Utilizing Peer Observation as a Professional Development Tool
To Learn in Context

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ABSTRACT

De-contextualized professional development is the common route taken by school districts to addresses pedagogical skills and address change within an educational organization. Research suggests that the current process of professional development activities is limited if not ineffective. Research shows that another model of professional development may serve teachers better through collaboration and contextual learning mediated through peer observations. This action research study will examine the potential of peer observations as a collaborative, collegial, and embedded process to professional learning for middle school teachers.

A qualitative design is utilized to capture the experiences of eight teachers as they participate in a cycle of peer observations. Data collection techniques include:

a) pre peer observation cycle interviews,
b) teachers’ pre- peer-observation form,
c) a learning journal,
d) a modified electronic post observation Strengths and Insights assessment form (Beyerlein, Holmes, & Apple, 2007) document),
e) a post peer observation cycle interview, and
f) a researcher’s log to collect field notes and capture perceptions and comments throughout the process.

Information collected using these tools is reviewed and analyzed to answer whether peer observations created collegiality and collaboration amongst a group of middle school teachers engaged in peer observation supported by an instructional facilitator, as well as identify the benefits and challenges of the process for professional learning.
Key Words: Peer observation, collegiality, collaboration, job-embedded practice, contextual learning, challenges, benefits, teachers as leaders, systems thinking, dynamic change, professional development, adult learning, leadership and organization.
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....................................................................................................................................3

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.............................................................................................................5

TABLE OF CONTENTS.................................................................................................................6

LIST OF TABLES...........................................................................................................................9

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION...................................................................................................10
  Educational Problem of Practice.........................................................................................10
  Significance of the Problem...............................................................................................11
  Intellectual Goals ...............................................................................................................12
  Research Questions............................................................................................................14
  Theoretical Framework.......................................................................................................15

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................................22
  The History of Teacher Professional Development........................................................24
  Traditional Professional Development: De-contextualized Learning...............................25
  Learning in Context ............................................................................................................28
  Dynamic Change and Collaborative Learning Environments ...........................................31
  Creating and Cultivating Collaborative Leaders within an Organization..........................34
  Contrary Reports on the Effectiveness of Peer Observations............................................40

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY ...............................................................................................43
  Research Questions............................................................................................................43
  Rational for a Qualitative Design .......................................................................................43
  Site and Participants...........................................................................................................47
  Data Collection ................................................................................................................52
  Interview Protocol..............................................................................................................53
  Data Analysis ....................................................................................................................56
  Validity and Creditability .................................................................................................60
  Researcher Bias..................................................................................................................63
  Protection of Human Subjects ............................................................................................63
  Conclusion............................................................................................................................64
CHAPTER IV: REPORT OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ...............................................................65
Reporting the Findings and Analysis ...........................................................................65
Study Context ..............................................................................................................66
Findings and Analysis Interviews Categories and Themes .........................................68
Categories ..................................................................................................................69
Themes ......................................................................................................................70
Findings and Analysis: Major Findings in the Pre and Post Peer Observation Cycle Interviews ....................................................................................79
Findings and Analysis: Major Findings in Pre-Observations Form Learning Journals, and Strength and Insight Forms ..........................................................98
Summary of Findings .................................................................................................106

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ......................................................107
Summary of the Problem .............................................................................................107
Review of Methodology .............................................................................................108
Summary of Findings .................................................................................................110
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review .........................................112
  Theme 1 – Learning in Context
    Did the peer observation process enable teachers to learn from one another? ...113
  Theme 2 – Dynamic and Collaborative Learning Environments
    Did the process of peer observation create collaborations and collegiality? ....115
  Theme 3 – Creating and Cultivating Collaborative Leaders within an Organization
    Did teachers emerge as leaders while engaging in peer observations? ..........119
Challenges to the Process
  What challenges were encountered by conducting peer observations? ..........121
Discussions of Findings in Relation to Theoretical Framework ....................................122
  Adult Theory and Findings ....................................................................................122
  Leadership and Organizational Theory and Findings ........................................125
Summary Review of Theoretical Frameworks in Relationship to Findings ..................127
Conclusion .................................................................................................................128
Significance of Study in the Field ............................................................................128

References .................................................................................................................135
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Teacher Responses Category A: Learning From Peers ..................................................73
Table 2: Illustrative Comments By Theme: Learning From Peers ..............................................74
Table 3: Teacher Response Category B – Collaboration and Collegiality ..................................75
Table 4: Illustrative Comments By Theme: Collaboration and Collegiality ...............................75
Table 5: Teacher Response Category B – Challenges of Peer Observation Process .................77
Table 6: Illustrative comments by Theme: Challenges of Peer Observation Process ............77
Table 7: Perceived Benefits and Challenges of Peer Observations Prior to Implementation ....85
Table 8: Comparison of Perceived and Actual Benefits and Challenges of Peer Observations .......................................96
Table 9: Peer Observation as a Meaningful Process of Professional Development ..............104
Table 10: Summary of Findings ...............................................................................................111
Chapter I: Introduction

Educational Problem of Practice

My general area of interest is moving teachers from isolation to collaboration using a process of peer observation in the classroom. It is my experience that learning from experienced teachers in a given area creates increased knowledge and collaboration in a school community. Additionally, a school-supported system of observations can create teacher-centered differentiated professional development that meets multiple needs within the learning community.

Currently, scheduling does not permit time for teachers to observe each other in their classrooms to gain new knowledge of teaching practices. At present, teachers only receive a few department days to talk briefly about what they do but never have concrete examples or models of what that idea or concept looks like in practice. What typically occurs are quick conversations between teachers with no follow-up, coupled with individual interpretations about what best practices look like for students. Additionally, the same teaching practices are implemented whether they work or not, and new teachers left alone to muddle through the curriculum, often struggle. Improvement can be made in the existing schedules to build in observation time, as well as a system to facilitate how observations should be conducted. Through this system, teachers can continually assess their teaching practice. Since a system of peer observations does not exist, teachers are missing opportunities to gain pedagogical knowledge in context. An embedded system of non-evaluative peer observation is a much-needed practice to propel teachers towards best practices and capitalize on its effectiveness as a professional development tool.
Significance of the Problem

As a teacher, I have observed curriculum and instruction changing at a rapid rate. Many teachers are experts in certain areas and yet are in need of support in others. The current middle school model does not have a system for teachers to observe each other in order to support the level of needs each teacher requires. Professional development provides teachers with quick one-day workshops where teachers need to digest information and, in isolation, transfer that knowledge to their classroom instruction. Elmore (2004) says, “…there is almost no opportunity for teachers to engage in continuous and substantial learning about their practice in the setting which they actually work” (p. 127). Best practices are not fully developed and professional development workshops are not specialized to meet what individual teachers need. Additionally, professional development is not tailored to meet the needs of teachers through experimentation, observation, reflection, exchanging of ideas, and problem solving, since teachers’ schedules do not build in time to watch and work with each other in context. Schmoker (2006) states that professional development, “…makes no formal immediate arrangements for teachers to translate learning into actual lessons or units, whose impact we assess and then use as the bases for on-going improvement. Without this simple cycle, training is irrelevant” (p. 109). Additionally, the unavailability of sharing environments, where teacher leaders share their expertise, creates a lack of authentic transferable knowledge and breeds fear of trialing new strategies. Teachers have worked in this model of professional development for years without a way to systematically share and expand their knowledge base. Since the system of observation does not exist, teachers are missing opportunities to gain pedagogical knowledge in context. An embedded system of non-
evaluative peer observation is a much-needed practice to propel teachers towards best practices.

Currently, observations for teachers are typically linked to an evaluation process. Administrators and teachers follow the contractual guidelines where the administrator observes several lessons and a final evaluation is given. Feedback is given to the teacher following the review, changes in a teacher’s instruction may or may not happen, and the evaluation process repeats. Teachers interpret the evaluator’s feedback and work in isolation to find ways to make improvements to their instruction alone. This isolation fosters a lack of collaboration and includes missed opportunities to capitalize on the most effective professional development available, peer observations. Fullan (2008) suggests that there is lack of opportunity for teachers to learn within the setting in which they work. Additionally, when learning is removed from context, the learning becomes superficial, (Fullan, 2008). Authentic learning happens with repeated experience on the job. This experience is deeply rooted in history with an account from John Dewey (2001) saying that the need for teachers to observe each other in context is a natural direct experience that places a “…sense of reality acquired through first-hand contact with actualities” (p.8). When a person learns in context, a free communication and interchanging of ideas and suggestions result. This removes the burden of functionalism for all participants.

**Intellectual Goals**

Maxwell (2005) states that in order to avoid going astray during your study and wasting efforts, one must have clear consideration of their intellectual goals. Two intellectual goals suited for this study include: (1) How do peer observations develop authentic learning in
context for teachers?, and (2) How can peer observations be embedded into the existing schedule of a school?

Teachers require opportunities to engage in reflective dialogue about their curriculum and teaching. Since teachers are at different stages based on their years of experience, grade level, and curriculum demands, there is need for focused classroom support. Because there is a continual need for improved classroom practice, support from qualified peers who understand the daily demands of the classroom, can be advantageous to teachers in helping them to develop these best practices.

As teachers identify their need for support, individual support can be developed into authentic professional development to be shared with other faculty members. Teachers can choose their observations based on specific foci that apply to their knowledge development. Similar to differentiated instruction for children, professional development can be tailored to a teacher’s need for instruction.

Currently, no process exists for teachers to gain additional knowledge by observing other classroom teachers or receive coaching from an experienced teacher in the building. Teachers pull ideas in piecemeal fashion, but there are no real times devoted to the creation, understanding, or development of curriculum, or the teaching of that curriculum. Educators are bombarded with many new mandates, teaching strategies monthly, and need a process in which they can reflect to internalize the new information. Making sense of what is required to teach well is not time that is afforded to teachers in the current schedule. A question raised by this observation is whether a schedule that allows for peer observation of other teachers, both departmentally and cross-departmentally, might benefit teachers’ professional growth.
Research Questions

I plan to investigate the following research questions that are rooted within Leadership and Organizational Theory and Adult Learning Theory. Leadership and Organizational Theory speaks to the activities and systems that support leadership and a culture of collaboration and learning, and Adult Learning Theory speaks to how adults learn best. The two research questions for this action research study are:

1. What do teachers perceive to be the benefits and challenges in pursuing meaningful professional development through peer observations in a professional learning community?

2. Did the process and tools implemented by an instructional leader use to facilitate learning through peer observation, enhance and contribute to meaningful contextual learning for teachers?

Paper Organization and Content

This study is presented in five chapters. In Chapter I, I present an overview of Leadership and Organizational Theory and Adult Learning Theory, which will ground my investigation in a problem of practice. In Chapter II, I provide an overview of the current literature introduced, which includes the historical background of professional development, current practices of professional development, and three emergent themes of learning in context, dynamic change and collaborative learning environments, and creating and cultivating collaborative leaders within and organization. The literature review also presents contrary research reports of peer observations. In Chapter III, I present the research design including overarching research questions, and how I pursued my problem of practice through a qualitative Action Research design including the site and participants, data collection methods, data analysis section, as
well as how I safeguarded the validity and credibility of the study. Additionally, I discuss how I have considered the ethical implication of the study for the participants. In Chapter IV I present a detailed description of the findings and an analysis of the results. Lastly, in Chapter V I connect the research findings to the research questions, theoretical framework, and literature review.

**Theoretical Framework**

Two theories inform my research. These theories provided direction and a focus for the study. In particular, these two theories informed my interpretation of the phenomena of peer observations as a professional development tool: Leadership and Organizational Theory and Adult Learning Theory.

**Leadership and Organizational Theory: Servant, Instructional, and Distributive**

Through Leadership and Organizational Theory, three types of leadership sub-theories are applicable to my problem of practice. First is servant leadership. The term “Servant Leadership” originated in Robert Greenleaf’s 1970 essay, *The Servant as Leader* (*Covey, 2010*). Since this theory is based on the wish to help others and the positioning of the leader in middle of an organization, it supports the idea of incorporating peer observations and as professional development tool within the organization. Rather than reporting the work that is being done to a few administrators, a servant leader is at the heart of organization and the individuals involved in the process (*Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005*). *Covey (2010)* promotes working with others in order to increase personal knowledge and abilities. This makes a person more prosperous and productive, thus making possible a team of people who possess knowledge and abilities. A teacher can balance weaknesses by drawing on this team as
necessary. Peer observations rely on an individual approach to learning in context (Covey, 2010).

Servant leadership rests on the concept of humility (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). According to Covey (2010), Greenleaf was one to espouse on the humility of servant leaders. Using Greenleaf’s ideas, Covey (2010) states, “If you are trying to serve purposes greater than your knowledge—greater than your comfort zone—this creates genuine humility and a desire to draw upon help from others (p. 5). This, in turn, creates liberation and internal motivation. Ultimately, an abundance of resource opportunities and growth become available for people to utilize (Covey, 2010). The lens of servant leadership to enhance its utility as a learning tool compliments a system of peer observation.

Next, instructional leadership connects to my action research study since it allows for facilitating relationships, such as collaboration, and using research on instruction and adult learning in context. Hallinger (2003) discussed that instructional leadership models were developed in the early 1980s from research conducted on successful schools. The author states that this model was used in the 1980’s and early 1990’s to shape much of the thinking about effective principal leadership disseminated during that period. Moreover, the model became so popular that it was adopted by most principal preparation institutions (Hallinger, 1992; Hallinger & Wimpelberg, 1992). Instructional leadership emphasizes raising values of an organization’s members and motivating them to go beyond self-interest to embrace organizational goals. Working collaboratively in this fashion, teachers using a peer observation process naturally internalize the values and goals of the organization (Hallinger, 2003).
Elmore (2000) describes instructional leadership as the responsibility of the leader to provide guidance and direction for instructional improvement. For continued success of peer observations and with nonstop change in teaching practice, instructional leadership is imperative for educational leadership (Elmore, 2000). Most importantly, Elmore (2000) declares the need to work with teachers on daily problems and that educational leadership’s primary goal should be instructional improvement. An instructional leader creates collaboration amongst peers to process new instructional techniques and develop processes that work. Typically, all teachers are involved with curriculum changes, as well as discussions around how those changes have affected the way students are taught. With a focus on instructional improvement at the core, change both effecting curriculum and teaching requires leadership theories that support the idea of peer observations (Elmore, 2000).

Lastly, distributive leadership explains how peer observations create improved instruction through continuous learning and how an organization can take control of learning. Since the demands have increased and teachers are required to implement many more initiatives and state mandates into their teaching practice, a more efficient way for teachers to learn has become imperative (Elmore, 2000; Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2008). Many scholars have presented distributive leadership in the field (Elmore, 2000; Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2004; Lashway, 2003; Spillane, 2006) as an option to lead schools efficiently and effectively. Distributive leadership theory addresses current school reform and state mandates in timely fashion.

Elmore’s (2000) distributive leadership model needs consideration for continuous learning, modeling, and alignment of curriculum. As discussed by Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005), through distributive leadership, expertise is necessary to dispense new knowledge, thus the organization must become responsible and own any new curriculum and instruction. A
school building houses many experienced teachers in a variety of curriculum and instruction areas. Rather than controlling how information is dispersed amongst staff members in the building, it becomes a responsibility of the school leadership to develop a culture of sharing, what Elmore (2000) calls the “glue” of a common task or goal, such as instructional improvement. This common task of instructional improvement through peer observations creates a continuous learning environment where a school can attend to the curriculum needs that directly affect teaching. This culture does not exist as a current goal in my school. This type of leadership theory must be considered and incorporated when addressing the development of a model for peer observations and its delivery in school Elmore, 2000; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005).

Harris (2004) reports about the increased bodies of evidence within the school improvement field that declares the importance of capacity building as a means for an organization to sustain continual improvement. Distributive leadership is at the center of this debate as a capacity-building model for sustainability (Harris, 2004). Looking at capacity building from the perspective of distributive leadership allows for the release of everyone within the organization to contribute with his or her expertise in an area (Harris, 2004). This release is what Gronn (2000) states as a network of people where everyone shares their expertise in an area. This theory further supports the idea of peer observations to activate this release. Leithwood and Riehl’s (2003) state that teacher leaders can assist others to “embrace goals, to understand the changes that are needed to strengthen teaching and learning and to work towards improvement” (p. 3). Rather than a formal practice, the purpose of distributed leadership is to call upon expertise within an organization as needed rather than rely on people through their formal position or role (Harris, 2004). A system of peer observation will service this purpose
by engaging experienced people throughout the organization. This allows the organization to maintain capacity-building, hence creating sustainability (Harris, 2004; Leithwood and Riehl, 2003).

**Adult Learning Theory**

Part of being an effective teacher involves understanding how we learn as adults. The applications of “real world” experiences are important motivators in adult learning (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). According to these authors, adults find it necessary to have a part in the design of their professional development and relate it to their relevant practice. New knowledge of teaching techniques and curriculum can be cumbersome, thus observing from peers is necessary for new learning to be incorporated into daily teaching (Fullan, 2008). According to Knowles, et al. (1998), adults want to align their personal goals with what they need to learn, hence knowledge increases. He presents the idea that better learning outcomes occur when adults learn what they need to know rather then being told what they need to know. Additionally, MacKeracher (2004) illuminates the fact that adults do not live in an academic world, thus transferable knowledge happens in context where new information is applied to practical situations. Adult Learning Theory provides insight into peer observation as a professional development tool because teachers can control what they learn based on their needs.

Beginning with his work in the 1970’s on adult learning theory, Knowles (1998) continues to challenge the notion that adults are passive recipients of knowledge and are motivated by external pressures. When developing his andragogical model, Knowles et al. (1998) offered a model of learning with five distinct assumptions that were presented originally by Lindeman (1926), that now, supported by research, compose the basis of adult learning theory. The first
assumption in the andragogical model is that adults are self-motivated and self-directed learners based on the experiences and interests they need. Next, adults possess a wealth of ideas, knowledge, and experiences that can be shared with one another. Thirdly, the model identifies that adults learn when they understand that they have a need to know or act upon something to be more effective in their lives. Furthermore, the model purports the idea that adults are life, task, and problem centered, and they learn in order to complete a task, solve problems or enrich their lives. Lastly, the andragogical model contends that internal forces motivate learning (Knowles et al., 1998). Keeping these assumptions in mind, peer observations are in alignment with adult learning theory, which suggests that the daily experiences of teachers should be the foundation of their professional development.

Modern day theorists build upon the idea of andragogy expanding its idea further. Literature on adult learning describes adults learners “...as autonomous individuals capable of identifying their own learning needs and planning...” (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 23). Mackeracher (2004) connects her assumptions of adult learning with Knowles et al. (1998) stating the following assumptions:

- Adults can and do learn throughout their lifetime.
- Adults are not mature children, nor are children immature adults.
- Adults change over time.
- Adults accumulate experiences and prior learning over their lifetime; the older they grow, the more past experience and prior learning they bring to bear on current learning.
- The role of time in the life of an adult has important implications for the learning process.
Adults bring to the learning process an established sense of self and an inclination to protect this self from perceived threats that might arise in learning interactions.

Both self-directedness and relatedness to others contribute to how adults prefer to learn (p. 25).

First, building on the work of Allen Tough (1971) that adults engage in many learning activities based on the needs and problems they encounter, MacKeracher (2004) reports that adults can and do learn in a variety of ways no matter what their intelligence, age, and/or stage of development. Secondly, to address the idea that adults not just mature children or children emulating immature adults, specific characteristics of the adult learner such as biological, historical, and life factors are compared and identified. Next, Mackracher (2004) addresses changes that adults incur over time. Sensory changes and physical responses all attribute to how an adult learns and retains information. Moreover, adults create new knowledge from experiences over their lifetime, and they bring these experiences to current learning (MacKeracher, 2004). Furthermore, children and young adults equate time as since birth while adults over forty equate current age to until death. The contrasting ideas of increasing to decreasing time, affects the learning process of adults (MacKeracher, 2004). In addition, adults bring a predetermined sense of self and work to protect themselves from and threats as they learn. Finally, having both self-direction and the need to relate to others, assist an adult in their learning (MacKeracher, 2004). MacKeracher’s (2004) assumptions expand the notion that peer observations are a differentiated professional development tool, as it allows teachers to enter the learning process based on their needs, characteristics, sensory and physical changes, past experience(s), timing needs, and personal direction.
Adult learning holds many implications for the use of peer observations as a professional development process. This theory identifies the main ideas that teachers can learn from each other, create authentic and contextual learning, and create a collaborative work environment based on trust, respect and support. All of which are necessary components of capacity building in order to sustain an organization through change (Fullan, 2008, Senge, 2008).

**Summary.** Both leadership and organizational theory and adult learning theory guide this study by providing a lens to view how teachers use peer observations as a form of professional development. Through servant leadership, the position of the leader within the organization allows for contact with all parts of the organization and the individuals that make it a whole. Instructional leadership places the leader as a resource provider and communicator to support the day-to-day needs of the organization. While finally, distributive leadership provides continuous learning in order for the system to sustain viability through change.

Lastly, adult learning theory looks at how learning is perceived by adults to be an autonomous practice. The idea is that adults are capable of identifying their own learning needs, finding a path for that learning, and assessing how and what else they need to learn. Through peer observations, adults can decided what and whom they can learn from in their buildings. The two theories combined provide an avenue to channel the direction of this study.

**Chapter II: Literature Review**

My literature review is comprised of five sections that encompass the history of professional development, three themes, and contradictions to the use of peer observations. Beginning with an introduction and ending with ineffectiveness of peer observations, this literature review informs and directs this study.
A thorough search of the literature unveils many authors and ideas that weave through both the leadership and organization models and the ways in which adults learn, retain, and transfer knowledge. All readings point to the main themes of learning in context, dynamic change and collaborative learning environments, and creating and cultivating collaborative leaders within an organization. Many authors speak to these key ideas. Beginning with a brief overview of the historical aspects for teacher professional development, current practices of professional development are discussed along with the challenges posed from such a model, with guiding questions that delve deeper in the themes, creating a path, which forms this literature review.

Theme 1) Learning in context: Guiding Question - How do we create meaningful contextualized learning at our school? (Adult Learning Theory; Organizational and Leadership Theory)

Theme 2) Dynamic Change and Collaborative Learning Environments: Guiding Question - How can organizational systems develop a collaborative self-sustaining learning environment to handle constant changes and still improve? (Adult Learning Theory; Organizational and Leadership Theory)

Theme 3) Creating and Cultivating Collaborative Leaders within an Organization: Guiding Question - How do teachers, as leaders, emerge to enhance and create learning in action? (Adult Learning Theory; Organizational and Leadership Theory)

The majority of the literature to date has focused on the mechanisms for implementing peer observation systems and its link to enhanced professional practice. Peer observation as a professional development tool is a well-used model in higher education (Shortland, 2004). Many of these studies indicate the effectiveness of peer observations as a form of professional
development (Bell, 2002; Lee & Macfadyen, 2007; Shortland, 2010). However, research has begun at the K-12 sector indicating an equal effectiveness of a peer observation model for use as professional development as well (Munson, 1998; Bruce & Ross, 2008; Zwart, Wubbels, Bolhuis, & Bergen, 2008). Contrary studies include ones conducted by both Kohut, et al. (2007) and Adshead, White, & Stephenson (2006). These researchers posit that through their studies, peer observation was not effective.

In the area of peer observations, researchers used a variety of theoretical frameworks to ground their studies, in order to present a conceptualization of ideas. Although many, there was a particular emphasis on adult learning theory, leadership and organizational theory, social learning theory, developmental theory, as well as reflective practices. Of less emphasis, but equal importance was on-line theory, grounded theory, and conceptual framework. For the purpose of this study, a focus on adult learning and leadership and organizational theory is investigated, in order to ground the study as action research. Incorporated into this literature review are studies involving higher education and the medical field since recent studies for the K-12 level are not in abundance.

**The History of Teacher Professional Development**

The teaching profession emerged in 1840 (Sykes, 1983). Since its beginning, this profession has confined teachers to their classrooms, only to interact with peers while entering and exiting the school (Johnson, 1991). Because of this, teachers have limited opportunities for professional growth (Lortie, 1975).

Professional development began in part because of unprepared teachers. The goal of professional development was to compensate for teacher deficits due to inadequate pre-service preparation. The formalization of professional development dates back to the early 1940’s
when teacher shortages were a direct result of World War II and was exasperated by the birth of the baby boom generation. The original goal of professional development was to remedy the issue of unqualified and uncertified teachers (Harris, 2004). Currently, the purpose of professional development is to improve the performance of teachers (Peery, 2004).

**Traditional Professional Development: De-contextualized Learning**

The effectiveness of traditional professional development for teachers has been both disputed and challenged since the early 1990’s (Joyce & Showers 1995; Tienken & Stonaker, 2007). Professional development follows an ineffective top-down approach, which inherently holds the belief that teachers are deficient and in need of remediation (Baron, 2008). Generic topics are picked that focus on teaching strategies rather than on learning (Liebermann, 1995), with topics that are fragmented and removed from what the teachers are currently teaching (Kelchtermans, 2004). According to Parks, Steve, Star, Graham, & Oppong (2007) the traditional approach to professional development is that teaching improvement happens in an up and down fashion from an expert in the field down to the teacher, in which the information is infused into the practitioner. With this process, the idea is that new educational practices are developed into generic guidelines, taught in a quick 3-8 hour ‘how to” workshops, with the assumption teachers will make a contextual connection to the context in which they teach. This model emphasizes the fact that workshops, where a teacher is removed from their classrooms, are valuable, while working with in authentic learning situations collaboratively with peers is not (Liebermann, 1995). To further emphasis the de-contextualized learning of a traditional professional development model, the design of workshops usually consists of department heads or staff developers/trainers making topic decision, placing teachers in the passive role of recipient of knowledge (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004).
Peter Cole (2004) describes our current method of teacher professional development as, “a great way to avoid change” (p.1). Professional Development focuses on the why and what to change and not on how the participants learn and implement improvements for change (Cole, 2004). Reeves (2009) points out the paradox of traditional professional development espoused ideas while acting in another manner when he states, “Ironically, we may find 500 teachers in a dark auditorium listening to an expert lecture at length about the need for differentiated instruction in precisely the same way to each teacher” (p.63). Because of this contradiction in advocated practice (the what) opposed to contextual context (the how), each teacher sees a different view on how the instruction should be utilized without a way to measure their effectiveness (Reeves, 2009). Moreover, Argyris and Schon (1974) argue that learning takes place when adults identify a discrepancy in what they say (espoused theories) and what they do (theories-in action). These concepts suggest that professional development should be fashioned around the daily experiences of teachers (Argyris & Schon, 1974).

How we learn is just as important as what is learned. Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino (1999) apply adult learning theory when they say authentic learning is a pedagogical approach that affords a learner the opportunity to create meaningful concepts in context that is relevant to the learner. These authors posit four interconnected characteristics of learning as learner centered, knowledge centered, assessment centered, and community centered. According to Donovan et al. (1999), “Many approaches to teaching adults violate principles for optimizing learning, professional development programs for teachers, for example, frequently are not learner centered…are not knowledge centered…are not assessment centered…are not community centered.” (p. 24). Opportunities must be made available for teachers to experience sustained learning in the models and methods in which they are asked to adopt
(Donovan et al., 1999). Hargreaves (2007) confirms this when he discussed the idea of off-site professional development as a disconnect from practice considering it as something that one does; ultimately, failing the teacher to apply their understanding of a concept.

If new models of collective and collaborative professional development are to be successful, attention must be given to the culture and dynamics of an organization (Fullan, 2008; Hargreaves, 1994; Schein, 2004). Culture is one lens for looking at an organization. Through this lens, the researcher views a deeper understanding, ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 1973), of how people within the organization interpret beliefs and assumptions and create focus and clarity from uncertainty and a lack of continuity (Martin, 2010). According to Schein (2004), culture is abstract; however, it creates social and organizational situations that carry a powerful impact that, if not understood, could make an organization vulnerable.

Typically, the culture of an organization is ignored with emphasis placed on production and profit. An attention shift to how and why people work together and what that means for an organization is the focus. According to Sparks and Hirsh (1997), not only should professional development affect knowledge and attitudes of teachers, the culture and structure of the organization must be examined for its implementation. Schools are planned around working in separate departments allowing teachers to teach in isolation (Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 1999). This isolation sabotages the implementation of professional development in context. Aspects of organizational leadership must be applied in order to examine the culture of the school in order to eliminate potential barriers to a model of peer observation for contextualized professional development (Sparks and Hirsh, 1997).

**Summary.** The organization of the teaching profession has confined teachers to their classrooms with little or no contact with other educators, limiting their professional growth.
Professional development began as responses to this disconnect from one another and that teachers were unprepared due to unqualified teachers and inadequate pre-service training. Little change has happened in the execution of professional development. Currently, teachers work in a de-contextualized environment, with a top down approach to learning. The focus of the in-service is on what teachers needs to learn rather than on how teachers learn. Little opportunities are available for teachers to experience situated learning models and method in which they are expected to adopt. Concepts from adult learning theory applied to how teachers learn in authentic pedagogical approach allows for the creating of meaning learning of concepts. The lens of leadership and organizational theory needs to be viewed in order to assess the culture and dynamics of the organization for a shift in the direction of contextualized learning.

**Learning in Context**

A new movement is emerging where teachers work collaboratively in Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008) and work together in a peer observation model that allows for contextual learning. Peer observations to enhance professional development in context, is deeply rooted in history dating back to John Dewey. Dewey (2001) supports this model as a natural first-hand experience in context. In addition, Ellen Lagemann (1996), reports that Ella Flagg Young, John Dewey’s assistant, facilitated the involvement of both teachers and principals in the decision-making concerning curriculum. She felt that the experience gained by teachers doing the actual teaching should not be ignored. Additionally, Johann Herbart (1896) promotes experience and practice and poses the question of, “When then does anyone become an experienced teacher?” (p. 82). Furthermore, Paolo
Friere’s (2000) philosophy proposed that teachers learn with students, which avoids the thought that the teacher knows all.

Learning in context collaboratively creates a systemic organization that can sustain itself through multiple changes (Fullan, 2008; Senge, 2006). Currently, research studies have focused on the idea of contextual learning through peer observation. Two such studies were conducted, both qualitatively and quantitatively by Zwart, Wubbles, Bergen, and Bolhuis (2007, 2008), revealing growth in teacher learning through the process of peer observation. Many studies have revealed the process and learning that has emerged from implementing such a model as a form of professional development.

Learning in context is a theme that permeates many of the readings and research investigated. In both the leadership and organization and adult learning theory, learning in context “…on the job, day after day, is the work” (Fullan, 2008 p. 86). Additionally, Elmore (2004) believes that the problem with school reform stems from the fact that there are no opportunities for teachers to continuous learn by observing and being observed in the classroom. Furthermore, MacKeracher (2004) uses the term “situated learning” to explain her statement that knowledge and skills that adults acquire are learned more effectively when learned within the context in which they are used.

Adult learning theory looks at the understanding of how we learn as adults. Reflective practices then assist in the meta-cognition of how we apply this learning to our current practices (Knowles et al., 1998; MacKeracher, 2004). Beginning with adult learning theory and reflective practice, the study conducted by Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhuis (2007) makes clear the connection between what was learned and activities involved in that learning for the adults. In addition, growth for the adults came from the reflection piece of the study by
the ways in which adults reflected in action. On the contrary were two studies using the same theories. Kohut, et al., (2007) used both adult learning theory and reflective practices to identify the perceptions associated with peer observations. These theories were able to capture how adults view their participation and perceptions; however, the study showed how peer observations did not assist in evaluations of peers.

Lastly, the study conducted by Adshead, et al. (2006) produced the results that peer observation was welcomed and would improve the education of future doctors, but it was not necessarily used by the participants due to fear of scrutiny. Participants were given a choice to join the study and think about how this model applied to their learning. Although not mentioned directly by the authors, several studies conducted spoke about the sole use of adult learning theory to guide the study. Related to this idea, Huston and Weaver (2008) performed a three-year pilot where each faculty member chose an area of focus for consultation. Also, not mentioned as adult learning theory, but apparent as such, was the review of many universities using peer observation as a choice for formal, information, requested, or diagnostic evaluations (Bell, 2002). This study revealed that the process of peer observation is highly personal depending on the use. Better learning outcomes occur when adults learn what they need to know rather then being told what they need to know, as well as, having the time to apply previous knowledge to new knowledge.

Summary. Historians and current authors suggest the need for creating and learning within professional learning communities that allow for contextual learning. Contextual learning sustains an organization through educational and leadership changes. Many authors posit that learning happens on the job, as well as using collective collaboration rather than isolation as a way to learn. The collective whole is better than the individual parts, which is how the process
currently works. These authors discuss how an organization has constant change with a need for a system that can handle the changes by tapping the internal resources thus continuous learning occurs naturally.

**Dynamic Change and Collaborative Learning Environments**

The continuous transformation in an educational organization requires investigation of how the organization can be equipped to collaboratively handle constant changes and still improve. Leadership and organizational theory provide the support into looking at how an organization functions and how change happens within that organization. Educational organizations are always trying to catch up; hence, a system of improvement is necessary for teachers to have direct access to in-house experts to learn (Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2008). Burke (2008) identifies an educational environment as an “open system” because it depends on a constant connection with the environment. The literature offers many distinctions about the “what” of change, such as planned or unplanned; however, there is a lack of information about the “why” and “how” of implementing change (Burke, 2008). Burke (2008) refers to the “what” part of change as content and the “how” as the process. As stated by Burke (2008), “…management consulting tends to focus on the content - on what needs to be changed. The process of how to bring about the change is either ignored or left to others, especially the client, to implement” (p. 165). DuFour and Eaker (1998) report that trying to change beliefs and habits will be complex and difficult to achieve. They state, “…if a change initiative is to be sustained, the elements of that change must be embedded with in the culture of the school” (p. 133). As stated by Fullan (2008), “Systems can learn on a continuous basis. The synergistic result of the previous five secrets in action is tantamount to a system that learns from itself” (p 14). Performance and outcomes will always change so the system will have to
learn from itself in order to move forward with changes for continual success (Fullan, 2008). In addition, Bandura (1997) supports the idea of a system learning from itself when he says that people can and do control their own motivation and thought process using peer observations and self-assessment to change their behaviors and attain goals. Peer observation is one way the system (the school) can learn from itself (Bandura, 1997).

The Professional Learning Community as a whole is the stakeholder. Administrators, teachers, staff, and students all hold a piece to the success of a community of learners that look to increase their knowledge capacity by learning from each other. Change is an occurrence that happens daily in any organization whether it is planned or unplanned (Burke, 2008). Each change made is always unique to the specific organizations. In order for organizations to survive, it is important to take the entire system into view when executing change. In the article *Adaptiveness of Organizations*, Petersen (2006), presents information about the independence of school districts when considering change. Not until the recent outside influences, such as political and legislative actions, has there been such a push toward accountability when incorporating change. According to Petersen (2006) “Political influences, formal and informal expectation, authority, and problems of perceived legitimacy have fostered a climate of accelerated change, compelling educational organizations to become increasingly responsive, innovative and adaptive” (p 1). These outside influences are driving the changes for school organizations with an overarching microscope lens watching every move. When considering change, schools need a possible model to assist them to incorporate change with consideration to all outside influences that affect that change. One such model is the, *Four Frame Model*, which was published in 1984 by Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal. The four frames of Structural, Human Resource, Political, and Symbolic are used to view change from
all levels. Fullan (2008) refers to this as *Dynamic Balance* where the system needs to put into practice continuous reflection and involvement of all stakeholders that be practical across parts. A fluid relationship creates a dynamic balance. Using a peer observation model creates relationships amongst teachers to increase knowledge capacity in a genuine form. Rather than professional development established from a top down approach where teachers are taken out of the classroom to learn, the teachers as stakeholders are utilized to make a fluid transfer of knowledge to one another (Fullan, 2008).

A top down approach only leads to fragmentation. Senge (2006) declares that we are inherently taught to take things apart rather than look at the whole picture. This leads to a loss of our intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole although we try to reassemble the pieces back to re-create the whole. When working in this type of isolation and fragmentation, it is like as Bohm (1973) says trying to reassemble a broken mirror, you will never have clear reflection. Once we begin to stop thinking and working in this fragmentized way, “… we can then build learning organizations, organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (p. 484). Learning from each other in our natural context will afford continual learning and collaboration. Senge (1990) coined the term “learning communities” when he discussed how only companies that embraced the model of learning communities would be able to keep internal sustainability and excel in the future. That sustainability comes from the ability to discover and use people’s talent from within the organization and allow everyone to learn at all levels. This moves the organization forward by allowing leaders to emerge (Senge, 2006).
Summary. Dynamic and collaborative learning environments show how an educational organization is an open system due to its constant connection to the environment and how that environment changes. In order for an organization to sustain its viability, in-house expertise is a premium resource for continuous learning to occur. Systems are quick to identify what needs to change but never how the change process will happen. According to most authors, outcomes will always change, hence an organization will have to learn from itself in order to move forward. Theorists concur that people can control their motivation to learn by observing and self-assessing to attain goals. Outside influences, such as political and legislative action, plus the need to inform stakeholders, make an impact on educational institutions accountability. The system must have a continuous reflective piece in place to handle these influences and the change that they impose.

Creating and Cultivating Collaborative Leaders within an Organization

Lastly, the idea of creating and cultivating collaborative leaders from within an organization warrants further exploration of the literature to illuminate how peer observations can produce teachers as leaders inside the organization. Both leadership and organizational theory and adult learning theory focus on how leaders emerge and sustain an educational organization. Dufour and Eaker (1998) assert that teachers are leaders since their tasks are similar. According to the authors, “Leaders are judged on the basis of results that cannot be achieved solely by their own efforts” (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p. 228). Fullan (2008) adds that the focus on individual leaders is why an organization does not maintain continuous learning. Leadership is a group effort that requires an environment that embraces working collaboratively. Authors Kouzes and Posner (2007) discuss how an organization must “enable people to act.” They claim that relationships must be fostered and that through these
relationships, people take risks, hence producing leaders (Gallos, 2008). In the area of adult learning, Knowles et al. (1998) posits that a democratic philosophy, which develops the person, will ultimately lead that person to the right decision. This view in leadership and organizational theory and adult theory leads to the idea that guiding principles will be based on the actual needs of the collective group, “…and that there will be a maximum of participation by all members of the organization in sharing responsibility for making and carrying out decisions” (Knowles et al., 1998, p.109). This philosophy promotes that all participants act as leaders in the group.

More administrators and teachers are looking into peer observations as a positive form of collaboration. As long as the purpose of using peer observation is used as a tool for professional development and not for evaluation, there are multiple benefits for the school. As capacity increases, the students profit from this knowledge, which in turn increases their ability to learn (Dufour and Eaker, 1998; Fullan, 2008; Gallos, 2008; Kouzes and Posner, 2007).

Peer observation involves all stakeholders to participate in order for change to happen. Fullan (2008) reports one finding on how companies endear themselves to all the stakeholders, which suggest that one stakeholder is not more important that the other. Using a peer observation model creates a professional learning community that focuses on learning to teach, working collaboratively, and produces accountable results for everyone Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008; Fullan, 2008).

Preparing children for the 21st century requires schools to give students techniques and strategies that can be used across the board for continued learning. This leads back to a school’s vision. A school’s vision must meet the foundational principles of a community. Without reverting to the goals of the school, you cannot implement the strategies to meet those
goals (Porras, 2004). Instructional leadership theory posits the idea elevating organizational member’s values to move them beyond themselves and emulated organizational goals (Elmore, 2000; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger, 1992; Hallinger & Wimpelberg, 1992). During the interview in the article, *The Path of Change*, Porras (2004) supports this argument when he states, “If you disagree about the big goal, then you can’t agree about the strategies and you can’t agree about the values; it’s a change” (p. 47). To make our schools successful, linking the goal with the strategies is imperative for survival. Once these goals are established, varieties of approaches are necessary for continued learning and increased knowledge capacity to persist. Peer observations must embed within the entire system for learning to continue. Burke (2008) refers to this as an “Evolutionary Change” (pg. 69), where continual improvement within a system will culminate and create a considerable change. Having a variety of ways for teachers to meet goals with different techniques and strategies will motivate teachers to use what they know to gain new knowledge. Leaders that create a collaborative learning environment that allows this linkage to happen, with all stakeholders, are the ones that make schools successful (Burke, 2008; Porras, 2004).

Typically, when a system wants a change, an outside agent is brought into the organization (Burke, 2008). When an organization wants to make a change, it goes outside the system to look for a leader to create that change. Weick and Quinn’s (1999), calls this concept “episodic change”. This type of change typically happens when new personnel descend on the workplace. This new leader tends to portray traits that instill confidence and conviction that are connected to the vision of the system. Porras (2004) states in his interview, that these leaders create a lot of anticipation and excitement, but not a lot of change. What is better is a leader who focuses on constructing the capacities of the school’s goals and the people in those
the leader is. That way you can pull the leader out and put in another one in…and the
organization will keep chugging along” (p. 49). Good leaders will make other leaders emerge
when they keep the focus on the goals of the system. Having someone come in that is going to
“save the day” will only work for a short while. A leader will fashion a learning culture that is
collaborative in nature that is also working toward a common vision. Leadership entrenched
throughout the system will last longer than having one leader that makes all the changes
(Porras, 2004). Peer observations follows a servant leadership model by placing the leaders in
the middle of the organization building leaders from within that can sustain the organization
through any change (Covey, 2010).

According to a study performed by Sanders and Horn (1989) after the report of Nation at
Risk, student achievement is directly linked to the effectiveness of the teacher. The result of
the study proves that the effectiveness of the teacher is the major determinant of student
academic progress. Furthermore, the ethnographic case study completed by Burke (2003)
showed how distributed leadership created a paradigm shift about the interrelationships in the
organization for both teachers and administrators, showing that the organization is dependent
on human capital (knowledge and skill) to sustain itself. Organizations house many experts in
a variety of areas. Rather than controlling how information is dispersed amongst staff
members in the building, it becomes a responsibility of the school leadership to develop a
culture of sharing, what Elmore (2000) calls the “glue” of a common task or goal, such as
instructional improvement for distributed leadership theory. Distributive leadership plays an
important role in peer observations. Of further emphasis was the use of leadership and
organizational theory for several studies. Through leadership and organizational theory,
several sub-theories are embedded within the framework. One such sub-theory is distributed leadership theory. Elmore (2000) emphasizes that through distributive leadership, expertise is necessary to dispense new knowledge, thus the organization must become responsible and own any new information. In the study conducted by Leander and Osborne (2008), understanding a teacher’s classroom practices, relationships, and beliefs will allow for a better awareness of his or her work. That work can then be shared with other teachers to continue the circle of knowledge; hence, teachers take responsibility for their own learning (Leander & Osborne, 2008).

Fullan (2008) discusses the six essential factors that an organization needs to exemplify to sustain change. Peer observations incorporate the six secrets: Love Your Employees, Connect with Peers with Purpose, Capacity Building Prevails, Learning is the Work, Transparency Rules, and Systems Learn, automatically (Fullan, 2008). One of the prevailing ideas suggested by Fullan (2008) is the study of Toyota’s continued success by which it has been observed that Toyota’s performance, “…shows no leadership effect…” (Fullan, p. 109). The idea behind this is that Toyota has thrived so well because they do not rely on the individual leaders but on many leaders intertwined throughout the company allowing them to flourish for many years. Many leaders cultivated additional leaders. The use of peer observations will create the same effect of many leaders that Toyota experiences which will incorporate all secrets for continued support of change (Fullan, 2008).

Change begins with the administration and the teachers actions and decisions must systemic (Senge, 2000). According to Solomon & Schrum, (2007), the first responsibility of the administration is to establish a school-wide commitment to any learning and change, which involves individuals through out the system. That begins with building of trust among faculty.
If teachers do not feel valued or see this as a form of evaluation, then it will fail (Burke, 2008). Advocating respect and a commitment to learning is imperative for capacity to build. School leaders must ensure that they advocate and support teacher observation as a valid form of professional development (Reeves, 2006). Teachers must buy-in to this approach as a legitimate form of professional development as well. Teachers that are committed to this approach must first allow other teachers to join in as on a volunteer basis. If the concept is forced, then the reception will take on a negative tone. Emphasis needs to be placed on student growth rather than evaluation and judgment. Teachers need to feel that what they are doing is a direct impact on the students rather than on their own personal pride. The focus must shift to how things can be done differently in the classroom to ensure that students succeed academically (Fullan, 2008). Fullan (2008) reveals in Secret One: Love Your Employees, “If you build your organization by focusing on your customers without the same careful commitment to your employees, you won’t succeed for long” (p. 12). Administrators need to focus on the teachers to make a safe place to learn while teachers need to provide a safe place for each other to learn. Administrators and teachers have to facilitate for one another to learn continuously and find significance in what they are doing (Fullan, 2008). Peer observations support this approach in leadership.

Schools cultures vary. In order for teachers observing teachers to be an effective change agent, schools need to embrace and nurture the concept of exchanging ideas. A certain level of trust needs establishment in order for the organization to change. Working in isolation does not increase ones capacity to acquire knowledge. Since student learning is so fluid, instruction should mirror that fluidness (Hargreaves, 1992). Implementers of this model need to implore caution and careful planning because this concept is not an easy task. Teachers may want the
change but many are not in a position to accept the change. The model of peer observations is a slow process that needs gradual integration. Forcing the concept will only raise fear and contempt. The idea makes teaching move from a very private to public affair, which makes people uneasy. One of the best ways to combat the fear is by trusted teachers sharing what has worked for them in the classroom. Trust holds the key for the whole system to work. That trust needs to come from both the administrators and teachers. Creating a positive learning community takes hard work and commitment (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Hargreaves, 1992).

**Summary.** Research in the area of peer observation explained the importance of creating and cultivating collaborative leaders from within the organization. Both Adult Learning and Leadership and Organizational theory applied to this idea demonstrates how an organization can allow for contextual learning and long lasting sustainability by allow people to act and take charge of their learning. This provides for a democratic viewpoint, whereby people will ultimately make the appropriate decisions because they know what they need. Again, all stakeholders are involved and collective whole makes decisions rather than isolated individuals. Additionally, a school’s vision that prepares students as 21st century learners focuses on the goals the school wants to achieve. This elevates an organization beyond their individual needs to the collective need of the organization. Goals and strategies need to be linked together with a variety of approaches for the system, to continue learn. Constant improvement will culminate and create change.

**Contrary Reports on the Effectiveness of Peer Observations**

Many of the research studies on peer observations discuss the benefits of this model (Zwart, Wubbles, Bergen, and Bolhuis, 2007, 2008; Latz, Speirs, Neumeister, Adams, & Pierce, 2009;
Leander, & Osborne, 2008; Huston, & Weaver, 2008; Munson, 1998; Murray, MA, & Mazur, 2009; Shortland, 2010; and Lee & Macfadyen, 2007). However, some studies speak to the ineffectiveness of such a model (Kohut, Burnap, & Yon, 2007 and Adshead, White, & Stephenson, 2006). According to an article by Cosh (1999), when the implementation of peer observation was used in the school of Languages at Anglia Polytechnic University, many participants saw the model as threatening and/or critical. Additionally, participants felt that feedback was not accurate because observers were trying to use “nice” and “non-offensive” language when they gave their feedback (p.23). Cosh (1999) states, “The danger is that friends could watch each other and be uncritical. ‘People should be watched by at least two others.’ Some of these are valid and laudable comments. However, my contention is that they all arise from a false view of what the objective of peer observation should be. It seems to me, therefore, not only that we are unqualified to judge our peers, but also that our judgments are subjective, and therefore of limited and questionable value to anyone other than ourselves” (p. 23). A reflective approach to encourage self-reflection and self-awareness about our own teaching is reported to be the best way to increase capacity using peer observations (Cosh, 1999).

Since most of the research and literature to date has reported on ways peer observation is implemented, Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004), report on the lack of attention that has been given to the deliver the peer observation process, and how to mange an integrated process to reap all the benefits. These authors contend that if peer observations are not focused with clear goals, the process is thus languorous (Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2004). Results yield mixed perceptions on the benefits of peer observations. The authors contend that there is not enough research available and that training in conducting observations becomes
necessary. Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004) cite the work of Hogston's (1995) that practitioners need the skills to be able to give constructive feedback of teaching in order for it to be professional development and Manning (1986) who states that involving all staff in observing improves teaching on a school-wide basis. Based on the information in this study, the authors warn against repetition of the same ideas addressed by both the observer and observee. “It is important that PoT [peer observation of teachers] does not stagnate by becoming repetitive. If the observer and observee cover the same issues regarding personal approaches to curriculum, teaching styles and subject understanding, then little development will be forthcoming” (p. 502). The process of peer observations can be a positive step towards professional development if emphasis is placed on clarity of how to manage the model.

Bell (2002) cautions that the term peer observation is used when, in fact, it is a supervisor that is the observer. In addition, the changes that follow an observation are a result of reflection suggesting that the actual peer observation of teaching may be an inadequate term to describe the process. Other studies, such as Zwart, Wubbels, Bergen, & Bolhuis, 2007; Murray, MA, & Mazur, 2009; Bruce & Ross, 2008; Slater, & Simmons, 2001, used the words observation, mentoring, and coaching interchangeably to discuss the enhancement of teacher professional development, further showing that the term peer observation has not be adequately defined.

**Summary.** Many research studies speak to the effectiveness of a process of peer observation as a professional development tool. As I conjecture how a process of peer observation may work in a school district, it is important that I look at all the research available to determine both the positive and negative aspects of such a program. This affords me, as the
researcher, to trial ideas that have proven to work and avoid mistakes which other research has identified.

Chapter III: Methodology

Research Questions

1. What do teachers perceive to be the benefits and challenges in pursuing meaningful professional development through peer observations in a professional learning community?

2. Did the process and tools implemented by an instructional leader use to facilitate learning through peer observation, enhance and contribute to meaningful contextual learning for teachers?

The first question connects to Adult Learning Theory and looks into how adult learners gain new knowledge and how the process promote success and addresses challenges. The second question connects with the theory of leadership and organization, in that the collective group must be involved to investigate an approach that works for our school. Once the approach is established, the next step of creating a collaborative environment for peer observations must evolve through leadership and organizational theory, which creates a culture for this type of learning to flourish.

Rationale for a Qualitative Design

After carefully considering the literature, frameworks, research questions, and feedback from both peers and instructors, it was determined that the research questions would best be answered by a qualitative study. Since I will be drawing on a small percentage of the building’s teachers to perform this study, my focus will be on their experiences rather than looking at quantitative differences. According to Maxwell (2005) qualitative research allows
for the understanding of “…how events, actions, and meanings are shaped by the unique circumstance in which these occur” (pg. 22). Another reason why qualitative research is appropriate for my study is its flexibility for change. Since teaching is not a fixed entity, change is inevitable. Qualitative research permits change in the research design when new discoveries are made (Maxwell, 2005). One of the most important reasons, presented by Maxwell (2005), for the use of qualitative research in my study is the generation of “…results and theories that are understandable and experientially credible, to both the people you are studying and to others” (pg. 24). For the purpose of this study, quantitative research does not have the same connection to teachers as a qualitative study. For the impact to happen, this study needs to connect to the realities that a teacher faces in a classroom. Many teachers may feel that the next new “fad” is in place. Credibility with peers is essential for full participation.

The research questions for this study have been revised through a combination of feedback, research, reading and appropriateness of building needs. Based on these questions and the readings on Practice Based Research, (PRB), the most appropriate type of research for this study would be Action Research. Since the problem of practice is teachers working in isolation and the need for observing each other to develop best teaching practices through authentic professional development, action research permits the examination of teaching practices to develop and test advancements for solutions in real time, using the process of spiraling cycles of action-inquiry (Ferrance, 2000). Tomal (2010) states that action-inquiry simultaneously allows for conducting action and inquiry in order to increase the wider effectiveness of our actions. These actions help individuals and groups become capable of self-transforming thus more sustainable. Most importantly, action research allows teachers to be part of the process, work collaboratively, and occurs within the context of their current
environment (Ferrance, 2000). Barriers and fear may be the biggest factors for teachers working in isolation. Action-based research affords the opportunity to start with a small group and then branch out to break down barriers and fear (Stringer, 2007).

Additional reasons for choosing action research as the basis for this study are as follows:

**Action research takes place in a school setting.** Using a collaborative method, colleagues address solutions to problems faced everyday in schools (Ferrence, 2000). Action research is built on the premise that the reflective practice of inquiry informs and changes current practice, (Ferrance, 2000). The work is authentic because is happens in the educator’s natural environment. The current professional development process is the opposite. Educators are removed from context and sent back to their classrooms to make sense of learned material individually (Argyris & Schön, 1974, Hargreaves, 2007; Reeves, 2004).

**Action-based research establishes credibility and ownership amongst colleagues.** When teachers work collectively to develop a plan, the combination of individual contributions creates a collective accomplishment to establish buy-in from all parties involved. Since more resources (teachers) are part of the process, the rewards are greater (Dufour, Dufour & Eaker, 2008). Action research would support that culture or what (Stringer, 2007) reports as a type of research that combats isolation through promoting collaboration rather than educators that are creating their own perception of what is going on when teaching.

**Action research provides the foundation for this research study.** Some of the strengths of Action Research that would be evident are:

- Influence as a practitioner.
- Authenticity
- School based problem
- Professional development tool
- Change agent
- Collegiality
- Communication
- Development of common language
- Opportunity to use the spiraling method of inquiry and action.
- Self Reflective process

In contrast, I have to keep in mind some of the limitations involved as well, such as:

- My influence may create bias of participants
- Participants may not work collaboratively
- Everyone (Stakeholders) must be kept informed throughout the process. (Stringer, 2007).

In sum, action research has generalized applicability to my research goals and questions simultaneously. Action research is credited to Kurt Lewin (1947) who founded the Researcher Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). Lewin emphasized the need for collaboration and group inquiry to collect information about social issues in order to develop action plans to solve these problems. In education, the researcher uses a systemic process to solve problems and make improvements. The goal is to understand what is happening in the school/classroom and determine what could be done to improve things in that particular context (Tomal, 2010).

When looking at my research questions, action research is an appropriate PBR since it involves ideas from actual participants of the study and contributes input that describes “why” those participating are not utilizing the process. Since action research is participant directed,
this piece allows those involved to reflect and identify problems they perceive as barriers to collaboration. This first step is important for educators so that they can examine where they are and how they can work differently. An action research study has the potential to affect school restructuring and change. Again, this study is an authentic school based problem, with participants reflecting on how they can function differently (Stringer, 2007; Tomal, 2010). Ferrence (2000) lists the circular connected steps to conducting action research: identification of the problem area, collection and organization of data, interpretation of data, action based on data, and reflections. Each research question falls into the steps of this sequence. The circle is unbroken, hence, as reflection happens, and “deep learning”, (Fullan, 2005), continues. Since a peer observation process is specific to the school in which I work, I am proposing that this be an Action Research study. As stated by (Stringer, 2007), “Action Research is a systematic approach to investigation that enables people to find effective solutions to problems they confront in their everyday lives” (p.1).

Site and Participants

Study site. Permission to conduct this study was given by both the superintendent of schools and the building principal (Appendix A). Since I am planning to be a participant and purpose of the conducting this study is to focus on a specific problem and identify a solution for my school, Action Research is the best research choice. This study was conducted at a middle to upper class, suburban large middle school in Eastern Massachusetts. This school is one of two middle schools in town providing education for approximately 940 students from grades 5-8. This school is one of the largest middle schools in its area. I purposely picked this school since I have access to participants and that my research can make a positive contribution to the school in an effort to create a professional learning community that embraces learning in
context.

**Research participants.** Participants include eight cross discipline teachers: two math, one science, one history, two English, one reading specialist, and one special education teacher in grades 7 and 8, who teach four sections of their content area daily. All teachers participating in this study are female. Teachers at this school work in teams of four content teachers with several support teachers assigned to the grade level. The two math teachers, science teacher, history teacher and one of the two English teachers teach grade seven only. Of these teachers, the one math teacher, science teacher, history teacher, and one of the English teachers all work on a collective team, servicing the same students. The second math teacher is on a mirror team, similar to the aforementioned team, that has three other content teachers, who work to service another team of students – these three content teachers are not included in this study. The one special education teacher works with the full team of content teachers participating in this study and co-teaches with both the English teacher and math teacher from this team. The second English teacher and reading teacher teach two sections their content area with seventh grade students and two sections of their content area with eighth grade students. The role of the reading teacher is to support, under regular education initiatives, students struggling in the content areas in a separate classroom for both grades seven and eight. These teachers will act as the target population for my sample drawing.

**Participant selection.** Since this is an Action Research study, the sample population was intentionally targeted, in order to obtain information on how a process of peer observations works in a middle school setting to promote collaboration and the ability to gain pedagogical knowledge. Criteria included inviting all content area teachers in grades seven and eight to generate a sample of interested teachers wanting to learn in context by observing in other
classrooms. The stakeholders (teachers) all indicated a strong interest in participating in the study.

In December of 2010, I met with the superintendent of schools, and both the building principal and assistant principal to notify them that I intended on conducting my study beginning in April 2011 and ending in May 2011. At this point, we discussed the support necessary to conduct the research and whom to include. It was agreed by all that I send an initial invite, via standard email, to all grade seven and eighth teachers (Appendix B) to generate interest in participation. Since research supports the aspect that peer observation should be embedded practice of teaching, this study relies on the use of volunteers that are interested in process. The teachers decide when the observations will take place and whom they will observe. This idea is in direct alignment with adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 1998; MacKeracher, 2004), in which adults want to be a part of their learning process and make decisions in what they want to learn. Additionally, leadership and organization theory connects to this research, as the leader (teacher) is placed in the middle of organization (the classroom) allowing the system to continue learning (Elmore, 2000; Harris, 2004; Hargreaves, 1994; Reeves, 2009; Fullan, 2005, 2008; Senge, 2000).

**Participant requirements.** The focus of this research is to study how a system of peer observations can create collaboration by identifying the benefits of such a process and challenges, in order to establish an embedded process at school. In order to obtain data, participants were asked to conduct weekly one-hour observations in another teachers’ classroom for a five-week continuous cycle. Participants took part in a pre-peer observation cycle interview to identify previous experiences and perceptions of peer observations (Appendix C). Participants (observer) met briefly to discuss the focus of the lesson with the
cooperating teacher (observee). Using a Pre-observation form (Appendix D) the participant recorded the date, time, which type of classroom they are observing, subject area of the teacher, and the proposed area for improvement. The participants will choose the teachers to observe based on their individual teaching schedules and professional development needs. Teachers (observers) conducted weekly observations, keeping a learning journal (Appendix E) to identify five newly learned skills gained by conducting the observation as well as two learnings that could be used immediately in the observers’ classroom. As a culminating reflective piece, teachers completed two brief questions, in which they identified strengths and insights gained from the observations using a modified SII (Strength, Improvement, Insight) method of assessment (Beyerlein, Holmes, & Apple, 2007) (Appendix F). At the conclusion of observations, the researcher, using ten guiding questions (Appendix G), conducted post-peer observation cycle interviews. Participation was strictly voluntary and adheres to adult learning theory, whereby adults are motivated by creating their own knowledge and seeking out what they need to learn rather than being told what to do and learn (Knowles, 1998 et al; MacKeracher, 2004).

**Role of the researcher.** For the purpose of this study, I used three roles of participant and resource person, doctoral student, and researcher.

According to Stringer (2007), the researcher acts as a facilitator to involve all stakeholders in defining problems and providing support towards an effective solution. Additionally, research in professional development places emphasis on the importance of curriculum developers acting as facilitators of information (Hargreaves, 2007; Sparks & Hirsch, 1997). Working as a facilitator placed emphasis in both ideas purported in leadership and organizational theory and adult learning theory. The facilitator role functioned under servant
leadership, since it is based on the wish to help others and the positioning of the leader in the middle of an organization and rests on the concept of humility by tapping the human resources within a building (Covey, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Next, the facilitator’s purpose fell under instructional leadership because it facilitates relationships, such as collaboration and using research on instruction and adult learning in context. It promotes that the responsibility of the leader is to provide guidance and direction for instructional improvement (Elmore, 2000; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger & Wimpelberg, 1992). Moreover, distributive leadership advanced the facilitators’s role, since continuous learning and how an organization can take control of learning takes precedence through observations. Lastly, acting as a facilitator endorsed adult learning theory by providing an unrestricted environment with shared thoughts and power to create individual and meaningful learning (Lindeman, 1926; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998; MacKeracher, 2004; Tough, 1971). My main roles included building a safe environment that is supportive of individual learning, where participants, including myself, can share information and take risks.

As the researcher, I was the primary instrument to gather data by observation, field notes, teacher email and document review, and interviews. Being an English teacher, I have access to colleagues interested in conducting observations. I used built relationships and trust to receive honest and open responses from the participants. My goal was to have participants provide valuable insight to the process of peer observations. The data collected will provide a complete understanding for this inquiry.

I have been a teacher for 19 years. Because I work as classroom teacher and believe in working collaboratively with other teachers, I have biases. I am hoping that the peer observation process is looked favorably upon and benefits teachers, but will, as best possible,
try to collect and assess the data for what it is at face value. All participants recognize me as an educator and colleague. All participants are aware that I am a doctoral student at Northeastern University and am looking to investigate this phenomenon of peer observations to improve instructional practices of teachers.

**Data Collection**

Data collection commenced for a period of five weeks beginning in April 2011 and ending in May 2011. The goal is for the observations to happen weekly on a continuous basis. A variety of data collection techniques were employed including:

a) Teachers’ pre-peer-observation notes

b) a learning journal for teachers to identify new learnings and meaningful applications of that learning to their own teaching practice based on their peer observations,

c) a modified electronic post observation assessment form -SI - Strengths and Insights (Beyerlein, Holmes, & Apple, 2007) document to capture the teacher-specified significant points of the observation,

d) a post peer observation interview with all participating teachers regarding their experience of the peer-observation cycle as a professional development tool after engaging in the peer-observation cycle, and what they gained from that experience, and

e) a researcher’s log to collect field notes and capture perceptions and comments through the process.

The focus of the data collection was to answer my research questions.
Establishing peer observational experience with cooperating teachers (observee) informs my research questions. A pre-study interview serves to identify preconceived perceptions, norms and trust necessary to conduct observations and create a collegial atmosphere. Furthermore, insights from the learning journals, SI form, and interviews delve further into research questions one and two of how, as an instructional leader, a collaborative environment can be attained and developed, as well as, provide insight into question three and four to perceived benefits and challenges of peer observations. Since this is a qualitative study, data collection requires the use of qualitative collection methods to answer research questions.

**Interview Protocol**

Interview protocol followed the guidelines of Kvale (1996). Kvale (1996) states that interviews are conversations with structure and purpose that are distinct and controlled by the researcher. Interviews capture the subjects’ views on something. The basic subject matter in qualitative research consists of meaningful relations to be interpreted (Kvale, 1996). During the interviews, participants answered questions about their experience with peer observations and the experiences they had as an observer. The direct source of data was two open-ended interviews with eight cross discipline teachers at the study site. Interviews were conducted both before and after the observations. I conducted the interviews in a comfortable setting chosen by each participant. Interviews were audio taped with the participant’s permission. As the researcher, I collected the data in this study. Data collection took place upon Internal Review Board (IRB) approval. I explained the nature and purpose of the study to the participants.

During the initial request for participant stage, I advised the participants of their confidentiality rights and apprised them that the information they would share would remain confidential without any identification of their names associated with their comments. I
informed the participants that no physical harm would occur from being a participant in the study.

The direct source of data collection was open-ended interviews with study participants (Appendix C & G). During the interviews, teacher participants answered general questions about their experiences with peer observations. According to Kvale (1996), in qualitative research, the use of interviews allowed the researcher to gather information regarding the study from a personal perspective, which can be an important form of data collection to obtain descriptions with respect to interpretations of the meaning of what is described. In order to gain further in-depth information directly related to the topic, teacher participants were interviewed as one form of data collection. I informed the participants that they could choose to withdraw their input from the study without any repercussions at any time during the study. I spoke to the participants individually to allow them not to feel hesitant to share their own input and ideas. Following the protocol when conducting the interviews, I reviewed the responses of the participants. Each interview took approximately one half hour each in duration both before and after conducting observations. I took notes during the interviews even though the interviews were audio taped and transcribed. These follow-up contacts were made in person (Kvale, 1996).

**Pre-peer-observation cycle interviews (Appendix C).** The use of a pre-observation interview that contains questions of participants’ prior experiences with observations was used in this study. Responses to interview question identified the degree to which participating teachers have participated in any form of peer observations and what was gained, if anything, through those observations. The interview questions are a combination of questions that mirror a variety of research studies in the area of peer observations. (See Interview Protocol).
Post-peer-observation cycle interviews (Appendix G). At the end of the observation process, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each teacher to gain a deeper understanding of what was gained by participating teachers through their peer observations as well as the advantages and challenges of this system of professional development through peer observations. According to Stringer (2007), interviews provide an opportunity for the participants to describe the situation from their own perspective. The participants’ experience is illuminated in detail using this form of reflective practice, thus legitimizing the knowledge gained.

All interviews were conducted at a convenient location chosen by the teachers. In order to avoid tainted questions that portray the researcher bias or to create negativity for participants, the researcher attempted to ask only standard, neutral and non-leading questions that addressed the research questions asked (Appendix E). All interviews were transcribed verbatim. Use of a digital recorder was used to capture the exact conversations between researcher and teacher. Eight separate interviews will inform this study. (See interview Protocol).

Journals and SI Form (Appendix E & F). Each participant was given a journal to be used for recording during the observations. Each teacher used this journal to identify five new learnings from the observations. Of the five new learnings, teachers identified two learnings that they could implement immediately in their classrooms. In addition, the learning journal was a place for teachers to record any further thoughts, questions, concerns, and ideas during the observation. The journals helped to organize the participants’ experiences in the different classrooms.

In addition to the observational data recorded, the observer was given an electronic form, by the researcher via standard email, once the observation concluded, in order for the observer
to reflect on the specific strengths and insights gained from observing a peer. Participant's records provided the researcher feedback on what the participant was thinking and feeling, as well as the positive aspects of the study (Barth, 1990; Gordon, 2004). These observational records were analyzed at the end of the peer observation procedure. Journals and SI forms were returned to the participants for their own personal reference at the conclusion of the study.

**Researcher’s Log.** Participant researchers need to record, carefully, the details of interviews. One way to do this is using field notes (Stringer, 2007). Throughout the process of the study, I kept a log to document the process and to record personal ideas, learning, meeting dates, and observations of participants, as well as any additional aspects of the study. Using a log minimized research bias, as perceptions and insights were recorded rather than recalled (Stringer, 2007). Corbin and Strauss (2008) push further the idea that field notes are data that may contain some conceptualization and analytic remarks. The following scheme produced by Schatzman and Strauss (1973) was used as a break down in the ideas in the researcher’s log. The first section will consist of observational notes (ONs) that describe the actual events. The next section will consist of theoretical notes (TNs) denoting the researchers thoughts about those events. Finally, the third section will hold methodological notes (MNs) or reminders about some procedural aspect of the research.

**Data Analysis**

Several steps occurred to analyze collected data. First, a review of the data took place. Next, data was broken down into meaningful parts and organized for coding the data into key words, phrases, subcategories and categories. Then, analysis consisted of the researcher constructing themes from data collected. The next step included organization of a category
system. Lastly, sharing a hard copy of the interview transcript with the participants to review for accuracy concluded the process (Maxwell, 2007; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Stringer, 2007).

**Phase one: reviewing the data.** Consistent with qualitative practices in data analysis, the initial step in the process was the reading of pre-observation documents, learning journals, SI electronic forms and interview transcripts to familiarize the researcher with data content. According to Maxwell (2005), this first stage of analysis allows me to immerse myself in the data to gain a sense of the whole before further breakdown of the information. While reading and listening to information, the process of reorganizing and rewriting my thoughts occurs.

**Phase two: categories and coding, themes, and category system.** This phase of the study involved an in-depth data collection process and analysis. This qualitative research design afforded me the opportunity to analyze each participant’s perceptions of their participation in the peer observation process, including their personal assessment of the benefits and challenges to the process as a means for meaningful professional developing in the context of professional learning community. In the review of transcripts, I was able to identify common categories and themes across participants in response to interview questions prior to and after participation in the peer observation cycle.

Initial categories for analyzing the transcripts were developed as broad areas for analysis before the interviews were conducted (Maxwell, 2007). They are considered categories for evaluating the content of teachers’ responses. Since I have a large amount of data, several categories needed to be created in order to capture information generated from the study and linked to the research questions.

**Open coding - step 1.** According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), open coding is the part of the analysis that identifies, names, categorizes, and describes the phenomena found in the
text. I read each line, sentence, and paragraph in search of the answer to the repeated questions of, "What is this about? What is being referenced here?" In addition, as codes were developed, I wrote memos, known as code notes that discuss the codes (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

As I read the data, I wrote a paraphrase, phrase, heading, or label that describes what I was seeing in that passage. Using a memo, I chunked or quoted the most important ideas, as well wrote a description of the code.

**Axial coding - step 2.** Once the information was categorized, the identification of themes emerged from each participant’s response. The job of the researcher is to identify the themes in common by comparing the categories and sub-categories presented (Stringer, 2007). Axial coding is the process of relating codes (categories and properties) to each other, through combination of inductive and deductive thinking. Emphasizes involved identifying causal relationships, and fitting ideas into a basic frame of generic relationships (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Using a copy of the coded data, sections were created based on the labels on the transcripts. Data was sorted and placed in piles that have the same or closely related labels. Each pile was labeled with a word or phrase that captures the main idea of that pile. Looking at the piles, I identified ideas that related to the label of each pile and noticed if any of the piles could be combined with others or if piles need to be eliminated because they do not relate to the research questions. This process helped me identify the main themes of the different data.

**Selective coding – step 3.** Selective coding is the process of choosing one category as the umbrella category, in which all other categories are related. Essential the idea is to develop a single focal point around which everything else is arranged. It is believed that such a central concept always exists (Corbin and Strauss, 2008).
In this step, I developed a conceptual schema to tie the data together and answer research questions. I looked at the themes to identify major and minor themes. Through the larger umbrella theme, I organized the information to create a narrative of the process of peer observations. At this point, I elicited the help of others such as cohort members and colleagues to talk through the ideas.

**Phase three: developing a report framework.** Reporting consists of creating a framework to present the outcomes of the research to the relevant stakeholders. The identified categories, and themes acted as headings and subheadings for the report (Stringer, 2007). Once the conceptual schema was developed, an analysis, that was driven by the schema, was reported. Using both theory and the literature, ideas from the schema were supported.

MAX QDA (software to facilitate thematic coding across several transcripts) was used to facilitate the organization of the data. All data from interviews, observations and documents were entered into electronic form by the researcher. The MAX QDA software program stored, sorted and retrieved the data, which helped the researcher to identify and develop specific categories and themes to highlight. The MAX QDA program printed out paragraphs with specific codes from all of the documents, thereby providing the opportunity to look at specific characteristics across a range of documents in an expeditious and efficient manner. In qualitative research, the use of technology allows for greater immediate access to multiple points of data thus increasing the ability of the researcher to make connections (Weitzman & Miles 1995).

The purpose of this study is to analyze the experiences of participants to determine if a peer observation environment provides meaningful collaborative and contextual learning, in which both success and challenges are identified. By analyzing key experiences of the
participants, greater clarity of the process comes into sight. As participants are interviewed and learning journals are completed, participants will most likely focus on experiences that make the process meaningful, as well as, understand the how the process affects their teaching practice (Stringer, 2007).

Validity and Credibility

Validity in a study answers whether or not the investigator is measuring what they say they are measuring (Maxwell, 2005). In qualitative research, people are the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. Maxwell (2005) suggested that when the subjects’ reality is accessed through observations and interviews, then the resulting validity is strengthened through the qualitative research process. Participants’ involvement in this study was completely anonymous and confidentiality of report findings were maintained. It is assumed that the participants provided honest and complete responses to in the data collection methods. Data collected in the researcher’s log was used to verify information reported by the participants. In action research, rigor is based on checks to ensure trustworthiness. Checks for trustworthiness in action research include creditably, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Stringer, 2007).

To ensure trustworthiness of the proposed study I used multiple data sources for creditability. A pre-observation interview established the participants’ prior experience and perception of peer observations. Prolonged engagement included a continuous weekly observation cycle with interviews to capture challenges and success. Moreover, participants had a learning journal to reflect on individual learning during the process. In addition, persistent observation will develop, since participants had the opportunity to use their learning journals to recall their learning rather than remember information from memory. During semi-
structured interviews, the researcher used member checking in order to review data to be sure that it adequately represents their experiences. This also allowed for participant briefing in order to identify any barriers that restrict the participant’s full participation in the study.

Action research outcomes apply to the particular people and places used in the study, which comes with limitations. This study consists of a small sample size, middle school level only, situated in a middle-upper income suburban community with a focus on participants that teach only two grade levels, and the researcher as a participant. This does affect the potential transferability of this study. In order for the study’s findings to be transferable to other contexts and populations, the procedures need to be carefully explored for the possibility of similar outcomes in different contexts and different participants (Stringer, 2007).

Additionally, this study’s generalizability needs to be carefully examined, since this is a single setting with a small number of participants. The degree in which the study can be generalized is restricted due to the culture of a school, the leadership actions, and the conditions of teacher interaction that may not be replicated elsewhere. Maxwell (2005) references this study’s generalizability as “internal” because the conclusion is in respect to the particular context and participants of the study. In addition, the limitations of this study includes “external” generalizability (Maxwell, 2005) as it is a very small sample size and thus difficult to ascertain the degree the outcomes could be generalized to a wider set of participants and contexts. Given these limitations, according to Stringer (2007), a “…detailed description of the context(s), activities, and events that are reported as part of the outcomes of the study” (p.59) to allow others outside of the study to decide whether or not the study is similar to their own situation to be applied. A full description of the study appears in the methodology section.
In action research, dependability occurs when people can trust the measure used and that the process has been followed. A detailed description of the procedures used in this study are included to allow for “inquiry audit” (Stringer, 2007, p. 59) for judgment of dependability. In addition, confirmability happens when the researcher is able to confirm that the procedures described in the study actually took place (Stringer, 2007). All instruments used to collect data including pre-observation interview questions, learning journals, SI forms, and post-interview questions as well as the participants’ responses through these instruments are available as an audit trail to confirm the veracity of the study and ensuring trustworthiness.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), the researcher must get in to the habit of writing memos while conducting research. The author states, “Qualitative analysis involves complex and cumulative thinking that would be very difficult to keep track of without the use of memos” (Corbin and Strauss, 2008, p. 119). Although I will use my researcher’s log to collect my field notes, in addition I wrote memos (Corbin and Strauss, 2008) to record my analyses and function as a way of storing information collected during the study. These memos were created weekly after observations were conducted and were kept electronically in my personal computer for reference. As suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008), each memo was dated with a heading and a reference as to the why the memo was created (i.e. field note, interview, strength and insight form). A short phrase or quote was added to the memo. I kept a list of concepts as well as identified codes and phrases that begin to sound alike. Memos created an audit trail for the entire review of the project. As the auditor is not familiar with the research or the project, the memos provided information for the auditor to make an objective assessment of the project through the process (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).
**Researcher Bias**

I [the researcher] am currently a seventh grade English teacher and program facilitator who believes that the impact of using a process of peer observation will positively impact the ability of my school to learn and sustain the school’s viability through change. I believe strongly in the need for the system to have a way to learn from itself as a way to maximize their professional development and knowledge in a climate of increasing demands and accountability. Additionally, I will be participating in the observation process in order to gain an emic (Martin, 2002) viewpoint and personally learn. This stance may influence the way I evaluate interviews and observation data, threatening the validity of the study, but every effort will be made to identify occasions and activities that may have affected the validity of analysis and findings.

To help address this issue, I continuously monitored myself and consulted with my advisor. Additionally, I consulted with other Northeastern University cohort members, the building principal, superintendent of schools, and director of curriculum, all of whom are not involved with the study, as auditors. They will assist by reading the data analysis checking for any researcher bias. I had these auditors review the transcripts of the interviews and recorded immediate field notes after observations and interviews.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Creswell (2009) reports Isreal & Hay (2006) ideas that, “Researchers need to protect their research participants; develop a trust with them; promote the integrity of research; guard against misconduct and impropriety that might reflect on their organizations or institutions; and cope with new, challenging problems” (p. 87). Before collecting any data, I passed the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB) proficiency test for researchers. All
guidelines provided by the IRB regarding research projects involving human subjects were followed. All subjects of the proposed study signed a letter of consent and their identities remain anonymous. The audiotapes and all research materials were stored in my home office and password protected computer. All audiotapes were destroyed upon conclusion of this study and participant generated data was returned to the participant or destroyed upon their request.

I identified any ethical challenges in connection to my study, such as my dual role of English teacher and Program Facilitator. All risks for participants, as well as challenges to relationships, were addressed in order to account for fairness of inquiry and interpretation. Application to the IRB followed approval of initial DPP by both my advisor, Dr. Unger, and the Northeastern University doctoral program committee. All participant information was kept confidential.

**Conclusion**

Educational organizations are rapidly changing. Teachers are not receiving the professional development necessary from in-house experts in order to enhance their teaching practice. A system of peer observation and coaching does not exist in most schools, including my school, and may prove to be a vital activity for propelling educators forward in the profession and create a constant flow of feedback.

Since I came to this program with my problem of practice of peer observation, I have been able to build and gather knowledge through the readings, lessons completed, and collaboration with my peers within my cohort. After a comprehensive review of the literature, many experts concur that these changes are rapid. Additionally, these experts believe that multiple leaders
are necessary in an organization to keep up with the change. In order to develop leaders and learn, we must work collaboratively within context with constant feedback to move forward.

Using a qualitative research design, I analyzed and extracted teachers’ perceptions of their involvement in peer observations at a middle school to determine if this program creates collaboration, collegiality, teacher leaders, and improves teaching practices. I reviewed and analyzed my own observations of teacher learning and the benefits and challenges of teacher participation in peer observations to inform my own analysis and findings.

Although this study is specific to the middle school level and has a small sample in which to draw upon, the documentation provided in this study identifies challenges to such a program for future research. Educators, wishing seek a process for learning in context and how to sustain an organization through change have a concrete example of one such process to provide insights and perspective of possible commonality in their schools to build upon for further reference and change within educational organizations.

**Chapter IV: Report of Research Findings**

**Reporting the Findings and Analyses**

This chapter advances a detailed description of the findings and analysis of results for each of eight individual teachers studied as participants of this study and is divided into five sections. The first section provides a brief description of the study context. The second section presents the categories used for coding the pre- and post-observation cycle interviews. Section three presents the emergent themes identified through a close examination of interview text captured through the categories used for coding. Next, the fourth section presents the findings and analysis of the data. Finally, in the last section, the findings are summarized.
For the purpose of presenting the analysis, I looked at the data to answer the two research questions identified at the beginning of the study:

1. What do teachers perceive to be the benefits and challenges in pursuing meaningful professional development through peer observations in a professional learning community?

2. Did the process and tools implemented by this instructional leader, enhance and contribute to meaningful contextual learning for teachers engaged in a cycle of peer observation?

Teachers who participated in the study were female and taught content topics (English, math, science, and social studies) in seventh or eight grade, with the exception of two teachers who taught both seventh and eight grade in their content area. Several teachers worked on the same team, while others worked on mirror teams (a team that has the same four content area teachers). All teachers participated in a pre- and post-peer observation cycle interview, and completed a pre-observation form, learning journal, and a strength and insight form as part of the process. The researcher, participating teacher’s, teammates, and the participants of the study provided coverage for the observations to occur. In addition, the building principal allowed for a substitute in the building to cover free periods. In some instances, teachers conducted observations during their planning time.

**Study Context**

Although all teachers had some experience with formal observations for the school district’s mandated evaluation process, being observed by a peer was not a formal process and usually involved individual interest in the process and actively seeking out other interested colleagues to conduct the observations. Most teachers in the study challenged the usefulness of the
evaluative formal observation process, in which they all participate. Participants reported having formal evaluations by an administrator as part of the school district evaluation process. All teachers reported their concern and uselessness of these observations as, “it is kind of silly...You obviously put your best lesson forward...it kind of turns into a show that may not be how you operate everyday...you are putting your best shoes on to impress the bosses observing you because your job depends on it”. All teachers believe that these evaluative observations do not improve their teaching. For example, one teacher refers to formal observations as a, “...hoop that they had to jump through because it was required, while another teacher says that evaluations are, “...not always, the normal environment...the environment is not always accurate”. Teachers believe a peer observation process would be more beneficial, since they are more comfortable asking a peer what they think and watching how they implement something rather than someone coming in to tell them what to do. One of the teachers says during a formal observation that, “...sometimes that nervousness might make me worried about how others might critique you, and I might not do well...” On the contrary, this same teacher said, “...you can learn a lot from everyone...I feel more comfortable talking to other teachers than my boss.”. Participants in this study believed that a non-evaluative peer observation process would be beneficial in order to learn from one another.

All teachers agreed to conduct a five-week peer observation cycle with one observation occurring each week. The teacher’s actual experiences with this process were dramatically different. Three teachers were able to conduct up to two observations, weekly, finishing the required five observations; however, they continued with observations and are still continuing to conduct observations using the process to increase their knowledge. Another teacher was in a similar situation until she unexpectedly needed to leave the study, due to an early arrival of
her baby. She was able to conduct three observations within the first week and a half. Two teachers stayed the course, conducting one observation per week, with the exception of another teacher conducting two observations in a week, due to scheduling changes and absence from school. The two math teachers struggled with the process, since the study came at the time of preparation and implementation of state mandated testing (MCAS). These two math teachers work with one other math teacher, not participating in this study, to prepare students for the MCAS. These teachers were not willing to give up class time to conduct the observations, leaving them with only their planning period to observe. This time was needed to share to lesson plans, as well has have department meetings. At times, they conducted three observations in a week’s time. Additionally, they stayed close to their content area teachers as observers and observees, since they had more access to these teachers during their off time. The goal of the study is to understand the teacher’s actions and thoughts to better assess the potential of peer observations as professional development tool to learn in context.

**Findings and Analysis: Interview Categories and Themes**

In this section, I present the categories and themes identified through a descriptive review and analysis of participants’ pre- and post-observation cycle interviews. To undertake this descriptive analysis, the interview questions were entered into the MAX QDA software system. To identify broad categories of teacher responses, I reviewed each teachers’ responses and developed categories for these responses; interviewee statements ranged from ten to twenty-five responses, as reported in this system under each category. After identifying these categories, I reviewed all interviewee statements within each category.
From this review, four common themes were identified in the pre-peer observation cycle interview and nine common themes were identified in the post-peer observation cycle interviews. From an analysis of these themes, I developed the findings.

For research question two, the content of the pre-observation form, learning journals, and participants’ strength and insight forms were analyzed to support, advance, or suggest contradictory information in respect to participants’ stated gains or experiences in the peer observation process as presented in teachers’ post-peer observation cycle interviews. With the findings from the interviews identified, teachers’ use of each tool was reviewed to verify, support, or contradict teachers’ statements in the interviews.

**Categories**

Each teacher was directly asked what they perceived to be the benefits and challenges in pursuing meaningful professional development through peer observations in a professional learning community during the pre- and post- peer observation cycle interviews. To answer this question, the interviews were categorized, as discussed in chapter three. From the results of that review, I arrived at three categories for the pre-peer observation cycle interview and three categories for the post-peer observation cycle interview as words, phrases, and statements were mentioned multiple times.

**Pre-peer observation cycle interview:** The three categories for the pre-peer observation cycle interview were:

A. learning from colleagues (mentioned 20 times across all 8 participants)

B. collegiality (mentioned 10 times across all 8 participants)

and

C. concerns (mentioned 24 times across all 8 participants)
**Post-peer observation cycle interview.** The three categories considered in this analysis were:

A.  learning from peers in context (mentioned 16 times across all 8 participants)

B.  collaboration and collegiality with peers, (mentioned 28 times across all 8 participants), and

C.  challenges of the process (mentioned 39 times across all 8 participants)

**Themes**

After arriving at the three categories, I reviewed teachers’ comments under each category for both the pre- and post- peer observation cycle, looking for common themes as presented by each teacher. From this analysis, several themes were identified under each category for both the pre- and post- peer observation cycle interviews, as presented below.

**Pre-peer observation cycle interview.** Three categories with five themes

*Category A-learning from colleagues.* In this category, all participants (8 out of 8) expressed in interest in using this process of peer observations to learn from a colleague. Two distinct themes emerged from the categories as determined from teachers’ responses in the pre-interview: (1) improved teaching performance, and (2) learning new teaching techniques.

*Theme 1 – improved teaching performance.* All teachers (8 out of 8 teachers, 13 comments) stated that they would like to learn more about how to improve as a teacher by participating in the process of peer observations with colleagues. One teacher stated, “I know I am effective in many areas because I have been teaching for some time now. At this point, I need to see how I can be effective in other areas of my teaching because I am not seeing anything by myself.”
**Theme 2 - learning new teaching techniques.** All teachers (8 out of 8 teachers, 12 comments) expressed how they would like to gain new teaching techniques from participating in peer observation with their colleagues. One such example comes from a teacher when she says, “I hope to gain new instructional techniques to use in my classroom - especially ideas for more interactive, hands-on activities.”

**Category B - increased collegiality.** In this category, all participants (8 out of 8) stated that peer observations would create a collegial environment where teachers would connect and share ideas. One theme emerged from the category as determined from teachers’ responses in the pre-interview: (1) supported environment for observations to occur.

**Theme 1 – teachers look forward to the opportunity to work together.** All teachers (8 out of 8 teachers, 10 comments) said that peer observations would be welcomed and supported at school. However, two teachers had some reservations. One of the teachers said (when asked about the school’s support in conducting these observations), “I think so, at least I was told I could observe other teachers.” While another teacher said, “I believe that it would be supported; however, attempts to conduct peer observation programs have not always been successful.” All comments did indicate that peer observations would be a supported practice at school.

**Category C - concerns.** In this category, all participants (8 out of 8) stated anticipated concerns with conducting peer observations during the five-week cycle. Two themes emerged which included: (1) scheduling/coverage, (2) trepidations with being observed.

**Theme 1- Scheduling.** Six of the eight teachers (12 comments) expressed concerns about scheduling observations and provisions for coverage. Two types of concerns surrounding scheduling and coverage were reported. First was the concern about when the
observations were going to be scheduled and how coverage was going be provided. It was stated by one teacher that, “Some of the teachers that I would like to observe are teaching at the same time as I am, so I am going to need classroom coverage. I am not sure how to schedule that.” Discussed in both the post-peer observation cycle interviews and in the major findings, this area of concern did not have full merit since the researcher, as facilitator, assisted in scheduling the observations and both the researcher and building principal were providing coverage for the process. The second concern included scheduling and coverage in terms of time away from teaching. One teacher said, “I am hoping to do my observations when I am not teaching. I don’t want to anyone to have to cover my class.” This theme is discussed further in the post-interview and major findings sections.

An interesting notation on scheduling and coverage is, as the researcher, I expressed concern about being able to support all teachers during the process.

**Theme 2 - trepidations with being observed.** Half of the teachers expressed concern over being observed by a peer in the process of observations, (12 comments). Although the purpose of this study was to conduct observations of other teachers, a natural part of the process included observers becoming observees. Teachers’ dialogue included nervousness about the role reversal of observer to observee. It was stated by one teacher that, “First of all, I am…I get… I get nervous when people observe me, which affects my performance. I can’t stop thinking about it until it is over.”

**Post-Peer Observation Cycle Interview.** Three categories with eight themes

*Category A - learning from peers in context.* Under the category of learning from peers in context, all participants (8 out of 8) reported that they learned from observing a colleague. Within this category, three distinct themes emerged based on what teachers stated that they
learned from their peers: (1) learned new teaching ideas, (2) increase content knowledge, and (3) gain new classroom management techniques.

Theme 1 – learned new teaching ideas. All teachers (8 out of 8 teachers, 24 comments) said that they learned from observing their peers. For example, one teacher said that peer observations, “…gave great insight/ideas for new strategies and techniques to try, particularly around the rate and flow of my lessons, motivating underperforming students…” This was also expressed by another teacher when she said, “This process reminded me of certain strategies, and taught me new ones”.

Theme 2 - increase content knowledge. Five of the eight teachers (19 comments) reported that they learned more about their content by observing a peer. For example, one of the teachers said, “I saw new ways to teach particular topics in mathematics. I came from the high school, so it is important for me to see how the middle school kids are taught math”.

Theme 3 – gain new classroom management techniques. Four of the eight teachers (17 comments) reported that they learned about classroom management. One teacher, for example, stated that she learned more ways to set up her room to facilitate how she worked with different groups. The classroom set up I observed has, “…made a significant change on how the student are engaged in my room”.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
</tr>
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<td>8 times</td>
</tr>
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Table 2

Illustrative comments by Theme under the Category of Learning from Peers

**Category: Learning from Peers**

**Theme 1: Learn new teaching ideas**
“…because you can get new ideas, get confirmation that you are on track with grade level material or pacing.”
“I found so many new learnings that I could apply to my classroom…I would not have even thought about any of these things before if I didn’t observe.”
“…I also saw new strategies that I am going to try to implement in my teaching.”

**Theme 2: Increase content knowledge**
“…I saw new ways to teach particular topics in mathematics.”
“I am trying new approaches to teaching science vocabulary.”
“It was great! I found two new ways to present mapping skills”

**Theme 3: Gain new classroom management techniques**
[Speaking about classroom arrangement] “…made a significant change on how the student are engaged in my room”.
[observations helped to], “…target my teaching in regards to classroom management and relationships with my students.
[By observing] “I know that correcting homework with another color pen might seem like a little thing, but not to me. I had never thought of it and struggled with handling students in my class the next day.”

**Category B – Collaboration and Collegiality.** Under the category of collaboration and collegiality, seven of the eight participants reported that peer observations created collaboration and collegiality. Under this category, two distinct themes were identified.

Teachers commented that collaboration and collegiality happened by: (1) building new relationships, and (2) creating dialog surrounding curriculum.

**Theme 1: building new relationships.** Seven of the eight participants (14 comments) reported that the peer observation process created new relationships that would otherwise not have happened. One of the teachers, for example, commented that the process helped her to
build relationships with other teachers she would not otherwise would have. In short, she said, “In particular, I made connections with those not in my subject area or grade level”.

Theme 2 – creating dialog surrounding curriculum. Through the relationships that were developed, all teachers (14 comments) began talking about curriculum. It was stated by a teacher, for example, that the peer observations process allowed her to talk more about the emerging technologies that are used to implement one of the district initiatives, Universal Design for Learning (UDL). She said that, “I talked more with teachers especially about the emerging technologies that are new to us this year. We can all be UDL teachers if we work together”.

Table 3

*Teacher Response Category B – Collaboration and Collegiality: Themes – New Teaching Idea, Content Knowledge, Classroom Management*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Comment</th>
<th>Building New Relationships</th>
<th>Creating Dialog Surrounding Curriculum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 times</td>
<td>8 times</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 4

Illustrative comments by Theme: Category of Collaboration and Collegiality

**Category: Collaboration and Collegiality**

**Theme 1: Building new relationships**

“Actually, I made a couple of connections with other teachers trying to set up the observations. They have invited me to come back”.

[Peer observations] “Helped me connect with my peers in a more enriching and meaningful manner.”

“Doing the observations brought back what I know about PLC’s (Professional Learning Communities). It is so important that we connect in order to make things better.”
Theme 2: Creating dialog about curriculum

“I am bringing up more curriculum items at my department meetings because I have more to share since I have been visiting classrooms.”

“Rather than the typical griping I do when I see other teachers, I found that my focus changed to how I instruct students and the curriculum I do.”

“I talked more with teachers especially about the emerging technologies that are new to us this year. We can all be UDL teachers if we work together”.

Category C - Challenges of Peer Observation Process. Under the category of challenges for the peer observation process, all teachers identified obstacles to conducting the observations. Three primary themes emerged from reviewing the comments in this category however: (1) the challenge of finding time and being able to schedule the peer evaluations, (2) finding coverage to do the peer observation, and (3) overcoming the fear of evaluation.

Theme 1 – time. When asked directly what the challenges of conducting peer observations would be, six of the eight teachers (16 comments) reported time as the number one challenge to conducting the observations in both the pre- and post- peer observation cycle interviews. One teacher stated, “…it has taken a lot of time to set up the observation, think out what goes into the paper work, and then find some other times to observe.”

Theme 2 – scheduling. In addition to time, five of the eight participants (12 comments) discussed scheduling as a challenge to conducting the peer observations. Although the researcher facilitated the scheduling of the observations and both the researcher and building principal arranged for coverage, participants still reported this as a challenge. For example, it was stated that, “…getting teachers into other classroom at appropriate times [when coverage was available] was a challenge to the process.”

Theme 3 – fear of evaluation. Four of the eight participants (11 comments) expressed concern that peer observations still felt like an evaluation. One teacher spoke about being
intimated when observations are conducted in her class. In her own words, she said, “I know that the teacher is there to learn for herself, but I just can’t help think about what is being thought about my teaching. It is always on my mind”.

Table 5

*Teacher Response Category B – Challenges of Peer Observation Process: Themes – Time, Scheduling and Coverage, Fear of Evaluation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Response</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Scheduling and Coverage</th>
<th>Classroom Management</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6 times</td>
<td>5 times</td>
<td>4 times</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6

Illustrative comments by Theme under the Category: Challenges of Peer Observation Process.

**Category: Challenges of Peer Observation Process.**

**Theme 1: Time**

“…it has taken a lot of time to set up the observation, think out what goes into the paper work, and then find some other times to observe.”

“I was really on top of setting up my observations in the beginning, but it became time consuming towards the end with all the end of year happenings around here.”

“I also found this time of year to be particularly hard to find the time to do my observation. With MCAS being right around the corner, I was trying to lesson plan and had to give up some of my planning time to do my observations.”

**Theme 2: Scheduling**

“…getting teachers into other classroom at appropriate times…”

“You are losing time on teaching”

“I am hoping to do my observations when I am not teaching. This would be before or after I begin teaching at the middle school or during my non-teaching periods.”

**Theme 3: Fear of Evaluation**

“…I am kind of intimidated to have someone watch me…”

“…worried that people will be judgmental…”

“I still had that feeling that I get when I am evaluated and it makes me nervous. I don’t perform as well as I do without someone in my room.”
Findings and Analysis: Major Findings in the Pre- and Post-Observation Cycle

Interviews

Research participants were interviewed both before and after conducting observations. This section reports about the major findings and analysis of both sets of interviews as they relate to research question #1.

Research Question #1

As I review across all categories and themes, findings and discussions for research question #1: What do teachers perceive to be the benefits and challenges in pursuing meaningful professional development through peer observations in a professional learning community?, are reported using both the pre- and post-peer observation cycle interview analysis to state the benefits and challenges of the process.

Pre-Peer Observations Cycle Interview

Finding #1. Participants expected that the peer observations cycle would be a meaningful, effective, and beneficial process of professional development by learning from colleagues.

Discussion. An analysis of the pre-peer observation cycle interviews indicated that all the teachers believed that they would gain insight into their teaching practices that is more meaningful than their current model of professional development (8 out of 8 interviewees), with peer observations providing an opportunity to (a) improve personal teaching practice through the observation of peers and (b) learn new teaching strategies.

Participants indicated, in the interviews, that they were viewing this process as an opportunity to, “…break out of their classroom and see what was happening out there.” When asked what they were hoping to gain from the process, all the teachers answered differently,
but with the same intent that they were going to gain knowledge from peers in either the same or different content area.

One teacher stated that she knew there were different strategies out there, including ways to manage, start, and set up the class but that she needed to see and talk to someone that was doing it. Her professional development was always content based and she felt she needed to expand on classroom management rather than content at this time. The only ways she felt she could learn about classroom management is to see other teacher’s classrooms and how they work with students. This teacher reports, “Some of the other teachers out there have strategies that if they are willing to share, is a great opportunity for me to learn from them”.

Another teacher shared the previous reported teacher’s feeling about learning from other colleagues in the building. Prior to the peer-observation cycle, this teacher believed that there is much to be learned by observing other teachers. In her own words, she stated, “We all possess unique talents, and observation is a first hand approach to learning from other educational professional”. She too would rather be shown than be told how to do something and feels it is a way to talk out and change how her teaching is presented.

In another example, a teacher explained how she believes there are many things to learn from other teachers that will improve her teaching of students. Additionally, she expressed that with all the new initiatives, she needed support from peers that are working on the same things and may have more expertise in an area that she is not clear about implementing.

From a different perspective, one teacher discussed how she thinks you can learn from others, and that, at times, she feels isolated since she is in special education. Prior to implementation of full inclusion, she felt that, “…everything happens here stays here kind of thing…” did not work support her or others’ learning from one another. With full inclusion,
she stated, “The doors are open…” to her due to peer observations and that she can learn a lot from all the different content teachers to better support her students.

A second perceived benefit of peer observation conjectured from the interviews was that peer observations included the opportunity to improve personal teaching practice by learning from peers. Each teacher talked about how she would like to change their instruction by learning from other teachers. One of the teachers stated that there may be some content that she may have forgotten or how a peer may approach a lesson differently then she would. She felt that conducting observations could help her improve her performance in the classroom. Additionally, another teacher feels that by conducting observations in another classroom, she will become a better teacher. Since she is new to teaching, she feels she needs, “…all the help I can get”. Her belief is that everything we learn from one another makes us a better teacher. Another teacher expressed that she needs to incorporate the state standards into her lessons because she knew how that would improve her teaching but did not know how. She says, “I know two teachers in this building that have the standards listed daily under the objectives. If I could only get in and see what this looks like first hand, I know could change how I do things when I teach.”. Each teacher indicated that their teaching would change if she could go and watch how from another teacher.

Under the idea of professional development, colleagues perceived that peer observations allowed for learning new teaching strategies as a perceived benefit. As illuminated from the pre-interviews, all participants (8 of 8) expressed that they wanted to learn new strategies for both general pedagogical knowledge and for content knowledge. One teacher said that she only knew what she learned in student teaching and needed some more ideas. She says, “I am interested in this process because I have been learning a lot of teaching strategies as a new
teacher. I have been doing many of the same things, but that is only what I know. I need some new ideas.”. Another teacher shared that, through the process she was looking to see if she could find more teaching strategies to increase student participation. A third teacher felt like she needed “more tricks” in the classroom because things were getting old. A fourth teacher conferred that thought by saying, “Everything gets stale sometime. I need some new activities because I get bored as well!” One teacher wanted not only new strategies for her content but for the new initiatives as well. A second teacher wanted to gain new instructional techniques especially ideas for more interactive, hands-on activities. The rest of the teachers expressed similar requests for new teaching ideas. It was a matter of what each teacher needed from the process that made the difference.

Finding #2. *Teachers perceived that they would encounter both collaboration and collegiality by participating in peer observations prior to conducting the observations.*

Discussion. When asked directly about whether each participant believed that colleagues and the principal would support peer observations at school and if the school climate was positive towards such a process, all participants agreed that the school would be supportive. Six of the eight participants have been teaching at this school for over five years, giving them a better understanding of the school climate. Each of these teachers reported that the school supported peer observations and that teachers were interested in collaborating. Interestingly enough, the two teachers whom only have been at the school for less than two years both agreed that the school was supportive and that other colleagues were actively seeking them out to collaborate and teach together. For example one of these teacher said without hesitation, “Yeah. I definitely think it would be supported by the (school’s name) staff. Hopefully, they will keep doing this after your project is done. I know some teachers
have asked to watch me teach too. Next year, I would like to see how other teachers teach so that I continue to learn”. Two teachers concurred when asked if the process would be supported by saying definitively, “Yes, I know so. Well I was told that a sub would be brought in for me if I wanted to observe other class when I first started last year”.

Further supporting this finding of collegiality and collaboration, as researcher of this project, word spread that the project was underway. Teachers who are not in this project showed an interest in the process and approached me to participate. According to my fourth memo written on April 29th, I stated,

A few participants came to me about observing at our sister school in their content area. The word is out. Teachers from both our sister school and [school name] have heard about this project and have offered their classrooms for observations. They want to be part of the project. I told them I would give them the guidelines, but participants have been set. I was surprised to hear of this, as this project was only though of as happening in one school. Technically, the teachers in this project are part of the [school name] community. Where the observations took place and additional teachers, wanting to be part of the process after it was under way, was never considered.

Prior to the beginning of this project, permissions from the both the superintendent and building principal were acquired. Both administrators were supportive of peer observations. The current superintendent was this school’s principal at the time of a previous initiative to implement a similar program of peer observations. Two of the participants presented this information in the interview to show how they perceived this school to work towards collegiality and collaboration with staff.
Finding #3. **Teachers have concerns about being an observee in the process of peer observations.**

**Discussion.** Part of the process of peer observation included the observers to be an observee at some point for other teachers in the study to participate. Two new teachers expressed concern about having someone watch them teach. For example, one of these teachers stated, “I have more concerns about anyone coming to watch me”. She felt as if she had to make sure everything was perfect and not to make any mistakes. This finding is more indicative of a formal evaluation concern rather than the purpose of this study, which is for teachers to learn. The other teacher expressed a similar concern when she said, “I am nervous to have someone in. It is easier for me to learn, but I am not sure if I have something for them to learn. I am not use to this yet”. Additionally, in the pre-peer observation cycle interview memo, generated after conducting the interviews, I noted how the body language of these teachers indicated their concern of being observed. As stated in Memo 2 on April 6th, “… she seemed nervous as she was answering the questions. Her face was red, fidgeting, playing with her hair. She also kept asking if she answered the questions correctly. As the interviewer, I reminded her that she needed to answer honestly and the rest would come naturally. She seemed to relax.” (Memo 2 – April 6th). This finding suggests that a certain comfort level needs to be met prior to the observation.

Three teachers expressed no concern of being an observee in this process. Rather, it was communicated that they were looking forward to both being an observer and observee. In fact, when asked about concerns of observations, they paused “as if they felt they needed to have a concern, then thought about it, and simply said that they did not have any concerns…her body language suggested that she was comfortable and confident” (Memo 2 April 6th). These
participants had a quiet comfort when answering the questions, while two other teachers had distinct differences in their mannerisms.

**Finding # 4.** Scheduling and coverage was a concern for participants.

**Discussion.** All participants indicated in the initial interview that the time and scheduling of observations was a concern. It was more of an apprehension about the process, as well as time away from students. One teacher expressed a combination of these concerns, since one of the teachers that she would like to observe is teaching at the same time as she is and that she would need coverage. Additionally, she said the concern is that you are losing time on teaching as well. She said that peer observations are something that you like to do but you are limited sometime because of the content you have to cover. Another teacher supported these feelings when she says, “I am hoping to do my observations when I am not teaching. This would be before or after I begin teaching at the middle school or during my non-teaching periods. If I do need to observe a teacher when I would have a class, I will need coverage, and I will have to supply an activity for the students.” Another teacher expressed that there may be challenges around providing time and/or coverage for observations.

All participants were briefed on the logistics of the process. The different steps were going to take some time; however, the participants knew and wanted to complete all the steps. For the most part, the concern for coverage was unfounded, since coverage was to be provided by the investigator and the school principal was willing to help provide coverage. Additionally, teachers were beginning to arrange for observations prior to the study, since they were excited to begin. In terms of the time away from teaching, arrangements were made to have these teachers observe during their planning period or have a same level content teacher combine
classes so content was not lost. The teachers were helpful in making arrangements that fit their schedule and elicited the help of colleagues for the observations to occur.

Table 7

*Perceived Benefits and Challenges of Peer Observations Prior to Implementation*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Challenges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gained insight into teaching practice</td>
<td>Amount of time need for process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of collegial relationships</td>
<td>Time away from content area</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful effective process</td>
<td>Release time to observe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New teaching strategies</td>
<td>Concern about being observed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Post - Peer Observation Cycle Interview*

**Finding # 5.** Peer observations create meaningful long-term professional development.

**Discussion.** Each of the six participants indicated in the post-peer observation cycle interview that this process is more meaningful and lasting professional development than traditional workshop professional development. Contributing to the meaningfulness was the personal, individual, and self-guiding nature of the process. One teacher stated, “This is very individualized. I like having a choice in what I observe.” Another teacher felt that this process “…provided something more long term to work on professionally as opposed to just an afternoon (2 hours) spent in a workshop.” This teacher compared the current model of professional development with peer observations:

Peer observations were more individualized to my needs as a teacher. Usually, the professional development they give us is a waste of time because it not useful. I
usually already know what they are talking about and think to myself, ‘I could be
learning so much more right now’. I would choose watching someone who is dealing
with what I am dealing with to collaborate with and learn. I would pick this process
over boring two-hour workshops.

Participants also found the process to be meaningful because it confirmed teaching
behaviors that they currently use. Teachers were able to gain insight into their teaching
practice. This is not part of a traditional staff development. One of the teachers believes that
peer observations are beneficial to observe other teachers, “…because you can get new ideas,
get confirmation that you are on track with grade level material or pacing.” Teachers are not
against workshops and think they are useful; however, they report that they do not learn
anything about their individual teaching. Workshops give useful information but do not tell
teachers anything about how they teach. Not only was observing other teachers seen as a
meaningful and useful professional development activity, the long-term affect was significant
for these teachers adding to the meaningfulness. One of the teachers sums this thought up when
she says:

This process compares to other staff development by giving teachers another way to be
reflective on their teaching. I think, as teachers, we should always be reflective and by
observing other teachers will help with this process. I also think it would be meaningful
for all teachers to do peer observations. I think that sometimes staff development is not
relevant and teachers can lose interest quickly. I believe that peer observations will be
relevant for all participants. Everyone will be able to learn from peer observations.
Finding #6. *Discussions about teaching and learning increased a sense of collegiality amongst participants.*

**Discussion.** Teachers reported in the pre-peer observation cycle interview that they felt isolated from other teachers in the building. It was observed and noted in the researcher’s log, that when teachers did have time to talk, it was because they engaged in social manners that did not revolve around instruction. Rather, it was around how students behaved and sharing sessions of frustration. This type of interaction led to sparse interactions and discussions about teaching.

From the perspective of the participants, it was reported that more discourse revolved around teaching from conducting the observations. A teacher stated that peer observations would help her be more reflective, hence generating conversations about her teaching. This will, “help me connect with my peers in a more enriching and meaningful manner. Another teacher found that, “It helped us to learn from each other and make the school as a whole much more effective. I think by implementing peer observations in a school, it helps staff that may have felt before as if they were being judged, be able to admit their weakness and learn new ways to improve on them. It will only help the school and teachers grow stronger”.

The participants of the peer observation process found that their talk about teaching and learning made them feel part of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker (2008). In particular, one teacher stated that peer observations could encourage the development of professional learning communities and that she connected to her peers more. In addition, another teacher shared that participating in the peer observation process created collegiality and collaboration amongst the staff by generating dialogue between teachers who usually do not get an opportunity to work together because of scheduling conflicts. She said
that, “rather than the typical griping I do when I see other teachers, I found that my focus changed to how I instruct students and the curriculum I do. Some teachers said they noticed this and have changed the way they connect with other colleagues.” During the study, teachers noticed that they began to talk more specifically about teaching rather than arbitrary topics. Participating teachers agreed that they would continue to have conversations around instruction, lessons, and the impact on students as much as possible with their colleagues.

**Finding #7. Peer observation changed teaching practices.**

**Discussion.** The teachers found that the knowledge gained from the observations helped to stop, reflect, and change the way they did something in either their classroom or teaching. In the initial pre-peer observation cycle interview, the participants indicated that they were motivated to follow this process in order to improve their teaching. As part of the process to improve, they wanted see if there were gains new learning that could be applied to what they were currently doing in their classroom. One teacher summarized her thoughts on the process when asked if she experimented or changed her current teaching practices after participating in the peer observation process:

Yes! I rearranged my room last week to be like a class that I observed. I learned new ways to approach situations that arise in class, new ways to display material that is being taught, and new ways to manage my classroom time. Lastly, I saw new ways to teach particular topics in mathematics. Had I not gone into this room, I would never had changed anything that I do. It made me think about what I really am doing.

Sometimes I don’t always do what I say I am going to do.

Sometimes what teacher say or think they are doing when they teach is not what actually happens. When looking at the data, it was noted that when teachers went through the process
of observations, it increased their understanding of teaching and learning. As said by one of
the teachers, “…sometimes I can be afraid to try something new because I’m not sure what to
expect. By seeing others do certain things, I am less reluctant to try new things myself.”

In the pre-peer observation cycle interview, one teacher hoped to gain some insight to her
teaching practice and possibly some feedback as principle investigator. She stated that, “I
really don’t get any feedback, whether it is positive or negative and any ways to change what I
do. That is something that I crave. If I get the chance to go out and see what others are doing,
I know that it will be helpful.” The observation and internal feedback from the process
allowed all participants to identify and reflect on how they could change what was happening
in their classroom.

Most of the teachers said they felt an awareness and confirmation about their teaching that
was not present before. For example, one teacher said, “I found so many new learnings that I
could apply to my classroom…I would not have even thought about any of these things before
if I didn’t observe.” The confirmation about their teaching through this experience boosted
their confidence and sense of efficacy. A second teacher states that, “It gave me validation that
I am on target with my teaching in regards to classroom management, relationships with my
students, subject matter (reading and ELA when I used to teach it by myself) and use of
creative teaching.” By observing their peers, the teachers were surprised that other teachers
were doing similar things. This was a good feeling, making them think that, “…what I do is
OK!”.

**Finding #8.** The process caused teachers to reflect on their learning.

**Discussion.** In the post interview, teachers claimed that the process caused them to
reflect more on their teaching. One teacher said that, “I find myself thinking about what I am
doing more.” Reflection took place while recording data and reviewing the written data the next day. For other teachers, the process, “…reminded me of certain strategies, and taught me new ones. I love teaching and it just reinforced and ignited my love this career.”. The peer observation process caused this teacher to be mindful of what she does and strengthen what she already does. Another teacher directly, said, “It helped me be reflective. I saw strategies that I am doing already in my classroom and ways to elaborate on them. I also saw new strategies that I am going to try to implement in my teaching.” A third teacher felt that she was able to look at what she was doing in her classroom and decide if what she saw affirmed that some of the tools and techniques she used were effective, while additionally gaining great insight/ideas for new strategies and techniques to try, particularly around the pacing and flow of lessons, motivating underperforming students, and classroom set-up/environment. Connecting this reflection to the validation and insights as discussed in finding #4 (post-interview below), help the teachers to take pause and assess their teaching as a whole.

One teacher shared her thoughts on the process by saying that she realized that there is a process that takes place when she teaches. She felt that going through the observations just showed how one has to, “…stop and think about what they are doing”. The idea of process transfers to teaching. The focus is not always on the results; it is how you get there as well. One teacher said, “While watching other teachers, I started thinking how what they were doing could affect my teaching…it was great to just sit back and think for once”. Having time to “think” caused the teacher to reflect on what they do in their classrooms.

**Finding # 9. Teachers made connections with other colleagues.**

**Discussion.** In the beginning of the study, all participants observed a teacher that they knew and trusted to be sure that they were comfortable with the process. Each felt that a level
of comfort was necessary to start this process. After the first two observations, seven teachers branched out to other teachers that they did not know as well. One teacher describes her experience by saying:

At first, I chose to observe a teacher I was friendly with and respect… it wasn’t a new connection, but I gained a greater respect for them. After I felt comfortable, I observed someone I was not familiar with and it was a bonding experience. I will have to try to branch out more like this!”

These statements show evidence of the comfort level a teacher must have to conduct observations. This idea of comfort level is further shown when another teacher says:

I began my observations with teachers with whom I already had very well established relationships. Then, I gained some confidence to connect with other teachers that I was not close to. After hearing from other participants how much they were learning, I could not hold myself back. Had I been able to complete the observations before having to leave school, I would expect that new connections could have been made.

A new teacher to the building felt that this process helped her, “…move forward with other math teachers…” in her department as a new teacher. This teacher came from the high school and did not know anyone from this school. She said that she would just come to work not really connection to anyone. When she did talk to other teachers, it would be just casual conversations. She never talked about her teaching or students with peers. After conducting the interviews, she said it made her closer to other teachers and now she can “…go to them to talk about curriculum”.

Another teacher discussed how easy it is to be stuck in the classroom and to lose touch with what colleagues are doing. This teacher felt that the peer observations helped her to reach
out and build connections with other faculty members in a positive and collaborative environment. She states, “I think that by developing better awareness of others teacher’s strengths and familiarity with the curriculum, the observations lead me to great collaboration and possible co-teaching opportunities across my content area. I am more connected”. This teacher went on to talk about the trust and confidence she now has to learn on her own.

A third teacher reported that she made a couple of connections with other teachers trying to set up the observations. She says that because of these inquires, she was able to have a conversation with these teachers that would not have taken place otherwise. Because of these conversations, she now feels comfortable enough to visit with them when she can.

Seven of the participants agreed that they now have conversations with colleagues, “outside their loop” about teaching and students. There is a sense of mutual trust that was not there in the beginning. Participants emphasized that professional trust and respect is necessary for connections to occur.

**Finding #10. Teachers will continue with observations.**

**Discussion.** Although limited in response, compared to the other questions, continued observation was reported as a benefit, since teachers do not have the opportunity to observe peers in their natural classroom environment. All participants indicated in the post interview that they would like to continue with the peer observation process. One teacher stated that she has learned so much by being in other classrooms that she feels, “a little addicted to it now, and can’t see how to give it up since it is such a valuable way to gain professional development”. Another teacher said that she learned so much about herself, as well as what others were doing. She determined that the benefits of conducting the observations were, “…well worth the time to do them, especially as a new teacher. I wish it was part of our natural day”. A third teacher
thought so highly of the process that she felt it should be mandatory and that, “The evaluation process should be changed and updated requiring all teachers to participate”. This is a change in view for this teacher as she stated in the pre-interview (reported in the study context) as did others that the evaluations were useless and how it was a “show”. She now sees the benefits of this process for reflective evaluation.

Conducting peer observations leads to an appreciation of other colleagues, as well as a better understanding of the curriculum. These factors increase the participants desire to continue with observations beyond this study.

Finding #11. *Time to conduct the observation was a challenge to the participants.*

Discussion. Reiterative of finding #4 in the pre-peer observation process interview, teachers found that time to schedule observations and plan for coverage difficult at times. This was a particular issue for math teachers as they were preparing for the state MCAS testing. According to one math teacher, she stated that her largest challenge was setting up the observation, and then not being available to attend. She found that it was difficult to try to start the process of finding time again. She says, “I also found this time of year to be particularly hard to find the time to do my observations. With MCAS being right around the corner, I was trying to lesson plan and had to give up some of my planning time to do my observations. This made more work for me to take home. I had to reschedule a lot which is time consuming.” The same teacher also expressed how she was late at times to the observations because she forgot to build in the travel time to the other classroom. This same teacher says, “One of my main focuses for doing the observations was seeing how teachers start their class and since I was late, I could not see it”. This was very frustrating to this teacher, especially since this is what she needed to feel successful as a new teacher.
The other math teacher shared the same struggle of time due to the MCAS testing. She also expanded on the issue of time to set up plans to have coverage in order to conduct observations. According to this teacher, “It takes a long time to prepare a lesson for someone other than you. I also worry about how that person carries out that plan. I know that everyone is a competent teacher, but they may not have the expertise in math, as I might not have the same expertise in their content area”.

The other participants did not get into as much detail, but all mentioned time as an issue. Another teacher did express that there was a lot of time involved, but it was worth the sacrifice. Yet another teacher noticed that there was a lot of time taken away from teaching students but noted that this was more of an issue due to the fact that the requirement of the study was to conduct many observations in a small window of time. Interestingly enough, there were several teachers that were reported earlier in the study context, as conducting more that the study requirement of observations and as reported in finding #5 in the post-peer observation cycle interview, teachers are still conducting observations after the conclusion of this study.

**Finding #12.** Observee perceptions are that observations could be evaluative.

**Discussion.** This was reported as a challenge to the process as participants were setting up their observations. As stated in finding #9 (post-peer observation cycle), teachers began their observations with a trusted colleague, in which they had an established relationship. As they felt comfortable, all but one teacher branched out to other faculty members that they were not as familiar with to conduct observations. This came with the job of participants explaining their purpose. Although the faculty was briefed at a staff meeting about the potential of being contacted, and many teachers, as reported in the study context, approached the researcher to be part of the process after participants were beginning, there was still an apprehension about
being observed. Even the participants of this study were worried about being observed because they did not want to be judged and were nervous.

This was the challenge for new teachers before beginning the process. As stated in finding #3 (pre-peer observation cycle), one teacher was extremely nervous getting, red in the face, and fidgeting just talking about having someone observe her in the classroom. These feelings were originally exclusive to new teachers in the pre-peer observation cycle interview. However, all participants (new and veteran teachers) expressed concerned about being observed as both, “…worried that people will be judgmental…”, and that there was some teacher reluctance as first when colleagues were saying, “…I am kind of intimidated to have someone watch me…” (when approaching teachers to observe). Interestingly enough, these first apprehensive teachers had similar results to the other participants in that after the first time they were observed, were very pleased with the process and encouraged other teachers to come in there after to watch them teach (Researchers Log – Observational Note: ON).

One teacher reported that it is important that this process is viewed as “voluntary” and that a combination of self-selection of teachers and mutual partnerships are formed prior to the observations. She says that, “This is a shift in how we think and it can be intimidating. If everyone is not on board and this is not voluntary, it will fail”. A second teacher stated that if the process is not done properly and carefully, it could have, “…a devastating reverse effect that could really upset and ruin someone’s confidence and break relationships”. She goes on to say that as soon as it becomes evaluative, then the issues arise. Thirdly, a teacher noted that this process does not lend itself to evaluation. She goes on to say, “I really did not run into to many problems once I explained, or shall I say you [the researcher] explained, the process to everyone. There is not place for evaluating anyone other than myself.” As discussed in
findings 3 and 4 (post-peer observation cycle interview), reflection of teaching practice was found to be a benefit of this process. At first, these issues were a barrier for participants to hurdle while setting up observations, which additional combined with the time challenge reported earlier in finding #17 (post-peer observation interview).

In addition to actual challenges endured while conducting observations, several hypothetical challenges were reported as “might happen” or “could happen” such as, feelings could be hurt if not asked to be observed or not having a chance to observe and if time is built in the schedule to observe what if people don’t conduct the interviews. These claims do not have any significant value and cannot be determined by the data collected in this study.

Table 8

Comparison of Perceived and Actual Benefits and Challenges of Peer Observations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BENEFITS</th>
<th>Pre Peer Observation Cycle Interview</th>
<th>Post Peer Observation Cycle Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gained prospective into teaching practice</td>
<td>The process caused teachers to reflect on their learning</td>
<td>*Teachers will continue with observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development of collegial relationships</td>
<td>Discussions about teaching and learning increased creating collegiality</td>
<td>*Teachers will continue with observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful effective process of professional development</td>
<td>meaningful long-term professional development</td>
<td>*Teachers will continue with observations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Teachers will continue with observations
New teaching strategies

*Continuation with observations will increase teachers’ insight to teaching practices, collegial relationships, development of effective process of professional development, and gain of new teaching strategies.

CHALLENGES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre Peer Observation Cycle Interview</th>
<th>Post Peer Observation Cycle Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amount of time need for process</td>
<td>Time to conduct the observation was a challenge to the participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time away from content area</td>
<td>Time to prepare for coverage while conducting interviews</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Release time to observe</td>
<td>Difficult time for grade specific teachers due to state testing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concern about being observed</td>
<td>Observee perceptions are that observations could be evaluative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>observations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Teachers will continue with observations
Findings and Analysis: Major Findings in the Pre-Observation Forms, Learning Journals, and Strength and Insight Forms

Research participants were provided with materials to conduct observations. This section reports the major findings and analysis of the pre-observation form, learning journal, and strength and insight form as they relate to research question #2.

Research Question 2

Beyond the pre- and post- peer observations cycle interviews, all participants were provided with the materials to conduct their observation including the pre-observation form, learning journal, and strength and insight form. The purpose of these materials were to provide a process, in which teachers, planned in advance to focus their observation, were active in the observations process, and reflected on what was learned in order to enhance their instructional practice and to answer research question #2: Did the process and tools implemented by an instructional leader enhance and contribute to meaningful contextual learning through a cycle of peer observations?

Findings from all three data sources, combined with the responses from the post-peer observation cycle interview, are presented to further enlighten and give more detailed information and insights regarding the usefulness of the peer observation cycle as meaningful contextual professional development.

Pre-Observation Form

All participants were provided with a pre-observation form (Appendix D) to plan, in advance, what they wanted to observe and where they would conduct the observations.

Finding #13. Participants stayed within their content area for observations.
**Discussion.** All but two of the participants observed teachers only in their content area. Even with the two teachers observing a teacher in a different content areas other than their own, (technology and health) this was only done once in the cycle of five teachers. One of these teachers reported, in the post interview, that she was ready to see something other than what the, “…typical English class is doing. I have been teaching for a long time and developed my craft. I have a new focus of integrating technology, especially with all the equipment I have, into the classroom and it makes sense for me to observe our technology department in action”. The other teacher had a different focus. Her students attend classes outside of the four content areas of English, math, science, and social studies. She felt she needed to see if there were any “fresh ideas”, she could learn from the specialist, since she hears about what is happening from her students. She goes on to say, “I am sure that there is a way to engage my students similar to what the specialists are doing”.

**Finding #14.** *All participants identified areas of improvement by observing a colleague.*

**Discussion.** Each teacher was able to identify at least one area of improvement from observing a colleague. It was apparent that within in these areas of improvement that new teachers with less than three years experience were clearly looking at classroom set up and management. Three teachers in the mid-range of teaching experience (8 years) were looking to observe content specific ideas such as quadratic equations, plant presentation format, mapping skills, and literature circles. Lastly, two teachers with 19 and 12 years of teaching experience were looking at areas of improvement that enhanced their content area such as technology integration to provide universal design for learning (UDL) concepts and learning how to
incorporate peer to peer and differentiated instruction. All participants were able to identify a different focus depending on her current needs.

Of interest is that the participants had a 50/50 response split on the use of the pre-observation form as part of the process. One teacher said, “…it [the pre-observation form] helped me focus” while a second teacher said, “I already know what I am doing; I don’t need to write it down”. Another teacher felt that using this form forced her to “focus on the observation”. Using the pre-observation form was an important step in the process to complete a peer observation for some teachers.

Learning Journals

The learning journals (Appendix E) were for participants to gather five new learnings and identity two learning that could be used immediately in the classroom. Findings include the journal’s connection to the pre-observation form.

Finding #15. All teachers were able to find meaningful learnings from a peer through observations.

Discussion. After examining each participant’s learning journal, it was clear that each participant was able to identity five new learnings from the observation and identify two of those learnings that they could use immediately in the classroom. In fact, three teachers identified more than two learnings from two of their observations that they could apply immediately to their classroom teachings. In the post interview, all teachers (8 out of 8) stated that the learning journal as the most useful part of the peer observation process. One of the teachers, who discussed how a focus was needed, in finding #2 (Learning Journals), went on to say that:
The step that was most valuable was finding five new things that you learned with each observation. It helped me focus on the observation and not get stuck on one thing. I was constantly searching for new things in each observation. This I believe helped me get the most out of each observation.”

Another teacher agrees with the value of the learning journals by stating, “They [learning journals] are necessary because it forces you to examine what strategies used in the lesson would make your lessons enriching”. One teacher summed up the use of the learning journals by saying, “I found that taking two things to try in the classroom immediately, a valuable part of the observation. If you don’t try anything, then you don’t learn anything.” All participants reported that they would use the format of the learning journals in subsequent observations that they conduct at the conclusion of this study.

**Finding #16.** Participants reported stated learnings and additional learnings beyond the focus.

**Discussion.** During the examination of the learning journals in connection to the pre-observation form, it was clear that not all teachers (four out of eight) observed what they first indicated on the pre-observation form (Appendix G). For example, one teacher in her first observation was focusing on the engagement of special education students in a co-taught classroom. It was noted in the learning journal that beyond this focus was the use of the “easi-teach” technology feature of the polyvision program installed in school. Additionally, there were learnings noted about the, “book share” program used by special educators in the classroom. Another example of additional learning beyond the original intent was with one of the teachers. She noted that her focus on the pre-observation form was for small group and
individual group instruction in reading. However, her learning journal for this observation indicated that she focused on classroom behavior.

There were many observations, in which what the teacher indicated as the focus in the pre-observation form was what they reported as learnings in their journal (four out of eight). One example of this is when a teacher wrote that she would benefit from learning about the use of technology with students conducting research in social studies. Each of her five learnings indicated using this technology feature (Webquest), as well as the immediate applications of two learnings directly. This example of connection was also the case for another teacher with a report in the pre-observation form focus on time management and pacing for science and additionally illustrated with this teacher’s pre-observation form focus on classroom management. Both teachers spotlighted learnings as indicated on the original reason for conducting an observation. The process was not steadfast, and teachers made adjustments for their individual learning needs.

Strength and Insight Forms

The strength and insights forms (Appendix F) were a final step in completing a peer observation. The purpose was for teachers to make one final reflection on the observations to give deeper thought and engagement of the process. Findings were reported in conjunction to the interviews and learning journals.

Finding #17. Participants thought deeper about their performance capabilities and their opportunities for making changes.

Discussion. All participants collected information while conducting interviews. It was important for the participants to note strong points of the observee’s teachings and classroom routines and why they are considered strong. Insights were to help the participants break
down the context further to reflect on the findings. All participants (eight out of eight) were able to think deeper about the ways in which an observation was valuable for their teaching and the effect these learnings have on their teaching practice. Each reported the insights and understandings that were gained and how it can be applied to their situation. As said by one teacher, “…the reflection questions were most valuable. It was helpful to think about the strengths of the observation and to consider what could be implemented immediately.” One teacher supported this teacher’s thoughts by saying, “…all the steps are necessary because it forces you to examine what strategies used in the lesson would make your lessons enriching. By doing everything you really take a step back and look”. Collected information in the strengths and insight form helped participants think about what they learned.

Although each teacher completed this step in the process, there were mixed results as to the value of this step in the process. The majority of the teachers (five out of eight) felt that this step was valuable and helped them learn more about their teaching. However, contrary to reporting the strengths and insights gained during the process, two participants reported in the post interview that this step was not essential to learn from observations. One of these teachers felt that the “…strengths and insight form was kind of repetitive. I already reflected in the learning journal.” While other teachers had a similar feeling when she said, “I felt the last part of the observation piece [strength and insight form] wasn’t necessary since it asked you to do the same thing in the summary section.” Of interest, a teacher’s similar feeling about the pre-observation form as noted in the finding #2 (pre-observation form) when she said that she knew what she was doing and didn’t need to write it down. Even though the usefulness of this step in the process was not reported by everyone as necessary, the fact that the teachers
reflected and looked further into their own practice indicated it a potential step in performance change. Each strength and insight was personal to the participants needs.

Table 9

Peer Observation as Meaningful Process of Professional Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaningful</th>
<th>Identified Area of Improvement</th>
<th>All Steps Needed</th>
<th>Continuation of Process</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8 times</td>
<td>8 times</td>
<td>5 times</td>
<td>8 times</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary of Findings

Blanketing all the data was the umbrella theme of opportunity. This theme has one general finding that *teachers were afforded opportunities to observe other teachers*. In general, teachers do not have the opportunity to observe their peers in the classroom setting. All participants showed a strong interest in participating in this study. After reviewing all data, participants indicated that peer observations would be a valuable course of action to provide unlimited professional development that each teacher needs to improve their teaching practice. Additionally, this process gave participants a choice to decide who and what worked best to make the observations a reality and create a safe collaborative environment.

Observing peers provided teachers techniques and lessons to implement in their own classroom. One teacher stated, “I pick up on something new each time I go into a classroom. I even pick up on things when I am not technically observing a room because the process is in my mind.” Another teacher found this to be beneficially because, “I never felt like I could know everything. Someone in the building always has an answer.” All of the participants determined that they learn something and changed the way they did something by observing a peer.
Observations created a channel for teachers to connect in the building. One teacher went deeper into the process by saying, “Once I feel like I have a better handle on what I am currently doing, I feel like I could contact teachers in the grades below and above me to see how this all connects”. Surprisingly, one teacher actually conducted one of her observations in the grade below because she, “…needed to get a sense of that was happening in 6th grade math so I can better help my students”. Collaboration and collegiality are essential to the process of peer observations in order for teachers to understand what is happening with teaching and curriculum.

**Unexpected Finding**

**Finding #18.** *Building proximity is not limiting to conducting observations.*

**Discussion.** During one of the weekly researcher/participant check-ins during the project, teachers from this school asked about conducting observations at our sister middle school. As word of the observations spread, teachers from our sister school offered their classrooms for observations and wanted to participate (Memo 4 – April 29th). Although they could not participate, they still offered their classrooms. As stated in the memo,

A few participants came to me about observing at our sister school in their content area. The word is out. Teachers from our sister school have heard about this project and have offered their classrooms for observations. They want to be part of the project. I told them I would give them the guidelines, but participants have been set. I was surprised to hear of this, as this project was only thought of as happening in one school. Technically, the teachers in this project are part of the [study site] community. Where the observations take place was never considered.
The group decided that observations should not be limited to the just the school. The problem was how to build in the time to do so. Observations were reported to be time consuming enough (finding #11) without the added travel time. One participant arranged to watch a last period class at the end of the day. For those teachers who could not spend time to do that but still wanted to observe elsewhere, as the researcher, I offered my experience with teaching remotely using Skype. Through collaborative relationships with teachers at our sister school, time was created for observations to happen remotely. As recalled from Memo 4:

The question of "How do I observe another teacher from a different school?" came into play. I had already conducted a few lessons via Skype from my room with a 6th grade ELA teacher from the other middle school in [study town]. It came to mind that Skype could be used to conduct the observations. Three teachers decided to use this venue. So it was settled that this was how the observations were going to happen for those teachers.

Three teacher had the experience of observing a lesson via Skype to learn in context. The use of technology is something that the participants felt could be shared with the faculty as an option for a process of peer observation to occur in the future at the school.

Summary of Findings

The context of this study, findings, and discussion of each research question was presented in this chapter. This chapter described the experiences of eight teachers during a five-week peer observation cycle process. Each participant had similar and different experiences throughout this study. All teachers completed the process of peer observation using all three steps, except one teacher who left due to pre-mature labor. The next chapter discusses the major research findings as they relate to the literature and theoretical frameworks.
Chapter V: Discussion of Research Findings

*If you have an apple, and I have an apple and we exchange apples then you and I will still each have one apple. But if you have an idea, and I have an idea and we exchange these ideas, then each of us will have two ideas.* ~ George Bernard Shaw

Summary of the Problem

Ongoing professional development is essential to the improvement of teaching, and ultimately, the school. Traditional staff development, consisting of pull out two-hour monthly workshops, is not meeting the changing and dynamic needs of the current teaching practice. This form of professional development is deeply rooted in tradition and is not current with how teachers learn today – or perhaps how teachers should have been learning in the past.

Continuation with this form of professional development will continue a less than stellar success rate for enhancing the professional practice of teachers. Teachers do not have the chance to observe each other in context – their classrooms – to share experiences and knowledge. There is a need for collaborative collegial staff development activities that allow individual teachers to focus on specific areas of self-identified need and help them to reflect on what they currently do in the classroom and what they can do to improve. Since curriculum and instruction changes constantly, opportunities must exist for teachers to engage in continuous and substantive learning about their practice within the context in which they work. Professional development workshops are not specialized to meet what individual teachers need. In addition, given that a system of observation does not exist, teachers are missing opportunities to gain pedagogical knowledge from their peers in context. An embedded system of non-evaluative peer observation is a much-needed practice to propel teachers forward with their instruction.
This study was developed to determine if a system of non-evaluative peer observations could be utilized as a professional development tool for teachers to learn, continually, in context. To guide this study and its data collection, two research questions were developed:

1. What do teachers perceive to be the benefits and challenges in pursuing meaningful professional development through peer observations in a professional learning community?
2. Did the process and tools implemented by an instructional leader use to facilitate learning through peer observation, enhance and contribute to meaningful contextual learning for teachers?

Review of Methodology

This action research study focused on answering two research questions regarding teachers’ use of peer observation as a professional development tool to learn in context. Data was collected from participants at a large middle school in eastern Massachusetts using pre- and post- peer observation cycle interviews, pre-observation documents, learning journals, and strength and insight forms. In addition, the researcher wrote weekly memos and kept a researchers’ log during the process. Data collection and analysis was ongoing throughout the study. The data was subsequently coded and placed into the following categories:

Pre-Peer Observation Cycle Interview

A. Learning from colleagues
B. Collegiality
C. Concerns

Post-Peer Observation Cycle Interview

A. Learning from Peers
B. Collaboration and collegiality

C. Challenges of peer observations

Next, themes were developed under each category. These themes included:

**Pre-Peer Observation Cycle Interview: Categories A, B, and C.**

1. Improved teaching performance
2. Learning new teaching techniques
3. Teachers looking forward to working together
4. Scheduling
5. Trepidations about being observed

**Post-Peer Observation Cycle Interview: Categories A, B, and C.**

1. Providing new teaching ideas
2. Promoting teacher skill development in content knowledge
3. Affecting classroom management
4. Building new relationships
5. Creating Dialog about Curriculum
6. Time
7. Scheduling
8. Fear of Evaluation

Before the observations began, teachers expressed an interest in the pre-peer observations interviews and that they were looking forward to connecting with colleagues to improve their teaching and learn new techniques. Their goal was to use this process as an additional form of professional development to enhance their teaching practices. Also, expressed in the pre-peer observation cycle interview, were concerns that teachers had about
the process, which included scheduling and trepidations about being observed during the process. Interestingly enough, some of the same overlapping themes of providing new teaching ideas, promoting teacher skill development in content knowledge, and building new relationships emerged in the post-peer observation cycle interview. Similar concerns about scheduling and being observed was also expressed by the teacher in the post-peer observations cycle interview. What each teacher wanted to get out of the process did, indeed, happen along with the same concerns of the process, which did not hold the teachers back from participating in the process.

Validity and credibility were addressed through checks to ensure trustworthiness. Checks for trustworthiness in this action research study included creditably, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Stringer, 2007), as discussed in Chapter 3.

Data were collected in this study through interviews, pre-observation forms, learning journals, and strength and insight forms. An analysis of this data was then presented in Chapter 4 in the form of categories, themes, and findings. In this chapter, I present a summary of the findings, and then discuss these findings as they inform, support, add to, or contradict the two bodies of theory and the literature reviewed for this study, and as reported in Chapter 2.

**Summary of Findings**

Through an analysis of the pre-observation cycle and post-observation cycle interviews, as well as a review of the documents constructed by the peer observation participants (the pre-observation documents, learning journals, and strength and insight forms), eighteen findings were identified, as provided in Table 10.
Table 10

Summary of Findings

1. Participants perceive that the peer observations cycle would be a meaningful, effective, and beneficial process of professional development by learning from colleagues prior to conducting interviews.

2. Teachers perceived that they would encounter both collaboration and collegiality by participation in peer observations prior to conducting the observations.

3. New Teachers have concerns about being an observee in the process of peer observations while teachers with more years of experience were looking forward to having peers observe their teaching.

4. Scheduling and coverage was a concern for participants.

5. Peer observations create meaningful long-term professional development.

6. Discussions about teaching and learning increased creating collegiality.

7. The process caused teachers to reflect on their learning.

8. Teachers made connections with other colleagues.

9. Teachers will continue with observations.

10. Time to conduct the observation was a challenge to the participants.

11. Observee perceptions are that observations could be evaluative.

12. Participants stayed within their content area for observations.

13. All participants identified areas of improvement by observing a colleague.

14. All teachers were able to find meaningful learnings from a peer through observations.

15. Participants reported stated learnings and additional learnings beyond the focus.

16. Participants thought deeper about their performance capabilities and their opportunities for making changes.

17. Teachers were afforded opportunities to observe other teachers.

18. Building proximity is not limiting to conducting observations.
All eight teachers reported that peer observation of teaching was an effective form of professional development. Each of the participants also stated they would participate (and some have) in peer observations again, and all would recommend it to colleagues as a form of professional development. All eight participants also commented that peer observations were effective because of the capacity to impact what teachers do in their practice. Teacher’s comments and writings led to the following insights regarding the benefits of peer observations supported in a professional learning community by providing (a) new teaching ideas (b) teacher content knowledge, and (c) classroom management strategies, as well as (d) build new relationships, and (e) creating opportunities for dialogue about curriculum. The degree to which participation in the study promoted each of the above components was dependent on the specific teachers and how the study supported their individual needs. Additionally, these comments and teachers’ written reflections identified insights about the challenges of instituting peer observation as a professional development tool, which included: (a) time, (b) scheduling and coverage, and (c) perception of evaluation.

Below I will review these finding in relationship to the theoretical framework and literature review that helped to inform and provide context to this study.

**Discussion of Findings in Relationship to the Literature Review of the Study**

This section will attempt to connect the literature review, theoretical framework, research design, and major findings from chapter four to the central question of whether peer observation supported meaningful professional development for teachers.

This problem of practice began with a review of literature that supported the use of peer observations as a professional development tool for teachers to learn in context. Framing that
literature review were three themes with guiding questions and their connection to the theories that ground this study:

Theme 1 – Learning in context. Guiding Question: How do we create meaningful contextualized learning at our school?

Theme 2 – Dynamic Change and Collaborative Learning Environments. Guiding Question: How can organizational systems develop a collaborative self-sustaining learning environment to handle constant changes and still improve?

Theme 3 – Creating and Cultivating Collaborative Leaders within an Organization. Guiding Question: How do teachers, as leaders, emerge to enhance and create learning in action?

The findings of this study are discussed in this chapter in relationship to these three themes and these two bodies of theory.

**Theme 1 – Learning in Context: Did the peer observation process enable teachers to learn from one another?**

As indicated in the literature review, peer observations have a deep history that was first revealed by theorist such as Dewey (2001), Herbart (1896), and Friere (2000). Currently, the movement in schools has been to work collaboratively in Professional Learning Communities (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). In these communities, teachers work together not only to have rich discussions and manipulation of curriculum but to provide contextual learning by observing one another. Through the literature it is revealed that peer observations create contextual learning that promotes collaboration (Bell, 2002; Bruce & Ross, 2008; Lee & Macfadyen, 2007; Munson, 1998; Shortland, 2010; Zwart, Wubbels, Bolhuis, & Bergen, 2008). This form of collaboration allows an organization to learn, continually, from itself, thus
generating sustainability through the many changes that develop (Cole, 2004; Elmore, 2004; Zwart, Wubbles, Bergen, and Bolhuis, 2007, 2008). Other studies have additionally revealed how this process can provide meaningful professional development (Adshead, et al., 2006; Bell, 2002; Huston and Weaver, 2008). When teachers were given this opportunity, they voiced how useful it was for them to see how their colleagues taught and to interpret what was useful for them to incorporate in their own teaching.

The teachers in this study similarly reported that peer observations provided meaningful learning for them. Gaining new teaching ideas, increasing content knowledge, and seeing new classroom management strategies were themes captured across the eight teacher post peer-observation cycle interviews. This was also evident in teachers’ learning journals, and strength and insight forms. This finding is in keeping with the studies of Zwart, Wubbles, Bergen, and Bolhuis (2007; 2008) which also found that teachers learned a great deal through a process of peer observation.

One of the main benefits of peer observations identified by participants was that the process provided them with new teaching ideas. This concept was reported twenty-four times across all eight participating teachers. In the pre-peer observation cycle interview, teachers anticipated that they would gain insight into their teaching. In addition, in the post-peer observation cycle interview, all teachers indeed reported that they gained insight into their teaching practice. They also reported that this process was more meaningful than their current model of professional development.

As reported in chapter four, five of the eight teachers described that they learned more about their content area by observing a peer. As found in previous research (Peery, 2004), participation in peer observations promoted skill development and the inquiry skills of
teachers. In addition, according to a study conducted by Joyce and Showers (2002), an increase in skill development observations lead to an increase in an individual’s learning capacity. This supports the effectiveness of peer observations as a form of professional development (Munson, 1998; Bruce & Ross, 2008; Zwart, Wubbels, Bolhuis, & Bergen, 2008). It was found that the development of teachers’ content knowledge was frequently commented on, as well as evidenced in the teachers’ documents used to implement the peer observation process.

Four of the eight teachers also reported that they learned about classroom management. This area of learning mirrors the previous results, in that it fosters control of what is learned and is again individualized. Although there is not direct literature relating to the potential of peer observations to affect classroom management, the literature points to the individual use of the process to gain personalized knowledge. Related to this idea, Huston and Weaver (2008) performed a three-year pilot (in higher education) where each faculty member chose an area of focus for consultation. Faculty members chose and took away what they needed to learn. Teachers at this school identified what they needed to learn from the observations, which in this case happened to be the need for classroom management.

Theme 2 – Dynamic Change and Collaborative Learning Environments: Did the process of peer observation create collaborations and collegiality?

Due to the constant change and continual transformations that educational organizations require because of changes in curriculum, student learning, and state requirements, the literature points to the need for these organizations to provide collaboration in order to handle these changes and simultaneously improve. Since educational organizations need to stay current, a process to unite teachers to access internal expertise can be very helpful. Burke
(2008) discusses this necessity when he identifies an educational environment as an “open system,” dependent on a constant interchange and connection with the environment. Change is inevitable, so the organization must take responsibility for its own learning to be successful. Bandura (1997) also discussed the need for internal learning when he talks about people controlling their own learning through intrinsic motivation and the self-assessment of goals. Peer observation can be said to be one way to foster the kind of self-directed learning presented by these authors as being both personally and organizationally advantageous.

The literature also suggests the necessary involvement of all stakeholders in the process as well. Today, the focus is on creating Professional Learning Communities in order to be successful, increasing one’s personal knowledge by learning from one another (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008; Elmore, 2004; Fullan, 2008). The daily change that is encountered, whether planned or unplanned (Burke, 2008), needs to be addressed and handled systematically. Since change is unique to any organization, the entire system must then be taken into account. Petersen (2006) expands on this idea when he discusses the influence of outside agencies (such as state departments of education and changes in state frameworks) that drives changes. Each change made, however, is always unique to the specific organization. When considering change, schools then need a possible model to assist them in incorporating change in consideration of all the outside influences affecting their change. A peer observation model can support the development of relationships amongst teachers with a focus on increasing their capacity to teach. However, rather than professional development established from a top-down, administrative approach where teachers are taken out of the classroom to learn, teachers as stakeholders are provided the opportunity to learn from one another in a context of personally meaningful and context-based learning from one another.
Lastly, the literature reveals that a top-down fragmented approach to learning can lead to isolation and a loss of connection amongst colleagues (Senge, 2006). Senge argues that this top-down method of professional development can lead to the loss of the whole picture, whereby teachers are creating meaning alone that may not be in alignment with their colleagues. Once we begin to look at our organization as a learning community, however, fragmentation can end and continual learning and collaboration can begin (Bohm, 1973). By learning from one another, collaboration becomes natural, the system becomes stable, and the organization can move forward.

The teachers in this study also reported that collaboration and collegiality occurred through the process of peer observation. The themes of building new relationships and creating dialog about curriculum naturally emerged in the interviews with teachers. The teachers reported making connections in their post-observation cycle interviews. This reported experience is in keeping with the research study conducted by Sparks and Hirsh (1997) that states that in order for observations to occur, barriers need to be removed for connections to be made amongst teachers.

Seven of the eight participants reported that the peer observation process created new relationships that would otherwise not happened. Another benefit of peer observations included the ability to promote collegiality and collaboration through building relationships amongst staff member. As stated previously, peer observation fostered the development of new teaching strategies and the acquisition of new content knowledge that could be applied to their teaching practice. Research studies revealed that schools revolve around working in separate departments allowing teachers to teach in isolation (Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 1999). Isolation sabotages the building of relationships and collaborative learning. The
difficulty lies in creating opportunities for teachers to make connections (Spark and Hirsh, 1997). The current model at this school still follows a traditional schedule where teachers are separated from one another. The process created by the researcher allowed connections and change in the way teachers increased their knowledge through professional development.

Peer observations created a collaborative environment with increased relationships that allows teachers to sustain a level of learning through these relationships. Kouzes and Posner’s (2007) concept of how an organization must “enable people to act”. They claim that relationships must be fostered and that through these relationships people take risks, hence producing leaders (Gallos, 2008).

In addition to the above, all participants (8 out of 8) stated that they began talking to colleagues about curriculum. During the process of peer observations, collaborative and collegial relationships were developed and conversations surrounding curriculum ensued due to these relationships. Although one teacher did not make new connections, her previous relationships became stronger. Because teacher professional development has typically followed a traditional approach with teachers limited to interactions with peers (Johnson, 1991), professional growth can be stagnant (Lortie, 1975). This leads to fragmentation and removal from context (Kelchtermans, 2004). Dialog surrounding curriculum happened when relationships formed during the process of peer observations. Through these relationships, teachers began to understand better the classroom practices of their peers and share with one another, enhancing their learning and helping them to handle change (Leander & Osborne, 2008). In short, teachers took responsibility for their own learning through these connections.
Theme 3 – Creating and Cultivating Collaborative Leaders within the Organization: Did teachers emerge as leaders while engaging in peer observations?

Finally, the idea of creating and cultivating collaborative leaders from within an organization was further explored in the literature to illuminate how peer observations can produce teachers as leaders inside the organization. Dufour and Eaker (1998) equate teachers to leaders since the two positions are similar. The authors state, “Leaders are judged on the basis of results that cannot be achieved solely by their own efforts” (Dufour & Eaker, 1998, p. 228). Fullan (2008) supports this statement when he discusses that an organization cannot maintain continuous learning when the sole focus is on the leader only. The literature on leadership says that true leadership involves the collective whole of the group and an environment to support that collaborative effort (Fullan, 2008; Gallos, 2008). Kouzes and Posner (2007) discuss how organizations should “enable people to act.” Once an organization develops a culture of relationships and collaboration, people take risks and emerge as a leader.

Since leadership requires the effort of all stakeholders in an organization, administrators and teachers are looking into peer observation as a positive form of collaboration (DuFour & Eaker 1998; Fullan, 2008; and Gallos, 2008). The literature discusses the purpose of peer observation as a tool for professional development to increase the learning capacity of teachers and not as a form of evaluation. This provides multiple benefits for the school because as a teacher’s learning capacity increases, the students profit from this knowledge, which in turn increases their opportunity to learn (Fullan, 2008).

The idea of a school committing to change and trust, in order to develop a system of peer observations, are two other important ideas in the literature. First, research conducted by Solomon & Schrum (2007) points out that responsibility rests on both administration and
teachers to create a school-wide commitment to the change, involving all stakeholders. Second, trust must be built amongst the faculty. Burke (2008) tells us that if teachers feel that this process is evaluative, then the process will be unsuccessful. And, finally, it is imperative that leadership promote peer observations as a legitimate form of professional development (Reeves, 2006). The emphasis of the process is on how teachers can grow rather than a tool for judging what a teacher does. Peer observations support this approach to leadership.

In keeping with this literature, teachers not only found the process to be meaningful, but they were able to take control of their own learning. As stated previously, relationships developed during the observations and teachers began to feel comfortable connecting with colleagues, arranging to observe and then learn in each others’ classrooms. This finding is congruent with Burke’s (2008) point that trust is necessary for observations to be successful. In addition, teachers as leaders were apparent when teachers were allowed the freedom to make decisions on when and where observations took place. Congruent with the literature (Burke 2008; Reeves, 2006; Solomon & Schrum, 2007), commitment to the process was established by all teachers involved in the study when they both indicated interest and followed through with the process. In addition, this project and process had support of the school administration.

Lastly, the numerous positive outcomes to teachers’ engagement in the peer observation process, teachers in this study reported several challenges that were encountered while implementing the process as well. These challenges included time, scheduling, and a fear of evaluation.
Challenges to the Process – What challenges were encountered by conducting peer observations?

Engagement in this process revealed that time was a major issue for teachers when engaged in peer observations. Six of the eight teachers reported time as a challenge to conducting the observations in both the pre and post peer observation cycle interviews. Although time was a major concern, participants said that they would be willing to take part in peer observation. Hammersley-Fletcher and Orsmond (2004) discuss the lack of research on the benefits of peer observations and how a process for execution is not available. These authors go on to say that there is not enough training in how to conduct peer observation, which is necessary in that most teachers do not wish to waste any time.

In addition to time, five of the eight participants discussed scheduling as a challenge to conducting the peer observations. Again, the lack of available research and attention to the process is reiterated by the study conducted by Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond (2004), which supports the challenges with scheduling, since training on how to implement the process is needed. The researcher facilitated the scheduling process with teachers but without clear guidance.

Lastly, four of the eight participants expressed concern that the peer observations still felt like an evaluation. As mentioned previously, this form of professional development is a change in the traditional practice where teacher’s improvement typically happens in a top-down fashion rather than a fluid continuous fashion (Park, Steve, Star, Graham, & Oppong, 2007). Peer observation, as a new model of professional development, emphasizes authentic collaborative learning situations (Liebermann, 1995). This shift in how teachers receive professional development begins with systemic change that starts with administrators (Schein,
Administrators must demonstrate commitment to the endeavor and build trust amongst the faculty. As Burke (2008) points out, when teachers do not buy into the values or see this process as evaluative, it will not work. While teachers in this study saw the value in this process, they also still expressed a concern that it felt evaluative when observed in the process.

In keeping with this reaction by teachers, some contrary studies do report the ineffectiveness of the peer observation process. Cosh (1999) discussed how participants saw this model to be threatening and critical. Thus, learning was not genuine because everyone was using “nice” and using “non-offensive language” in order not to offend participants. This was clear in the case of one teacher in this study who stated that evaluations were just for “show” and did not reflect what is truly done in the classroom. In both the pre- and post-observation cycle interviews, teachers reported that evaluative methods still existed for them, making them worried about the process, and that trust had not fully developed for this process to be successful.

Discussion of the Findings in Relationship to the Theoretical Framework

Two theories informed my research: Leadership and Organizational Theory, and Adult Learning Theory. These theories provided direction and a focus for the study. In particular, these two theories informed my interpretation and analysis of the phenomena of peer observations as a professional development tool.

Adult Learning Theory and Study Findings

Adult Learning Theory is the understanding of how adults process and learn new information. It is based on applying real world experiences to motivate adults, help them assimilate new experiences, and learn from their experiences (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson,
This theory claims that adults find it necessary to have a part in the design of what they learn and the ability to relate it to what they believe is relevant. According to Knowles, et al. (1998), knowledge increases when personal goals are aligned with what needs to be learned. This leads to better learning outcomes because adults are part the process rather than exclude from the learning process. Additionally, MacKeracher (2004) says that since adults are not always immersed in a scholarly manner, they must have a vehicle to transfer knowledge in the context in which it happens.

Adult Learning Theory provided a lens into peer observation as a professional development tool as it allows teachers to take control of what they learn based on their needs. This concept of adult learning theory began with Knowles’ (1998) work on the andragogical model that was based on the five distinct assumptions originally presented by Lindeman (1926). These assumptions were that adults: (a) are self-motivated and self-directed learners, (b) possess a wealth of ideas, knowledge, and experiences to share, (c) learn when they understand that they need to act on something applicable to their lives, (d) learn best when the learning is life, task, and problem centered, and (e) are motivated by personal, intrinsic incentives.

Given that most people are not aware of their theories in action, or how they act (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004), it is important for teachers to understand that they already engage in some form of practice. This is an important finding since espoused thoughts and actual application needs to be in alignment. As reported in the literature review, Argyris and Schon (1974) stated that learning takes place when adults identify a discrepancy in what they say (espoused theories) and what they do (theories in action). This is further supported in more recent literature by Reeves (2009) when he discusses the contradiction in advocated practices (the
what) as opposed the contextual context (the how) and the different views on how instruction should be implemented. As illuminated in the both the pre- and post- peer observation cycle interviews, teachers not only believed that they would gain insight into their teaching, they confirmed it with both verbal and written examples of the insights gained.

How we learn and what we learn are important concepts in adult learning theory. Donovan, Bransford, and Pellegrino (1999) discussed the four interconnected characteristics of learning. These authors report that one such characteristic – learner centered, as it applies to adult learning theory – provides a pedagogical approach for a learner to create meaningful concepts that are relevant. Learning new teaching ideas was provided in peer observations as it offers the opportunity for teachers to learn in an environment in which they work. Hargreaves (2007) substantiates this idea as he posits that de-contextualized professional development is a disconnect from teachers’ current practice which does not allow for application of concepts. All eight teachers engaged in observations and demonstrated that they identified new teaching ideas that they could apply to their classroom. In addition, all teachers were actively seeking out peers to find teaching ideas that were applicable to their specific personal needs. This is congruent to the concepts of adult learning theory in that teachers are not passive recipients of knowledge (Knowles, 1998) and can learn from one another (MacKeracher, 2004).

Adult learning theory confirms that adults can and prefer to make their own decisions about their learning. As reported by MacKeracher (2004), modern theory based on the idea of andragogy describes adult learners “…as autonomous individuals capable of identifying their own learning needs and planning…” (MacKeracher, 2004, p. 23). The findings in this study identified peer observations as a process of professional development that allowed for choice and autonomy by teachers to learn in context.
Leadership and Organizational Theory and Study Findings

In Leadership and Organizational Theory, three types of leadership sub-theories were applicable to my problem of practice: servant, instructional, and distributive. First is servant leadership. Since this theory is based on the wish to help others and the positioning of the leader in middle of an organization, it supports the idea of incorporating peer observations and as professional development tool within the organization (Covey, 2010; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Covey (2010) discusses how working with others in order to increase personal knowledge and abilities is a necessary component to servant leadership. Next, instructional leadership connected to my research since it allowed for facilitating relationships, such as collaboration and using research on instruction and adult learning in context. An instructional leader creates collaboration amongst peers to process new instructional techniques and develop processes that work (Elmore, 2000; Hallinger, 2003; Hallinger, 1992; Hallinger & Wimpelberg, 1992). Lastly, distributive leadership explained how peer observations created improved instruction through continuous learning and how an organization can take control of learning (Elmore, 2000; Gronn, 2000; Harris, 2004; Lashway, 2003; Spillane, 2006).

The act of collectively working with colleagues using peer observations supports the idea of learning via a professional learning community (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). Teachers were willing to maximize the benefit of their own professional experience and engage in the interactive process of thinking about what they need to learn, acting on that need to learn, and reflecting on what they learned. Currently, this middle school is organized into separate departments with teachers teaching in isolation (Joyce, Calhoun, & Hopkins, 1999). Leadership and Organizational theory, as applied to this study, reveals that learning new teaching ideas from peers provides an opportunity for teachers to learn continuously by
observing in the classroom, thus breaking the change of isolation. This activity supports collective learning across teachers in a learning community.

A system, which can learn from itself (Bandura, 1997), provides for individual control, motivation, and thought using observations to change behaviors and accomplish goals. Senge (2006) supports this using his term “learning communities” when he discusses internal sustainability by discovering internal talents that allows everyone to learn at all levels. Leaders emerge moving the organization forward. Since teachers used peer observations as a way to gain new teaching ideas, they provided a means for individual learning, and in turn, ongoing improvement in the organization. In addition to reinforcing current practices, peer observations allowed for and exposed participants of this study to new ideas and teaching strategies. In short, it was beneficial for teachers to see how someone else was doing the same job and to consider how this could help them to improve their own practice.

Leadership and organizational theory sheds light on the need for leaders to make this process successful. According to Elmore (2000), instructional leaders take responsibility to provide guidance and direction for improvement. As facilitator and participant of this study, materials used during the observations and process were developed and implemented. Moreover, to implement this process, it required the researcher [leader] to assist with daily/weekly problems that the teachers encountered (placing the leader in the middle). Instructional leadership supports providing teachers with the tools and time to complete the process of peer observations. The researcher met with teachers weekly to address any issues or complications that arose when conducting the observations.

Leadership and organizational theory plays in important role in providing a system for peer observations to occur. Reeves (2006), reminds us that school leaders must advocate and
support observations as a legitimate form of professional development. Additionally, Fullan (2008) discusses that the school focus must shift how they do things differently to ensure student’s academic success. As stated previously, since this is a new form of professional development that switches teaching from a private public matter, it must be done correctly. If done incorrectly, it can breed fear and contempt. Trust from both administrators and teachers are the key to success. All stakeholders need to commit and work hard to create a positive professional learning community (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Hargreaves, 1992). As stated earlier, teachers identified that they struggled with being the observee as some point during the study and still expressed feelings that that are more indicative of a formal observation. Trust and comfort with this process must be addressed for this process to succeed.

**Summary Review of the Theoretical Framework in Relationship to the Findings**

In both adult learning theory and organizational leadership and, learning in context “…on the job, day after day, is the work” (Fullan, 2008 p. 86). Many experts (Fullan, 2008; Elmore, 2004; Reeves, 2009; Schmoker, 2006) believe that the issue with school reform is that opportunities for continuous teacher learning through observations are nonexistent. Furthermore, MacKeracher (2004) uses the term “situated learning” to argue that knowledge and skills are acquired more effectively and learned by adults when learned within the context in which they are used. Teachers in this study – their “situation” – self-identified the need to learn more teaching ideas, content knowledge, and classroom management, choosing to learn from their peers and change their practice.

Knowles (1998) adds that providing a democratic philosophy, which develops the person by providing individual choice, will ultimately lead that person to the right decision. This view in organizational and adult theory leads to the idea that guiding principles will be based on the
actual needs of the collective group, “…and that there will be a maximum of participation by all members of the organization in sharing responsibility for making and carrying out decisions” (Knowles, 1998, p.109). This philosophy suggests that all participants act as leaders in the group. In this study, all participants emerged as leaders, taking responsibility for both their individual learning and the collective groups learning by meeting weekly and discussing how to handle challenges in the process yet still move forward.

**Conclusion**

As a result of conducting this action research study, several key findings have been realized:

- One of the main benefits of peer observations, identified by participants, was that the process provided new teaching ideas. Teachers gained insight into their teaching and viewed this process as more meaningful than their current model of professional development.
- Peer observations were an effective professional development process that promoted teacher skill development in content knowledge. Teachers described that they learned more about their content area by observing a peer.
- Teachers were able to focus observations to an area that they wanted to learn. Specifically, many focused their learning on classroom management.
- Peer observations created new relationships amongst colleagues that would not have happened otherwise.
- Peer observations formed collaborative and collegial relationships, supporting a number of conversations regarding curriculum.
• The time involved in the peer observation process was a major challenge for teachers. Finding time was often difficult.

• Scheduling is a challenge to conducting the peer observations.

• Peer observations still felt evaluative in nature for some teachers; however, they were useful.

The many benefits and challenges of peer observations were drawn from the data. The findings were based on the responses made by the teachers regarding the process of peer observations depending on what each particular teacher needed. The opportunity to participate in peer observations should be made available to interested teachers. Before teachers begin the process, it is important that the teachers are familiar with the steps and instruments involved to conduct the classroom observations. Release time must be made available for both planning purposes and implementation of the peer observation process.

This study, grounded in both leadership and organizational and adult learning theories, makes known both the possible benefits and challenges to the use of peer observations as professional development tool. First, findings in this study indicate participation in the peer observation process provided contextual learning from peers. Second, teachers participating in this study recognized the benefits and challenges of using peer observations as a professional development tool. Third, increased collaboration and collegiality through a process of peer observations lead to conversations about curriculum. Finally, this study contributes to the further understanding of professional development as it lends insight into meaningful adult learning and leadership within an organization with the use of peer observations in a middle school setting.
Schmoker (2006) states that professional development “…makes no formal immediate arrangements for teachers to translate learning into actual lessons or units, whose impact we assess and then use as the bases for ongoing improvement. Without this simple cycle, training is irrelevant” (p. 109). The current middle school model at this middle school does not have a system for teachers to observe each other in order to support the level of needs each teacher requires to handle constant change and learning. As a result, de-contextualized learning continues often in the form of top-down workshops, leading to isolation and fragmentation of teaching practices. A system that promotes communication and collaboration skills, utilizing knowledge from within the organization, is currently lacking in this school. Teachers are not gaining meaningful professional development as we continue with de-contextualized workshops. Peter Cole (2004) describes our current method of teacher professional development as, “a great way to avoid change” (p.1). The responsibility to increase, collaboratively, teacher’s knowledge and skills, lies with this organization to create a culture of learning, yet this school has not created a process for this internal and continuous learning to happen.

An increasing body of evidence within the school improvement field identifies the importance of internal capacity building as a means for an organization to sustain continual improvement (Harris, 2004). As a result of this study, I found that teachers would utilize peer observations as form of professional development to enhance their professional knowledge, in order to better educate students. It is my opinion that if we are to handle increased demands and changes in education, we must have a process that allows teachers to take charge of their own learning and meet those challenges to sustain the organization. Peer observations are one answer to meet the demands and changes in educations collectively.
With the rapid changes in curriculum and instruction, today’s professional development must be accessible to teachers in order to meet the daily demands of teaching and provide teachers with an avenue for connecting with their colleagues. Teaching, reflecting on teaching, and change are a connected and continuous cycle that teachers engage in to better their teaching practices. Teachers are still engaging in professional development that is not conducive to how they learn. In order for an organization to be sustainable, peer observation should be utilized in order to learn from the experts within the organization. In keeping with organizational and leadership and adult learning theories, the participants of this study recommend the following:

- Teachers should have access to more content area expertise colleagues
- Learning journals and strengths and insights forms are most effective in gathering new knowledge. (Keep it simple)
- Specific subject areas should avoid conducting observations during testing times
- The school should dedicate one to two days per month with substitute coverage for observations to happen. This will help with scheduling and provide more structure to the process.
- Teachers should advertise what their area of expertise is on school’s intranet in order for teachers to identify who has what skill sets.
- Time should be built into the process for observers to talk to observes, as questions may arise out of the observation.

As the investigator of this process, I recommend that more research be conducted in the K-12 sector on the potential use of peer observations as a professional development tool. If duplicating this study, the following procedures should be considered:
• Involve participants from all grade levels in the school to gain insight as to whether the process is applicable for a wider spectrum of teachers.
• Conduct interviews biweekly on the same day of the week to build consistency.
• Consult the school/district calendar to avoid conflicts.
• Incorporate the use of peer-to-peer (VoIP’s) technology (such as Skype) to assist in conducting the observations.
• Broadcast to the faculty more than once to indicate interest as the message may not stick the first time.

Using these procedures will allow for peer observations to be built into the culture of the school. Also, consideration of scheduling is imperative, in order to keep the momentum of the process intact. Furthermore, as technologies increase, more opportunities for peer observations become available for teachers to utilize. Lastly, constant communication is the key in order for teachers’ awareness of this professional development option.

**Significance of the Study in the Field**

This study examined the potential of using peer observations as a tool for meaningful professional development. From an analysis of the data collected and analyzed, two major findings were identified:

1. This study advocates for the use of peer observation as a form of meaningful professional development for teachers to learn in context.
2. Peer observation as a form of professional development can enhance how and what teachers learn allowing for the differentiation of teacher professional development that meets all teachers’ needs.
This study contributes to the understanding of the potential use for professional growth through peer observations at the middle school level. It is recognized that the transferability of this study is limited to other schools and is dependent on the school culture and administrative support. As change in both curriculum and implementation of curriculum happen at a rapid pace, more opportunities for collaboration and contextualized learning becomes important for educators to provide high quality education for students.

This study provided one piece to a larger body of research in the area of peer observations. Additional research is needed to further the understanding of peer observations as a professional development tool to include:

- Multiple grade levels and subject areas
- Process of peer observations at both the elementary level and secondary level.
- The effectiveness of same department observations versus multidepartment observations
- The use of technology to facilitate observations
- Long-term use of peer observations
- New teachers versus veteran teachers use of peer observations
- Standardizing the process of peer observations

This action research study provided new insight into the use of peer observations as a contextual form of professional development. However, it has only a topical application to the deeper understanding of how this process can be utilized further. The suggestions for future research were made to in order for a more in-depth examination to be executed by future researchers in the field of professional development.
Final Words

Peer observations allow for more autonomy and self-governance for teachers, as well as provide an avenue for collective collaboration for continuous learning to increase capacity and provide sustainability within the organization. This process must be voluntary and a gradual starting with a trusted colleague. As a one school, small sample sized study, generalizations to all schools are not appropriate. However, this study offers one process for developing individualized professional development for teachers. This model may not fit other schools settings but is one possible context for promoting differentiated, teacher driven contextualized professional development.
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Appendix A

Permission Letter Superintendent of Schools/Building Principal

December 15, 2010

Dear [Superintendent of Schools] and [Building Principal],

My name is Linda Hirsch. I am the grade 7 English language arts teacher and Program Facilitator at the [Name of School] and am currently working on my doctoral dissertation at Northeastern University. I am conducting a study regarding peer observation as a professional development tool to learn in context. This study requires data to be collected at school, and I am requesting permission to elicit participation from teachers and conduct the study at school during the school day.

In this research study, I plan to investigate if a process of peer observations creates a collegial collaborative environment in which teachers can learn new skills in context. A process for how embedded peer observations happen within a school will be shared should this study determine the benefits in contextual learning.

It is my hope that this study will demonstrate the impact and potential of peer observations by providing a facet of professional development for teachers to utilize. Given the increasing demands on the role of the teaching practice to incorporating new curriculum, peer observation may provide the bridge for practitioners to benefit from the knowledge generated on a daily basis by their own continuous actions and interactions with colleagues.

Should you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly [school phone number] (work), (978) 251-1378 (home) or the chairperson of my committee, Dr. Christopher Unger at Northeastern University, (617) 909-1360. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Linda Hirsch
Grade 7 ELA Teacher
ELA Program Facilitator Grades 5-8
[town, city]
Doctoral Candidate, College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University, Boston
Appendix B

*Initial Teacher Request for Participation - email*

January 10, 2011

Dear Colleagues,

I will be conducting the research portion of my doctoral program at Northeastern University, this spring, between the months of April and June. I will be researching peer observations as a professional development tool for teachers to learn in context.

I am currently looking for 7th and 8th grade teachers who are interested in participating in a 5-week cycle of once-a-week observations of another teachers’ classroom (whether it is the participant’s current content area or a different content area), in order to gain pedagogical knowledge to increase the participants’ understanding of their own teaching practices. These are non-evaluative observations that increase the observers’ knowledge base. In other words, you will be observing another teacher to help you (the participant) learn, not to discuss the observation with the observed teacher. Data collection will include brief interviews and questionnaires to elicit learning from these observations.

Once I complete a full literature review, develop how the process will work, and receive approval from Northeastern University, I will formally request your participation. At this time, I am looking for an initial interest response from teachers. Once I receive your response of interest, I will hold a meeting to finalize the plans that is mutually convenient for all. Please know participation will include the individual observations, helping with coverage for the observations to happen, the possibility of being observed by other participants of the study, a brief learning journal identifying your learning and challenges, and a semi-structured interview with me, the researcher. In addition, this is an action research project that I will be participating in personally. All data will be confidential and your personal information, including names, will not be used.

Please respond via email to [email address], only if you are interested. Thank you in advance for your time.

Linda
Appendix C

The following set of questions guided the discussions with teachers involved in the study. These questions will be asked prior to the observation process.

Pre-Observation Interview Questions
1. Have you participated in any kind of peer observation process in your teaching experience? If so, what was the process and engagement of the concept?
2. Why are you interested in participating in the observation process?
3. What concerns do you have about conducting the observations?
4. Have you ever been observed for an evaluation as a teacher? What did you gain from that process?
5. What do you hope to gain from the experience?
6. What support will you need during the process?
7. Would peer observation be supported at your school (e.g., by colleagues, principal, the school climate?) If so, how? If not, why not?
Appendix D

Observed Teacher 1

Pre- Observation Form

Grade: __________ Content Area: __________ Date: __________ Time: ________

The area(s) in which I feel I can improve by observing a colleague is/are:

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Observed Teacher 2

Pre- Observation Form

Grade: __________ Content Area: __________ Date: __________ Time: ________

The area(s) in which I feel I can improve by observing a colleague is/are:

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Observed Teacher 3

Pre- Observation Form

Grade: __________ Content Area: __________ Date: __________ Time: ________

The area(s) in which I feel I can improve by observing a colleague is/are:

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________
Observed Teacher 4

Pre-Observation Form

Grade: ________ Content Area: ________ Date: ________ Time: ________

The area(s) in which I feel I can improve by observing a colleague is/are:

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Observed Teacher 5

Pre-Observation Form

Grade: ________ Content Area: ________ Date: ________ Time: ________

The area(s) in which I feel I can improve by observing a colleague is/are:

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________
Appendix E

Learning Journal
Date: _______________ Observation # ___________
Highlight five newly learned skills gained by conducting today’s observation.

1. __________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

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2. __________________________________________________________________________

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3. __________________________________________________________________________

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4. __________________________________________________________________________

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5. __________________________________________________________________________

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____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________
Identify two ideas, in the prior section, that could be used immediately in your classroom.

1. ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________

2. ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
   ____________________________________________________________
### Appendix F

**Strength and Insight Form**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observation #</th>
<th>Date:</th>
<th>SI Assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The two greatest **strengths** of the observation— include the reasons why they were strengths:

1. __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

   Reason(s): __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

2. __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

   Reason(s): __________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________________________

I gained the following insight from completing this observation  
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________________________
Appendix G

Post-Observation Interview Questions
The following set of questions guided the discussions with teachers involved in the study. These questions will be asked prior to the observation process.

1. Did you find the peer observation process beneficial? Why or Why not?
2. Which steps in the process were most valuable? Are all the steps necessary?
3. How does this process compare to other staff development activities in which you have participated? Was it meaningful and/or effective?
4. Would peer observation be useful as a professional development?
5. What would be some challenges to implement the process?
6. How did the peer observation process affect your perception of your teaching?
7. Did the process cause you to experiment or change your current teaching practices? Explain how.
8. How might peer observation create collegiality and collaboration amongst the staff?
9. Did you make a new connection with your colleagues from conducting the observation?
10. Will you continue to seek out and conduct peer observations outside this study?
March 2, 2011

Northeastern University Institutional Review Board
Human Subject Research Protection
960 Renaissance Park
Boston, MA 02115

To Who It May Concern,

This letter is to indicate that Ms. Linda Hirsch, doctoral student at Northeastern University and English teacher, has permission to conduct research at the McCarthy Middle School in Chelmsford, MA for her study of "Utilizing Peer Observation as a Professional Development Tool to Learn in Context". Ms Hirsch requested permission from both my office and the building principal, Kurt McPhee, to have McCarthy serve as her study site.

Ms. Hirsch will contact teachers to recruit them via standard email. Once teachers express interest in the study, Ms. Hirsch will meet with them individually to explain the requirements of the study and answer any questions. Ms. Hirsch will inform the research volunteers that participation in this study is strictly voluntary and that they may choose not to participate after explanation of the requirements. In addition, participants will be informed that they may choose to be removed from the study at any time and that all participant information will be held confidential. Ms Hirsch's study will occur between the months of April and May 2011.

Ms. Hirsch has also agreed to provide to my office a copy of the Northeastern University IRB-approved, stamped consent document before she recruits participants at school and will also provide a copy of any aggregate results.

Sincerely,

Frank Tiano, Ed.D.
Superintendent
Appendix I

Signed Informed Consent Document
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies

Investigator Name: Linda Hirsch
Title of Project: UTILIZING PEER OBSERVATION AS A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOL TO LEARN IN CONTEXT

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
I am inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have been asked to participate in this study because you are either a 7th or 8th grade teacher. In addition, you have been asked to participate in this study since you expressed initial interest in peer observations from a request letter sent in January 2011.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this research is determine if a process of peer observations is a viable option for teachers a professional development tool by learning in context.

What will I be asked to do?
The researcher will be looking for you to participate in the following ways.
- Participate in an initial interview with seven question that will be audio taped
- Observe five separate cooperating teachers in their classrooms
- Complete a peer observation form stating the focus of the observation
- Complete a learning journal during the observation identifying five new learnings and two applications of the new learnings
- Meet weekly to discuss observations and plan following weeks observation
- Complete an electronic strengths and insight form after the observation
- Complete a post interview with ten questions that will be audio taped

Where will this take place and how much time will it take?
Interviews will take place at a school during a convenient time and place for the participant and in a private office. Classroom observations, with cooperating teacher, will be conducted based on the participants schedule for five consecutive weeks (one observation per week). Peer observation forms, and strengths and insight forms will be sent to the participant’s private
Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks involved in take part in this study.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may give participants insight into their own teaching practices.

Who will see the information about me?
Your part in the study will be held in a confidential manner. Only the researcher of this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will be use information that can identify you in any way. All audio tapes, pre-observation forms, and learning journals will be destroyed after analysis. All email links will be broken and documentation obtained from those links will be destroyed.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?
You are not required to participate in this study. Stopping your participation will not affect your professional standing. At any time during the study, you may refuse to answer questions or complete form, as well as end your participation. If you chose not to participate, do not sign and ignore this form.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?
Linda Hirsch
McCarthy Middle School
Work # (978) 251-5122
Email hirschl@chelmsford.k12.ma.us

Chris Unger, Ed.D
Principal Investigator –Overseeing Study
Northeastern University, Boston
Campus # 617-373-2400
Email: c.unger@neu.edu

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?
If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115 tel. 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation?
There is no compensation for participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?
There is not cost to participate in this study.
I have read, understood and had the opportunity to ask questions regarding this consent form. I fully understand the nature and character of my involvement in this research program as a participant and the potential risks. Should I be selected, I agree to participate in this study on a voluntary basis.

______________________________  ___________________
Research Participant (Printed Name)       Date

______________________________
Research Participant (Signature)
APPRAISAL EXPIRATION DATE: APRIL 6, 2012

Notificaton of IRB Action

Northestern University

Human Subjects Research Protection

C. Kendall Cohn, Ph.D., Chair

C. Kendall Cohn, Ph.D., Chair

Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

C. Kendall Cohn, Ph.D., Chair

Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

C. Kendall Cohn, Ph.D., Chair

Other university approves that may be necessary.
6. The approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
information that may arise or be acquired at the University.
5. As approved and approved by the Committee of the Human Research Protection
Study, the proposal and those approved to study may include
information that may arise or be acquired at the University.
4. The investigation may involve the use of experimental procedures or new
Resident participants into the study.
3. The investigation may involve the use of experimental procedures or new
Resident participants into the study.
2. The study investigator must notify the IRB/IRB of all proposals and their
respective procedures into the study.
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when
Investigator's Responsibilities:

Appendix J

Peer Observation as a Professional Development Tool
There are no foreseeable risks involved in taking part in this study.

Will there be any part of the questionnaire or consent form that I will need to complete?

Application of the consent form will be provided in the following ways:

- Participate in an initial interview with the consent form.
- Complete a brief questionnaire with the consent form.
- Complete an electronic questionnaire and sign agreement form.
- Complete the questionnaire online.
- Complete the questionnaire on paper.
- Complete the questionnaire by telephone.

The researcher will be looking for you to participate in the following ways:

- Participate in a professional development tool.
- Participate in a professional development tool by completing a questionnaire.

The purpose of this research is to determine if a professional development tool is a viable option for teachers.

Will I be able to do?

(Answer provided)
PEER OBSERVATION AS A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TOOL

I agree to participate.

I have read, understood, and have the opportunity to ask questions regarding the consent form.

If I do not want to take part in the study, when choices do I have?

If I have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Linda Friedli at 780-251-5372 or the Principal Investigator:

You can contact me about any results or procedures related to this study.

You may call anonymously if you wish.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Research Ethics Board of Western University.

I do not want to be involved in this study. What choices do I have?

This participant information sheet is voluntary.

I do not want to take part in the study. What choices do I have?

If I do not want to be involved in this study. What choices do I have?

If you have any questions about the study, please feel free to contact Linda Friedli at 780-251-5372 or the Principal Investigator:

The information collected will be stored in an electronic format. No paper copies of this study will be kept. The information collected will be held in a confidential manner. Only the researcher of this study will have access to the information collected.

The information collected will be used to better understand the teaching and learning process.

I agree to the participation above and opt into the study.

Signature of person who explained the study

Date

Signature of person agreeing to take part

Date