 believed that more teachers would willingly attend professional development if they could choose which experiences to attend. T8 stated that if teachers willingly attend and choose which sessions they attend then they have a better chance of taking something applicable back to the classroom.

A second theme that became apparent through this sub-question was that professional development is more effective when presented by a master of the craft. T1, T3, T5, T7, and T8 all agreed that teachers will gain more from a presenter that has mastered their craft. T1 stated “I think that professional development could be very

affective for me as a professional because I am interested in bettering myself as a teacher; it is most effective when I attend learning experiences presented by people who are true masters of what they are presenting.” T1 continued to explain that these types of experiences provide an engagement level and excitement that just does not exist in regular professional development.

T3 followed with the sentiment that professional development needs to be “well, professional” collecting all the teachers in one room and telling them all the same thing is not learning. “Effective professional development needs to be engaging, exciting and presented by someone who is credible and a true master of the art of teaching.” T3 followed with the explanation that teachers never have enough time “so to pull them out for a day and have a district administrator or another teacher stumble through district provided learning” is not effective. When teachers are given the opportunity to choose to attend a “master presenter” one who specializes in what is being presented, they often return to the classroom motivated to try new things, to be better. T5 corroborated this sentiment by explaining that when “I leave district provided professional development, I often feel like I am missing something to be able to use what I learned in my classroom.” However, “when I attend outside experiences I come back with all the tools I need to effectively try new strategies in my classroom, I am motivated and excited to try them.”

T1-T3 and T5- T8 all agreed that there are several barriers that prevent effective professional development from occurring and therefore hinder their ability to learn new techniques for applying content knowledge within the classrooms. T4 being a math specialist did not feel there were any barriers to receiving effective professional

development. The two most commonly shared barriers to effective professional development were lack of personal interest, which included relevance of what is being presented; and lack of district support, which included financial support.

T3, T7, and T8 stated that money is a barrier to attending professional development which translates to a lack of effective development in the sense that teachers just do not attend any learning except what is provided by the district. T3 stated that one of the reasons she struggles with professional development is that the district is very focused on the message they want to get out to staff that very few outside professional learning opportunities are provided. “Not readily accessible professional development because our district is so focused on what we provide internally, there is very little money available to teachers for outside learning experiences.” T3 continued with the sentiment that she feels only the same few people are chosen to attend outside professional development that is often selected by the district, a good example is the Ohio Middle Level Conference. T3 shared that the Ohio Middle Level Conference is usually held within driving distance and only a handful of teachers are approved to attend, I know this because I am an OMLA board member and see who comes from our district, never more than 5 people and usually the same people attend.

T7 disclosed that the district does not provide information regarding outside professional development. She continued explaining that this lack of support makes it very difficult to find learning experiences that are relevant to what we need, if we really want to attend something provided outside of the district we need to go and find it on our own. T7 stated she does not attend many professional learning experiences for a few

reasons “mostly lack of employer support and it is just too expensive. There have been courses available that I was interested in but could not attend because the time is not provided.” T8 expressed similar concerns explaining that “at this stage in my career it is just hard to find something that fits my needs, the district is very focused on early career teachers and I do not need that.” T8 explained that as a veteran teacher her professional development needs to be focused on very specific things and these experiences take time to find with the districts lack of support it is too much work to find the learning experience, submit the request, to be denied “so I just attend what is provided.”

T1, T2, T3, T5, T6, and T8 all believed that lack of interest in what is being presented is a deterrent to district provided professional development, which affects the ability to share content knowledge in the classroom. T1 shared that the reason she is rarely motivated to attend professional development is mostly a lack of interest. “I think professional development would be very positive for me because I am interested in bettering myself as a professional; however, these opportunities are not provided.” T1 continued to explain that professional development experiences are provided, but little to no choice is offered and as a result there is not interest in the offered experiences. T2 shared similar feelings that the offered professional development is not relevant or interesting to a point where nothing is gained from attending. “I would say most of the time it is not relevant, professional development if it is through the district it is not relevant and as a result I have little interest in attending.” T2 continued explaining that this lack of relevance creates a negative feeling toward required district provided professional learning experiences.

T3 shared that in her mind the barriers that exist when seeking effective professional learning experiences are lack of district support and a lack of relevance. T3 explained that a lack of district support is expressed through the lack of funding offered to attend non-district provided experiences and that a lack of relevance equates to little interest in attending what is provided “this is why many teachers take sick days on district professional development days.” T5 shared similar thoughts explaining that there is “no motivation to leave the classroom” because the district provided professional development does not meet his needs and the district does not offer other options. T5 also expressed his frustration that there are good professional development opportunities out there, but the district does not provide information on what is available.

T6 shared similar sentiments as T3, that as a veteran teacher the offered professional development does not meet her needs. “After teaching for 25 year I feel like I am getting meaningless professional development because I have been around for 25 years and most of the learning is geared toward newer teachers.” T6 disclosed that in her opinion most of the offered professional development is focused on the teachers with less than 10 years of experience and there is nothing offered for the “seasoned teacher.” These feelings echo the lack of interest in attending provided professional development because what is being shared and taught is not relevant to what a teacher of her experience needs or wants. T8 followed with similar sentiments as a veteran teacher there is really nothing offered that helps me improve as a professional. T8 shared that “there are two purposes to attend professional development; first to grow as a professional and second to grow as a person. When this does not occur, professional development

becomes a waste of time.” T8 explained that these are the feelings that create a lack of interest in attending district provided professional development throughout the building.

Summary for findings for SQ3. Sub-question 3 focused on how professional development can be improved to enhance teachers’ ability to apply content knowledge in their classrooms. Several themes were presented in the findings the participants disclosed that differentiation and choice need to be part of the provided professional development, professional development should be provided by a master of the material being presented, and that there are several barriers that exist which prevent them from attending effective professional development.

The study participants expressed that choices need to be offered to teachers so that they can select experiences that meet their needs. This makes sense when looking at the results the second most common result was that professional development experiences need to be differentiated to meet the individual needs of the teachers. The results from the interviews demonstrated that when attending professional development experiences, the participants believe that when the material is presented by a person who has mastered the material being presented creates a better, more effective learning experience.

The last component to attending experiences that enhance teacher’s ability to apply content knowledge in their classrooms is looking at the reason teachers feel they cannot access these learning events. The two reasons that nearly all participants agreed upon as barriers to attaining effective learning experiences that help apply content knowledge were lack of district support, including financial support and lack of interest

in the professional development. The participants shared an overwhelming sense of lack of support from the district regarding attending outside learning experiences. This lack of support was expressed as not being financially willing to support the attending of outside learning experiences and the district does not provide any support in finding appropriate learning experiences.

Research Question

What are the middle level teachers' perceptions of effective professional development?

Findings for Research Question. The participants at the middle school under study shared their perceptions of what effective professional development should look like. A common theme that developed throughout the interview process was that effective professional development needs to offer choices to the teachers. Choice as an element of effective professional development appeared as a result for each of the three sub-questions. T3 shared “When I am given a choice as to what learning session I will attend I feel respected as a professional and I seek to attend a session that will allow me to learn something new or improve on a something I believe to be a weakness. However, the most important thing is I am given the opportunity to choose what is best for me.” The data shows that teachers perceive a greater level of motivation and engagement when provided choice in selecting professional development experiences.

Sub-question 1 and 3 resulted in teachers feeling that differentiation was an important aspect of effective professional development. T8 stated “as a result of choice often we find professional development to be differentiated, we naturally gravitate to

experiences that meet us at our level so that we can learn and grow.” This sentiment was echoed by several of the participants; T2 explaining “that we are expected to differentiate in our classrooms, but the district never does this in our professional development.” The teachers expressed that differentiated professional development creates a more effective learning environment.

Relevance and applicability were perceived as an element of effective professional development as well. The teachers expressed that what is being learned during professional development experiences needs to be something that can be used in the classroom immediately. Several teachers referred back to choice in selecting professional development; when given choices it is more likely that teachers will leave with something they can use in their classrooms. The common factor being that teachers will choose to attend experiences that address the problems they are having in the classroom at the time of the learning experience or will focus on a strategy or skill the teachers are working to learn. T1-T8 also expressed that they believe effective professional development provides resources that teachers can refer back to when they return to their classrooms.

Several participants believed that effective professional development occurs off site or not provided by the district. This also linked back to having the ability to choose or select learning experiences that meet individual needs. T8 shared that when professional development occurs in the building in which a teacher works, the “job” and all the responsibilities of it are front and center on the teacher’s mind, the focus is not on the learning. She continued that when professional development occurs off -site and

presented by a master presenter the focus is on the learning. The participants expressed the concern that favoritism and a single focus on sharing district initiatives occurs to readily when all the learning is provided by the district. All eight participants expressed that outside experiences open teachers to the ideas of others and this is where learning occurs.

The consensus among all the participants was that when they were able to attend professional development experiences not provided by the district the students reacted in a positive manner. Overwhelmingly, T1-T8 agreed that when they attended a learning experience that was motivating and engaging to them as individuals this excitement translates back to the classroom and the students feed on this emotion. This was not the case when these same eight teachers attended district provided professional development, mostly because the excitement and engagement was not there. T5 explained that he dreads in house professional development, “usually it does not apply to me as a classroom teacher or to what I am trying to learn.” Therefore, the teachers are lacking the excitement and this lack of excitement also transfers back to the classroom. A second issue the participants disclosed during the interviews was that in-house professional development or district provided professional development is not differentiated to the needs of the teachers and the students do not respond as well to what is brought back to the classroom.

The participants disclosed that there are two main barriers that prevent or hinder middle level teachers, in this building, from attending effective professional development. These two barriers are a lack of interest in professional development being

offered and a lack of support, which includes administrative and financial support. All eight participants agreed that the lack of interest in attending professional development stems from the lack of choice in what they get to attend. The district provides professional development and it is often focused on district directives as explained by T8. T8 continued to explain that not all teachers need the same experiences for learning, for example “as a veteran teacher of 32 years I do not need the same thing as a 1st or 2nd year teacher and to make me sit through it creates an awful experience.” This feeling is widespread among the participants that professional development is frowned upon and often approached with a negative attitude making it difficult for teachers to gain anything from the experience.

The second barrier that was exposed during the interview process was the sentiment that the district does not support attending outside professional development experiences. This was expressed by T3 who explained that as a board member of Ohio Middle Level Association she only saw 5 teachers from the district attend the most recent conference. T1, T2, and T7 all disclosed that they requested to attend the conference and were denied permission to attend citing the cost as the given reason. However, T3 shared that conference fees had been waived for the building as a result of T3 holding a board position and with the intention of increasing attendance. T8, T6, and T5 shared that when attending outside professional development the paperwork to attend is overwhelming and enough to dissuade one from wanting to attend and the fees have to be paid for by the teacher and then the district refunds the money several weeks later. The lack of support to attend professional development outside the district is made clear as explained by the

participants, what has happened over the years is that teachers stop trying to go outside for learning experiences. T4 stated that “I have a unique position where I can go to professional development when I want; however, this is not the case for most teachers. As a district what has happened is teachers have stopped asking to go to outside professional learning experiences, which may be the districts goal.” T1-T8 all agreed that teachers need to be treated as professionals and trusted to attend learning experiences that will help each teacher improve individually.

Summary for Findings of Research Question 1. Effective professional development in the eyes of middle level educators provides choice in selection of what experiences to attend. It was found that the eight participants believe that teachers understand what they need to improve and should be provided with the opportunities to seek out these experiences and attend them. The study also established that when choice is provided in selecting professional development experiences differentiation occurs. The teacher participants believed this to be true because when allowed to self-select learning experiences the result is the attendance of learning experiences that meet the teachers where they are in the development of a new skill or strategy. A second result of the ability to choose which professional development experiences to attend is that the learning is relevant and applicable. Relevance to what the teachers are doing in their classrooms was a big concern for the teachers participating in the study. Several of the participants agreed that when professional development is relevant and applicable it is more engaging, and they leave the experience feeling they have learned something useful

for the classroom. T4 explained that “there is nothing worse than being forced into a room and wasting your time.” This sentiment was expressed by T6, and T7 as well.

The participants disclosed the concerns that there is a lack of interest in attending professional development because there is no choice in what is being attended. Additionally, the participants believed the district does not support the attendance of outside professional development experiences. The eight participants feel the district has made the request to attend process so cumbersome that most teachers have stopped trying to attend learning experiences outside the district. In conjunction with the process the district makes it hard to gain funding to attend outside conferences or workshops, by either denying financial support or requiring teachers to pay fees up front.

Accuracy and Credibility

Accuracy and credibility are two components that are essential to the data analysis process (Cramton, 2015). To ensure accuracy and credibility for this study I followed the guidelines provided by Walden University’s IRB. I used member checks for validity within this study. Member checking, according to Creswell (2012), is used to ensure validity in qualitative research. Member checking is a technique used to allow participants the opportunity to verify the responses given during the interview session are accurate (James, 2016). In addition to the transcripts of the individual interview participants were provided with a summary of the findings to assure that their individual voices were present within the data analysis summary. Participants reviewed findings related to their responses and clarified responses as needed.

Discrepant Cases

Data collection included interview notes and researcher reflection. Using these two forms of data collection coupled with member checking helped to create triangulation. All of the data collected fell within similar parameters. This triangulation enhances the study's credibility through the recurrent appearance of similar themes (Creswell, 2012). According to Creswell (2012), triangulation confirms the data being presented from individuals describes a theme in qualitative research. There were no discrepant cases found in the literature review.

The only discrepant case occurred as a result of one participant's role within the building. Participant T4 at the time of the study was a math teacher and math specialist; the designation of math specialist provided him with the opportunity to attend non-district provided professional development experiences on a regular basis. Resulting from these outside experiences T4 felt that the professional development he was receiving was effective. T4 stated that "I have the opportunity to attend multiple educational conferences a year that most teachers do not get to go to, because of this I feel that the professional development experiences that I get are really good." This feeling of receiving effective professional development was not the normal response from study participants.

Summary

The research provided information about middle level teachers' perceptions of effective professional development. A general qualitative study approach allowed for gaining a deeper understanding of the participants' views. According to Creswell (2012)

a general qualitative study design positions the researcher to ask questions in an interview format and collect data about a particular event. Potential participants were identified using purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to purposely select the individuals who may participate in the study (Creswell, 2012). The data collected during the interview process was audio recorded and then transcribed into a reflective journal. The data were analyzed to check for patterns or themes to ensure credibility of the study. Findings showed that the teachers at the study site perceive effective professional development as containing choice, differentiation and relevance to what the teachers are teaching. Additionally, the findings disclosed when provided effective professional development the students react in a positive manner to learned teaching strategies. Lastly, the participants expressed the concerns that there is a lack of interest in attending professional development and a lack of support from the district regarding attending non-district provided professional development.

Section 3 of this paper reflects the findings and the development of the project associated with the research study. The findings, which have been presented in a narrative form, answer the research question and related sub-questions. This section also includes explanation of how and why the related project is meaningful for the future of the study site. Section 4 provides conclusions and reflections for this project.

Section 3: The Project

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of middle level teachers regarding effective professional development. My goal was to create a project based on this research that will support middle level teachers in receiving more effective professional development. Findings for this study indicated that middle level teachers at Middle School A believe they are not receiving effective professional development. Currently, the district in which Middle School A is located provides a sit-and-get, one size fits all professional development program which has harvested a lack of motivation to attend and lack of learning within the teachers. Participants in the study suggested that effective professional development needs to provide teachers with choices, needs to be differentiated, and relevant to the classroom.

Overall, participants shared that effective professional development is needed to help translate content knowledge to the classroom and keep students engaged. They also shared that effective professional development is essential to helping them better plan, prepare and deliver instruction. Participants indicated that effective professional development includes meeting the teachers where they are in the classroom and providing the teachers with the resources and knowledge to return to the classroom ready to implement what has been learned.

Through one-on-one, semistructured interviews participants in the study expressed their concerns about the district provided professional development experiences. All participants in the study agreed that effective professional development

is essential for teachers to grow and improve. The key themes that emerged related to this call for effective professional development included (a) choice in professional development, (b) differentiation, (c) relevance to the classroom, and (d) the ability to attend off-campus professional development. Additionally, the participants identified barriers affecting their ability to receive effective professional development: lack of interest as a result of lack of choice and lack of support from the district to attend outside professional development experiences. In order to address this need, the project associated with this project study is a policy paper that district stakeholders can use as the foundation for creating district policy designed to foster effective professional development experiences.

The instructional leaders and local school officials need to make a collaborative effort to consider the perceptions of the teachers regarding the definition of effective professional development. Those responsible may include the superintendent, professional development coordinator, and the principal. The goal of the project is to share information with all stakeholders so that there are more effective professional learning experiences available which should help the teachers transfer the content knowledge more effectively to the classroom.

Rationale

To help resolve the local problem, I created a policy paper because the school district does not provide effective professional development experiences for the teachers. Teachers at Middle School A desire effective and ongoing professional development, and creating a policy outlining the teacher's perceptions of effective professional

development will help ensure the teachers' needs are met. Providing a onetime sit-and-get professional learning experience may meet the needs of younger teachers who attend; however, a single training session of this style will not meet the needs of the entire teaching staff. The problem of inadequate professional development experiences is a perennial problem, and the typical large group training sessions would not provide effective professional development experiences for future teachers and would serve to perpetuate the problem. The participants indicated that to fully address the problem of ineffective district provided professional development, they need experiences that provide choices and learning that is differentiated and relevant, as well as district support to attend outside learning experiences. Given that my review of district policy showed, there is no defined professional development plan that meets the needs of all the teachers. The district needs to commit to a policy of providing ongoing, systemic, professional development that offers choice, is differentiated and relevant, and supports the teachers attending outside experiences, rather than providing one large group training session.

Creating a policy paper provided a manner to ensure that teachers' professional development needs will be met not only in the short term, but long term as well. I believe that all stakeholders need to gain a better understanding of what the teacher's perceptions of professional development are and how these needs can be used to formulate more effective professional development experiences which can help improve teaching and subsequently academic performance at Middle School A. The policy document created for the project portion of this study should help to ensure district leaders provide effective

professional development that is needed and desired by the teachers by making it a district priority.

A policy paper may be referred to as a research-based document that addresses a policy and provides recommendations. According to Stelzner (2013), a policy paper is used to explain, persuade, and suggest change for a potential problem. The purpose of the policy paper written for this project study was to create awareness of the lack of effective professional development and the lack of district support to attend effective professional development experiences and to convince district stakeholders to make critical changes to improve district provided professional development experiences. This policy paper provides information about what constitutes effective professional development and why it is important.

To implement the policy, the superintendent and professional development director will need to create an overall plan to include the design of learning experiences that offer choices that are differentiated in the learning and relevant to the individual teachers classrooms A plan to support teachers' desire to attend effective learning experiences is also needed. They will also need to create a plan to develop a professional development committee to help plan and facilitate improved district provided professional development. Having a policy would help to ensure that all educational professionals, no matter the experience, is provided the opportunity to be well prepared, resource supported, and effective in the classroom. In addition, thoughtfully planned learning experiences adds to the accountability of the policy. A substantial amount of research suggests that policy papers on professional learning experiences can generate

meaningful conversations (Stylianidou et al., 2018). Recommendations in this policy paper provide a foundational base for addressing this problem by informing on the elements of effective professional development, as indicated by research findings. A policy paper was the best approach to provide the information to district officials and stakeholders. The findings provide the basis for suggestion to improve district provided professional development. A conclusion of the study is that district officials and the professional development director should consider the teachers perceptions of what constitutes effective professional development when planning these learning experiences. Having teachers attend effective learning experiences and share their experiences with other teachers would improve transfer of content knowledge in the classroom and is an important step for district instructional leaders to take. My policy paper provides information to help the district superintendent, professional development director, and district stakeholders understand what the teachers perceive as effective professional development.

I designed this policy paper to accommodate the needs of the teachers who are not receiving effective professional development. In the paper, I share information about the problem, analysis of data, summary of findings, and recommendations to consider for implementation. The recommendations also suggest the next steps that need to be taken for effective use of the findings. The conclusion addresses the overall goal, resulting in an action step taken to improve the current district provided professional development. The policy would support all teachers in their professional learning and growth.

Review of the Literature

In this study, I examined middle level teachers' perceptions of effective professional development. Participants in the study indicated that effective professional development provides choices for the teachers, is differentiated to meet the teachers' needs, and is relevant to the classroom. The district's current policy requires teachers to attend quarterly district provided large group professional development sessions which are generalized and focused on district initiatives. For example, at the middle school level the professional development experience is often focused on one subject such as English, which does not relate to the science, math, or history classroom. Based on the findings of the study, I believe providing one-time professional development in the sit and get format will not be enough to address the problem at the study site. For sustainable change to occur and to meet the needs of the teachers, the district must adopt policy that establishes a continued commitment to ensure that middle level teachers are being provided with effective professional development experiences. Therefore, the project related to this study is a policy paper that encourages the district to implement policy that will support the ongoing effective professional development of middle level teachers. The idea of a policy paper for this project resulted from the research findings related to this study. These findings inspired the idea of a policy paper to help ensure that effective professional development is being provided to middle level teachers.

According to Taylor, Roth, Wilson, Stuhlsatz, & Tipton, (2017) professional development for teachers has increased and refined instructional strategies that are required to teach content, critical thinking, and problem solving to students. In order to

produce improved performance professional development must be effective. Effective professional development may be defined as structured learning designed to influence change to teacher practices and improving student outcomes (McKeown et al., 2019). The structured learning approach can be linked to Middle School A's district policy that requires teachers to attend no less than four professional learning experiences per calendar year.

The literature review includes the examination of several key concepts related to the project. To establish the structure for the project, the literature focuses on policy papers. The project focuses on one policy which is comprised of four parts: (a) requiring district leaders to provide middle level teachers with choices regarding professional development, (b) providing professional development that is differentiated, (c) providing learning experiences that are relevant to the classroom so that the teachers can implement strategies quickly, and (d) the reduction of professional development barriers to increase teacher interest in attending professional learning experiences

Sources used for locating relevant literature included Google Scholar, PROQuest, and Eric through the Walden University Library. Search terms included *policy paper*, *policy plan*, *policy paper in educational research*, *organizing study results*, *position papers*, *instructional tools*, and *policy recommendations*. Information cited in this literature review came from peer-reviewed sources published within the past 5 years.

Policy Paper

A policy paper was developed to recommend policy options to local school district officials about professional development experiences as a strategy to improve

district provided professional development. A policy plan, policy paper, or a position paper serves the purpose of presenting informative narratives that communicates a persons, organizations, or nation's data-guided opinions, recommendations or positions regarding an issue (Darling – Hammond, 2016; Golden, Katzman, Ornstein, & Sawyer, 2015; Harwood & Knight, 2015). Designed with the purpose to persuade stakeholders to follow or comply with the recommendations, opinions, or positions of the author, policy papers are authored by officials in many professional fields such as; education, medicine, law, and government (Austin, McEvoy, & Singleton, 2016; Echardt & Poletti, 2016). Most position papers, regardless of the discipline, are composed of six components: an introduction which details the history and demographics of the participants and their environment; the problem and how it affects the participants and their environment; evidence of the problem in the local setting; a review of literature pertaining to the problem and the participants; recommendations to address the problem and the implications of the recommendations as they pertain to the participants and the environment (Ansre, 2017; Crowley, 2015; Daniel & Sulmasy, 2015). These components help to organize the authors approach to the policy paper, establishing credibility, analyzing strengths and weaknesses to the author's positions, and presenting the written policy or argument in a concise and informative manner (Cox & Hodgkinson-Williams, 2015; MacDonald & Roetert, 2015). Effective policy papers are created to elicit change based on the recommendations focused on a problem or issue.

Policy Papers and Change

In order to effect change or resolve existing issues data needs to be collected to identify the problems. A study conducted by Carey, Kay, and Nevile (2017) demonstrated how policy lead to change in the insurance industry with the implementation of no-fault insurance. The study explained that based on customer feedback and current needs in society the insurance industry needed to change and as a result no-fault insurance was implemented and still exists today. Policy recommendations in the industrial agriculture industry has changed how trees are harvested reducing deforestation and the negative affect it has on climate change. The policy recommendations where written based on years of research and political pressure; however, the existing changes that have come out of this policy has improved the environment for Ethiopia and the world as a whole (Korhomen-Kurki, et al., 2019). Policy papers focus on improvement which often revolves around a change in the thought process of how something is currently being done.

McNie, Parris, and Sarewitz (2016) explained that change is difficult to accomplish and that a detailed plan based on research findings needs to be created, shared, and agreed upon in order to actively effect change. Policy papers are well written plans that are formed out of the results of research and lay the groundwork for change. Theory and practice are often brought together through a policy or plan which often facilitate change through a detailed explanation of the findings from one or many studies (Jackson & Burch, 2016). A policy paper is the culmination of the findings of a study and the call to action that results from these findings. West and Sheppard (2016) explained

that policy is an organized call to action that is grounded in the results of multiple studies and organized into a single cohesive plan. Research creates policy recommendation, which have a definite and focused purpose to initiate change in current procedures, habits, and situations.

A policy paper may be used to focus on a specific policy, offering clear recommendations so that policy makers can make conscious decisions about needed change (Gaber & Gaber, 2017), in this case the implementation of choice based professional development experiences for middle level teachers. The information in this policy paper provides meaningful ways to improve district provided professional development and solve the problem of middle level teachers believing they are not exposed to effective professional learning experiences. Policy papers make recommendations that are viewed as best practice with the interests of all stakeholders at the center of the policy. Hatvani-Kovacs, Bush, Sharifi, and Boland (2018) agreed that policy papers are often written with the intent to address the needs of a particular group regarding a specific issue or problem. Policy is written based on the findings of a study and offer clear and concise solutions to an identified problem. Policy writing is evidence-based solutions to an existing problem written in a detailed manner with the intent of creating change for the better (Dabanch, et al., 2019). Policy papers create a clear direction for change so that stakeholders, administrators, and district leaders can make an informed decision regarding professional development. Engbers and Rubin (2018) explained that policy papers are theoretical ideas based on research and the findings of research and are written for the explicit purpose of informing the decision-making

process. Policy papers serve to align the thought process of a group or governing body to instigate change.

According to James (2016), district stakeholders and school officials are the pipeline to adopting and enforcing new policies for the district. The policy paper, written for the benefit of district stakeholders and school officials, includes a description of the specific professional development approaches that middle level teachers indicated would help to provide effective professional learning experiences. Professional development is a training session designed to focus on a specific concept to improve the education process (Almuntasheri, Gillies & Wright, 2016). The education process can be in the areas of curriculum, teaching, and assessment.

A recent study conducted by LaBelle (2017) revealed that policy papers can be effective for a particular group of individuals. This policy paper will benefit teachers at Middle School A and perhaps other middle level teachers. Policy papers are written for the purpose of providing insight to a problem and providing solutions through a persuasive argument while justifying the policy recommendations presented in the paper and to allow the policy paper to act as a decision making tool and generate a call to action for the district stakeholders (Young & Quinn, 2002). According to Yoshida and Van De Walt (2018), a policy paper is a tool used to help explain information to a group or individuals. Policy papers have been used to effect change in education, agriculture, business, medicine, law and many other professions.

Policy Papers and Policy Recommendations in Education

The literature contains many position papers and policy recommendations in the field of education. Hardy and Woodcock (2015) analyzed multiple policy papers regarding inclusive policy in education. They recommend that many European countries should adopt the United States model for academic inclusion. The recommendation made by Hardy and Woodcock was that European nations should change inclusion policy to allow students with disabilities to learn in the least restrictive environment, a practice used in the United States. Connor, Honan, and Snowball (2017) wrote a position paper to argue the need for an instrument to measure literacy and numeracy achievement for kindergartners in Australia. The authors recommendation was to use an assessment solution known as the UK Phonics Check to measure the Year 1 (kindergarten) students' achievement (Connor, Honan, & Snowball). De Beer, Steyn, and Vos (2018) used a policy paper to "explain the reciprocal relationship between education and modern society." They suggested that the education system will differentiate learning for students so that they can become contributing members of society; whereas society is accountable for providing funding and support to the educational agencies (der Beer, Steyn, Vos, 2018). Education has been shaped by policy throughout time, policy brings about change that is often needed and wanted.

Policy can be written in an attempt to save money. Financial burden is often the struggle for many school districts. Burkett and Smith (2016) wrote a position paper recommending that schools use virtually simulated laboratories to supplement learning instead of substituting hands on laboratories to reduce the cost of laboratory materials and

increase student learning. English (2017) wrote a position paper to address the multifaceted learning styles and interests of learners at the elementary and middle school levels explaining that STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) needed the arts added to it to support the equitable learning of all students, thus creating STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math). Through a position paper, De Carvalho (2016) suggested the restructuring and reconceptualization of the training programs for science teachers to take into account pedagogy for diversity and superdiverse classrooms. The goal of a policy paper is to effect positive change, to realign the thought process, and to help facilitate decision making.

Policy Papers and Policy Recommendations in Other Fields

In a similar manner to how policy papers have been used to support and recommend changes in the educational profession, other professions have also used them to initiate change. Hellberg and Knutsson (2018) wrote a policy paper based on the biopolitical theory to examine the sustainable development of the global neoliberal government. They argued against the clear divide between affluent mass procurers and the underprivileged subsistence -level populaces and advocate for biopolitical homogenization (Hellberg & Knutsson, 2018). Rajtar (2016) used a position paper to investigate the medical environment of Germany by studying the religious beliefs of Jehovah's Witness patients and their position on refusing blood transfusions. Blandizzi, Gatta, Scarpignato, and Zullo (2016) developed a position paper to argue the advantages and possible physical damages of acid suppression in proton pump inhibitor medications. They recommended that although there are potential side effects proton pump inhibitors

are irreplaceable in the management and prescription of acid related ailments (Blandizzi, Gatta, Scarpignato, & Zullo, 2016). Well written, carefully researched policy papers are powerful documents that often facilitate change.

Project Description

The project developed for this doctoral study is a policy paper aimed at assisting education leaders at the district and building level recognize the need to provide more effective professional development for middle level teachers and suggesting policy that would provide the foundation for a workable solution to the problem. Providing the district policy suggestions will encourage a more sustainable approach to improving professional development at the study site. Findings indicated that middle level teachers view effective professional development as offering choices, differentiated instruction, being relevant to the classroom, and professional development experiences outside the district. The policy paper includes recommendations that call for the district to provide professional development in a conference style format, thus providing learning options, instruction at various levels, experiences that connect to the classroom and the opportunity for teachers to attend outside the district professional development. The literature review and the findings from the study informed the policy paper. The objective of the policy paper is to help ensure that the problem of poor district provided professional development was addressed in a sustainable manner. Implementation of the project will include the presentation of the information to the stakeholders to inform them of the research findings and encourage them to adopt the recommendations contained within the policy paper.

To achieve the widest possible support for the policy recommendations, all stakeholders will receive invitations to the presentation. Central office leaders including the Superintendent, Director of Human Resources, Director of Curriculum and Planning, Director of Operations, and the Professional Development Director will be invited because they have the authority to implement the suggested policy at the district level which will include all five middle schools. School Board members will receive invitations to the presentation because they have the ability to suggest and recommend to the district leadership team the recommended policy be implemented. Building leadership at the study site will receive invitations to the presentation because they have the ability and authority to implement many of the recommendations at the building level, excluding the ability to attend outside professional development. Middle level teachers at the study site will receive invitations to the presentations because they would be directly impacted if the policy recommendations are instituted as their professional development experiences would improve. Even if the district and building leadership were unwilling to implement any of the recommended policies, teachers could choose to attend professional development outside the district on their own without financial support from the district. During the presentation, research findings and how those findings informed the policy paper will be shared with the stakeholders. They will all receive a copy of the policy paper and be provided the opportunity to ask questions.

Project Evaluation Plan

The policy paper provides recommendations for the district to provide more effective professional development experiences to the middle level teachers. Three

primary stakeholder groups could provide meaningful evaluation of the project: (1) district leaders, more specifically the Superintendent, Director of Curriculum and Instruction, and Professional Development Director, who hold jurisdiction over policy development; (2) Principal and Assistant Principal at Middle School A, and (3) middle level teachers at Middle School A. Gathering feedback from each of these stakeholder groups will offer insight into the quality of the recommendations found in the policy paper and the probability that they will be adopted and implemented. The stakeholders will complete an evaluation at the conclusion of the presentation of the policy paper in which they will provide feedback. Evaluations may be viewed as an assessment when they are focused on the results at the end of a program (Fastring et.al, 2018). The purpose of this project is to improve district provided professional development for middle level teachers at Middle School A. The policy recommendations will be evaluated upon the completion of the policy presentation. Evaluation of the policy plan will consist of a questionnaire.

Upon the conclusion of the presentation of the policy paper, participants will receive an evaluation questionnaire to assess the effectiveness of the presentation, the depth and explanation of the information provided concerning the policy recommendations, and areas for improvement. There will be a section on the questionnaire which will allow stakeholders to provide feedback relating to the quality of the recommendations found in the policy paper and the probability that these recommendations will be adopted and implemented. This assessment will help aid the

process of making any needed revisions to the policy paper. Participant questions will be addressed at the end of the presentation

Project Implications

This project will contribute to creating district policy that provides middle level teachers with effective professional development which can improve their teaching practice. When the recommendations are fully implemented the teachers will gain 21st century teaching skills, new teaching strategies, and knowledge for effective classroom instruction through which student learning should increase. As Hill (2016) suggested effective professional development enhances student learning, which increases the opportunity for social change. Effective professional development will provide teachers with the 21st century teaching skills which in turn will provide students with a clearer vision of where and how they fit into society.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

The findings of this project study provided information that may be beneficial to the stakeholders of Middle School A and the school district that Middle School A is a part of. The findings showed that district provided professional development was not of the quality or effectiveness that the middle level teachers believed they need to be successful and to meet the needs of the students at Middle School A.

Project Strengths and Limitations

Project Strengths

The greatest strength of this project is that it makes the case for continued and ongoing effective choice-based professional development for middle level teachers and encourages the acceptance of district level policy to ensure that such professional development is provided and viable. The policy paper includes discussion of how professional development experiences are essential to the growth and development of all teachers. According to Mohammadi and Moradi (2017), well designed professional development can help teachers to become highly effective in the subject areas they teach as they will become core subject experts. A conclusion of this study is that middle level teachers need to have the opportunity to leverage effective choice-based professional development experiences on an ongoing basis throughout the school year, so they can remain effective in the classroom and motivated to be life-long learners outside the classroom. Beisiegel, Mitchell, and Hill (2018) explained in their study that when teachers are provided with choices, they take ownership over their own learning and become more engaged. Choice-based professional development will help to motivate and

excite middle level teachers to attend professional development experiences provided by the district, thus improving their classroom practices. The policy paper I developed has four recommendations that are suitable for improving district provided professional development: (a) developing choice-based professional development experiences, (b) developing professional development that is differentiated to meet the learning needs of the teachers, (c) developing professional development that is relevant to the classroom, and (d) providing the opportunity for teachers to attend outside or non-district provided professional development experiences.

Looking at the recommendations of the policy paper, these practices when used to plan professional development for the middle level teachers will provide learning experiences that will motivate, invigorate and excite the middle level teachers and in turn improve student learning. This policy paper can serve as a guide for the district as professional development experiences are planned for the middle level teachers. I created this policy paper with idea that it would impact change within the local school district, more specifically at the middle school level.

Project Limitations

Despite the policy papers strengths, the paper is still limited in that identifying the need for effective choice-based professional development is only the first step in addressing the problem of poorly planned professional development experiences at Middle School A. The professional development director may not be willing to focus on improving district provided professional development as outlined in the policy paper. Furthermore, the local district may not be in favor of the slight additional time it takes to

plan choice-based professional development experiences. Opperman, Liebig, Bowling, and Johnson (2018) explained that often larger companies conduct a cost analysis regarding the effect of a designed professional development scenario and rule it out before it is even tried as a result of the cost analysis. Teachers may also resist the initial change in professional development as they will be asked to volunteer to prepare and present learning experiences for the rest of the district in order to provide choices. Lack of support at the district leadership level may prolong the implementation process.

Limited resources may delay the timeline for implementing of choice-based professional development. To begin the choice-based professional development process there should be money allocated to allow for teachers to attend nondistrict provided professional development. This allocation of funds should also include monies for presenters that are brought in to present as keynote speakers for district provided professional development. The potential of limited financial resources may alter the scheduling for professional development sessions at the school under study. Additional limitations may include time and personnel to accomplish choice-based professional development planning and to accomplish this objective.

Poor planning on behalf of the professional development director would cause the implementation of choice-based professional development sessions to be limited. The professional development director may have a different idea about what the middle level teachers need to support their growth, development, and overall improvement of student learning. Adequate planning could also present problems in the adoption of choice-based professional development. Choice-based professional development is often a combination

of selective learning and collaboration and if not planned well can become an exercise in frustration instead of the opportunity for growth and learning it is meant to be (Jackson & Markarin, 2018). The roles of all administrators and teachers involved in the planning of choice-based professional development required by new policy should be clearly defined and aligned with each person's area of expertise. When administrators take on all the responsibility and do not delegate the many tasks of planning effective choice-based professional development, they introduce additional limitations. According to Jackson and Markarin, the challenge for executing an effective plan involves educators, administrators and teachers, using the necessary resources for executing the plan. Furthermore, when teachers are not involved in the planning of professional development, they may not feel invested in the process and are less likely to be motivated to attend.

To address potential limitations of this project, district and building leadership will be essential in establishing a positive climate for change at the school. To create a positive climate for change they will need to commit to investing the time, human resources, and financial resources needed to implement the policy to fidelity. The district leadership team will also need to develop a vision and mission for implementing the new policy and articulate them clearly and frequently to the professional development director and building leadership team.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

This study addressed the local problem of middle level teachers not receiving effective district provided professional development. The project focused on the need to

adopt policy to provide effective choice-based professional development opportunities to augment their teaching practices. Professional development is currently conducted once a quarter throughout the school year. An alternative approach to presenting choice-based professional development is to develop a program where teachers could attend courses of their choice provided by the district after school. Another alternative approach to the presentation of choice-based professional development is to include the entire district in a large-scale professional learning experience, by including high school and elementary teachers there may be more teachers willing to present and keynote speakers are experienced by all teachers.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

In this section, I reflect on my development as a scholar, project developer and evaluator, and leader.

Scholarship

Scholarship, to me, is the process by which students learn at a higher level. The initial steps of this program have prepared me to understand the process of research and the different methods which can be used to address the local problem. This doctoral project study has taught me the importance of collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing data to make informed decisions. The program's design has also given me the skills necessary to view topics, read research, and understand them on a scholarly level. As a scholar practitioner, I am now able to engage in a deeper understanding of problems and concerns that affect the profession of education. The program has also provided me with

a broader and stronger set of skills that can be used for collecting and analyzing data and then using it to foster social change.

I learned how to conduct scholarly research during my doctoral journey. Early in the program I was faced with the challenge of writing in a scholarly manner. This was a difficult challenge for me due to a weakness in understanding what a scholarly voice was meant to sound like. I was provided the opportunity, through the program, to take a scholarly writing course to overcome this problem; however, I opted to seek help from fellow students who I met at one of the seminars. The ability to meet and work with fellow students provided me the opportunity to overcome the barrier of not being able to write with a scholarly voice. With the help of a few classmates, I was able to improve my writing, proceed with my coursework and complete my assessments. I learned that research material needed to be supported by peer-reviewed articles written within the last 5 years. I also came to understand that the articles being used for research support should also be research-based in the same field of study.

The scholarship built into this doctoral program provided me with the opportunity to grow as a learner and expand my skills as a rookie researcher. Thanks to this program I am now able to identify a local problem in my field of study, determine a purpose, create and develop research questions, collect and analyze data, and create a presentation of the findings. I have gained knowledge and learned how to use research to improve the current situation in area of interest or concern. I have also learned that it is important for district and building officials to buy into the research so that they will work to improve or correct the problem.

The qualitative research design provided the opportunity for me to conduct research using an interview protocol and interview sessions to collect data. I was able to develop a policy paper based on the results found in the research findings of this study. The project suggests a policy for choice-based professional development be adopted as a tool to meet the needs of the middle level teachers. With the project, there are recommendations for the district leadership team and professional development director to consider as to what choice-based professional development entails and requires to be effective.

The scholarship, research process, project development, and leadership for change has opened my eyes to scholarly work and the importance of being an agent of change. This doctoral process has caused me to begin delving deeper into my work and the work of others as it relates to building a capacity to impact social change in my community. The skills I have gained have given me the research tools needed and the confidence in myself to address topics of concern and to lead professional meetings in support of making changes needed to make a difference. Additionally, I will seek out opportunities to serve in an official capacity on boards and committees and to procure an adjunct teaching position to use my acquired knowledge and research skills to benefit the local community and impact social change.

Project Development and Evaluation

As I was developing the project for this doctoral program, I wanted to create something that would be useful, practical, and effective for middle level teachers. Based on the results of my doctoral research, I knew I had to do something that would improve

the district-provided professional development in a manner that would motivate and meet the needs of the teachers. I learned that education is a calling, not just a profession and that self-efficacy often plays a role in how we see ourselves. To this end, I came to realize that it is important that one feels confident in his or her job and that he is respected as a professional. I developed a professional development policy that is rooted in teacher choice and will motivate teachers to attend, invigorate teachers as they return to the classroom, and increase their knowledge and skills. I learned that effective professional development is based in teacher choice, differentiated, relevant to the classroom, is sustainable, data driven, and high quality so that teachers can learn about 21st century teaching skills and other effective teaching strategies.

The policy paper will be distributed to all district stakeholders with the understanding that effective choice-based professional development will be the tool used to meet the needs of the middle level teachers. The immediate and long-term impact of the recommendations should be monitored to evaluate the effectiveness of the policy recommendations. My role in developing this policy paper has extended to me the privilege of working with the professional development director at the district level and it has been shared with me that the district may consider some of the recommendations for implementation.

Leadership and Change

An effective leader possesses the ability to initiate change. Effective leaders have a collection of skills and knowledge that enables him or her to influence those around him. Effective leaders have a vision and draw on their personal passions to influence

others (Valiga, 2019). One of the many things this doctoral program has taught me is how to be an effective leader. I learned how to be an effective leader by learning to plan effectively, collect and analyze data. During the interview process, while collecting data, I was afforded the opportunity to work on and improve my leadership skills through the interview process itself. Once the data was collected I again had the opportunity to apply my leadership skills by analyzing and interpreting the data to make informed decisions by developing a policy to improve district provided professional development. Developing policy for the middle level teachers' professional development provided me with the opportunity to think as a leader. As I collected and synthesized the data from the interviews, I felt the need to create a policy that would generate change in how district-provided professional development was presented so that the teachers would be motivated to attend and would grow and develop while in attendance. The knowledge and skills gained from this doctoral program have made me realize that as a leader, I can make a greater impact in my community. This project study has provided me the opportunity to view myself through a different lens and see myself as a future leader by creating policy to improve district-provided professional development. The policy created for this study offers recommendations that will hopefully inspire teachers to attend professional development and excite them as they return to their classrooms. An effective leader needs to develop policy that changes current district professional development to a professional development experience that will enhance the teachers' knowledge and skills to promote academic success of all scholars, teachers and students alike.

Reflection on Importance of the Work

The overall importance to this research was to create social change within the local school that is experiencing a problem with professional development for the middle level teachers that is provided by the school district. The problem with the current professional development model has become apparent as the students' state test scores have been declining as teachers are no longer motivated to attend nor focused on learning while in attendance of the current district provided learning experiences. The problem with the current professional development at Middle School A is that it is offered in a large group setting, is not connected to relevant classroom matters, and there is no choice for the teachers as to what they will learn. Implementation of choice-based professional development will help to foster teacher learning that is directly related to their subject areas, provide choice as to what to learn, it will be differentiated for all levels of learners, and it will be made possible to attend non-district learning experiences. The objective of the policy paper is to create change within the district that will motivate teachers to attend professional development, engage them while they are there, and provide learning experiences that meet their needs, thus improving their teaching strategies and in turn providing relevant learning experiences for their students.

These efforts may lead to improvements in district provided professional development across all grade levels, not just middle level. Teachers who are motivated and committed to learning new ideas and new strategies take a substantial leap toward the betterment of themselves, others, and their students (Smylie & Eckert, 2018). The social change that results from this project study has the potential to improve the local

community as the teachers return to the classroom with 21st century teaching skills, the students will leave the middle school better prepared for high school (Rast, Hogg, & Randsley, 2018). As the local school district becomes aware of the benefits of choice-based professional development, district leadership and district stakeholders may be more willing to increase the investment in teacher learning.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

The potential impact of social change for this project study will be to improve the overall quality of district-provided professional development in the local school district. The organization may find benefit from the findings of this study as it relates to improving teacher quality through the implementation of choice-based professional development. Teacher quality is often referred to as having the applicable skills necessary to ensure learning occurs within the classroom (Goldhaber, Quince, & Theobald, 2018). Providing teacher's with choice in regard to their professional learning may increase their motivation to attend learning experiences and their ability to teach with a purpose in the classroom. A recommendation for future study is to conduct this study with middle level teachers from several schools within the same district.

Conclusion

This project focused on the local problem of middle level teachers' not receiving effective district-provided professional development. The purpose of the research was to find out the perceptions of middle level teachers regarding effective professional development. The findings revealed that the middle level teachers believed that effective professional development is grounded in teacher choice, differentiated instruction,

relevance to the classroom, and the ability to attend outside the district learning experiences. The findings were presented in a narrative form to all stakeholders.

I have provided information about this study that began with the strengths of this project, scholarship, development of this project, implications of the project, and implication for change. As I reflected on this project in its entirety, I realized that conducting research has given me experience that can make a difference in my community and society. My contribution to making change and impacting society has made me struggle with time management and scholarly writing; however, it has been worthwhile. I am now able to pass along valuable information to the district stakeholders that has the potential to be implemented and impact the teachers and eventually the students.

I suggest that district leadership and the building leadership team consider the recommendations suggested in the policy paper. The findings in this study may benefit the middle level teachers of the local school district. The information may be shared during planning times, faculty meetings, conferences, workshops and professional development sessions.

My doctoral journey at Walden has been eye-opening, challenging, and educational. Being provided the opportunity to identify a problem and then delve deeper into the problem, collect data, and learn to interpret and understand the findings has improved my skills as a graduate student and a leader. I will continue to read literature that presents information on effective professional development, effective leadership, social change, and the field of education. I will also continue to embark on research

opportunities that pertain to my field of interest and pursue an adjunct teaching position in the field of education, so that I may continue to effect social change in the field of education.

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Appendix A: The Project

Effective Professional Development as Perceived by Middle Level Educators

Walden University

A Policy Paper

By

Justin Turner

Introduction

The policy recommendations were developed from a research study which investigated teachers' perceptions of effective professional development. The policy recommendations include the following:

- Professional development opportunities that provide choices to the teachers regarding what learning experiences they attend.
- Professional development experiences that are differentiated to facilitate the teachers needs and improve skill transfer to the classroom.
- Professional development experiences that are relative to the classroom.
- The expansion of professional development experiences beyond that of district provided learning experiences.

To understand why middle level teachers' perceptions matter, it is important to define what or who a middle level teacher is. Middle level teachers are teachers who are prepared to teach students between the ages of 10-14 and must be prepared to develop the cognitive, physical, social-emotional, and character development needs of adolescents (Howell, Faulkner, Cook, Miller & Thompson, 2016). Middle level teachers must be able to provide learning experiences for adolescents that are “developmentally responsive, challenging, empowering, and equitable” (National Middle School Association, 2010, p. 13).

The process of implementation was also given considerable attention to process the policy options. The findings were essential in determining the action to be taken, so all stakeholders and district officials are given the opportunity to review the data for

implementation. The stakeholders and district officials have the option to accept or not accept the suggested recommendations. This policy paper provides information for the local school district officials to account for policy recommendations to improve district provided professional development experiences. The recommended policy suggests that professional development be implemented by district officials and a committee of teachers. The concern that exists with the current system is the lack of quality professional development provided by the district resulting in declining state tests scores for the students.

Implementation of Effective Professional Development

To present effective professional development it is vital that an understanding of what effective professional development is exists. Professional development is a requirement in the field of education for the purpose of improving instruction and teachers approach to classroom instruction. Effective professional development is essential to modern teachers because it is an opportunity for them to gain the important and complex 21st century teaching skills needed to meet the complex learning needs of students today. Complex forms of teaching are needed to develop student competencies in the areas of content mastery, critical thinking, problem solving, time management, effective communication and collaboration, and self-direction. Effective professional development is needed for teachers to learn, refine, and master the instructional strategies needed to teach such skills. According to Egert, Fukkink, and Eckhardt (2018), professional development is a strategy used to facilitate teacher growth and development throughout their career.

Professional development can also be used as a model to demonstrate new teaching strategies and various approaches to successful instruction. Modeling instruction provides educators with a clear picture of what best practices are and how these newly learned strategies should look. Modeling can be in the form of lesson plans, unit plans, student work samples, observations of colleagues, and video recordings of accomplished teachers. Modeling supports a teacher's ability to visualize what best practices look like and helps to support teachers as these new strategies are implemented in the classroom. Professional development as a model for instruction has been connected to building teacher's pedagogical, cognitive, interpersonal, and collaborative skills (Kiemer, Groschner, Kunter, & Seidel, 2018). Effective professional development is essential to teacher improvement, progress, and positive professional identity.

Professional development experiences need to be matched to the needs of the teachers. According to Qian, Hambrusch, Yadav, and Gretter (2018) when designing professional development experiences, the backgrounds and needs of the teachers must be understood, when we fail to gain this understanding, often we fail to design effective professional development. Teacher input is necessary for the planning of effective professional development. Professional development that is focused on specific content curriculum and on teaching strategies that align with this specific content creates teacher learning that is focused and supported on the classroom in which they function. In the science classroom, for example, professional development may be structured much like the science classroom; whereas, a new lab or teaching strategy is being introduced and the teachers go through the process and procedure just as their students will. This type of

learning experience fully supports the teachers in the realm of which they function on daily basis. When district officials and building administration allow for teachers to have a voice in or lead professional development often this experience is effective and the teachers learn and the result is that students are positively affected (Boatright, Miels, & Hendricks, 2014).

Teachers are required to attend professional development; however, they have different needs, strengths, and backgrounds which require different content in their professional development. All teachers need professional development in order to thrive in the profession; however, teachers need different skill sets at different stages of their careers. Providing choice in professional development is a motivator for many teachers to attend professional development experiences, choice also allows teachers at varied levels of their career to learn at the level needed for improvement (Jones, Hope, & Adams, 2018). Choice-based professional development can be offered in many different formats ranging from lunch and learns, quarterly learning experiences, webinars, and conferences. By providing options and choice ownership over personnel learning is given to the teachers creating a sense of professionalism that is deserved. Providing choice in professional development positions teachers as competent professionals and will increase teacher investment in professional learning (Saclarides & Lubienski, 2018). Choice-based professional development provides personalized learning experiences that are better aligned with teacher needs, interest, goals, and learning styles which makes it more profitable in the long run. Professional development is not meant to teach teachers how to teach; however, it is meant to build off the knowledge they already have. Choice-based

learning experiences give teachers the ability to remain focused on their content, to learn new strategies and important content to remain relevant in the classroom.

Effective professional development allows teachers to decide what and how they will learn (Knight, 2007; Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; & Saclarides & Lubienski, 2018). There are several benefits to choice-based professional development because many teachers know exactly what they need. When professional development allows teachers to meet their needs, they see the learning experience as having value. When professional development does not meet the teacher's needs, they perceive it as a waste of their time. The key is to provide choices to the teachers, choice in what they learn about and choice in how they learn it. Providing effective, meaningful, and differentiated professional development is vital to the education profession.

Professional development for teachers should not be a one-size-fits all format, but if instruction is intentionally differentiated teachers receive instruction at a level that matches their needs (Van Geel, et al., 2019). For years educators have been getting punished for things that they have no accountability for, or they are being re-instructed on skills they have already learned and mastered. Professional development must stop meeting the needs of the few and turning off the masses, it is time educators are treated as they are being instructed to treat their students. As teachers grow and improve they impact hundreds to thousands of students that they will teach throughout their career; therefore, teachers should have guidance from professionals who have knowledge and understanding of the content they teach. Strickland (2009) explained that effectively differentiated professional development leads to teacher improvements in both content

and pedagogy and has a positive impact on the classroom in terms of both teaching strategies and student achievement.

The implementation of effective choice based professional development must gain the support of all district stakeholders. It has been established through research that the educational system in which the professional development experience is being presented has bearing on its effectiveness. Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) explained that teaching and learning both within the schools at the district level can limit the effectiveness of professional development. They continue by exposing the ineffectiveness of professional development is often related to inadequate financial resources and materials (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017). Professional development has to be deemed important enough to allocate proper funding toward it to generate an effective and sustained learning experience. Standards should be adopted for professional development that will guide the design of the experience and the funding for it. Technology based learning opportunities should be designed and built into the district's plan to support professional learning. Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017) stated that effective professional development must be considered an essential component of teaching and learning that supports students in the development of the 21st century skills needed to succeed in college and beyond.

The first step in the implementation of effective professional development is to solicit for participants to form the professional development committee. This committee will represent the middle level teaching body for the school district as professional development is planned. The professional development committee will consist of the

professional development director and at least one teacher from each middle school building, at least one teacher from each grade level (6th-8th grade), at least one non-core subject teacher, a foreign language teacher, and at least one administrator from each building. The committee will be responsible for determining the focus of the professional development sessions, recruiting teachers from the district and from outside the district to host learning sessions during district professional development days, to procure keynote speakers, and to create the schedule for the event. The committee will select the four dates that professional development will be held and will plan the schedule for each day. Professional development should be planned from the inside out, using the experts in the buildings, the teachers. With teachers as members of the planning committee they have a feel for what the building needs and what the teachers may need making it easier to plan effective and relevant learning experiences. Effective professional development is often considered the path to teacher success (Arifin & Rasid, 2017).

The exposure to effective choice-based professional development is critical to the growth and development of the middle level teachers at Middle School A. According to Bates and Morgan (2018) effective professional development equates to highly motivated teachers which translates to improved student success. Teacher professional development is challenging, but when done well teachers and students improve (Bates & Morgan, 2018). The teachers understand that effective professional development is the vehicle needed to support their growth and development as teachers no matter their experience. The suggested design of effective choice based professional development for middle level teachers will focus on choices in regard to what sessions to attend, differentiation in

the sense that there will be enough options that teachers can learn at their level, training that is relevant to the classroom, and the removal of district installed barriers to outside professional learning experiences. According to Darling-Hammond (2010) teachers judge professional development to be most valuable when it provides opportunities to do “hands-on” work that builds their knowledge of academic content and how to teach it to their students, and when it takes into account the local context (p. 227). Teachers are professionals and should be treated as such, providing them the opportunity to self-select the professional learning experiences they believe they need to improve is only appropriate.

Teacher participation in professional development provides invaluable information for success with instruction and the development of individual professional identity. Egert, Fukkik and Eckhardt (2018) mentioned that teachers are able to identify their own errors and quickly find solutions when they are active participants in professional development. Teacher participation in professional development is vital to the profession because it enables educators the ability to develop the knowledge and skills they need to address the varied learning challenges faced by their students. Professional development is not effective unless it creates change for the better in current teaching strategies or meets a particular need of the teachers attending. When teachers choose which learning sessions to attend they are invested in the learning process and are engaged in the learning and they become active participants. Golombek and Johnson (2017) explained that teacher engagement in professional development provides the skills and knowledge needed for intellectual growth and personal improvement.

This policy paper recommends the implementation of effective professional development experiences that function more like a learning conference providing greater opportunities for choice and teacher growth. The professional development planning will include local school officials and teachers from various grade levels, this will create buy-in from the teachers and improve teacher motivation to attend district provided professional development.

Recommendation A: Choices

District officials including the professional development director should focus their initial attention on creating professional development experiences that offer middle level teachers choices regarding what learning experiences they attend. In a study conducted by Thibodeaux, Harapnuik, and Cummings (2019) it was determined that when choice is offered during learning experiences students of all levels, including adults, feel they have ownership over their own learning, and this positively affects the learning process. As learners' teachers need to drive their own learning, be able to connect their learning to their passions and interests and reflect on themselves as learners and as professionals. It is important to provide adult learners with choices and just enough challenge to make the learning relevant and accessible. As professionals teachers all need something different when it comes to professional development, the challenge is to figure out what the teachers need and provide them the options to self-select the learning experience they need most or are most interested in. Professional development experiences should offer teachers several options as to what they will spend their time learning about. Professional Conferences provide a list of session options in advance to

attendees so that they can think about and decide where to spend their time learning.

District professional development needs to mimic this and offer middle level teachers professional development options or classes that can be reviewed and selected.

The participants of this study suggested that the district offer general education professional development courses that focus on how to use certain programs or technology, while offering courses on current grading practices such as standards based grading, and subject specific professional development. According to Mirriahi, Jovanovic, Dawson, Gasevic, and Pardo (2018) one of the keys to successful learning experiences is the learners ability to select a learning strategy or experience that is optimal for him or her based on their current situation and more importantly their ability to change these experiences as their needs change. District provided professional development should focus on the following principles for creating choice-based professional learning experiences:

1. Professional development should be based in choice, teachers appreciate options. Choice allows teachers to self-assess and determine their own personal priorities.
2. Learning experiences need to be flexible to accommodate teachers at different levels, essentially the learning needs to be differentiated to meet the teachers where they are in the learning process.
3. Professional development needs to be scaffolded in a manner that allows teachers to take small steps with the new material they are learning. It

takes time to change practice and choice-based learning allows for this type of incremental learning.

4. If the district provides choice-based learning experiences the teachers need to be held accountable for their own personal learning. Additionally, this cannot be a one and done professional development experience this style learning needs to be sustained so that teachers can gain the confidence in themselves to choose what to learn.

Most professional development today is ineffective because it does not change teaching practices. Professional development often falls short for several reasons one being a lack of interest because the experience is forced on the teachers (Liu & Hallinger, 2017).

Additional reasons for ineffective professional development are lack of sustained support, inappropriate timing, conflicting messages, unrealistic expectations, and lack of feedback (Whitworth & Chu, 2015). District stakeholders and professional development planners must realize that teaching is inherently complex and nuanced and to plan effective learning experiences they need to promote empowerment of the teachers to choose which learning experiences fit their needs the best. It is not uncommon for 10 teachers of the same grade level and similar experience to need several different things and the ability to select the learning experience that meets their individual needs and then share with each other what is learned is invaluable to the profession (Mirriahi, Jovanovic, Dawson, Gasevic, & Pardo, 2018).

In order to offer choices to the middle level teachers at the study site the district needs to change how professional development is presented. Below are several suggestions that will improve the delivery of district provided professional development:

1. Create a collection of classes that are taught throughout the school year either in a traditional classroom or an on-line format that could meet the many needs of the middle level teachers. These classes could include technology-based classes focused on Schoology or Google Classroom, formative and summative assessment usage and creation, social media usage in the classroom, character education programs for advisory time, as well as collaboration time to create common assessments or projects. A study conducted by Powell and Bodur (2019) disclosed that teachers demonstrated exceptional growth when they attended professional development that was authentic, relevant, useful, collaborative and reflective in nature.
2. Conference format professional development. Here the district arranges to have a keynote speaker initiate the learning experience and then district leaders present the district agenda and disseminate important district information. Following this the teachers are provided a list of sessions that they can attend. This provides them choice in what they learn and motivates the teachers to attend professional learning. The presenters can be teachers from within the district or neighboring districts.

3. Institute lunch and learn experiences, these are 20-30 minute voluntary learning experiences where lunch is provided and the teacher selects which session to attend. Benefits to this type of learning is that it makes an excellent use of time, brief informal meetings that provide quick access to the direct point of the learning, teacher moral is increased.

Providing teacher with choices for their learning increases their engagement and motivation to attend professional development. Think-Tank, professional development provided by the district, during the summer only is an excellent example of choice-based professional development. Although, Think-Tank is offered in the summer and teachers are off for the summer, attendance is high and motivation to attend is increased. Increased desire to attend professional development translates to better classroom teachers as they improve their classroom skills and are excited to try new strategies and lessons in the classroom. In a study conducted by Power and Goodnough (2019) it was determined that when teachers believe their schools and districts to be more supportive of teachers selecting the learning experiences they attend, teachers are more willing and motivated to persist and use in the classroom what they learned during professional development. Providing choices for professional development increases teacher learning and improves their classroom practices, in turn improving student learning. This evident in the district under study during the summer when optional district professional development is offered in an small group settings and teachers have the option to sign up for what they want to learn about.

Recommendation B: Differentiated Professional Development

A common finding from the study was that the participating teachers at Middle School A, at the time of the study, felt that district-provided professional development was provided at a level that did not facilitate learning, but created confusion and frustration. Professional development should be differentiated, teachers are expected to differentiate their lesson plans, then it only stands to reason that professional learning should be differentiated to meet the various needs of the teachers. Professional development must meet the teachers where they are in their learning so that they can synthesize the new material into usable strategies for their classrooms. McKeown, Brindle, Harris, Graham, Collins, and Brown (2016) explained that differentiating instruction involves personalizing and adapting content, process, and the learning environment to meet the individual needs of the learner. When differentiation occurs, teachers are more comfortable attending professional development and leave with information that translates to new classroom lessons, strategies in a variety of areas, and a renewed vigor for teaching. In a recent study conducted by Abu-Tineh and Sideq (2018) it was found that professional development that has the most impact on teachers and students focuses on the needs of the teacher at the time of the professional development and is presented in a manner that allows learning to occur at the individuals level and is sustained over time. This type of professional development occurs only in the summers for this district. Summer professional development is differentiated because the groups are much smaller and the administrators are more able to facilitate the different needs of the attending teachers. Differentiated professional development provides the learning

environment needed by teachers at various levels in their careers, it facilitates engagement in the learning experiences and motivates teachers to be more effective in the classroom.

Differentiated professional development can be presented by offering beginners classes and intermediate classes, especially when addressing technology needs of the teachers. The district could offer a level I class in the fall and a level II class in the spring or in a conference style learning experience both classes could be offered at different times during the day. New skills need to be taught to teachers just as they are taught to students, they need to be taught in steps (Sprott, 2019). Sprott (2019) continued with the notion that effective professional development scaffolds teachers much like teachers do in their classrooms for struggling students, when this occurs teachers leave the experience feeling as they have gained usable knowledge for their classrooms. Smaller groups instead of whole building professional development would be able to meet these standards. When learning occurs in the small group setting the teacher or administrator has the time and flexibility to address individual teachers needs.

Differentiated professional development also applies to the skill level of the teacher. Sometimes teachers need to learn differently based on where they are in their careers. There is alignment between goals, teaching strategies, and the amount of time spent in the classroom, teachers in various stages of their professional career require different things of professional development (van Geel, et al., 2019). Early in a teaching career the professional development focuses on pedagogy, content, and classroom management; later in that same career professional development needs to be more

focused and purposeful. Professional development is often differentiated when teacher experience is considered during the planning of the professional development experience, teachers at different stages of their careers require different things, when these needs are met differentiation is achieved (Choy & Chua, 2019). This is another benefit of conference style choice-based professional development is that there are enough sessions that the teachers are able to find a learning experience that matches with their experience and needs.

Recommendation C: Professional Development Relevant to the Classroom

The participants of the study expressed frustration that most often the district-provided professional development is not related to what is happening in their classrooms. Several expressed the concern that they feel that the only reason professional development occurs is so that the district leadership can disseminate the current district agenda and is not related to teacher learning at all. Professional development experiences should be relevant to the problems and needs that the teachers are facing in their classrooms at the time of the learning experience. A study conducted by Misra (2018) disclosed that educators are leaning toward on-line professional development mostly because the online format provides the opportunity to elect experiences that relate to their classroom needs. In a study conducted by Alt (2018) it was disclosed that teacher's classroom interactions closely resemble what they learn during professional development which is why it is important that professional development experiences are relevant to the classrooms that the teachers work in. Relevance to the classroom is a motivator for teachers to attend professional development experiences. The Summer Think-Tank event,

although not during the school year is created based on a survey that the teachers take toward the end of the school year so that what is being taught is relevant to what the teachers are trying to do in the classroom. When professional development does not relate to the classroom teachers quickly become disengaged and conversely when the learning experience is connected to the classroom teachers are engaged and excited to be present. Pedagogical changes occur and the classroom focus improves when professional development experiences align with the needs of the teacher especially when the learning experiences is relevant to the teacher's classroom (Mitchell, Roy, Fritch, & Wood, 2018). Relevance to the classroom increases teacher motivation to attend professional development sessions and heightens teacher engagement while in attendance. The summer learning experiences prove this to be true, the district under study is host to nearly 2400 teachers and the district reports a 45% attendance rate during Think-Tank (Professional Development Director, 2019).

Recommendation D: Going Beyond District Provided Professional Development

Study participants expressed frustration with the district because it has become very difficult to attain approval for outside learning experiences. Several neighboring school districts host large learning conferences during the weeks leading up to mid-year break and offer free attendance to our district teachers; however, approval to attend is rarely given. Teachers are at their best when they are provided the opportunity to collaborate with other educators. By attending outside district professional development experiences teachers are exposed to the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of other educators, thus expanding their own pedagogical knowledge. Educational conferences, seminars and

professional association conferences provide valuable collaboration to teachers who normally would not have the opportunity to meet and share ideas (Hong, et al., 2019). Navy, Maeng, and Bell (2019) shared similar findings in a recent study explaining that professional development conferences provide professional teachers the opportunity to freely select what they want to learn. They continue by disclosing this free learning opportunity is invaluable because it creates the opportunity for educators to have conversations with other educators where they would normally never get this chance (Navy, Maeng, & Bell, 2019). The conversations and the connections that occur at these conferences provide unscripted learning experiences that open the door to changes in educational practice. Outside district conferences provide teachers with the opportunity to keep up with their field of specialty. Navy, Maeng, and Bell (2019) shared that many teachers view professional conferences as a chance to keep up with the advances made in their field of study and teaching. Professional development provided outside the district provides teachers with the chance to freely select their learning, to network with other educators, provides learning that is relevant to the classroom, maintain and gain knowledge specific to their field, and to return to the classroom energized and invigorated to teach. The conference setting presents outside views on education that may expand the beliefs and help shape young teachers and remind those close to the end of their career why they became teachers. A study conducted by Csikos, Kovacs, and Kereszty (2018) disclosed that conferences, seminars, and workshops provide teachers with experiences that change how they teach, renew their passion for teaching and translate to lessons that extend beyond their classroom walls.

Conclusion

The lack of effective professional development for middle level teachers at Middle School A was the focus of this study. This policy paper was written with the purpose of suggesting recommendations to improve the overall presentation and instruction of district provided professional development at the target school. The implementation of effective professional development will be supportive to the teachers needs for their identified areas of weakness or improvement. The data collected for this research revealed that effective professional development needs to be based in teacher choice, relevant to the classroom, and differentiated to meet the teachers at their level of learning.

Professional development that offers choice, is differentiated, relevant to the classroom, and can be accessed beyond the district will provide the study site with teachers who are excited to be in the classroom. Professional Development that is deemed effective provides choice, instructs at a level that is accessible by all participants, is relative to current issues, and is based in active learning, when this is the foundation of the learning experience teachers grow as professionals (Boylan, Coldwell, Maxwell, & Jordan, 2019). Effective professional development looks very different from standard professional development; teachers are engaged, motivated to learn, there is active collaboration occurring, and true learning is taking effect. A study conducted by Makopoulou (2018) disclosed that carefully designed professional development result in higher quality teachers who enjoy the classroom and produce higher performing students.

The planning of effective professional development should be taken into consideration by the district's instructional leaders. These individuals are responsible for the daily operations of the school, teacher development and student achievement. The middle level teachers will gain essential skills and knowledge from choice-based effective professional development. The instructional leaders along with the professional development committee will plan learning experiences that provide choices to the teachers.

The conference style professional development experiences should occur once per quarter throughout the school year. This will provide opportunities for the teachers to continue the learning process and receive consistent exposure to teaching concepts and strategies throughout the school year. The consistent exposure to choice-based professional development should increase the professional learning, motivation, and engagement of the middle level teachers. Additionally, teachers will need to attend the quarterly professional development conferences regularly so that they are instrumental in their own self growth.

The value of effective professional development must be understood by all stakeholders and district leaders. The district leadership must buy-in to choice-based professional development in order for implementation to be successful. The district also needs to make effective professional development a priority in order to facilitate the formation of a professional development committee and conference style learning experiences. District leadership needs to actively pursue keynote speakers that fit the goals and direction of the district as a whole and work in partnership with the middle

school buildings to facilitate the change in how professional development is implemented.

Future research on this problem should address how teachers are improving as a result of choice-based or conference style professional development. The professional development experiences must be designed in manner that offers teachers choices in what to attend, be differentiated to help meet the teachers where they are and be relevant to what the teachers are doing in their classrooms. The district also needs to support the teachers in attending learning experiences that exist outside the district.

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Appendix B: Policy Paper PowerPoint



POLICY PAPER: TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

By Justin Turner



Policy Recommendations

- Professional development opportunities that provide choices to the teachers regarding what learning experiences they attend.
- Professional development experiences that are differentiated to facilitate the teachers needs and improve skill transfer to the classroom.
- Professional development experiences that are relative to the classroom.
- The expansion of professional development experiences beyond that of district provided learning experiences.

Implementation of Effective Professional Development

- Designers need to understand what effective professional development looks like.
- Professional development should model expectations
- Professional development should be relevant to teacher needs in the classroom
- Not all teachers have the same needs and professional development needs to meet the needs of all teachers.
- Effective professional development needs to provide teachers with choices regarding their learning.
- All district stakeholders need to buy in to choice-based professional development format for the change to effectively take hold.

Recommendation A: Choice

- District officials including the professional development director should focus their initial attention on creating professional development experiences that offer middle level teachers choices regarding what learning experiences they attend.
- The participants of this study suggested that the district offer general education professional development courses that focus on how to use certain programs or technology, while offering courses on current grading practices such as standards based grading, and subject specific professional development

Recommendation B: Differentiation

- A common finding from the study was that the participating teachers at Middle School A, at the time of the study, felt that district-provided professional development was provided at a level that did not facilitate learning, but created confusion and frustration. Professional development should be differentiated, teachers are expected to differentiate their lesson plans, then it only stands to reason that professional learning should be differentiated to meet the various needs of the teachers.

Recommendation C: Relevance

- The participants of the study expressed frustration that most often the district-provided professional development is not related to what is happening in their classrooms. Several expressed the concern that they feel that the only reason professional development occurs is so that the district leadership can disseminate the current district agenda and is not related to teacher learning at all. Professional development experiences should be relevant to the problems and needs that the teachers are facing in their classrooms at the time of the learning experience.

Recommendation D: Outside District Professional Development

- Study participants expressed frustration with the district because it has become very difficult to attain approval for outside learning experiences. Several neighboring school districts host large learning conferences during the weeks leading up to mid-year break and offer free attendance to our district teachers; however, approval to attend is rarely given. Teachers are at their best when they are provided the opportunity to collaborate with other educators. By attending outside district professional development experiences teachers are exposed to the ideas, opinions, and beliefs of other educators, thus expanding their own pedagogical knowledge.

Conclusion

- The lack of effective professional development for middle level teachers at Middle School A was the focus of this study. This policy paper was written with the purpose of suggesting recommendations to improve the overall presentation and instruction of district provided professional development at the target school. The implementation of effective professional development will be supportive to the teachers needs for their identified areas of weakness or improvement. The data collected for this research revealed that effective professional development needs to be based in teacher choice, relevant to the classroom, and differentiated to meet the teachers at their level of learning.

Appendix C: Interview Questions and Form

Date: _____

Time: _____

Location: _____

Interviewer: _____

Interviewee: _____

Consent form signed at time of interview?: _____

Introduction to Interview:

1. Thank you for participating in today's interview to explore your perceptions of professional development. Your input is valuable to ensure effective professional development practices.
2. Your responses are confidential.
3. The approximate length of this interview will be 30-45 minutes.
4. The purpose of this research is to allow teachers to explore effective and personalized qualities of professional development.

Interview Question 1:

How many years of work experience do you have?

Total years as a teacher?

Years at this school?

Years working in other education positions?

Response from Interviewee

Reflection from Interviewer

Interview Question 2:

What is the highest level of formal education you have completed?

Response from Interviewee:

Reflection by Interviewer:

Interview Question 3:

Tell me what your concept of professional development is.

Response from the Interviewee:

Reflection by the Interviewer:

Interview Question 4:

During the last 12 months, did you participate in any of the following professional development activities, and if yes, for how many days did they last?

- Subject matter or methods-based courses/workshop
- Education conference or seminar
- Observations to other schools or your school
- In service training

Part 2:

During the last 12 months did you participate in any of the following activities?

- Degree program
- Individual or collaborative research on a topic of interest to you
- Mentoring or peer observation as part of a formal school arrangements

- Participation in a network of teachers formed for the purpose of the professional development of teachers.

Response from interviewee:

Reflection of Interviewer:

Interview Question 5:

Did the professional development activities you participated in during the last 12 months cover any of the following topics? If so what positive impact did these have on your teacher?

- Knowledge and understanding of my subject fields
- Pedagogical competencies in teaching my subject field(s)
- Knowledge of curriculum
- Student evaluation and assessment practices
- Information and communication technology skills for teaching

Interview Question 6:

Tell me what you perceive as the qualities of effective and meaningful professional development

Response from the Interviewee:

Reflection by the Interviewer:

Interview Question 7:

What are your expectations of professional development?

Response from the Interviewee:

Reflection by the Interviewer:

Interview Question 8:

How do students react to strategies that you've learned from professional development?

Response from the Interviewee:

Reflection by the Interviewer:

Interview Question 9:

Have you noticed any changes in student performance after using the strategies you have learned in professional development?

Response from the Interviewee:

Reflection by the Interviewer:

Interview Question 10:

Have you received professional development that you have experienced as effective and meaningful? Please explain.

Response from the Interviewee:

Reflection by the Interviewer:

Interview Question 11:

Explain how the qualities you described of effective and meaningful professional development address gaps or strengthen your professional practice.

Response from the Interviewee:

Reflection by the Interviewer:

Interview Question #12:

Please tell me what area(s) you feel that you would benefit from professional development?

Response from Interviewee:

Reflection of Interviewer:

Interview Question #13:

What barriers exist regarding professional development for you, regarding participation in professional development? (lack of employer support, too expensive or unaffordable,

family, not relevant, no incentives offered, not readily accessible, professional development offered is of poor quality)

Response from Interviewee:

Reflection of the Interviewer:

Closure:

1. Is there anything you would like to add that I haven't asked?
2. Is there anything else that you feel is important about your professional development experiences?
3. Thank you for your participation.
4. Once again, your responses are confidential.
5. Do I have your permission to follow-up with you regarding your responses to the research questions? _____