HOW TO MAKE IT MATTER:  
TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

A Thesis presented 
by

Dan Barber

to 
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of 
Doctorate of Education

in the field of 
Curriculum, Teaching, Learning, and Leadership

College of Professional Studies 
Northeastern University 
Boston, Massachusetts 
May 2019
Dedication

This dissertation would not have been possible without the love and support of those closest to me. To my parents, John and Nancy Barber, thank you for your belief in me, encouraging me to pursue what I am most passionate about, instilling in me the capacity to make a positive difference in the lives of others, and supporting me through some of my hardest moments. I am eternally grateful for all you have done and dedicate this dissertation to you.

To my brother, David Barber, you left us far too soon and not a day goes by that I do not miss you. You were a true inspiration to me for the capacity of the human spirit, what matters most in life, and how to conduct and give of yourself to those around you. Your spirit lives on in the way I live my life, endeavor to treat others and give of myself. I dedicate this dissertation to you, your wife Marcia, and your three boys, Scott, Joe, and Jacob, each of whom are carving out amazing paths of their own in your image.

I also want to dedicate this to my six beautiful daughters. I grapple some days with whether being a parent has helped me to be a better educator or being an educator has helped me to be a better parent. Either way, I am truly blessed to be able to share this journey in life with my girls, Olivia, Kiley, Caroline, Julia, Emily and Zoë, and am inspired daily by the incredible things you each do and being able to watch each of you grow and blossom into the wonderful people you are becoming.

And, most importantly, I want to dedicate this to my wife Brandy. As any spouse of any educator can tell you, when you marry an educator you are marrying into a certain lifestyle. My work, whether in the schoolhouse or on this dissertation, can often consume me. I can honestly say I would not be where I am without your unconditional love and support so I thank you and dedicate this to you and your mother, Deborah Roper, who I know inspired you so much.
Acknowledgements

I owe a debt of gratitude to so many people for making my dream of completing this dissertation and earning my doctorate a reality. First, to my adviser, Dr. Sara Ewell, thank you for your encouragement, feedback and pushing me to my potential. Thank you also to Dr. Billye Sankofa Waters and Dr. Chris Unger for serving on my proposal and defense committees, respectively, and challenging me to see my work in new and different lights.

To the final member of my thesis defense committee, Dr. Traci Smith, I am truly indebted to you. Our friendship spans decades and we have seen each other through some challenging trials and tribulations. I am not sure either of us would have predicted, back when we were at Idlewild teaching kindergarten (you) and second grade (me) that our life journeys would intersect again at such a pivotal point. But I could not have asked for a better friend to be on my committee and join me at such an important moment in my life. Please know I will always be thankful to you for this.

I also want to thank some of the smartest individuals I know for agreeing, at different points, to read and provide me feedback on my work. So, thank you to Dr. Beth Bennett, Dr. Steve Cohen, and Dr. Ellen Rintell for all the valuable insight and feedback you provided me on my dissertation drafts. A special thanks to Dr. Greg Buchanan, my teacher, employee, colleague, counselor, confidant, but most importantly, friend, for taking the time to not only read over my work and provide me feedback but also taking the time to counsel, advise me, and help me understand the dissertation process.

I want to thank my research site and research participants for taking the time out of their busy schedules to offer me the valuable insight that guided this dissertation. Each of you
brought a different perspective and a different range of experiences to this work. I, truly, could not have produced such an interesting body of work without your help.

I want to thank my two bosses, Jaime Wallace and Kevin Paquette, for being so supportive and encouraging of this endeavor. Jaime, you have been such an incredible mentor to me; I could write volumes about everything I have learned from you and how it has benefited me both professionally and personally. Kevin, it’s hard to believe we have been teaming up to make great things happen for over a decade. I appreciate your friendship, particularly during some of my most challenging times, providing me opportunities to see the world, and for letting me be a part of some of the incredible projects we have collaborated on. Keeping dreaming big and taking me along for the ride with you! I truly could not have accomplished this fete without the two of you in my corner.

I want to thank the teachers, staff, students and families of the schools I have worked at for inspiring me on a daily basis. Part of my passion for education is rooted in the fact that I have learned something new from our students and teachers every day. There is no better profession than education and no greater joy than waking up each day and coming to work at a school. I am truly inspired by some of the amazing teachers I have been able to work with and the students I have had the good fortune of working with, whether as a teacher or an administrator. I expect great things from each and every one of you!

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover. – Mark Twain
Abstract

Professional development is one of the most efficient means for improving teacher performance and student outcomes. While research has identified several key attributes of effective professional development, there remains a discrepancy between what such positive qualities and actual implementation. At the same time, most professional development targets the improvement of student learning outcomes as measured by performance on standardized tests by attempting to improve teacher content knowledge and pedagogy. Little attention within the realm of professional development is paid to teacher-student relationships and the effect such relationships can have on improving student learning outcomes. Therefore, the purpose of this descriptive case study was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of teachers in an urban elementary setting toward school-specific professional development and their influence on student learning outcomes. Using Guskey’s Alternative model of professional development and teacher change this study sought to answer the following central research question: How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as it relates to improving their teaching practice? Guskey’s Alternative model of professional development and teacher change suggests that in order for professional development to effective in changing teachers’ beliefs and attitudes, teachers must first see a change in student outcomes following the successful implementation of what was learned in PD. This case study found: (1) variance in how professional development is defined, (2) professional development = opportunity, (3) professional development = teacher growth, (4) teachers desire holistic improvement in their students, (5) teachers desire student growth over proficiency, (6) teachers perceive their relationship with students in terms of love, (7) teachers desire to strengthen their relationship with students, (8) teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too
broad, (9) teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too repetitive, (10) teachers perceive self-selected professional development as better aligned to their goals and more timely, (11) greater choice in self-selected professional development leads to greater teacher satisfaction, and (12) self-selected professional development offers teachers more opportunities for quality collaboration. From these findings this study concluded that professional development needs to offer more choices that better align with teacher needs and is most effective when it stresses high-quality collaboration. Additionally, this study also found that more professional development teacher-leader opportunities need to be offered and more explicit professional development needs to be offered on strengthening teacher-student relationships.

*Keywords:* Professional development, student outcomes, teacher-student relationships, holistic improvement, motivation, boosts, barriers, growth, proficiency, value-added, Guskey, North Carolina,
# Table of Contents

**Acknowledgments** 3  
**Abstract** 5  
**List of Figures** 8  
**List of Tables** 9  
**Chapter One: Introduction** 10  
**Chapter Two: Literature Review** 24  
**Chapter Three: Methodology** 55  
**Chapter Four: Research Findings and Analysis** 78  
**Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications** 124  
**Personal Reflection** 190  
**References** 193  
**Appendix** 226
List of Figures

Figure 1. Alternative Model of Professional Development and Teacher Change ..................20

Figure 2. Trends in the Percent of Beginning Teachers Participating in Induction or Mentor Programs .........................................................................................................................47

Figure 3. North Carolina Teacher Evaluation Process Professional Development Plan Section 90

Figure 4. Key Findings .................................................................................................127

Figure 5. Themes and Theoretical Connections ................................................................155

Figure 6. Barriers Impeding the Likelihood Teachers will Change Classroom Practices ....158

Figure 7. Boosts Increasing the Likelihood Teachers will Change Classroom Practices ....159

Figure 8. Desired Change in Teachers’ Classroom Practices as a Result of PD .................160

Figure 9. Desired Change in Student Learning Outcomes ..............................................162

Figure 10. Cyclical Representation of Guskey’s Theory .................................................164
List of Tables

Table 1: *Overview of research participants* ................................................................. 66

Table 2: *Major categories and themes which emerged from the data* ....................... 80

Table 3: *Mandatory versus Self-Selected Professional Development* ...................... 104
Chapter One: Introduction

Problem Statement

This problem of practice was rooted in three fundamental premises. First, when a school hires a teacher it is making an important investment. Second, student learning and success are due, in large part, to the effectiveness of teachers (Good, 2014; Hirsch, 2012; Konstantopoulos, 2014). Third, professional development is an essential mechanism for enhancing teachers’ content knowledge, skills, and improving their instructional practices (Avalos, 2011; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Yoon, & Birman, 2002).

While it can be difficult to advertise for, recruit, and hire effective teachers, it is even more challenging to evaluate the effectiveness of current teachers (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Marzano, 2012; Sass, Semykina, & Harris, 2014). This, in turn, makes it an even more imprecise science to attempt to design and implement a foolproof means for effectively identifying ineffectual teachers and replacing them with teachers who can be confidently predicted to perform better than their predecessors.

Given the challenges presented by attempting to accurately and objectively judge the effectiveness of teachers and improve the teaching force through attrition and replacement, professional development of the current teaching force presents itself as the practical alternative to improve student learning outcomes (Whitaker, 2012). While professional development presents itself as the more sensible solution for improving student learning outcomes, much about what defines effective professional development remains elusive (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013). Therefore, identifying the qualities of effective professional development was one of the goals of this study. Taking things a step further, this study looked at the alignment of what
researchers identify as the qualities of effective professional development with the specific abilities teachers at an urban elementary school perceive to be effective.

While time and energy are invested in identifying, recruiting, interviewing, and hiring teachers possessing the passion, commitment and dedication to succeed in such a challenging field, time invested in their professional growth and development of those teachers is often lagging. This constant churn of the teaching workforce has a negative impact on student learning outcomes as the time, energy, and resources that could be devoted to improving the content knowledge, skills, and pedagogy of the current workforce is reallocated to searching for and hiring new teachers (Ingersoll, Merrill, & Stuckey, 2014). While new teachers can be a source of fresh ideas and energy, research has shown that teacher effectiveness at improving student achievement scores increases significantly during a teacher’s first several years on the job (Henry, Fortner, & Bastian, 2012). Additionally, while student achievement scores are just one measure of effectiveness, experienced teachers also tend to acquire and refine many of the other attributes critical to improving student learning outcomes including such things as behavior management, parent communication, how to teach students with diverse backgrounds and abilities, and nurturing student self-esteem (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

It is clear that the role professional development plays is vital in improving the effectiveness of teachers, encouraging teachers to remain in the profession past the crucial first few years while they are honing their craft, and driving positive student learning outcomes. By carefully examining and revamping the ways in which new and experienced teachers are supported through professional development it is possible to improve student learning outcomes and realize positive returns on the investments we make when we first recruit and hire teachers. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of teachers in an urban
elementary setting toward school-specific professional development and their influence on student learning outcomes.

**Purpose Statement**

The development and support of teachers plays a critical role in student learning outcomes (Antoniou & Kyriakides, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2015). When designed and implemented appropriately, professional development can be an effective means for bridging the gap between a beginning teacher’s preservice experience to their induction during the critical first few years of teaching (Ingersoll, 2012). Professional development can help “sharpen the saw” of veteran teachers, providing them critical content knowledge, improvements in their pedagogy, new technology tools they can leverage in their teaching, and the chance to assume leadership roles within their school (Taylor, Yates, Meyer, & Kinsella, 2011). Despite its known benefits, however, professional development, in practice, routinely falls short of its capabilities (Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob, 2013). This study looked at the reasons why professional development regularly misses its mark through the lens of the perceptions of teachers at an urban elementary school.

The concept of effective professional development is not the only elusive concept within the realm of public education. Equally as mysterious is the notion of student achievement defined in this study, in a broader sense, as student learning outcomes. The prevailing tendency within public education these days tends to be to equate student learning outcomes with student achievement scores on some variety of standardized assessment (Gargani & Strong, 2014; Marzano, 2012). While tying student learning outcomes to one or more scores on a standardized assessment can provide one quantifiable means for examining the effectiveness of teaching practice, there are several dangerous flaws in the use of standardized tests as the sole means for
evaluating student achievement. These flaws include such things as the narrowing of the curriculum to only teach what is tested, the lack of tests in a multitude of different areas, and the multiple choice nature of most standardized tests that discourages critical thinking skills and increases the likelihood of test scores being inaccurate (Koretz, 2017). This study more deeply explored the concept of student learning outcomes, as one that is not merely limited to student achievement scores, by asking the teachers themselves about their perceptions of what constitutes student learning outcomes.

Finally, this study tied together professional development and student learning outcomes by examining how these same teachers endeavor to apply the content, knowledge or skills they acquire through professional development toward improving student learning outcomes. This study explored the school-specific professional development provided to teachers, the effectiveness of such professional development, and the ways in which professional development can be altered or improved to better support the school-specific needs of teachers and student learning outcomes. The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of teachers in an urban elementary setting toward school-specific professional development and the influence of the training they received on addressing student learning outcomes. This study endeavored to fill this gap in research and professional practice by examining current professional development practices. Teachers’ perceptions of the professional development they receive was solicited in an effort to gather insight about their attitudes and beliefs. Teachers’ perceptions were also collected as a means for gaining insight into the relationship between professional development, teacher attitudes and beliefs, and student learning outcomes. Though this study focused on school-specific professional development at an urban elementary school, it
is hoped that the findings can be used toward the creation of a better model for teacher professional development that better supports student learning outcomes.

**Research Questions**

In an effort to determine how the perceptions of teachers in a specific urban elementary setting of professional development influence teaching practice, student learning outcomes and teachers’ relationships with their students this study posited the following research questions:

**Central research question.** How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as it relates to improving their teaching practice?

**Research sub-question.**

1. How do teachers at Grace Elementary school apply the skills and information received from professional development toward improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their students?

**Significance of the Research**

The first few years of teaching are often likened to a “sink or swim” proposition with many teachers seemingly “sinking” and leaving the profession within the first five years (Deangelis, & Presley, 2011; Ingersoll et al, 2014; Kaiser, 2011). Some of the blame for teacher attrition can certainly be attributed to teacher preparation programs, which, though they may be heavy on pedagogy, may not give teachers enough practical experience to prepare them for many of the realities that accompany being a teacher (Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014; Goldstein, 2014). At the same time one could certainly argue that no amount of practicum hours could ever truly prepare an individual for the teaching profession.

The challenges faced by teachers during their first few years of teaching can often be attributed to two important factors. First, practicum teaching experiences typically focus on
pedagogy and may not accurately mirror the administrative, parent-teacher communication, and countless other tasks and responsibilities that often consume significant time and detract from a teacher’s ability to focus solely on their teaching (Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014). Second, education, as a profession, does not do enough to professionally develop and support new teachers during their first few years of teaching (Avidov-Ungar, 2014; Scherer, 2012). This study looked at school-based professional development with the purpose of defining what constitutes effective teaching, what defines effective professional development, how student learning outcomes can be defined, and how effective professional development can be leveraged to improve teacher effectiveness and student outcomes.

Measuring teacher effectiveness can take several forms. Since the inception of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, student achievement data have been used liberally as a measurement of teacher effectiveness. While “objective” in nature, there are several limitations to the use of data from standardized tests as the sole determinant of teacher effectiveness. School districts and states across the United States have adopted a “value-added” model to assess district, school, and individual teacher effectiveness (Koretz, 2017). While the concept of value-added has made its way into the public vernacular, the very definition of this term and the factors that contribute to value added remain elusive to both the public and the teachers whom the term impacts. Value-added measures of teacher performance attempt to translate student achievement on standardized tests into statistical analyses of teacher effectiveness (Goldhaber, 2015). Given that the totality of many teachers’ effectiveness may be judged based upon just one or two standardized tests in a limited number of courses they teach, generalizing teacher effectiveness based on student achievement scores often proves problematic (Sandholtz et al., 2016). Other means for measuring teacher effectiveness include teacher self-efficacy (Aloe, Amo, &
Shanahan, 2014; Collie, Shaprka, & Perry, 2012; Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Thoonen et al., 2011; Zee & Koomen, 2016), alignment of teacher personality traits to student needs (Borghans, ter Weel, & Weinberg, 2014), and administrator observations (Harris & Sass, 2014). The measurement of teacher effectiveness is an imperfect art. This study looked at the variety of different ways teacher effectiveness is measured in an attempt to arrive at some clarity in defining an effective teacher.

Professional development, much like teachers themselves, ranges in its effectiveness. In addition to defining effective teachers, this study also identified the qualities of effective professional development. While the most thoughtfully designed professional development can fail miserably, there are certain characteristics of effective professional development that increase the likelihood of its success. These characteristics include a bottom-up approach that values teacher leadership and input (Lee & Min, 2017; Taylor et al., 2011; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011; Yoon, 2016), focused and goal based (Desimone & Garet, 2015; Sandholtz et al., 2016), and implemented within a smaller, school-based framework (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Owen, 2014).

Once a teacher is hired, the ability to develop teacher effectiveness becomes the most practical means for helping drive positive gains in student learning outcomes. At the same time, our understanding of what constitutes an effective teacher remains elusive and even when some factors seem known they are rarely isolated and easily observable. While measuring teacher effectiveness can be challenging, it is viable to leverage effective professional development to improve teacher performance and student learning outcomes. Through improved professional development and deeper, extensive research into the topic of teacher effectiveness we can support our most effective educators and improve student learning outcomes.
Positionality Statement

The development and support of teachers have critical consequences for their effectiveness and their ability to impact student learning outcomes. In this positionality statement I will explore my personal background and biases. I will also delve into my professional experiences as a teacher and administrator, my experiences with professional development and how I believe these experiences may impact my role as an impartial researcher.

Personal Background. I have spent the entirety of my career in education working in predominately non-white, high-poverty schools. Consequently, my problem of practice will focus on ways to aid teachers in such schools, which can often be disadvantaged by such things as lacking parental involvement and available resources and encompassing higher rates of socio-emotional problems. Yet, in some regards, I may be hindered in my efforts to bring about impactful change by my own biography.

I grew up in a middle class suburban town in Western Massachusetts with a very small non-white population. Upon graduating from high school, I attended a small college in the Berkshires which, though in a city more economically disadvantaged than my hometown, had an even smaller non-white population. It was not until I attended graduate school in Boston, in my early 20’s, that I was exposed to a more diverse population, and it was not until I accepted my first teaching position, a few years later, that I would have firsthand experience working with a population that was both diverse and economically disadvantaged. While I can empathize with the upbringing of the students in the schools I have worked with and I am reminded, daily, of the many subtle and more obvious differences between my upbringing and theirs I cannot discount the blind spot such differences represent in my positionality.
Professional Background. My experiences in two distinct roles within education figure prominently into my positionality and figure to bias my role as a researcher examining professional development. First, as a teacher, I have been trained in pedagogy and, as a result of this training, have very strong opinions on teacher preparation programs and their effectiveness based on my own experiences, preparation for teaching, and my first few years within the profession. Additionally, tantamount to my research is the very definition of what constitutes an effective teacher, another topic about which I have strong personal opinions and biases shaped by my own experiences as a teacher. In an effort to measure teacher effectiveness most states have adopted a “value-added” means for quantifying teacher impact on the basis of student scores on standardized tests (Koretz, 2017). While value-added has made its way into the conversation on American education and teacher effectiveness, research, such as Koretz (2017), has pointed out several potential flaws with our current overreliance on value-added measurements to gauge teacher effectiveness. As a teacher who spent four years teaching fifth grade and having my effectiveness measured each year on the basis of three standardized tests my students took in reading, math, and science, I have strong personal biases about the ways in which we assess teacher effectiveness, particularly the use of standardized tests and value-added measures.

In addition to my personal biases about the ways in which we measure teacher effectiveness, I also have strong feelings about what constitutes effective professional development. These biases are outgrowths of my personal experiences as a teacher having participated in multiple hours of professional development classes spaced out over the course of my 11 years teaching. I recognize, for example, that I have strong feelings about the types and varieties of professional development I enjoy and find to be beneficial. I also recognize the
possibility of removing some of my personal feelings related to the effectiveness of the professional development I have received by attempting to objectively correlate the professional development I received with my students’ academic performance. I cannot discount, however, the possibility that my disposition towards different types of professional development figured prominently in my reception of what was being taught and, consequently, my implementation of it. To be a successful analyzer of professional development effectiveness I must recognize and admit that my personal biases, predicated on my years of teaching, have a bearing on the ways in which I perceive professional development. While, for example, I am typically more receptive to professional development being offered within my schoolhouse by a trusted and respected colleague and am less receptive when “outsiders” offer courses, it is possible that teachers, in general, may be more receptive to “outsiders” or that such an approach may be more effective in generating student achievement outcomes.

Such concerns about my personal thoughts on professional development are only amplified now that I have transitioned to the role of administrator. As a teacher, my viewpoint on the effectiveness of professional development was often limited to the perspective of a “receiver” of professional development. While, at times, I had some role in deciding what professional development classes I took, I generally had little to no control over the content or delivery of such professional development. Thus, I was merely a passive receiver of professional development.

As an administrator, though, I am in the dual role of professional development receiver and provider. As an assistant principal, I stand at a crossroads. Very often, decisions about professional development offerings, within my large school district, will be made by district administrators or my principal. When this is the case I, like the teachers within my school, am at
the whim of the district or professional development provider and merely receive the training. As an assistant principal, however, I also have the ability to provide professional development to my teachers or control some of the factors involved in offering professional development. In my role as a professional development provider I am certainly biased by my own thoughts and tend to offer trainings that align most closely with my personal preferences toward professional development. Consequently, my impressions of professional development are skewed by my experiences both as a professional development receiver and also as a professional development provider.

**Theoretical Framework**

Guskey’s (2002) Theory of Professional Development and Teacher Change formed the theoretical framework for this study. Guskey (2002) (see Figure 1) posits that significant changes in teachers’ attitudes and beliefs occur after their students’ learning outcomes have improved. In his alternative model of professional development, teachers often need to witness positive impact on student outcomes as a result of a professional development program before their beliefs and attitudes begin to shift (Guskey, 2002). He theorizes the most critical aspect of a professional development change program is experience teachers gain from successful implementation of the program (Guskey, 2002). This positive experience then shapes teachers’ broader beliefs and attitudes (Guskey, 2002).

![Figure 1](image)

*Figure 1. Alternative Model of Professional Development and Teacher Change*
Guskey’s (2002) Theory of Professional Development and Teacher Change was a good lens through which to understand the problem of practice and research questions in this study. This study addressed how teachers’ perceptions of the professional development they receive impacts their willingness and ability to implement what they have learned. This study also examined how such implementation affects student learning outcomes. The central research question lays the groundwork for the application of this theory by gathering information related to teachers’ perceptions of professional development they receive. The research sub-question moves past teacher perception of their training and into the implementation or changes in classroom practices and changes in the student learning outcomes stages of Guskey’s (2002) theory. This research sub-question broadens back out to solicit teachers’ input on the effectiveness of professional development offerings with the intent of gathering additional data on how changes to classroom practices and student learning outcomes might be better influenced by professional development. These research questions also related to the final stage in Guskey’s (2002) model as it endeavors to garner information from teachers related to their attitudes and beliefs following a professional development program.

**Definitions of Terms**

*Beginning teacher (BT) or Novice teacher:* A teacher in the first years of their teaching career, typically years 1-3, signified by the abbreviation “BT” and the corresponding year they are in the profession. For example, a “BT1” would be a beginning teacher in their very first year of teaching while a “BT3” would be a teacher entering their third year in the profession.

*Bottom-up:* A system of management in which actions, policies, and decisions are initiated at lower levels. Within the confines of a school or school system, this most
typically means actions, policies, and decisions come from teachers or staff personnel and are implemented on a school, department, or school system-wide basis.

**Career-status teacher:** A teacher who has successfully completed three years of teaching and has had their teaching license renewed.

**English Learner (EL):** (Sometimes also referred to as English language learners or ELL students or limited English proficient (LEP) students). Students who are unable to communicate fluently or learn effectively in English and often come from non-English speaking homes. EL students typically require specialized or modified instruction in both English and core academic areas.

**Exceptional children (EC):** Children, who because of physical attributes and/or learning abilities, differ from the norm to such an extent that they require an individualized program of special education or related services to fully benefit from education (Heward, 2008).

**Experienced teacher:** A teacher who has successfully completed three or more years of teaching.

**Impactful:** Having a measurable or perceived significant effect.

**New teacher induction:** A set of support systems designed to provide beginning teachers with guidance and support during their first years in the teaching profession. Induction is typically acknowledged as the second stage in a teacher’s career cycle falling after pre-service teaching. (Ingersoll, 2012)

**Perception:** How an individual understands something.

**Pre-service teaching:** Generally acknowledged as the first stage in a teacher’s career cycle. This is the time in a teacher’s career when they are most typically taking college-
level classes related to pedagogy and completing internship (typically referred to as practicum) experiences whereby they shadow or observe a practicing teacher for a minimum number of required hours and engage in a student-teaching experience under the tutelage of a career-status or veteran teacher. (Van Nuland, 2011)

**Top-down:** A system of management in which actions, policies, and decisions are initiated at the highest levels and implemented at the levels below. Within the confines of a school or school system, this most typically means actions, policies, and decisions come from someone in an administrators role (Superintendent, Director, or Principal, for example).

**Value-added measurements (VAMs):** A student achievement measurement tool used by educational researchers and policymakers derived by comparing a student’s performance on a standardized assessment to a student’s predicted performance on that very same assessment (Koedel et al., 2015).

**Veteran teacher:** A teacher who has completed several years of teaching, which, though not officially numerically defined, tends to be at least 10 or more years.

**Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the purpose of this study, which was to explore the perceptions and attitudes of teachers in an urban elementary setting toward school-specific professional development and the influence of the training they received on student learning outcomes. Though this study focused on school-specific professional development at an urban elementary school, it is hoped that the findings generated by this study can be used to create a better model for teacher professional development that better supports student learning outcomes. The next chapter reviews the literature related to this study.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Introduction

Although many factors contribute to the academic experiences of students, teachers have the most significant impact on student achievement (Good, 2014; Hirsch, 2012; Konstantopoulos, 2014). When looking to improve student learning outcomes, schools and districts are faced with a critical choice:

1. Get better teachers.

2. Improve the teachers you have. (Whitaker, 2012, p. 8)

Option 1, hiring more effective teachers to replace ineffective teachers, presents a variety of different seemingly insurmountable challenges. First, research in this literature review (Haunshek & Rivkin, 2010; Klassen & Tze, 2014; Marzano, 2012; Sass, Semykina, & Harris, 2014) will demonstrate that distinguishing an effective teacher from an ineffective teacher is a difficult task. Even in instances where one is able to single out an ineffective teacher to be replaced, there are still challenges with replacing them with a more effective teacher. Staiger and Rockoff (2010) found that student achievement outcomes for second-year teachers were dramatically higher than first-year teachers and that third-year teachers had higher student achievement outcomes than second-year teachers. As they summarize, “the primary cost of teacher turnover is not the direct cost of hiring and firing, but rather is the loss to students who will be taught by a novice teacher rather than one with several years of experience” (Staiger & Rockoff, 2010, p. 98). Thus, even when one is able to identify a higher performing teacher to replace an ineffective one, it can be surmised that it may take them at least a couple of years before they begin to realize their potential.
Again, even considering if one were able to successfully identify ineffective teachers and single them out for replacement, another challenge with option one lies in the identification of more effective teachers to replace them. Staiger and Rockoff (2010) note that there is no perfect formula or means for identifying an effective teacher at the time of hire. It often takes some time and evidence of on-the-job performance before a teacher distinguishes themselves as effective. Thus, merely proposing to replace underperforming teachers with more effective ones as a means for school improvement proves to be a risky proposition.

Circling back to the improvement teachers show over the course of their first few years of teaching, Henry, Bastian and Fortner (2011) call attention to two possible reasons for this dramatic improvement, both of which revolve around professional development. First, the dramatic gains realized by teachers in their second and third years of teaching could be the result of on-the-job training they receive when they first enter the field (Henry et al., 2011). If, indeed, that is the case, it then stands to reason that improving the quality and quantity of professional development a novice teacher receives early on in their career could lead to greater improvements sooner. Alternatively, the dramatic gains could be the result of teacher attrition whereby the less effective teachers leave the profession the first couple of years (Henry et al., 2011). If this is the case, than better screening processes could be put in place, more focused attention can be given to observing and strengthening beginning teachers, and professional development can be leveraged as an early intervention strategy to help teachers who may not be less effective to improve and stick with the profession.

Given the many challenges involved in attempting to replace underperforming teachers (Rockoff, Jacob, Kane, & Staiger, 2011) effective professional development is the most efficient means for improving teaching practice and student learning outcomes (Antoniou, & Kyriakides,
2011; Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2016; Desimone & Garet, 2016; Fisher, Schumaker, Culbertson, & Deshler, 2010; Polly, Mcgee, Wang, Martin, Lambert, & Pugalee, 2015). Yet despite its importance, the education profession does not do enough to professionally develop or support teachers with many institutions preferring to focus on changing the programs teachers are supposed to implement over improving teachers through professional development (Avidov-Ungar, 2014; Whitaker, 2012).

This literature review begins by defining professional development and its various iterations within schools and school districts. Designing more efficacious professional development and teacher support requires greater cognizance of effective teaching and effective teachers. Only by seeking first to understand the qualities of an effective teacher can professional development and support be put in place to aid teachers in achieving such qualities. Therefore, the second major topic of this literature review is measures of teacher effectiveness.

The third major topic of this literature review was current teacher professional development practices. Attention is given to the perceived and measured success of such programs currently in place. Outcomes of current professional development models was be examined as well as teacher satisfaction ratings for different types of models.

Close attention is then paid to the way teachers are professionally developed and supported during their first few years of teaching. Research shows a gap between a teacher’s college or university-level preparation and their first few years of teaching (Scherer, 2012). While colleges and universities are expected to prepare prospective teachers for the general rigor and demands of the profession, these teacher preparation programs often fall short of preparing teachers for the school-specific challenges they may face. The racial, social, and economic composition of a student body, their families, as well as the leadership styles of building
administrators figure prominently into a new teacher’s experience. Given that most teacher attrition occurs during the critical first few years a teacher is in the profession (Ingersoll et al., 2014; Kaiser, 2011), emphasis will be placed on programs that have sprung up to address the needs of teachers during the critical orientation and induction period.

Finally, this literature review concludes by defining what is meant by student learning outcomes and examining the relationship between professional development and such outcomes. Since the term student achievement has become synonymous with scores on a handful of narrowly-focused standardized tests, it is important to take a critical look at what specific learning outcomes can be improved through impactful professional development. Consequently, this literature review concludes by looking at a broad range of different ways in which student learning outcomes can be defined and exploring the interrelationship between such definitions and the motivating purposes of professional development.

**Professional Development Defined**

Professional development, in its broadest sense, refers to the formal and informal supports and activities put in place with the purpose of helping teachers develop as professionals (Coldwell, 2017). Learning Forward (2010) defines professional development as “a comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teachers’ and principals’ effectiveness in raising student achievement” (p. 16). Guskey (2014) views professional development as a systematic approach of change at all levels of educational practice ranging from teacher beliefs and attitudes to classroom practice.

Much of the current and historical literature on professional development tends to emphasize the ineffectiveness of many practices in place today (Ball & Forzani, 2011; Goldstein, 2014). Despite the lack of historical emphasis, Guskey (2014) asserts that we have entered into a
critical stage in the evolution of teacher professional development. A renewed emphasis on a
culture of collaboration (Malone & Hargreaves, 2017) manifested in the form of professional
learning communities (Bausmith & Barry, 2011; DuFour & DuFour, 2012) situated within
schools and districts has led to a rebirth of professional development as a means toward
improved student learning outcomes. Towards this end, Learning Forward (2010) advocates for
the expansion of professional development’s definition through the inclusion of several key
characteristics:

1. Collective responsibility
2. Occurring several times per week
3. A continuous cycle of improvement
4. Opportunities for job-embedded coaching
5. Supported by external assistance

A review of the literature supports many of the characteristics advocated by Learning
Forward (2010), while also advocating for the inclusion of a preference for professional
development that is long-term, incorporates active learning, encourages collegiality, and
emphasizes analysis and reflection (Borko, Jacobs, & Koellner, 2010; Guskey, 2014; Prenger,
Poortman, & Handelzalts, 2017). While Learning Forward (2010) advocates for a more
expansive definition of professional development that includes research-based best practices, the
reality is that much of what is currently offered in the way of professional development does not
fit this idealistic notion (Grimmett, 2014). Guskey (2014) argues that some of the shortcomings
in professional development stem from a lack of purpose, not a failure to understand best
practices within the field. Guskey (2014) notes that many schools and school districts dive into
professional development without a clear sense of what they hope to accomplish. Lacking this
specific purpose, such schools and districts tend to “fall prey to clever consultants and adept entrepreneurs more concerned with what sells than with what works to improve student learning” (Guskey, 2014, p. 12). Grimmett (2014) also argues that the problem lies not with a lack of knowledge about effective professional development practices, in theory, but rather with a lack of knowledge on how to put such practices into effect on a large-scale basis. Grimmett (2014) posits that when such a dichotomy presents itself most institutions struggle with disrupting traditional means of professional development and fall victim to the “this is how we always do it” mentality often ferociously espoused by veteran teachers, administrators, and professional development providers.

Hill, Beisiegel and Jacob (2013) note that we have reached a “crossroads” in the field of professional development. Though recent studies within the field of professional development have identified elements thought to maximize teacher learning such as content focus, collaborative participation, and coherence with school curricula and policies, results from studies of programs containing these elements have proven disappointing (Hill et al., 2013). Despite recent research into professional development and a reconceptualization, Harris and Sass (2011) note that returns from dollars invested in this realm remain quite weak. However, Hill et al. (2013) do not advocate for a redefinition of professional development and its redeeming qualities so much as they argue for more research into its initial stages when critical decisions are being made about what professional development to offer and how to implement it.

Given the extensiveness with which professional development continues to be defined and implemented for the purposes of this study, professional development will refer to all programs designed and implemented to support current practicing teachers. This umbrella definition of professional development covers programs both short and long in duration,
delivered in large groups or through individualized coaching, focused on improving individual practice as well as collaboration, and in support of both beginning teachers and seasoned veterans.

**Measuring Effectiveness: What makes an Effective Teacher?**

To support teachers through impactful professional development, it is important to distinguish the characteristics of effective teaching. Klassen and Tze (2014) define teacher effectiveness as “the aggregated effects of a complex set of in-classroom teacher behaviors on student learning typically operationalized as measured student achievement or evaluations of observed teaching performance” (p. 60). Marzano (2012) argues that a distinction be made between teacher evaluation systems that aim to measure teacher competence versus those that aspire to improve teacher effectiveness. Marzano (2012) contends that the current focus of teacher evaluation is predominately on assessing competence and, as an outgrowth of this, it diminishes the ability to use such evaluation mechanisms as a means to improve teaching practice.

Measuring teacher effectiveness can take several forms (Haunshek & Rivkin, 2010; Klassen & Tze, 2014; Marzano, 2012; Sass et al., 2014). The No Child Left Behind Act (2001) defines a “highly-qualified” teacher as one who possess a bachelor’s degree, certification or licensure in teaching, and a measure of proof, typically in the form of a standardized test, that they know the content matter they are charged with teaching. Such standards of effectiveness address teachers’ background and academic abilities, but fail to adequately speak to their teaching ability. In response to this void, measures of teacher effectiveness, most commonly tied to student outcomes on standardized tests, have been established to attempt to quantify the value a teacher adds to their students, classes, and school (Gargani & Strong, 2014; Marzano, 2012).
While aspiring to be objective in nature, there are several limitations to the use of data from standardized tests as the sole determinant of teacher effectiveness (Marzano, 2012). Not all teachers teach in content areas that are formally assessed using standardized tests (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Sass et al., 2014). Additionally, even the most comprehensive of standardized tests may only scratch the surface of what a student should have learned over the course of a semester or school year (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Sass et al., 2014). To utilize such standardized tests as a means to rate teachers seems foolish. Along those lines, Marzano (2012) notes the need for a comprehensive model of teacher evaluation inclusive not only of standardized test scores, but also of observations and self-reflection, with the specified purpose of aiding teacher development and growth.

**Value-Added Models for Measuring Teacher Effectiveness**

School districts and states across the United States have adopted a “value-added” model to assess district, school, and individual teacher effectiveness. Value-added is derived from comparing student performance on standardized assessment to a student’s predicted score (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Koedel, et al., 2015; Koretz, 2017; Sass et al., 2014). When students achieve their predicted score, or within a range of their predicted score, teachers are classified as having met expected growth. When students achieve higher than their predicted score, teachers are classified as exceeding growth. When students performed lower than their predicted score, teachers are classified as not meeting expected growth. Individual student data is then combined to draw broader conclusions about teacher, school and school district value-added (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Koretz, 2017; Sass et al., 2014).

**Value-added flaws.** There are several flaws with solely using value-added models derived from standardized test scores to evaluate teacher effectiveness. Value-added models do
not control for factors related to students’ gains or losses outside of a teacher’s impact (Harris, Ingle, & Rutledge, 2014; Sass et al., 2014). Since a variety of factors, ranging from absenteeism to home environment and family support, can impact how well or poorly a student performs in school, it is problematic to draw broad generalizations about teacher effectiveness from only one source of information (Harris, Ingle, & Rutledge, 2014; Sass et al., 2014).

While the concept of value-added has made its way into public vernacular, the very definition of this term and the factors which contribute to value added remain elusive to both the public and the teachers whom the term impacts. Value-added measures of teacher performance attempt to translate student achievement on standardized tests into statistical analyses of teacher effectiveness (Goldhaber, 2015; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010). Given that the totality of many teachers’ effectiveness may be judged based upon only one or two standardized tests in a limited number of courses they teach, generalizing teacher effectiveness based on student achievement scores proves problematic. Additionally, using standardized test scores as a measure of teacher effectiveness often diminishes their original purpose, which is to inform instructional decisions (Marzano, 2012; Sandholtz, Ringstaff, & Matlen, 2016).

**Benefits of value-added.** Using a value-added model to make broad generalizations about a teacher’s effectiveness and rank teachers is problematic. Despite the limitations and misuses of a value-added model, there are some benefits. Value-added models are helpful in identifying teacher strengths and weaknesses (Marzano, 2012). For example, some teachers are more effective with younger students than they are with older students. Other teachers may be more effective at teaching certain content, such as math, than they are at teaching literacy or science (Condie, Lefgren, & Sims, 2014). While value-added has limitations as a comprehensive
measurement of teacher effectiveness, it can be a useful tool for instructional planning and personnel deployment (Marzano, 2012).

In addition to serving as a tool for matching teachers to a population of students or subject matter they are more effective at teaching, a value-added model is also a valuable tool in drawing generalizations about professional development training topics and growth plans for teachers (Goldhaber, 2015; Marzano, 2012). Vescio, Ross, and Adams (2008) and Bausmith and Barry (2011) stress the use of student assessments, including value-added data, in driving conversations in professional learning communities. So while value-added may be a problematic tool for drawing generalizations of the effectiveness of individual teachers, it can be a valuable tool in deciding which professional development to offer to a group of a teachers at a school, in general, to improve their effectiveness.

**Administrator Evaluation of Teacher Effectiveness**

Another important tool in assessing teacher effectiveness is administrator evaluation. Harris, Ingle, and Rutledge (2014) found a principal’s evaluation, when considered independent of value-added data, can be ineffectual in determining a teacher’s effectiveness. Principals in their study tended to value teacher effort over impact on student learning, rating those teachers who exerted greater effort over “lone wolves” who produced better student achievement outcomes (Harris et al., 2014). Strong, Gargani and Hacifazlioglu (2011), similarly, found principals were most able to identify their teachers at the “extremes” (highest-performing and lowest-performing) but struggled to successfully categorize their “middle range” teachers. Strong et al. (2011) showed a poorer correlation between principal categorization of middle range teachers and objective measures of their effectiveness, finding many principals based their ratings of teachers on flawed measures such as whether said teachers were good colleagues or
imparted knowledge well. However, when value added was coupled with principal evaluation, a clearer picture of teacher effectiveness emerged. Harris et al. (2014), argue, “principals know who their high flyers are” (p. 105). When seeking to establish a clearer picture of teacher effectiveness, it is important, then, to consider multiple sources of information.

**Teacher Self-Efficacy**

How a teacher perceives their effectiveness also plays a significant role in their ability to drive student achievement. Thoonen et al. (2011) found teachers’ self-perception of their own ability to drive student performance had a strong relationship to actual student achievement. Positive teacher self-efficacy beliefs have also been linked to improved psychological benefits ranging from higher levels of job satisfaction and commitment to lower levels of stress and burnout which can indirectly benefit student learning outcomes (Aloe, Amo, & Shanahan, 2014; Collie, Shaprka, & Perry, 2012; Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Much like the “self-fulfilling prophecy” whereby students who believe they can achieve will, the same can be said of teachers. Bandura (2012) notes that findings on self-efficacy can be skewed by contextual factors, the validity of the measurement tools used, and the accuracy of teachers’ self-appraisals. It is hard, for example, to say with a degree of certainty that a teacher is being one hundred percent honest in their self-assessment. However, what can be said with a degree of certainty is that effective, impactful teacher professional development programs should endeavor to include as core components teacher motivation and the development of teacher efficacy.

**Personality Characteristics**

In addition to the cognitive ability to understand the content they are teaching and the efficacy to teach such content confidently, teachers must possess a set of personality characteristics not typically looked for in other professions. Borghans, ter Weel, and Weinberg
(2014) found that different professions require different sets of skills and personality traits. For example, teaching and nursing are the two professions most correlated with the personality trait of caring (Borghans, ter Weel, & Weinberg, 2014). While doctors can lack a sufficient “bedside manner” and still get by on their knowledge and skill set alone, teacher effectiveness is predicated on a certain set of personality traits unique to this profession.

Personality traits are both difficult to assess, in general, and even more challenging to measure objectively (Yilmaz, 2014). The importance of personality traits as an indicator of teacher effectiveness lends credence to the use of observational data, in addition to standardized testing data and teacher self-assessment, when measuring teacher effectiveness. Data have shown correlations between principals’ evaluations of teachers and student test score data (Harris et al., 2014; Harris & Sass, 2014; Strong et al., 2011). Additionally, principals’ ratings of teachers have been shown to be indicative of “traditional human capital measures like teacher intelligence, subject knowledge and teaching skills” (Harris & Sass, 2014, p. 199) as well as personality traits such as enthusiasm and motivation. Rimm-Kaufman and Hamre (2010) cite a lack of research into the relationship between personality characteristics and teacher effectiveness as a reason to withhold judgment until further research can shed some light on the topic. However, given the importance of certain personality traits on the effectiveness of teachers, assessing teacher effectiveness devoid of this data appears irresponsible.

**Measuring Teacher Effectiveness through Observation**

Observation is another important tool utilized in evaluating teacher effectiveness. However, utilizing observational data is risky in that it is conditional on evaluator objectivity. Harris and Sass (2014) found that while the ability to distinguish differences in teachers varied from principal to principal, most were able better able to distinguish differences between veteran
teachers than they were able to with beginning teachers. Additionally, the correlation between administrator evaluations and teacher value-added measures were greater the longer a principal had known a particular teacher (Harris & Sass, 2014). Thus, while it is important to recognize the value of observational data and the need to couple observational data with other measures (e.g., teacher self-assessment and value-added data) it is equally important to be wary of the limitations of relying solely on observational data.

The measurement of teacher effectiveness is an imperfect art. While value-added data based on student assessment appear objective, they are very limited and problematic in the types of generalizations often drawn from it. Principals’ observational data, while open to subjectivity and bias, have been shown to identify human capital and personality characteristics of teachers which cannot be captured by student assessment data (Harris et al., 2014; Harris & Sass, 2014; Strong et al., 2011). Additionally, teacher motivation and their self-assessment of their effectiveness are key variables in unraveling the mystery shrouding teacher effectiveness (Aloe et al., 2014; Collie, et al., 2012; Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Thoonen et al., 2011; Zee & Koomen, 2016). None of these means, alone, appears sufficient to form a complete picture of a teacher’s effectiveness. Consequently, when looking at ways in which to measure teacher effectiveness, it is important to not rely solely on one performance instrument, but rather, as Rockoff and Speroni (2010) conclude, to incorporate both subjective measures made by trained professionals and more objective job performance data in one’s rendering of teacher effectiveness.

**Qualities of Effective Professional Development**

Effectively measuring teacher quality goes hand in hand with professional development. As Gore et al. (2017) espouse “leaving aside complex and unresolved measurement issues, evaluating teaching quality will have limited impact on improving teaching quality unless linked
to an effective approach to PD” (p. 100). Despite its importance toward improving teacher quality, professional development in the United States has many shortcomings. According to Hill, Beisiegel, & Jacob (2013) “professional development in the United States consists of a hodgepodge of providers, formats, philosophies and content” (p. 476). Providers of professional development tend to be locally-based, drawing from a school or school district’s immediate geographic area and including independent contractors, university faculty, district-level personnel and even teachers within a school or school district. The format ranges from “one and done” day (or half-day) workshops to more prolonged “institutes,” typically spanning no longer than one week during the summer, to “embedded” workshops, mentoring and coaching, and other forms of informal in-school collaboration (Hill et al., 2013).

**Current Format of Professional Development**

One of the problems with the current formats and philosophies of professional development is that they tend to be heavily influenced by the content-providers, and less influenced by the specific needs of the district, schools or individual teachers. Organizational change, inclusive of professional development, is most effective when driven from a “bottom-up” perspective whereby teachers feel they have input and a voice in the change being implemented (Beer, 2011; Jackson, 2012; Kumar & Jauhari, 2016; Nolan & Palazzolo, 2011; Thomas et al., 2011). Effective professional development, therefore, should be driven by school-specific and individual teacher needs, with content providers and formats designed to fit those needs, not the other way around.

**Key qualities of effective professional development.** Several qualities distinguish effective teacher professional development. Sandholtz, Ringstaff and Matlen (2016) identified effective teacher professional development as enhancing teacher commitment and leading to
enhanced student learning. Desimone and Garet (2015) identify several core features and structural features essential for professional development to be successful. Among the core features are: 1) focus on content knowledge, 2) opportunities for active learning and 3) coherence with learning activities, 4) sustained duration, and 5) collective participation (Desimone, 2009; Desimone & Garet, 2015).

In many cases, professional development intentionality does not always equate to desired outcomes. Desimone and Garet (2015) point out that despite our knowledge and understanding of effective professional development, achieving success in this realm still proves elusive. Two major flaws they identified which can lead to failed professional development are a lack of focus on desired goals and a failure to value the expertise of the teachers involved in the professional development effort. Sandholtz et al. (2016) followed the comprehensive reform effort of a California school district over a three-year period. In the case of this reform effort, the school district was focused on the wrong set of desired outcomes. Teachers were collaboratively involved in a comprehensive change process that was supported by their district. Their goal was to develop a new set of standards for their district. Focusing on the creation of this set of standards, ironically, detracted from their ability to work collaboratively with other teachers to impact student learning. While they were investing countless hours developing new set of standards this left them little time to collaborate with their peers toward achieving the standards they had created (Sandholtz et al., 2016). Professional development focus, while important, is ineffectual if the focus is not placed on the right goals.

**Teacher buy-in.** Valuing teacher expertise or “buy-in” is another hallmark of effective professional development. Sandholtz et al. (2016), in an extensive study of a major professional development reform effort in a California school district noted one of the reasons for this
initiative’s failure was the school district’s inability to value teacher expertise. While the school district expressed the desire to value teacher “buy-in” and achieved a high level of teacher participation, it failed to attach value to the experience and expertise its teachers brought to the profession and to the specific reform effort (Sandholtz et al., 2016). Outside consultants were brought in to advise and supervise teachers on the development of these new standards, further diminishing the professional credibility being lent to teachers. Even after district-wide standards had been developed, district administrators still relied heavily upon outside research when advising teachers about effective implementation of the new standards (Sandholtz et al. 2016). The result of all of this was a body of teachers who were relied on heavily to develop district-level standards being made to seem incapable of providing the expertise to implement those standards effectively.

Feuerborn and Chinn (2012) derived similar findings about teacher buy-in, noting that novice teachers tended to be easier to convince to buy-in to change efforts while veteran teachers were much harder to persuade. In both instances, though, a lasting degree of change was predicated on the ability to get all teachers to buy into the change effort. Yoon (2016) found that students attending schools with high teacher buy-in to a change initiative were likely to have a higher reading achievement outcome than their counterparts at a school with a low degree of teacher buy-in. Lee and Min (2017) found that even when different strategies for changing teacher instructional practice were employed, the one constant remained the relationship between teacher buy-in to the change and academic achievement. Since most educational reform involves a high degree of teacher support and active participation, Lee and Min (2017) found the degree of teacher buy-in to be critical to the success of such initiatives. Taken in its totality, it becomes
easy to argue that a clear hallmark of impactful professional development is a high-degree of teacher buy-in.

**Differentiation.** Effective teacher professional development, much like effective instruction for students, should be differentiated. Gabriel (2010) suggests a three-phase implementation of differentiated teacher professional development. In Gabriel’s (2010) model, teachers move from the “technical assistance” phase to the “theory building” phase to the “sustenance” phase (p. 88). Each phase is specific in the role colleagues take on in supporting teacher development, the tangible supports needed, and the coursework which would be considered relevant for teachers in that particular phase (Gabriel, 2010). Gabriel’s (2010) differentiated model for professional development aligns with the Hill et al. (2013) criteria that effective professional development be continuous, goal-based, and involve teacher input. In the same vein in which we ask students to progress through different grade levels and coursework, effective teacher training should endeavor to have teachers move through the different phases of a professional development process.

**Collaboration.** Another key ingredient in effective professional development is collaboration. When teachers plan, work, and participate in collaborative professional development, instruction improves (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Sandholtz et al., 2016). Yet, more typically than not, teacher planning takes place in isolation (Levine & Marcus, 2010; Ronfeldt, McQueen, & Grisson, 2015). When teachers plan in isolation, they typically approach planning as a task to be completed (Levine & Marcus, 2010); when teachers plan collaboratively, inquiry and discussion tends to arise and that leads to improved student achievement outcomes. Pedder and Opfer (2011), however, caution that too much teacher collaboration, particularly when it is deemed mandatory or seems to be forced, may be too
stifling for teachers. They advocate for what they refer to as the ‘Goldilocks model’ of collaboration: too much is stifling, too little results in teacher isolation and inhibits growth, but “just enough collaboration and teachers receive the stimulation and support from colleagues necessary for change” (p. 386).

Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found that teacher collaboration tended to vary significantly as an outgrowth of school context and teacher characteristics. They also found that an increase in collaboration among teachers led to improvements in both teaching practice and student achievement outcomes. Teachers who reported engaging in higher-quality collaboration also reported greater improvement in their teaching. Ronfeldt et al. (2015) also found schools and teachers that had better quality collaboration also had higher-achievement gains. Drilling down a little deeper, collaboration related to assessment data was more often predictive of achievement gains, particularly in math and reading (Ronfeldt et al., 2015).

Butler and Schnellert (2012) stress the collaborative nature of professional development and the use of collaborative inquiry as a tool for improving student outcomes. However, while Ronfeldt et al. (2015) noted the correlation between teacher collaboration centered around student assessment data and student achievement gains, Butler and Schnellert (2012) and Sandholtz et al. (2016) observed that many teachers resist the use of student data as a tool toward improved collaboration, fearing judgment from their peers based on their student outcomes. For professional development to be impactful, a judgment-free atmosphere must be cultivated whereby teachers feel comfortable sharing and discussing student data and other sensitive topics.

**Bottom-up approach.** Impactful professional development must also follow a “bottom-up” approach, emanating from teachers and schools. Taylor et al. (2011) note that veteran teachers are often neglected in the professional development planning process with most support
opportunities directed to the needs of new or inexperienced teachers. Veteran teachers relish leadership roles and the opportunity to offer guidance in the creation and implementation of professional development and support plans (Lee & Min, 2017; Taylor et al., 2011; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011; Yoon, 2016). Valuing veteran teacher input in professional development plans is dual purpose – veteran teachers garner experience in leadership roles and as providers of teacher support while new and inexperienced teachers profit from such expertise (Taylor et al., 2011). Such an approach to professional development, in which teacher-leadership is simultaneously relied upon and enhanced, is not feasible when professional development is mandated by a “top-down” district or state entity.

**Professional learning communities.** One notably effective means for shifting professional development culture from one in which teachers learn, plan, and develop in isolation to one in which teachers plan collaboratively is the implementation of professional learning communities (PLCs). Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, and Thomas (2006) define PLCs as “a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, the key purpose of which is to enhance teacher effectiveness as professionals for students’ ultimate benefit” (p. 229). Stoll et al. (2006) identify five key characteristics to an effective PLC:

- Shared values and vision.
- Collective responsibility for student learning.
- Reflective professional inquiry.
- Collaboration focused on student learning.
- Professional learning that is both group-focused and individual-focused.
In addition to these characteristics, Stoll et al. (2006) also identify three additional attributes which they deem fundamental to a PLC being able to perform effectively:

- Membership that is inclusive.
- Mutual trust, respect, and support.
- Openness.

Professional learning communities provide an excellent opportunity for bottom-up, school-specific, teacher-led professional development and support. Professional learning communities typically consist of teachers who teach the same grade level or content area, working together collaboratively toward improving student achievement (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Prenger et al., 2017). Success for a PLC is contingent upon a student-centered focus with specific, measurable outcomes (DuFour & DuFour, 2012). PLCs emphasize the dual role of educators as both teachers and learners, providing teachers the ability to assume leadership roles and smaller teams of teachers within a school the opportunity to hone and improve their craft (Owen, 2014).

Many of the characteristics of PLCs align with research-supported characteristics of effective professional development. PLCs require teachers to work together over an extended period of time, have a focus on student learning, involve a great deal of collaboration and sharing, and require teachers to be reflective in their practice (Owen, 2014). Hadar and Brody (2013) identify four stages of group learning accomplished through effective professional learning communities: breaking isolation, talking about student learning, improving teaching, and professional growth. According to Hadar and Brody (2013) the progression through the stages of group learning are interrelated. For example, talking about student learning helps
teachers to break the isolationism often associated with teaching. Talking about student learning, in turn, leads to improvements in teaching which plays an integral role in professional growth. As Richmond and Manokore (2011) succinctly put it, “the question is not whether teacher PLCs are important, but rather, how to build, support, and maintain such communities in complex and challenging settings” (p. 569).

Watson (2014) cautions that as professional learning communities have become more commonplace in educational settings, they have also been more commonly misunderstood and poorly implemented. At the core of the PLC model is the notion of teachers collaboratively working together to discuss and address problems related to student learning. In such a model, all teachers benefit and the effectiveness of all teachers should, in general, improve (Watson, 2014). As Watson (2014) explains, “the PLC is therefore a complex phenomenon, each purposefully chosen word of which constitutes an essentially contestable concept but which holistically invites an examination of professional practices and the development of ‘teacher leadership’ in schools” (p. 20).

In practice, Watson (2014) notes, PLCs often fall short of these lofty expectations. In some educational settings, the concept of a PLC has been diluted to merely signify a group of teachers who share some commonality, akin to a grade level or department. While these individuals may meet on a regular basis, it is not with the underlying goal of examining student learning outcomes, improving teacher effectiveness, or engaging teachers in leadership roles (Watson, 2014). As DuFour & DuFour (2012) caution, the term PLC has been tossed around and used so ubiquitously in education these days that it is at risk of losing its meaning. For PLCs to be successful in driving improvement in teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes, they must not merely be PLCs in name but, rather, must be PLCs in practice.
Professional development, much like teachers themselves, ranges in its effectiveness. While the most thoughtfully designed professional development can fail miserably, there are certain characteristics of effective professional development which increase the likelihood of its success. These characteristics include a bottom-up approach which values teacher leadership and input, focused and goal-based, and implemented within the smaller framework of school-based teachers.

Professional Development: New Teacher Induction

One area related to the professional development and support of teachers receiving an increasing amount of attention in recent years is the orientation and induction of beginning teachers. Teacher preparation programs, ranging from those offered by colleges and universities to non-profit organizations such as Teach for America and The New Teacher Project, pride themselves on providing teachers the content and skill training they will need to be successful. The harsh reality, however, is that it is nearly impossible to fully replicate an authentic teaching experience (Allen & Wright, 2014). While such programs tend to focus on providing teachers a foundation in pedagogy, they cannot account for the multitude of other responsibilities, ranging from parent-teacher relationships to clerical responsibilities to mandated meeting participation, that beginning teachers assume when they first enter the field (Allen & Wright, 2014; Meijer, de Graaf, & Meirink, 2011). Additionally, while such programs can aim to giving aspiring teachers a range of experiences in different types and varieties of schools and classroom settings, they often have no way of determining what specific school, or type of school, a teacher will ultimately end up at and, as a result of this, cannot fully prepare teachers for the climate of that school.
In addition to the challenges presented to teacher preparation programs, Ingersoll (2012) notes that, though teachers spend the bulk of their days in front of an audience of students, they are, ironically enough, quite isolated from their teaching colleagues. Once a teacher has transitioned from their preparation program into the role of beginning teacher, they will spend relatively little time observing, learning and even collaborating with their school-based colleagues. This isolation is especially difficult for beginning teachers who are frequently left to succeed or fail on their own in what Ingersoll (2012) likens to a “lost at sea or sink or swim experience” (p. 47).

Teacher induction is premised on the fact that teacher preparation programs are rarely sufficient to provide all of the knowledge and skills necessary to become a successful teacher and, therefore, the gap from teacher preparation to full-time teaching must be bridged (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). As a result of this, the number of teachers participating in some variety of
induction or mentoring program has increased dramatically over the last 15 years (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Trends in the percent of beginning teachers participating in induction or mentor programs. Reprinted from Beginning teacher induction: What the data tell us. By R. M. Ingersoll (2012). Phi Delta Kappan, 93(8), 4p. 49

While induction and mentoring programs are, in general, on the rise, their degree of success varies from school district to school district and even within schools in the same school district. The context of induction programs matter with programs in low-poverty schools seemingly having more impact than those programs in high-poverty schools (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011).

The impact of teacher induction is closely tied to the type, number and duration of support beginning teachers receive during those ever-so-critical first years on the job. Ingersoll (2012) found the methods of teacher induction with the strongest impact on teacher retention were having a mentor in one’s subject area and collaboratively planning with other teachers in
one’s subject area. Additionally, Ingersoll (2012) found that providing teachers a variety of
different types of induction support, ranging from a reduced course load to seminars explicitly
geread toward beginning teachers and additional one-on-one time with administrators, decreased
the likelihood that those teachers would leave the profession.

Despite a dramatic increase in the number of such programs offered, there remains much
to still be researched on this topic. Teacher induction programs, while widespread, tend to vary
significantly in the types of activities, supports and components they offer as well as their
duration and frequency (Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). As beginning teachers pose the greatest
“flight risk” in the greater context of teacher attrition, it is critical to look at ways to leverage
professional development and support, including teacher induction, to ensure the best and
brightest new teachers remain in the profession.

**Linking Professional Development and Student Learning Outcomes**

Some professional development goals do not directly relate to improving student learning
outcomes. These iterations of professional development are usually designed to boost staff
morale, improve teacher efficacy or increase collegiality. More often than not, however,
professional development opportunities tend to be designed and implemented with student
achievement as the driving force, even when this is not the stated rationale (Timperley, 2011). In
addition to this, educational reform movements within the United States over the last couple of
decades have set ambitious goals for student learning outcomes.

Many factors contribute to whether or not students achieve the ambitious goals laid out
by educational reform movements. Without a doubt, one of the biggest of these factors is
teachers (Alton-Lee, 2011; Borko & Klingner, 2013; Konstantopoulos, 2014; Penuel, Fishman,
Cheng, & Sabelli, 2011). There is strong evidence that high-quality professional development
can positively impact teaching practice (Borko & Klingner, 2013; Hill et al., 2013; Desimone & Garet, 2013). However, less evidence exists to draw a connection between the professional development of teachers and its ultimate effect on student learning outcomes (Penuel, Riel, Pearlman, Kim & Frank, 2010; Wallace, 2009).

While studies have been conducted to assess the impact teachers have on student learning outcomes (Desimone & Long, 2010; Desimone, Smith & Phillips, 2013; Goldhaber, 2015; Kanter & Konstantopoulos, 2016; Konstantopoulos, 2014; Meissel, Parr, & Timperley, 2016) it is often difficult to distinguish teachers’ naturalistic practices from those influenced by professional development. Akiba and Liang (2016) found that professional development can have a generally moderate impact on student achievement. When professional development practice is aimed at increasing teacher collaboration, both formal and informal, the effect can be even more significant (Akiba & Liang, 2016; Lomos, Hofman, & Bosker, 2011; Moolenaar, Sleegers, & Daly, 2012; Wallace, 2009).

Two predominant approaches to improving student achievement through professional development dominate the current dialogue. Many schools and school districts focus professional development efforts on improving teacher content knowledge as a means for improving student achievement. Other schools and school districts tend to place an emphasis on improving teacher pedagogy. Polly et al. (2015) found that professional development that focused on increasing teacher knowledge in their content area, in this case math, led to gains in student knowledge in math.

**Toward a New Model of Professional Development**

Desimone and Garet (2015) suggest a move toward a professional development model that stresses five research-based, core conceptual attributes. Desimone and Garet (2015) note
that effective, impactful professional development should be content-focused, provide active learning opportunities, emphasize coherence (defined as consistency with teachers’ knowledge and beliefs) be of an appropriate duration, and focus on collective participation among teachers from the same school or level in an effort to maximize participation. Opfer and Pedder (2011), however, take issue with this model noting that despite its optimistic framing there is little research to allow us to predict such a model’s impact on professional development, let alone student learning. Opfer and Pedder (2011) note the need for greater research into the complex systems that typically make up professional development and how those systems interact with each other.

Buczynski and Hansen (2010) echo Opfer and Pedder (2011) by noting the important role teacher attitudes and beliefs play in effective professional development. Buczynski and Hansen (2010) note that positive changes in student learning outcomes are contingent on sustainable change in classroom practices. However, such change, in turn, is conditional on teachers changing their attitudes, beliefs and perceptions (Buczynski & Hansen, 2010; Wilkinson et al., 2017). Nelson and Guerra (2014) note that despite an abundance of research linking teachers’ personal beliefs to changes in professional practice, most school improvement efforts continue to focus nearly exclusively on changing practice and not beliefs, attitudes, and perceptions. The good news, though, is that teachers’ beliefs can be changed through effective professional development (Guerra & Nelson, 2014).

Timperley (2011) describes an endeavor at professional development that seems to fit many of the components advocated for by Desimone and Garet (2015) and the complexity of professional development encouraged by Opfer and Pedder (2011) with the aim of changing teachers’ attitudes and beliefs. In their study, professional development facilitators visited
schools on a regular basis, offering feedback and engaging teachers in learning conversations. These facilitators also partnered with school literacy leaders to model lessons and professional development practices in teachers’ classrooms. Facilitators also provided feedback to school leaders when they conducted whole group and individual meetings related to the professional development efforts (Timperley, 2011). Timperley (2011) found that through the critical conversations and collaboration the professional development evolved to better meet the needs of the administrators, teachers, and students at the schools involved.

In a very similar study, Meissel, Parr, and Timperley (2016) found that focused, effective professional development can have an impact on both teachers’ attitudes and beliefs as well as student learning outcomes. In their study, student writing ability was targeted based on the school-wide data indicating this as an area of need. Teachers, at the onset of the study, also self-identified that they were less confident in their ability to effectively teach writing, thereby signaling a match between student data and teacher-identified deficiencies that led to greater buy-in of the professional development effort from teachers. By tailoring their professional development to an area of need evidenced by both data and teacher perception, Meissel et al. (2016) found that professional development facilitators were able to generate positive student achievement gains.

**Conclusion**

Taking steps to protect the investment made in teachers first involves identifying the characteristics of effective teachers. The hard truth is that some teachers are more effective than others. But pinpointing teacher effectiveness is an elusive task. In our data-driven age, the most prevalent measure of teacher effectiveness is value-added data derived from student test scores (Goldhaber, 2015). Using standardized test scores to determine teacher effectiveness can
diminish their original purpose for being used for instructional planning (Sandholtz et al., 2016) and prove problematic for the factors they cannot control (Koretz, 2017). While ineffectual for drawing broad generalizations about teacher effectiveness, value-added is an effective tool for determining teacher strength, with specific content and populations of students (Condie et al., 2014) and topics for teacher professional development (Goldhaber, 2015). Value-added should not be the only tool used to measure teacher effectiveness.

Principal observation, much like value-added data, can prove to be an ineffectual determinant of teacher effectiveness (Harris et al., 2014). When principal observation is coupled with value-added measures, however, a more complete picture of a teacher effectiveness begins to emerge. Harris and Sass (2014) found principal observation to be important in identifying the teacher personality traits most correlated with effectiveness.

While teachers must possess certain background knowledge, cognitive ability, pedagogy and personality characteristics to be successful, it is also important that they are both motivated and confident in their role. Thoonen et al. (2011) found a link between teacher efficacy and student achievement. When taken in totality, several factors play an important role in teacher effectiveness. Those factors are measured in a variety of different ways. While the literature is very specific in identifying some of the tools teachers must possess in order to be effective, there is still much work to be done in identifying successful ways to measure teacher effectiveness.

Developing and implementing impactful professional development to improve teacher effectiveness is not contingent on the precise ability to measure teacher effectiveness. While measuring teacher effectiveness evolves as an art form, it is still possible to use data derived from teacher effectiveness tools to pinpoint professional development needs (Goldhaber, 2015; Sandholtz et al., 2016).
Following the identification of the greatest area of need, attention turns to the development and implementation of impactful professional development. For professional development to be impactful it must be focused on a specific goal and elicit teacher buy-in (Lee & Min, 2017; Sandholtz et al., 2016; Yoon, 2016). Impactful professional development should be differentiated (Gabriel, 2010), collaborative (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Garet & Desimone, 2015) continuous and involve a degree of follow-up and accountability (Hill et al., 2013). In essence, impactful professional development should resemble many of the characteristics we look for in impactful instruction for our students.

Achieving impactful professional development can be quite challenging. Owen (2014) and DuFour and DuFour (2012) emphasize the role professional learning communities can play in shaping impactful professional development. Since impactful professional development espouses many of the same values of impactful student instruction, professional learning communities play to those same strengths by placing teachers in targeted teams, with a student-centered approach and pedagogical discussion around topics identified by data (Hadar & Brody, 2013). While professional development and teacher support mandated by larger governing bodies, such as state or school district entities, has proven ineffectual, focused professional development and teacher support implemented in professional learning communities holds the potential for having the maximum impact on student achievement.

One area of teacher professional development receiving much attention recently is teacher induction. Even the best teacher preparatory programs may lead some teachers ill-prepared for the realities that await them when they begin teaching on a full-time basis (Ingersoll, 2012). Teacher induction programs are a form of professional development that can ease this transition and better help teachers acclimate to their school and profession. While the
quantity of teacher induction programs has steadily risen over the years, the quality of such programs can vary significantly (Ingersoll, 2012; Ingersoll & Strong, 2011). Thus, teacher induction remains one area within the realm of professional development in need of improvement.

Linking student learning outcomes with professional development efforts also remains a challenge. While there is increasing emphasis on student achievement and numerous ways in which learning outcomes are measured and quantified, it can be difficult to control for and isolate the relationship between professional development and student outcomes. In order to impact student learning outcomes, effective professional development must first have an impact on teaching practice as well as teachers’ attitudes, beliefs and perceptions (Grisham et al., 2002; Nelson & Guerra, 2014). Only after this has occurred, can it be expected that teachers will implement a professional development change effort with enough fidelity to have a lasting impact on student learning outcomes. Since the bulk of professional development fails to reach these thresholds, it is difficult to measure, with any level of reliability, how impactful such efforts are.

While measuring both teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes can be challenging, it is viable to leverage effective professional development to improve both of these factors. Through improved professional development and deeper, extensive research into the topic of teacher effectiveness, we can support our teachers and help positively change their teaching practice as well as their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. We can then leverage this deliberate change to improve student learning outcomes.
Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter describes the methodology of this study starting with the purpose for the study and the research questions. It then details the research method chosen including the research paradigm adopted for this study. This is followed by an explanation of the research site, processing for choosing research participants, and an overview of the research participants selected for this study. Following this, the protection of human subjects, data collection, data analysis, and storage of data are discussed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the trustworthiness, limitations of the study, and a chapter summary.

Purpose and Research Questions

As chapter two’s literature review illustrated, there is a lack of consensus on what constitutes effective teaching. While most educational policymakers and society in general have tended to define teacher effectiveness on the basis of value-added measures derived from standardized tests, a number of researchers (Harris et al., 2014; Koretz, 2017; Sass et al., 2014) have identified flaws in relying so heavily on value-added measures as a means for judging teacher effectiveness. Administrator evaluation (Harris et al., 2014; Strong et al., 2011) also continues to play an important role in determining teacher effectiveness as do other factors such as teacher self-efficacy (Aloe et al., 2014; Collie et al., 2012; Klass & Chiu, 2011; Thoonen et al., 2011; Zee & Koomen, 2016), personality characteristics (Borghans et al., 2014; Yilmaz, 2014), and observational data (Harris et al., 2014; Harris & Sass, 2014; Strong et al., 2011). In each of these proposed schemes for measuring teacher effectiveness, however, one important perspective remains absent – the teacher. This study attempted to account for the perspective of teachers by soliciting their input on the ever-important topic of teacher effectiveness. Teachers serve at the discretion of the school or school district by which they are employed and, as such,
are subject to the means those institutions employ to judge their effectiveness. This, however, does not override the fact that they have their own personal beliefs and perceptions about what constitutes effectiveness. This study solicited teacher input on the ways in which they define their own effectiveness as well as the efforts of professional development to positive influence their teaching practice.

In addition to describing the ways in which teachers perceive their own effectiveness, this study also endeavored to identify ways in which professional development can be leveraged to improving teaching practice. Professional development has been shown to be one of the most effective means of improving the teaching profession (Antoniou, & Kyriakides, 2011; Avalos, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2016; Desimone & Garet, 2016; Fisher et al., 2010; Gore et al., 2017; Polly et al., 2015). Much like teacher effectiveness, however, professional development remains an enigma within the realm of education. While researchers have sought and identified what they believe to be characteristics of effective professional development (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Desimone & Garet, 2015; DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Feuerbon & Chinn, 2012; Gabriel, 2010; Hill et al., 2013; Sandholtz et al., 2016), most current professional development lacks these characteristics (Hill et al., 2013). Thus, this study also endeavored to examine teachers’ perceptions of the professional development they have received and its influence on improving both teaching practice and student learning outcomes.

Tying the two strands together, this study further endeavored to examine the ways in which teachers apply the content or skills they received from their professional development towards the goal of improving the current professional development program at their school. Through a case study methodology teachers were asked to reflect upon their professional development experience by discussing the ways in which they applied what they learned from
the professional development they received to their teaching practice and toward the goal of improving student learning outcomes. Finally, teachers were asked to discuss their perceptions of what they feel would be necessary to enhance or improve their professional development program at their school.

**Research Questions**

In an effort to determine how the perceptions of teachers in a specific urban elementary setting of professional development influence student learning outcomes and a teacher’s decision to remain at that specific school or in the teaching profession, this study posited the following research questions:

**Central research question.** How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as influencing their teaching practice?

**Research sub-questions.**

1. How do teachers at Grace Elementary school apply the skills and information received from professional development toward improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their students?

**Research design**

This study used a qualitative case study approach to gain insight into the teachers’ perceptions at a specific, urban elementary school regarding the professional development they receive. Creswell (2014) suggests a case study approach as a means of in-depth analysis of a case, program, event, or process bounded by a specific time and activity. A case study is an exploratory form of inquiry, providing an in-depth picture of the case in question (Flyvbjerg, 2011). According to Yin (2013) a case study empirically investigates a particular case seeking to answer the “why” and “how” questions related to the case or phenomenon in question. Yin
(2013) categorizes case studies into three types: exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. Exploratory case studies are typically used to formulate questions or test hypotheses. Descriptive case studies attempt to describe a particular event, entity, or “case”, while explanatory case studies, as the name implies, attempt to explain the same (Yazan, 2015). Case studies are intensive, consisting of more detail, richness, completeness, and variance than broader cross-unit analyses (Flybjerg, 2011). Given this study’s focus on the professional development received by faculty at Grace Elementary School over the course of one school year and the researcher’s desire to collect detailed information from multiple sources, a descriptive case study research design was deemed most appropriate.

According to Yin (2013) case studies are used to investigate contemporary phenomenon within real-life contexts. Unlike narrative or descriptive studies, case studies are not out to merely describe a situation or circumstance, but rather to attribute causal relationships between sets of circumstances. Case study approaches are analogous to crime scene investigations whereby the research question is akin to the crime being investigated and the researcher is the detective on the scene collecting information from different sources in an effort to piece together what has occurred (Creswell, 2014). As such, case studies draw information from a variety of different sources – observations, documents and artifacts, and interviews with key personnel, among other things. Another important key characteristic of a case study is its “bounded” nature (Creswell, 2014). Case studies are bounded in time and space – they seek to explore a specific phenomenon occurring in a specific space at a specific time or time period. For example, this research study was bounded by professional development implemented and received at a specific urban elementary school over the course of one school year.
Qualitative research also has an inherent openness and flexibility to it that allows researchers to modify their design and focus during the research process to pursue new discoveries (Maxwell, 2013; Stake, 1995). According to Stake (1995), researchers should have the flexibility to make major changes even after they transition from the design to the research phase. While researchers need two or three refined research questions or issues to guide and structure their research and subsequent observations, interviews, and artifact review, Stake (1995) notes that “the course of the study cannot be charted in advance” (p. 22) and, therefore, there needs to be room for researchers to alter their design as they go. For example, the primary tool for data collection in this research was interviews with individual research participants. While the researcher utilized a set of basic questions that were asked of all participants, the semi-structured nature of this case study allowed the researcher a degree of freedom to ask follow-up questions tied more specifically to participants’ responses that provided deeper, more meaningful data.

Setting, more succinctly defined in qualitative studies as context, also plays an important role in case study research (Maxwell, 2013). While quantitative researchers tend to collect large amounts of data with the purpose of drawing generalizations across multiple contexts, qualitative researchers typically study a small number of individuals or situations and work to preserve this individuality in their analysis of the data. Qualitative researchers, by the nature of their work, are more often better able to understand how events, actions, and phenomena are shaped by the unique circumstances in which they are situated (Maxwell, 2004). Context, therefore played an important role in the design of this study. The setting, make-up, and culture of the school coupled with the background and experiences of the teachers in this study were just some of the factors that aided in defining the context for this study.
Related to the importance of context is the notion that case studies are grounded in a constructivist paradigm (Baxter & Jack, 2008) whereby truth is seemingly relative and dependent on one’s perspectives. While not rejecting a notion of objectivity outright, this paradigm recognizes that there is a degree of human subjectivity involved in meaning-making. Reality, from a constructivist approach, is a social creation involving some degree of collaboration between researcher and participant (Searle, 2010). Thus, this study was approached from the perspective of a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm to aid in the process of making meaning of the perceptions and experiences of the participants in this study and the context within which they were situated.

**Research Paradigm**

The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm aligns with qualitative methods of research, allowing researchers the ability to explore bounded phenomenon, such as professional development, through participants’ own experiences and perceptions (Butin, 2010). The constructivist-interpretivist perspective has as its aim a deeper understanding of the “stories” that lay below the surface and cannot be unearthed through quantitative research (Ponterotto, 2005). In the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, deeper meaning is contingent on an interaction between the investigator (researcher) and the investigated (participant). Consequently, meaning is co-created through dialogue and its interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005). Equally as important as a shared sense of meaning-making is the constructivist-interpretivist perspective that the researcher plays an active and influential role in the research process (Ponterotto, 2005). As a consequence of this, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm informed the design of this study as the researcher took great care in interactions with participants so as to ensure dialogue that is open and honest in nature.
Another important feature of the constructivist-interpretivist perspective that make it a good fit for this study is the way in which it views reality. Unlike the post-positivist perspective that presumes a single external reality, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm views reality as a construct unique to each individual (Ponterotto, 2005). Thus, in the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm there is no one true external shared reality but, rather, as many realities as there are individuals. This is an important distinction as it relates to many of the topics and subtopics within this study. Applying the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, one can conclude that there is no one, collective, shared understanding of such things as what constitutes student learning outcomes or professional development. Instead, this study was informed by the fact that each participant, as well as the researcher, interpret and understand these concepts based on their own realities and culmination of their experiences.

Interaction between researcher and participants was critical to the design of this study and underlied the importance of why the constructivist-interpretivist perspective was chosen. There is a lingering fear that a positivist or post-positivist perspective may miss some of the deepest meaning and reasoning that may only be able to be brought to the surface and constructed through the interaction of a researcher and participant (Ponterotto, 2005). For example, when questioned about the level of support they received as a beginning teacher, a participant may cite disillusionment with the training or professional development they received. Through additional probing, questioning and stimulation, however, deeper rationale behind this disillusionment may surface. For example, it is possible frustration that the professional development they were provided did not align with what they needed and or detracted from their ability to adequately prepare for the challenges they faced during their first few years of teaching might surface.
Another reason the constructivist-interpretivist approach was chosen is the value bestowed upon the researcher and research participants as “meaning-makers” and the notion that they cannot simply be removed from the research equation. Ponterotto (2005) cites the work of Kant (1966) who reasoned that meaning cannot be independent of the reality of the research participant who is experiencing and making sense of that meaning. Thus, the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm seeks to qualitatively understand the experiences of the research participants while simultaneously seeking to understand that participant’s reality. The constructivist-interpretivist paradigm advocates a hermeneutical approach to research which stresses that “meaning is hidden and must be brought to the surface through deep reflection” (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 129). Given the depth and complexity of this study and the impactful changes it aspires to make on professional development in public education, a deeper dive into this topic through a constructivist-interpretivist approach was deemed appropriate.

**Site and Participants**

This case study was carried out at a mid-sized urban public elementary school located within one of the ten largest school districts in North Carolina (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). This school district has a population of over 30,000 students and employs nearly 2,000 teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The specific elementary school used for this study is considered mid-sized, with a student population of nearly 650 students, grades pre-K through 5th grade, and over 45 certified teachers.

The purpose of this descriptive case study was to describe the natural phenomena of teacher professional development and to draw connections between teachers’ perceptions of the professional development they receive and its perceived influence on their teaching practice and their efforts at improving student learning outcomes. The teachers at Grace Elementary School,
because it is situated within one of the largest school districts in North Carolina, were exposed to an abundance of professional development opportunities. Teachers at Grace Elementary School participated in a variety of different professional development opportunities ranging from ones that are mandated to ones that are optional to state-sponsored to district trainings to school-specific opportunities. Additionally, the majority of teachers at Grace Elementary School, by virtue of the variety of teaching experiences they have had over the course of their careers, have a wealth of professional development information and experience upon which to draw in formulating their perceptions on this topic. As a consequence of these factors, Grace Elementary School presented itself as an ideal site from which to solicit participants to study when investigating this case.

**Selection of participants.** The purpose of this study was to examine teachers’ perceptions of the professional development they receive and its perceived impact on student learning outcomes. Given the fact that professional development can be perceived differently by individuals merely based on what stage they are at in their career cycle (Staiger & Rockoff, 2010), care was taken to select research participants in three unique stages of the career cycle: beginning teachers in their first three years of teaching, experienced teachers with between 3-10 years in the profession, and veteran teachers with more than ten years of experience. Merriam (2014) refers to this process of deliberate participant selection as purposeful sampling and highlights the benefits of it when conducting qualitative case study research that attempts to derive information about a very specific topic.

As a result of the purposeful nature of the selection of participants for this research, criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) was employed to recruit participants who fell into the specific categories the researcher was courting for this study. Two important criteria were employed in
the selection of participants for this study: 1) years of teaching experience and 2) diversity of teaching experiences as distinguished by the number of different schools in which participants have taught. Patton (2002) advocates for the use of criterion sampling as a means of deriving case study data that is information-rich. Since this study was conducted at one specific elementary school, selecting participants for this study who may have had a greater number of professional development experiences outside of their experience at their school was theorized to enrich the data derived from the interviews. To solicit the information used to select participants for this study, each participant was asked on their professional development needs assessment to self-identify their number of years of teaching experience as well as the number of years they have spent teaching at schools other than Grace Elementary School.

Recruitment of participants. Prior to seeking the approval for this research from Northeastern’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher solicited and received a letter of support from the principal of the research site (Appendix A). Approval from Northeastern’s IRB was then sought and received (Appendix B). The researcher then followed these steps:

1. An electronic communication (e-mail) was distributed between the researcher and all teachers of Grace Elementary School (Appendix C) encouraging all teachers to take the professional development needs assessment (Appendix D).
2. Following the completion of the professional development needs assessment, the researcher applied the sampling criteria described in this methodology to determine participant suitability for the interview stage of this research. Participants were first classified based on their number of years of experience and placed in one of three categories: Beginning teacher (0-2 years of experience), Experienced teacher (3-10 years of experience), and Veteran teacher (more than 10 years of experience). Within
the categories of Experienced teacher and Veteran teacher, participants were additionally classified on the basis of the diversity of different teaching experiences they had accumulated. When determining which participants to interview, greater weight was given to those Experienced and Veteran teachers who had have a greater number of experiences teaching in settings other than Grace Elementary School and, therefore, a greater number of experiences from which to mine data.

3. Following the gathering of information from the professional development needs assessment, individual e-mails (Appendix E) were sent to select participants who met the preselected criteria of having a set number of years of teaching experience and, for experienced and veteran teachers, having a diversity of different teaching experiences at various institutions. Participants in the Beginning teacher category were randomly selected to participate in this study. Participants in the Experienced and Veteran teacher categories were ranked by diversity of teaching experiences and contacted in rank order. In instances where multiple teachers received the same ranking, potential participants were selected and contacted randomly. In instances where higher-ranked participants were unwilling to participate in the study, the next highest-ranked participant was contacted on through until ample participants at each career stage have been recruited.

**Access.** This research was conducted at Grace Elementary School situated within a large school district in North Carolina. The research site does not have its own formal IRB or research evaluation process. The researcher contacted and solicited the permission of Grace Elementary School’s principal to be able to conduct research at her school, access the site’s buildings,
observe professional development taking place on-site, and to conduct one-on-one participant interviews on-site (Appendix A).

Summary of Study Participants

The participants in this study were elementary school teachers at Grace Elementary School in North Carolina. Seven participants were interviewed at two different points during the school year, once at the beginning of the school year and once toward the end of the school year. Teacher identification, gender, years of teaching experience, and years of teaching experience at Grace Elementary School are included in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher ID</th>
<th>Teacher 1</th>
<th>Teacher 2</th>
<th>Teacher 3</th>
<th>Teacher 4</th>
<th>Teacher 5</th>
<th>Teacher 6</th>
<th>Teacher 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years of Teaching Experience</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Teaching at Grace Elementary</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years Teaching at other schools</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overview of research participants

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix I) was designed to offer participants the opportunity to respond to open-ended questions that allowed the researcher to develop rich descriptions of participants’ responses (Creswell, 2014). Following each interview, the audio recording was transcribed and the researched analyzed participant transcripts. All transcripts were reviewed and themes were developed through a process of coding of each interview.

Protection of Human Subjects and Ethics

To ensure the protection of participants in this study, the approval of Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) and Office of Human Subjects’ Research
Protection (OHSRP) was sought prior to the recruitment stage of this study. Approval from the participating elementary school and school district were obtained prior to the conducting of this study. Additionally, the researcher completed and passed the Protecting Human Research Participant Training course provided by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) with a copy of the certificate of completion included as Appendix F and placed on file with Northeastern’s IRB.

In accordance with NIH guidelines on conducting studies involving human subjects, each participant in this study was informed of the intent of the study: to investigate the perceptions of teachers about the professional development they receive and its perceived impact on student learning outcomes. No potential risk to participants’ physical or mental health was anticipated as part of this study, however, all participants were informed of their right to discontinue their participation in the study at any point. Once consent was given (Appendix G), the researcher then asked each participant for their consent to record their individual interviews through audio or visual means so as to ensure accuracy of what is said during these interviews.

Given the anticipated delicate nature of the opinions that were expressed during the interviews and the possibility of personal or professional ramifications if such views were associated with their source, great care was taken to protect the confidentiality of the research participants. Pseudonyms were used to identify research participants and care was taken to disguise other identifiable characteristics of research participants. Care was also taken to ensure the accuracy of what was reported to the researcher through the use of member checking (Appendix J), a process for allowing participants to check the accuracy of transcripts from their interview as well as to clarify any comments (Creswell, 2014).

Data Collection
One of the important characteristics of case study data collection was its use of multiple sources of data. According to Patton (2002) and Yin (2013) the use of multiple sources of data in a case study methodology helps to paint a broader picture of the phenomenon being studied and, therefore, increase data credibility. Patton (2002), in describing case study data collection, stresses the purposefulness involved in selecting what data to collect. Unlike quantitative studies that often seek to derive meaning from a large quantity of data, Patton (2002) notes that the power of case study methodology is derived from selecting “information-rich cases” (p. 169) that one feels they can glean relevant and important information about their topic from. Patton (2002) describes several case study sampling strategies ranging from convenience-based (the least credible) to stratified sampling. Baxter and Jack (2008), Merriam (2014), Stake (1995), and Yin (2013), all note the data for case studies can be collected from primary source documents, archival records, interviews, physical artifacts, and observations, and they stress the importance of triangulating the data through a variety of different data sources. According to Yin’s (2013) approach, researchers are allowed to collect quantitative survey data to use in creating a more holistic perspective of their case study.

Conn (2011) notes that each type of case study data collection has its own set of strengths and weaknesses. Documentation, archival records, and physical artifacts can provide data spanning a lengthier period of time and can also be reviewed repeatedly and, perhaps, more objectively. All three can require a level of confidentiality and are also subject to the bias of the documenter and may unwittingly be subject to the bias of the researcher when deciding what documents and artifacts are pertinent. Interviews are often one of the most powerful data sources for case studies. However, some major drawbacks with interviews include poorly-constructed questions, poor recall on the part of the interviewee or bias in interviewees providing an
interviewer with the answers they believe that individual wants to hear. Observations, too, can prove very insightful toward creating the case but pose some of the same problems as the subject(s) of the observation can “perform” differently when they are under observation than they might otherwise naturally act. For the purpose of this study, three primary measures of data were collected and analyzed: participants’ need assessments (Appendix D), interview questions (Appendix H), and documents.

**Professional development needs assessment.** Prior to the commencing of the interviews, the researcher gave a professional development needs assessment to all teachers at Grace Elementary School (Appendix D). This assessment were delivered to teachers via Google Forms. The purpose of this assessment was twofold:

1) To gather the requisite background information on teachers at Grace Elementary School to determine which teachers would be good candidates to take part in the interviews for this study

2) To encourage teachers to self-reflect on their individual professional needs and professional development topics that they felt might best align with their needs.

**Interviews.** The primary source of data for this study was semi-structured interviews conducted by the researcher. Following the administration of the professional development needs assessment, six teachers from various grade levels and discipline areas were selected for this study. Two teachers each were chosen from the categories of Beginning teacher, Experienced teacher, and Veteran teacher. Each teacher was interviewed on three separate occasions – at the onset of the study prior to having received in-depth professional development, once during the course of the study as they were taking part in their professional development
experience, and once at the end of the study after having concluded their professional
development experience for that school year.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face, at a predetermined time and place, and digitally recorded to ensure accuracy. Hatch (2002) advocates for the use of semi-structured interviews as a formal means for gathering information-rich data from research participants without hampering the ability of the researcher to follow-up on important themes or topics that may arise during the interview. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher is “in charge” of the interview in that they prepare a set of guiding questions. Unlike a structured interviewed, however, the researcher is free to follow the lead of the participants and probe more deeply into topics or areas that may arise during the interview (Hatch, 2002). Interviews were 30-40 minutes in length and were transcribed after the fact. Throughout the interview process, the researcher took field notes. After the interviews are completed and transcribed, participants were permitted to check the transcription notes for accuracy and, if needed, to add or elaborate upon their responses.

**Documents.** Patton (2002) espouses the benefits of documents as a source of information for researchers, providing valuable insight into the behind-the-scenes institutional processes and how those processes may have come into being. For the purposes of qualitative case study research, documents ran the gamut from public documents, such as curriculum guides, policy statements, and codes of conduct, to internal communications such as memos, e-mails, or school-specific policies (Hatch, 2002). For this study the researcher relied on public documents such as curriculum standard guides as well as state, district, and school-based data. Data specific to the topic of this research, such as copies of professional development presentations and handouts as well as student work samples, assessments and other materials used by teachers, were also be
collected and analyzed. In addition, the researcher kept a journal throughout the course of the study and, in particular, while analyzing and reflecting on interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Case study data analysis generally involves a cyclical process that proceeds from more general to more specific observations (Creswell, 2014). Analysis essentially begins at the moment data is collected as researchers make note of relevant observations, it then continues through the transcription process, and evolves into the identification of themes, patterns, and categories. Themes, patterns and categories are often further coded often in a several step process described by Miles, Huberman and Saldana (2014).

Conn (2011) describes two general strategies or approaches a researcher can take when analyzing evidence: theoretical propositions or descriptive frameworks. In applying a theoretical approach to data analysis, a researcher compares and contrasts the data they have collected to theories that already exist on the phenomenon and then either support or reject those theories with their findings. In a descriptive framework, the researcher describes their findings and suggests areas in which quantitative analysis might be helpful in further analyzing findings.

Yin (2013) describes five specific techniques for case study data analysis: pattern matching, explanation building, time-series analysis, logic models and cross-case synthesis. Pattern matching involves attempting to match collected data with expected patterns or to create new patterns based upon seemingly unexpected results. For example, it might be expected that teachers perceive self-selected professional development as more meaningful than trainings they are required to take, however, a different pattern may emerge when the data are collected and more thoroughly analyzed. Explanation building takes pattern analysis a step further and attempts to form theories based on patterns that emerged when the data were first analyzed.
Explanation building attempts to answer the questions of “how” or “why” a particular phenomenon occurred. In a time-series analysis, a case study is examined over a period of time, either in a simple manner, chronologically, or more complexly as multiple cases are presented over time. A logic model analytical approach is similar to pattern matching only it’s presented in a cause-effect pattern. A logic model technique involves matching case study data collected with predicted events. Finally, a cross-case synthesis involves the comparison and analysis of multiple cases related to the same research project or topic.

In analyzing qualitative data, Stake (1995) emphasizes categorical aggregation versus direct interpretation. Categorical aggregation, as the name denotes, involves the researcher seeking a collection of similar instances from the data they have collected towards the emergence of particular conclusions. Additionally, the researcher looks for and establishes patterns and attempts to make connections between two or more categories. Direct interpretation, on the other hand, involves looking at a single instance or occurrence of something within the data and attempts to draw meaning from it, devoid of substantiating it with other instances. Finally, Stake (1995) also advocates for naturalistic generalizations whereby the reader themselves can draw their own conclusions from the data as presented.

Merriam (2014) suggests three levels of data analysis. The first, or most basic level, is merely the descriptive account of what occurred during the study. Digging a level deeper, case study researchers construct categories of themes and attempt to capture recurring patterns within those themes. The third, or final level of analysis, according to Merriam (2014) involves “making inferences, developing models, or generating theories” (p. 187).

Transcribed interviews were read over thoroughly by the researcher. Interviews were then coded for themes. When coding, Creswell (2014) recommends categorizing data into three
groups: what one might expect to find, surprising or unanticipated things, and unusual things. Finally, the data collected in this study will be interpreted to describe lessons learned about the impact of teachers’ perceptions of professional development on their teaching practice and their efforts toward improving student learning outcomes.

When analyzing data, Miles, et al. (2014) suggest two cycles of coding. The first cycle of analysis is primarily intended to summarize segments of data. Miles, et al. (2014) describe several forms of first cycle coding. In vivo coding was the first applied to this interview. In vivo was chosen to bring to the forefront and highlight the key words and phrases that stuck out to the researcher when transcribing the interviews. The in vivo coding process was particularly helpful as it removed an element of subjectivity, as the participants were quoted verbatim, and helped to uncover some common themes in the data that emerged, evidenced through the repetition of certain phrases and expressions. For example, phrases such as “growth,” “love,” and “community” were repeated several times throughout the interview transcripts.

After having in vivo coded the data, a second pass through the transcripts were made using an evaluation coding process. Miles, et al. (2014) recommend evaluation coding for “policy, critical, action, organizational, and evaluation studies” (p. 76). Since this research centered around evaluating the perceptions teachers have of professional development, an evaluation coding of the data was deemed appropriate. The findings were not disappointing. Evaluation coding allowed for the opportunity to get a better sense of participants’ impressions of the professional development they received and the relationship between those trainings, their own development, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their students.

Next, a third pass through the data was conducted using emotion coding. Reflecting upon the interview, it was noted that several key emotions had emerged within the transcripts. For
example, in recounting some of the experiences they had had with professional development, there were several instances where the participants in this study were notably excited to share what they had learned and later implemented. At other points in the interview, frustration crept to the surface. For instance, teacher two was noticeably agitated when discussing how the means for professional development implementation was often mandated, the frequency with which professional development was pushed and, within a short time period, abandoned and replaced. Given the important role emotion played, particularly in offering a better sense of what questions and topics struck chords with the participants this study, emotion coding of the data proved to be extremely helpful.

Once first cycle coding is complete, Miles, et al. (2014) stress the importance of returning to the data for what they identify as second cycle coding. Second cycle involves grouping or summarizing the larger quantities of data into smaller categories, themes or constructs (Miles, et al., 2014) toward the purpose of identifying emerging patterns. For example, when looking closely at the in vivo and emotion coding the repetitive use of “another meeting” to describe professional development trainings teacher two had participated in as well as the frustration noted when discussing trainings which had been abandoned suggested themes of making professional development more meaningful, long-lasting and sustainable.

Finally, in addition to coding, using analytical memos proved very helpful in providing insight into the interviewer’s thought process through the protocol development, interview, transcription and analysis process. The memos proved to be a good resource to reference when returning to the data after prolonged time away from it and in helping to control for interviewer positionality throughout the analysis process.

Data Storage
All audio recordings collected from the personal interviews conducted in this study were downloaded, secured on the researcher’s password-protected laptop, and backed-up on a password-protected cloud service called “Box”. Additional digital files, such as e-mails and electronic copies of materials, were similarly downloaded, saved on the researcher’s laptop and backed-up on Box. All physical data collected as part of this study was stored in a locked file cabinet in the researcher’s home.

**Trustworthiness**

Miles et al. (2014) assert that the trustworthiness of research is dependent on the researcher’s ability to confirm their findings. Saldana (2009) further iterates this by stressing that researchers check their interpretations with their participants on a regular basis, establish a coding process when transcribing their data, and taking detailed field notes throughout the course of their research. Creswell (2014) further details a number of validation strategies that can be applied to aid in assuring a study is trustworthy. For the purposes of this study, member checking (Appendix J), a research journal containing field notes, triangulation, a coding consistency check, and clarification of researcher bias were all used to verify the trustworthiness of the data collected and analyzed.

**Limitations**

There are many strengths to case study research. For example, the use of face-to-face interviews allow researchers to develop a degree of rapport with participants that can assist them in identifying and honing in on important details (Creswell, 2014; Jacobs & Furgerson, 2012). Face-to-face interviewing also provides researchers the opportunity to take note of non-verbal cues, clarify ambiguous responses, and engage participants more in the interview process.
However, there are quite a few limitations to case study research, in general, and the research for this study, in particular.

1. Case study research can often yield an enormous amount of data that can be quite time-consuming to sift through and analyze (Choy, 2014; Creswell, 2014). This was certainly the case with this study as it consisted of close to 20 interviews. While great care was taken in the collection and analysis of the data gathered from the interviews, the sheer volume of what is collected presented itself as a study limitation.

2. This study was specific to an elementary school situated in a suburban school district in North Carolina. While other schools and other school districts in every state implement professional development, the findings from this study cannot be generalized to apply to schools, school districts, or states other than the one utilized for this study.

3. This study used a small sample size and relied on participants to volunteer to participate in the study. Since this research focused on a criterion-selected sample of research participants within a single school within a single school district in a specific state, the researcher’s ability to make any generalized statements related to the outcome of this study beyond the specific case that was examined is limited (Maxwell, 2013).

4. Since the researcher of this study had experience as both a teacher and professional development provider, researcher bias certainly played a role in this study. The researcher attempted to control for this bias through a thorough and full disclosure of their positionality and potential biases.

Chapter Summary
This study aspired to show how the perceptions of teachers in a specific urban elementary setting of the professional development influence their perceived effectiveness and their efforts to improve student learning outcomes. The researcher applied a qualitative, descriptive case study research design and approached the study through the lens of a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm. The researcher collected data from a professional development needs assessment, participant interviews, and relevant documents to inform the construction of the case. Data collected as part of this study was then analyzed and coded to identify themes and patterns. Every effort was made to protect research participants from any potential harm, ensure the trustworthiness of the findings from this study, and identify the limitations of the study.
Chapter Four: Research Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents findings triangulated from two rounds of participant interviews, research field notes, a participant questionnaire, and secondary data about the professional development experiences of several teachers employed in an elementary school in an urban school district outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. The goal of this study was to gain a better understanding of teachers’ perceptions of the professional development they receive in an effort to make this critical support of teachers more meaningful and supportive. Seven elementary teachers, ranging from one year of teaching experience to over twenty years, participated in interviews for this study. This study utilized a qualitative data collection method of semi-structured interviews focused on understanding the professional development experiences and perceptions of teachers at Grace Elementary School. The research questions explored through this study included:

Central research question. How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as it relates to improving their teaching practice?

Research sub-question.

2. How do teachers at Grace Elementary school apply the skills and information received from professional development toward improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their students?

Research Context

This case study was carried out at a mid-sized urban public elementary school located within one of the ten largest school districts in North Carolina. This school district has a population of over 31,500 students and employs nearly 2,000 teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). The school district is comprised of over 50 schools, more than half
of which are either elementary or primary schools. The school district’s demographics can be summarized as 57% Caucasian, 23% African American, 14% Hispanic, 5% Multiracial, 1.5% Asian, and less than 1% American Indian or Pacific Islanders. Over 3,000 of the district’s students are certified as Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) with nearly 5,000 students qualifying for Special Needs Services.

The school district boasts a graduation rate of over 85% of its seniors a nearly 17% increase in the twelve years the state of North Carolina has been tracking this statistic. It’s overall proficiency rate, as gauged by North Carolina end-of-grade and end-of-course testing was 56% (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). Of the district’s 49 schools with a school growth measure, 43, or 88% of the schools, achieved or exceeded growth. Of the district’s schools with a performance measure, 2 received an “A” grade on the state school performance “report card” system, 13 were rated a “B”, 28 received a “C” rating, 9 were categorized as “D” schools, and 1 school was designated an “F” (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018c).

The specific elementary school used for this study is considered mid-sized, with a student population of nearly 650 students, grades pre-K through 5th grade, and over 45 certified teachers. The school is nearly equal parts African American, Caucasian, and Hispanic with 33% of the student population classified as African American, 30% as Caucasian, 30% Hispanic, 6% Multiracial, and less than 1% Asian or Pacific Islander (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018). The specific elementary school used for this study had most recently received a “C” rating having achieved expected growth (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2018c).

Findings
The purpose of this study was to explore how teachers’ perception of the professional development they receive relates to improving teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and teacher-student relationships. As was stated in the introduction to this study, professional development serves as an important tool toward both acclimating beginning and novice teachers to the rigors that come from teaching (Ingersoll, 2012) and helping veteran teachers improve their skillset (Taylor et al., 2011). Yet, while a great body of research exists regarding effective and ineffective professional development practices, further evidence seems to point toward such practices not being applied on a regular basis (Hill et al., 2013). This section starts off by presenting findings from the teachers in this study regarding their perceptions of what constitutes professional development at their urban elementary school. Next, how teachers perceive the effectiveness of the professional development they receive is explored with a distinction drawn between mandatory and self-selected professional development. Finally, the effectiveness of professional development on student learning outcomes and student-teacher relationships is explored. Several categories and themes emerged during second cycle coding (see Table 2).

Table 2

Major categories and themes which emerged from the data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development Defined</td>
<td>Theme One: Variance in how professional development is defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme Two: Professional development = Opportunity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme Three: Professional development = Teacher growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Goals and Desired Student Outcomes</td>
<td>Theme One: Teachers desire holistic improvement in their students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme Two: Teachers desire student growth over proficiency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship with Students</td>
<td>Theme One: Teachers perceive their relationships with students in terms of love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme Two: Teachers desire to strengthen their relationships with students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandatory Professional Development</td>
<td>Theme One: Teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too broad</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Theme Two: Teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too repetitive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Central research question.

The central research question of this study was: How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as it relates to improving their teaching practice? In addition to the central research question, the research sub-question of how do teachers at Grace Elementary school apply the skills and information received from professional development toward improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their students was also addressed in this study. To answer these research questions, the researcher examined the verbatim transcripts of each research participant. Based on code frequency and the recurrence of certain codes, eleven major themes emerged from the qualitative data. These themes were further categorized into five categories (see Table 2). In an effort to fully understand how the teachers at Grace Elementary perceive the professional development they receive, it was important to more completely understand how they perceived and defined professional development. The category of professional development defined produce three major themes: (1) variance, (2) opportunity, and (3) teacher growth.

Next, the questions of how teachers applied what they learned in professional development toward improving their teaching practice and student learning outcomes was addressed. To answer this it was important to identify what goals teachers had for themselves, what areas of their teaching practice they desired to improve and how they went about making those improvements as well as what goals and desired learning outcomes teachers had for students and how they perceived professional development helping them in those areas. The
category of teacher goals and desired student outcomes produced two themes: (1) holistic improvement and (2) growth over proficiency.

In addition to the correlation between professional development and student learning outcomes, this study also dug into the often less explored topic of professional development’s impact on the student-teacher relationship. Participants in this study were asked about their current perceptions of their relationship with their students and the role they perceived professional development might play in improving these relationships. From this data emerged the category of relationship with students and the two themes of: (1) Love and (2) Strengthening relationships.

After discussing their impressions of what constituted professional development and the various forms it took at Grace Elementary, what outcomes they desired from their students, and their relationship with their students, participants tackled questions related to how they perceived professional development might help them achieve their desired outcomes. From this data there emerged two categories related to the type of training teachers receive: mandatory and self-selected professional development. Within the category of mandatory professional development were two themes: (1) Too broad and (2) Too repetitive. An additional three themes emerged from discussion of self-selected professional development: (1) Alignment to goals and timeliness, (2) Choice leads to satisfaction and (3) Quality collaboration. Each theme, within each category, is described below utilizing participants’ verbatim responses.

**Professional Development Defined**

Several themes related to how the participants in this study defined professional development emerged.
Professional development defined theme one: Variance in how professional development is defined. One theme that emerged from teachers’ perceptions of what constitutes professional development was a general lack of consensus on the topic. Teacher two, when asked for her open-ended thoughts of what sprung to mind when she thought of professional development exclaimed, “my first thought is, oh goodness we have another meeting.” She went on to clarify a bit, drawing a distinction:

… if it is on a topic that I feel that’s necessary or something I am interested in or I need more skills in, than I’m very intrigued and interested and want to go. If it’s on something I’ve been to quite often or have already had, you know, the last ten years plus than more so I think, oh goodness I’m just going to be sitting here for another hour through something I’ve already heard…. 

Teacher seven, perhaps as an outgrowth of being a beginning teacher with only a year of experience to draw upon, immediately cited “collaboration” as what sprung to mind when she thought of professional development. Teacher four described professional development as a means for providing her with the “tools” she needed to grow in her career, albeit whether those tools were to improve her capacity as an instructor or merely to improve her capacity to help her students improve in some of the affective domains most teachers cited as a goal. Teacher six’s immediate perceptions of professional development were the “courses” she had taken that were “intended to strengthen our knowledge of content areas, of behavior management, working with parents” and cited the constantly changing nature of education as an underlying need for professional development.

Given the variance in how teachers perceived professional development, one interesting detail that emerged in both their answer to this question and throughout the ensuring
conversations around this and other questions was what was not said by most teachers. Perhaps the most glaring of omissions in teachers’ perceptions of how professional development was defined was a lack of emphasis on the potential collaborative nature of professional development. This was also quite interesting considering anecdotal observations throughout the course of the school year at Grace Elementary showed that each of the teachers in this study met with a professional learning community (PLC) on a near weekly basis. Additionally, each PLC at Grace Elementary was in its’ second year of a professional lab site initiative whereby teachers were engaging in the process of observing in each other’s classroom, providing feedback, and being asked to reflect upon ways in which what they observed could be applied toward improving their own instructional practice.

Thus, in consideration of these anecdotal observations, it was quite interesting to note that only the least experienced of the teachers in this study cited collaboration as a foremost thought in her mind for professional development. This theme takes on even more relevance when it is coupled with the varied descriptions of professional development from all the other teachers in this study as courses they had to take or meetings they were required to attend. It was, thereby, apparent that most teachers in this study perceived professional development from a top-down perspective of something that is done to them.

**Professional development defined theme two: Professional development = Opportunity.** Despite the variance in the responses provided by teachers regarding their general perceptions of professional development, another common theme did emerge from the data. While teachers’ perceptions of professional development tended to be a top-down one depicted as meetings or courses teachers were required to take, all of the teachers in the study expressed a degree of optimism in their view of professional development. Most participants in this study
characterized professional development as an opportunity or some variation of this term. Said teacher one, “when I hear professional development I hear… an opportunity to learn more about my craft.” Teacher three echoed those sentiments stating, “I think of an opportunity to make me a better teacher in the classroom. What can I know and be trained on or learn a better method or learn something more to make me a better teacher…?”

Teacher seven, in speaking of the collaborative nature of professional development, touched upon what she perceived, as a beginning teacher, as an opportunity to learn from her colleagues. Said teacher seven:

I feel like it’s definitely a good opportunity… to work alongside some of my colleagues, collaborate with my colleagues, but also be able to get insight from them and just be able to learn new things that I’m still trying to gain experience on.

Teachers four and five both framed professional development as opportunities whose benefits could be transferred to their students. Teacher four equated professional development to an opportunity to help her “grow as a teacher” that, in turn, would help her “kids grow as learners.” Teacher five described professional development as “those things that will help me improve as a professional… those things that will help me to better help my students.” Elaborating further, teacher five went on to say:

I consider myself a lifelong learner and professional development is one means by which I can constantly be improving myself, my skillset, my ability to teach and, of course, my ability to help my students achieve and succeed.

Teacher two, while initially expressing some apprehension toward professional development as “another meeting”, in clarifying and elaborating, drew a distinction between
repetitive trainings and opportunities aligned more closely to her personal needs as a professional. Said teacher two:

… the essential goals are for you to gain skills or insight into an area in our teaching that we can do better in. For example, if it’s in reading workshop than it’s to take us through the process so that we can become more experienced, more educated I guess. They’re educating the educators.

Teacher six referenced the changing nature of the field of education and the opportunity for teachers, through professional development, to stay abreast of those changes and meet the needs of their students:

I think things are always changing. Whether it’s the standards or how we’re working with kids or technology, there’s always new and better ideas out there…. I think the intent of professional development is to expose us to those things and help us get on a track to learning more about them and making sure we are up-to-date on what we need to do. Just like things have changed since we were young, it’s going to keep changing with the kids, so we have to continue meeting them where they are. I think that’s what professional development does for us.

Though varied in their conceptualization of what constituted professional development, the dueling theme of professional development as an opportunity for teachers that emerged from this study was an important one. Regardless of whether teachers viewed professional development as a course they had to take, a meeting they had to attend, or a collaborative experience they partook in with their peers, each teacher also expressed a degree of optimism as they viewed the inherent opportunities that professional development presented. When considering the central research question of this study it is important to note that all teachers in
this study seemingly optimistically perceived professional development as a means for improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with students.

**Professional development defined theme three: Professional development = Teacher growth.** Drilling a bit deeper into teachers’ perceptions of professional development as opportunities, the additional theme of teacher growth emerged from the data in this study. As will be discussed later, one prevalent theme related to the goals teachers had for their students was their desire for them to show growth or improvements in both academic and affective domains. Teachers, in their perceptions of professional development, recognized that much of their ability to help students grow was predicated on their own ability to grow or improve. Thus, teacher growth emerged as another theme from the data.

Teacher one zeroed in on the theme of professional growth when discussing her educational journey and goals she had for herself:

… I don’t ever want to stop learning. … my goal as an educator, for as long as I’m teaching, is to continue to get better because, as I look back over the last 16 years that I have been at Grace, how much things have changed. Then, when I look back on my education, how much education has changed. And I think that if, we as educators, don’t take more professional development and keep learning we’re not going to get better and we’re not going to be able to grow with the changes that are coming in education.

Teacher three shared a similar sentiment, drawing a connection between her personal growth and that of her students. Said teacher three, “as a teacher, I want to grow. I have goals that I have set of myself that I want to grow and, in return, it helps my students, too.” Teacher seven defined growth as the difference between her first-year teaching goal of “just to survive”
and her second-year goal of getting a better handle on the curriculum and meeting the diverse needs of her students:

… this year, I definitely find myself diving more into the different curriculums and the content of what I’m teaching and then, from there, I feel that I’m really trying to be conscious of all the different levels of kids in my class…. I think that I’ve kind of had some challenges already this year with that but I think that already having a year under my belt and some of the professional developments that I’ve gone to, I feel that I kind of have a better handle on that.

Teacher four identified her growth as a desire to “not get content” in her teaching, but rather, “to seek new, innovative things to bring into my classroom.” Elaborating further on this theme, teacher four identified a specific area of weakness she felt she had and the accompanying professional development she was hoping would help her improve and innovate in this area:

This year, reading workshop is a goal. I hate teaching reading and I don’t feel confident in it and it’s been really hard to get what I need until last year. I went to a workshop… and it was like, spot-on, what I needed…. when I came to Grace Elementary a lot of people just assumed I didn’t have a lot of needs. But I had only taught math and science… I do want to get better at my reading workshop and my small groups, so that’s kind of a goal and just being better about encouraging my kids to take ownership of their growth.

Teacher four’s comments about her personal professional growth and journey to fulfill that growth through professional development was especially insightful for two important reasons. First, it highlighted the assumptions that can often be made regarding teachers’ expertise and experience. Hired at Grace Elementary to teach all subjects, possessing nine years
of teaching experience and an elementary (K-6) teaching license, it was not outwardly apparent that teacher four might have had a weakness in one particular area. Second, while teacher four took it upon herself to seek out and take professional development specific to her self-identified area of weakness, it cannot be assumed that all teachers, both in general and specifically at Grace Elementary, were this self-reflective.

As will be discussed in a later section, professional development opportunities can be placed into two different categories, 1) mandatory offerings that teachers are required to attend and 2) self-selected opportunities that teachers seek out and opt into themselves. It is possible for teachers to fulfill the requirements to renew their teaching license merely by completing mandatory professional development opportunities. But, as will also be discussed later, such professional development may not always meet the individual needs a teacher may have, as illustrated by teacher four. If teachers are not engaging in such self-reflection and seeking out training opportunities they feel match their needs, on a regular basis, it is quite possible for teachers to receive substantial amounts of professional development without ever “growing” or addressing deficiencies in their practice.

This theme of personal growth takes on even more weight when coupled with observational data regarding how teachers in North Carolina are evaluated. As part of their
yearly evaluation process, each North Carolina teacher is expected to create a personal professional development plan in which they set at least two goals for themselves (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2015). Teachers then detail the activities or actions they expect to take toward the fulfillment of those goals, their expected outcomes, including evidence of completion of their goals, and the resources they feel they will need to be successful in their completion of their goals. Teachers can opt to include professional development they expect to pursue related to their goal as one of the actions aligned to the goal’s completion. Figure 3 details the professional development plan section of the teacher evaluation process that teachers are expected to complete each year.

Figure 3. North Carolina teacher evaluation process professional development plan section

Summary. While there was a wide degree of variance in the understanding and definition of professional development by each of the participants in this study and varying degrees of frustration with previous trainings they had received, each teacher continued to express a degree of optimism regarding this topic. The participants in this study continued to view the trainings they participated in as opportunities and chances for growth. As a result of this, they continued to buy-in to the idea that professional development was beneficial to them and continued to be receptive to the idea of receiving professional development as a means for bettering themselves. To be effective and seize upon this positive energy, though, it is important to have a clearer understanding of how teachers perceive their desired student outcomes as well as the goals they have for both themselves and their students.

Teachers’ Goals and Desired Student Outcomes

In order for professional development to aid teachers in improving their instructional practice, relationship with students, and student learning outcomes, it was important for teachers
to define what goals they had for themselves and their students. Given the increased emphasis
being placed on student scores on standardized tests and their use as accountability measures for
both student achievement and teacher effectiveness might have hypothesized that the teachers in
this study would have chosen to set goals for themselves and their student related to the
improvement of test scores. None of the seven teachers interviewed directly mentioned student
achievement on test scores as a primary goal they had for themselves or their students. Instead,
one prevalent theme, and one commonality among all seven teachers, was the desire for students
to improve in holistic ways. Teachers’ goals for students ranged from developing a love for
school, to being a better person, to feeling engaged in school and realizing that learning can be
fun. When the topic of academic performance did surface, the participants in this study spoke of
their desire to see an improvement in student academic performance or “growth” over as being
more important than students achieving an arbitrary, grade-level or subject-matter specific
benchmark most often referred to as “proficiency”.

Teachers’ goals and desired student outcomes theme one: Teachers desire holistic
improvement in their students. Teacher 4 best epitomized the holistic qualities she and her
colleagues had hoped their students would get out of their time spent together. Said Teacher 4,
“I always want my kids, first of all, to be nice, good kids. … That is always my first goal; who
they are as people, but one of my goals for my classroom, for my students and for me, is just
learning how to have this classroom culture that we are here to support each other and respect
each other. We don’t have to like or love each other but we do have to respect and support each
other.”

Teacher one echoed some of these same sentiments, stressing that she wanted her
students to “leave better when they leave me than when they came to me” and her desire that
students grow “socially or emotionally” in addition to being able to achieve academic growth. Teachers two and three echoed the theme of student affective development in sharing the goals they have for their students. Said teacher two, “my first goal for students has always been… to know that they have a teacher that cares and that they come out of the classroom a better person.” Teacher three drew a distinction between what she described as the “academic world” and the “social world”.

… and then the social world of it is how to be a better person in our world that we live… how do I treat others the way that I want to be treated, how do I just be a better person. So I don’t want them to grow just academically. I feel like I fail the student if that’s all I do and vice versa. … it’s a whole person that you’re wanting to grow.

Echoing her colleagues, teacher seven expressed her desire to see her students not only show affective improvement over the course of their time with her, but also aspire to acquire values that will benefit them in life. Said teacher seven, “… I just also, you know, just try to instill certain values in them just because I want them to grow up and just become the best person they can be, not just students.”

The common theme of student improvement in holistic qualities such as helping students to be better people, instilling values, and teaching students how to treat each other fairly and with respect is significant when considering the role professional development plays in improving teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes. Much emphasis in the media is given to student academic achievement and a student’s deemed readiness to excel in college and careers being perceived as an outgrowth of how they perform on standardized test scores. Much professional development, then, is focused on improving teaching pedagogy with the hope that this improvement would lead to better student academic outcomes.
When teaching, learning, and professional development are focused on improving student achievement scores in high-stakes standardized tested areas such as reading, math, and science, opportunities to help students improve in other areas are often neglected. Such an emphasis on these tested areas can often leave teachers ill-equipped to help their students develop and maintain some of the necessary soft skills, such as effective communication, respect for others, empathy, and collaboration. Ironically, one could further argue that these holistic qualities play more of a critical role in helping each student, as was expressed in this study, be a better person, as well as providing them the social, emotional, and career skills that will help them be successful in life.

**Teachers’ goals and desired student outcomes theme two: Teachers desire student growth over proficiency.** In addition to a desire to see their students holistically improve in all areas, not just those assessed by a standardized test, another common theme all seven teachers in this study embedded in the goals they had for their students, was the hope that they could get their students to “grow” over the course of the school year. While each teacher had slight differences in the ways they defined growth, embedded within each of their answers to this question was the common theme of valuing student improvement, in such areas as social and emotional development as well as academic achievement, over students achieving, the often ambiguously set, grade level benchmark standards, often dubbed student “proficiency”, by which teachers are measured.

In speaking about student growth, teachers two and seven both expressed more holistic views of this theme. Said teacher two, “I want them to realize that learning can be a lot of fun.” Teacher seven echoed this sentiment stating, “… I really just want them to just continue on, no matter what grade level they’re in, and to just feel engaged and love to be in school.” Similarly,
teacher four expressed a desire for her students to start to “love learning” but was also more succinct in declaring her disdain for an emphasis on student proficiency, going so far as to say, “I want them to grow. I don’t care about proficiency. I don’t really care about test scores…. I like to celebrate a child’s growth.”

In rationalizing her preference for student growth over student proficiency, teacher four shared a poignant anecdote:

… my group that I had two groups ago, they’re the kids that I had, I was in the top 25% for our county and for the state for their math growth…. And that’s the year that I had so many kids, for the first time, make a three. I had one kid who tested from, like, eight in the morning to literally, I think she came back in my room at like 2:10 that afternoon and that was the first three she had ever made in anything and she was so excited when she got her scores back. I think, from watching that growth, that meant so much more to me than, like, she actually made a three. Seeing that she went up from a one to a three, that’s a huge amount of growth for a student. So, to me, those are the things that matter.

Teacher five also seized upon the theme of growth, emphasizing her desires for students to grow both toward academic proficiency and in their desire to want to learn. Said teacher five:

… it’s always about my students learning more or becoming more proficient. I don’t think all of my students will be considered proficient by the end of the school year, but I do want them to be more proficient than when they came to me. I want them to grow as learners, to read more and want to read more and to be better in math. Now will they all be considered proficient in all areas by the end of the school year? No. But I at least want them to be further along than where they came to me at and to be able to have shown some improvement.
Teacher three shared many of the same sentiments stating her goal for her students was “to see them grow” but qualifying her definition of growth as, “I’m not just saying by the numbers.” Clarifying even further, teacher three described her definition of growth in terms of a series of “light bulb moments” students experience over the course of a school year when they begin to grasp concepts they had previously not understood well. For example, “whether it’s even something as simple as single-digit addition that they couldn’t do before but now they can use manipulatives and they know how to do it now.” Growth, to teacher three, constituted a culmination of these moments or improvements stating, “just to see those light bulb moments in the students daily and, at the end, you’re going to see huge light bulb moments because they’ve grown in little bits along the way.”

Growth, to teacher three, was not merely an academic aspiration but also a social one, for which she had additional, distinct growth goals for her students. Said teacher three:

I think… that’s the academic world of it, and then the social world of it is how to be a better person in our world that we live…. how do I treat others the way that I want to be treated, how do I just be a better person. So I don’t want them to grow just academically.

I feel like I fail the student if that’s all I do….

Teacher one defined her students’ growth in a similar fashion stating, “of course we all want them to grow academically” but adding that her ultimate goal was for her students “to leave better when they leave me than when they came to me.” Teacher one spoke of this growth in terms of the “whole child” stating, “my things is does the whole child grow from when they walk in my door?” In viewing her role as a teacher and her goals for her students, teacher one expressed:
… I try to grow them as a whole child because, yes, I want them to grow with fourth grade material and be ready for fifth. But I also have to prepare them as people and successful citizens in society after school. So I try to instill those lessons early on so that they are a better person all-around, academically, socially, emotionally, physically, whatever.

Though only in her second year of teaching, teacher six also expressed the need to “look past scores” and drilling down to specific student needs to help students grow. To illustrate this, she recounted the story of the growth one particular student had shown the previous school year:

So, one of my kids, last year, came into the year as a transition kid (a 4th grade student still “labeled” as a 3rd grader because they had not passed a reading benchmark), didn’t pass the BOY (beginning-of-year reading test), so she stayed a transition kid…. Then, on her first round of the EOGs, before retakes, she was within one to two questions of passing the fourth grade reading EOG. So, that’s not something that other people see when they look as just a score and for me that was a huge moment because I was so proud of her and she worked so hard.

For teacher six, growth is predicated on the ability to help students feel success with the hopes that the success they feel would beget more success and, as an outgrowth of this, further growth. Said teacher six:

I know I can’t grow all of them in every single subject. So, finding what motivates them and what ways that we can show growth is key because I think they need those successes to really set them up to continue to succeed as students.

Summary. Before designing a professional development program that aids teachers in improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their
students, it is important to know what goals teachers have for themselves in these areas. As the themes that emerged from this research study show, teachers perceive their goals for students as much more than helping students achieve proficiency in a certain subject or grade level. The teachers in this study tended to have a more holistic perspective regarding their goals for students, desiring to see students show growth not only in academic proficiency but also in affective domains like respect, peer interactions, and their desire to improve. Armed with these findings it was then important to examine whether teachers perceived the professional development they received as aligning with these goals and helping them to improve in these areas so that they could, in turn, help their students show growth both academically and holistically.

Relationships with Students

One unique area this study sought insight on was teachers’ relationships with their students. The topic of professional development is quite often examined in terms of its impact on improving teachers’ instructional practice and increasing student achievement, quite typically as a measure of their performance on standardized tests. This study, however, endeavored to take a close look at teachers’ relationships with their students and the ways in which professional development might be leveraged to impact those relationships and, subsequently, influence instructional practice and student performance. Two important themes related to teachers’ relationships with their students and the effect of professional development on those relationships emerged from the data.

Relationship with students theme one: Teachers perceive their relationship with students in terms of love. All seven teachers in this study described their perceptions of their relationships with their students in positive terms. Six of the seven teachers in this study implied
a deeper relationship with their students expressed as some derivation of either the love they show students or that they receive from their students. Teacher seven, in only her second year in the profession, in speaking of her relationship with her students stated, “I, like, love them unconditionally” and that her biggest desire was for her students to “feel that love and security from me.”

Teacher two equated the love she has for her students with care and her wanting the best for her students. Said teacher two, “I’ve always been one of those teachers where kids know I care about them and love them…. I feel like they know I really care about them and really wanted the most for them.” Teacher one, in a similar fashion, drew comparisons between her relationship with her students, the love she has for them, and her high expectations for them. Said teacher one:

I love my kids. They drive me crazy sometimes, but I do love my kids…. I want them to know that I’m there for them, that I’ll fight for them, and that I’ll work for them, but at the same time, I expect them to work for me. So it’s a two-way street.

Teacher one further stressed the important role establishing connections with her students played in her ability to show them love and holding students to high expectations:

I have made it a priority to me to make sure that I connect with them as much as possible…. I’m always high-fiving or fist-bumping. And some of them have responded and they don’t want either one of those; they want a hug. And that’s fine. That works for me, too. So they hug me, a pat on the back, and I’ll say go and they’ll get what they need. To me, that is incredible. I think that’s very beneficial to have that. I think they trust me. I think they depend on me and I have to be there for them.
In addition to love and care, themes of trust and respect also emerged from teacher three’s comments about her relationship with her students. Said teacher three:

I think I have a good relationship with them…. I want to be a teacher that makes a difference, even it it’s in the life of one kid, that’s still a win. I want to be that person that does have a good relationship; it’s a comfort(able) place that you can come but, it’s also a place of respect, that they have the respect…. in respect comes love and care for somebody…. so I want to be a teacher that they can feel like they can come to, that they can trust.

Teacher three noted the need to fulfill students’ social and emotional needs, first, through teacher-student relationships, before endeavoring to help them improve academically:

I feel like, when you can come to their needs socially and emotionally then you’re going to make a massive impact academically, too. I want to meet those social needs that they have, and emotional needs, first and foremost, and then to go to academics because they’ll be ready.

Teacher four shared teacher three’s sentiment regarding relationships with students preceding and driving student academic achievement noting, “I grow pretty close to my kids because that is a priority to me ever since I’ve stated my career.” Teacher four noted some of the ways in which she fostered her relationship with students, saying, “I did a lot of home visits, church visits, and a lot of outings with my kids.” Much like teachers one and two, teacher four leveraged her relationship with and love for her students to drive the high expectations they had for them, in this case, in terms of growth. Said teacher four:

So I really try to get to know my kids. I try to get my kids to understand they can come to me about everything. But I do have really high expectations for my kids…. I also need
them to know that me loving them means I’m going to want them to grow which means that I’m not going to be okay with them staying where they are right now.

In describing the interplay between her love for her students and the high expectations she set and held her students to, teacher four recounted a particularly poignant story:

I can think of my one kid this year. They were living in a motel and they got kicked out for a while. So before they got kicked out of the motel, he struggled. And I struggled to connect to him. And a lot of it was, I understand, life is hard, but I want him to grow. He barely knows to capitalize the first letter of his name. He struggles greatly with instruction, and we were just going at it all the time. So, then they were gone for a week. And I wrote a note on his desk and it wasn’t like an “I love you note.” It was literally like, “I know you’ve been going through something hard, but your first day back here, I want you to step up your game. I need you to make sure you’re paying attention. I need you to ask for help.” And I just listed all of the things I wanted him to do. He read that note like ten times that day. And every time I caught him, he was like reading that note. He was on it. He participated. We have had such a huge shift in our relationship and that’s important to me.

Teacher six’s description of her relationship with her students was very similar to teacher four’s as she described both the love she had for her students as well as the high expectations she expected had for them in return. Said teacher six:

I love my kids…. it’s the tough love thing, so, I’m pretty hard on my kids sometimes, not like in a negative way, but I have high standards for them and I let them know that…

Also similar to teacher four, teacher six expressed her expectations for her students in terms of growth stating, “it’s not so much the intellect thing, because I want to meet them where
they are. For me, it’s more about the growth mindset and really, really trying…” In describing
her relationship with her students, teacher four cited two separate analogies, first expressing, “I
try to build confidence at the beginning of the year and really build a family in my classroom.”
Elaborating on family comparison, later in her response, teacher four likened her role in this
dynamic to that of a coach saying:

I want us to be able to come back together as class and to get to work and to support one
another. And I think it’s an important lesson for kids to learn, to work with one another
and support each other even if you’re not necessarily the best of friends. So, for me, my
relationship with them is a teacher, but also, just kind of a coach. I’m trying to make
them be good people as well as good students.

**Relationship with students theme two: Teachers desire to strengthen their relationships with students.** Another common theme that emerged from the data regarding teachers’ relationships with their students was the need to build upon or strengthen relationships or the class community they were attempting to foster. Teacher five, for example, expressed the need to “improve our class culture” and her desire for her class to become both “more tight-knit” as well as “a stronger, more supportive class community.” Teachers two and four expressed their goal for strengthening their relationship with students as striking a delicate balance between continuing to have and express to students high expectations while, simultaneously, helping students to understand that they have such high expectations because they love and care for their students so much. Said teacher two:

… I also want them to realize that because I set expectations and because I’m stern at
some points, it’s not because I don’t care for them or I don’t love them. It’s because I
have such high expectations for them; that I know that they can do so much more than what’s even being asked of them.

Teacher four expressed much the same sentiment, noting her desire to spend the school year “extend(ing) those relationships” and the need to be consistent in showing students that she loves and cares for them, but also has lofty expectations of them. Said teacher four:

… these are my expectations; it’s just a matter of being consistent. I’m going to love you. I’m going to love you always. Everyday is a new day. But when they do something good, I’m still going to be excited and cheer with them…. I’m not just going to be stern.

Teacher six, similarly, expressed her goal of striking a delicate balance between the love and care she desired to show her students while, at the same time, continuing to hold and communicate her high expectations to them. Stated teacher six, “I don’t want to get too relaxed with my students, but I do want them to feel comfortable because I think that’s the time that they’re willing to take risks and to put themselves out there in terms of learning.” Teacher six noted that strengthening her relationship with students involved concurrent efforts of “building trust”, “finding common ground”, and “just figuring out who my kids are.”

While teacher six was focusing on strengthening her relationship with her students through building trust, common ground, and figuring her students out, teacher one was focused on enhancing her connection to her students, fostering respect, and being a positive role model to her student, something she felt might be missing for a lot of her students. Teacher one summed up this need saying, “I think I need to be that for them. I need to be the best that I can possibly be so that they are the best that they can possibly be.”
For teacher seven, in just her second year of teaching, strengthening her relationships with her students was encapsulated in her goal to find a way to better distribute her love and attention more evenly among her students. Teacher seven succinctly described this goal stating: … there have been some students, in particular, that have kind of taken my attention from others. So I’m starting to do things like, you know, just maybe drop a positive note on a post-it and just drop it on their desk and doing little things like that throughout the day just so those other students, that maybe don’t really require as much attention, still know that I’m here and I love them and I love that they’re working hard….  

Summary. As professional development is designed to help teachers become more effective in their practice and improve desired student outcomes, the role of the teacher-student relationship cannot be discounted. Professional development quite often tends to focus on either improving teacher content knowledge or pedagogy. Yet, if there does not exist a strong relationship between a student(s) and their teacher, efforts to improve content knowledge and teaching practice may prove ineffective in helping teachers achieve their desired outcomes for both themselves and their students. As the teachers in this study posited, those teacher-student relationships are predicated on varying degrees of love for or from students and the fact that the teacher-student relationship is not a stagnant one, but rather, is constantly changing, evolving, and in need of strengthening. Thus, the question then becomes, can professional development be leveraged as a means for helping teachers to improve their relationship with their students?

Mandatory versus Self-Selected Professional Development

In an effort to get at the core of the central research question of this study, how Grace Elementary School teachers perceived the professional development they received as it related to improving their teaching practice, a distinction between professional development teachers were
required to take, identified in this study by the term “mandatory”, and those that teachers were
not required to take, identified in this study as “self-selected”, quickly became apparent. Table 3
details each teacher’s response when asked to identify what percentage of professional
development they were taking this school year they considered to be mandatory versus self-
selected. With the exception of teacher three, all teachers noted that they were participating in
more mandatory professional development than self-selected. In the interest of full disclosure,
teacher three did note this was an “off year” for her and that she had chosen to take more self-
selected professional development than typical:

I think I’m signed up for eight or nine (workshops) this school year and the only reason I
signed up for more is I felt like our county is looking for us to implement and use specific
methods and specific ideas in our classroom and… I need to be refreshed in that and just
have some new takeaways.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teacher ID</th>
<th>Teacher 1</th>
<th>Teacher 2</th>
<th>Teacher 3</th>
<th>Teacher 4</th>
<th>Teacher 5</th>
<th>Teacher 6</th>
<th>Teacher 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Mandatory PD</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>75%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Self-Selected PD</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Even including teacher three’s outlier data, all seven teachers identified that, on average,
they spent close to 65% of their time in mandatory professional development. Given the open-
ended nature of how teachers defined professional development, it was interesting to hear what
teachers did and did not include in their assessment of what percentage of time they spend in.
For example, teacher four initially stated, “in a given school year” she participated in
professional development “at least six times.” She immediately amended her answer saying, “if
you count our PLCs… then it’s like weekly” before finally elaborating, “as far as me seeking out other things to go to or finding something that is tailored to what I need, probably about four to six in a school year.” Teacher seven, similarly, took a broader perspective on professional development stating, “… for us, it’s every week. Every Wednesday.” Also of a related note was that none of the seven teachers explicitly included their weekly PLC meetings with their grade-level teams as being included in their assessment of how much professional development they participated in. Adopting a broad definition of professional development, such as this study’s definition of “all programs designed and implemented to support current practicing teachers”, PLCs, with the stated purpose of improving teacher effectiveness and student learning outcomes (Owen, 2014; Stoll et al., 2006) clearly fit the criteria. It was, thus, interesting to note that none of the teachers in this study perceived of their weekly PLC meetings as a form of professional development.

One other interesting observation of note regarding the perceptions of teachers regarding the time spent in mandatory versus self-selected professional development was the differences between experienced and beginning teachers. Teacher three aside, teachers six and seven, both only in their second year of teaching, identified lower (60%) percentages of mandatory PD than their more experienced colleagues. As beginning teachers within their first three years of teaching, both teachers were required to attend monthly new teacher induction trainings that their experienced colleagues were not, therefore it would have been assumed that they would have identified a greater percentage of mandatory professional development than experienced teachers.

While no explicit themes were derived from teachers’ reporting of their perception of how much mandatory professional development they participated in versus self-selected, the
information obtained from these answers when coupled with some of the themes that emerged from teachers’ general perceptions of professional development proved invaluable and insightful in conjunction with other themes which surfaced throughout this study. For example, as was discussed earlier in this section, all of the teachers in this study perceived of professional development as an opportunity. Likewise, in setting goals for themselves and their students, the theme of growth was quite prominent. If teachers are earnest in their desire to grow professionally and are setting personal goals that align with this desire than it would stand to reason that professional development could be an effective means toward the achievement of those goals. Couple this with all seven teachers in this study perceiving professional development as an opportunity and it is easy to see an alignment between teachers’ goals and professional development.

When you factor in the difference between the percentage of time teachers spend in mandatory versus self-selected professional development, however, a different picture begins to emerge. For example, while it is quite possible that many of the mandatory professional developments teachers attend align closely with the goals they may set for themselves, this is not likely given the individualistic nature of these goals and the varying backgrounds, skillsets, and experiences of each teacher. If a district or school is holding true to permitting teachers to set all of their goals independently based on self-identified areas of growth, than it would be extremely difficult to predict commonalities of goals across sets of teachers and be able to mandate district-wide or school-wide professional development that addresses all or most of those needs. Likewise, if a district or school is mandating a common goal for all or most sets of teachers in the hopes of offering professional development that aligns with said goal, it is difficult to believe
this goal would be authentically applicable to all teachers based on each individual teacher’s backgrounds, skillsets, and experiences.

It is more likely, then, that the mandatory professional development teachers receive does not align as closely with their individual needs or goals, whether explicitly stated or not, than the professional development they may seek out and opt into on their own. It is troubling, then, to consider that the teachers in this study stated they spend, on average, nearly 2/3 of their dedicated professional development time in mandatory PD. While it is certainly conceivable that some of this professional development may, by happenchance, align with teachers’ needs, or that such mandatory trainings may wind up addressing unrealized needs teachers have, it still remains true that teachers are only spending an average of 1/3 of their professional development time in self-selected PD that, presuming it is quality, aligns more closely to their needs. This context will play an important role in considering some of the additional themes that emerged from the data in this study.

Mandatory Professional Development

Mandatory professional development theme one: Teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too broad. One common theme associated with mandatory professional development shared by the participants in this study was how broad such training offerings typically were. While recognizing that district and school leaders typically had the best interests of their staffs and students in mind, the teachers in this study also conceded that any attempt to mandate professional development topics relevant to all staff members often meant selection of broader topics that might not necessarily meant the needs of individual teachers. As teacher one explained, “The mandatory, a lot of times, goes along with the school improvement plan or the direction that the administration wants to take….” Teacher five described mandatory
professional development as “more hit or miss” citing the alignment between the topics selected and her personal growth goals. Said teacher five:

For example, this year’s professional development, I feel like I’ve learned some things that will help me be more effective with my EL students…. Not every professional development I may take in a given school year aligns well with the goals I have for myself.

Teacher six shared similar sentiments noting:

It’s been at opposite ends of the spectrum for me. It’s either been really great, something I’ll use in my classroom or in my day-to-day planning, or it’s been completely not. And, so that seems to happen if it’s something that’s been mandated by the county. Like, you all have to go to the same thing. Instead of being more specific as to grade level or here’s a list of things that we’re providing that you could choose from.

Teacher three was a bit more sharp in her criticism of mandatory professional development, stating, “I know we need to do it, but I would say it’s not as helpful at times.” She also noted that the broadness of the topics, the fact that it was being delivered to larger audiences of teachers such as a school’s entire faculty, and the recognition that teachers are in attendance because they are required to be not because they have chosen to be can lead to a lack of buy-in even on the part of the PD presenter.

Said teacher three:

… sometimes I feel like even the people presenting (are thinking) I’m doing this because I have to and, so, they don’t see us as being there electively, so neither are they. So I think sometimes that hurts the whole gist of what’s trying to be accomplished.
Mandatory professional development theme two: Teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too repetitive. Another common theme that emerged regarding mandatory professional development was its potentially repetitive nature. Again, because such trainings are intended for “the masses”, the selection of such topics can often preclude taking into account the experience individual teachers have with such topics and if it is a training that they, as an individual, necessarily need. Said teacher four, “Like, for example, the training that we did at the beginning of the school years…was, like, such a waste of time, because we had already spent time the summer before doing all that.” Teacher two echoed this sentiment sharing:

In the past, I feel like a lot of the mandatory is not something that I necessarily need…. I feel like a lot of the mandatory is something that is mandatory every year, so we continue to get the same kind of thing over and over and over. It might just be said with new vocabulary, but it is the same thing.

Summary. The data gleaned from teachers’ perceptions of the mandatory professional development they received painted a picture of trainings that were too broad to meet their individual needs and often repetitive in nature. Recall that the participants in this study, while in disagreement on their exact definition of what constitutes professional development, generally viewed it quite positively as an opportunity for professional growth. Since it is not uncommon for school districts and schools to create and put on mandatory professional development, it is discouraging to hear that the participants in this study viewed the professional development they perceived as opportunities for professional growth as being too broad or repetitive to meet their needs and achieve their goals.

Self-Selected Professional Development
In contrast to mandatory professional development which received, at best, mixed reviews, self-selected PD tended to elicit more positive emotions from the participants in this study with two important themes emerging. First, the teachers in this study tended to perceive a better alignment between their goals and the professional development they selected for themselves. Second, possessing the mere autonomy to set goals for themselves and pursue professional development they felt aligned well to their goals tended to increase teacher satisfaction with said trainings. Choice, in essence, improved satisfaction.

Self-selected professional development theme one: Teachers perceive self-selected professional development as better aligned to their goals and more timely. One of the important themes that emerged from the data regarding self-selected professional development was that it better aligned to the goals teachers had set for themselves and the needs they had identified for their students. Said teacher five, “the self-selected professional development has aligned better to my goals as they are based on personal needs I have identified and are things that I have sought out that I felt would address those needs.” Teacher three echoed teacher two’s sentiments adding the importance expectations plays in a participant’s experiences. Said teacher three, “you know you’re going into it because you’re expecting to get something out of it for yourself”. Elaborating further, teacher three shared a recent experience she had with a self-selected training:

For example, last year, with the math foundations (a training she had attended), I knew I was not teaching as effectively as I could and that all went back to how I was trained when I was in college. So I knew I needed to revisit why math is done different now and why we’re teaching the way we are.
Teacher six, as well, discussed how the self-selected professional development she had taken had better aligned with her needs as a teacher. Said teacher six:

I took the fractions one (professional development) I mentioned and another one about executive functioning as a learning, not disability, but a learning issue. I chose those, specifically, because I knew I would be doing fractions in the fourth grade, which was a little alarming to me at the time, and because I had a student in my class that I just couldn’t seem to make anything work, any of the interventions I knew about and the ones that had been suggested and tried. It just wasn’t working. So, it was kind like a last ditch, please let this work. And it did work for what I needed it to do.

Teacher five also spoke of a better alignment between self-selected professional development and the goals she set for herself, referencing the professional development plan discussed in detail earlier in this chapter. Said teacher five:

If it’s something I have gone out, looked for, and taken based on a need I have identified, either for myself or for my students, than typically it aligns well with the goals I have for my students. The goals I am setting for myself and as part of my PDP are needs I have identified and things I’d like to do to improve in and, obviously, related to the needs of my students and the goals I have for them. So, typically, the professional development I have chosen for myself have helped me toward helping my students achieve their goals.

Teacher seven summed up the better alignment between self-selected PD, her goals and needs, and the goals and needs of her students, describing such professional development as “just for me”. Elaborating a bit, she described the purpose of self-selected professional development as:
… to make sure I’m doing all I can and learning all that I can with specific content areas that I feel I’ve kind of struggled with so that… I can better serve my students and better help them with accomplishing the goals that I have set for them.

**Timeliness.** Several teachers, in their comments, discussed the importance of timing professional development to align with their needs. In some instances, mandatory professional development occurred at a point after which teachers had identified a particular need and had already sought out resources and trainings to address that need. In many of those instances, the mandatory professional development seemed repetitive. In other instances, the professional development was poorly timed, occurring either too soon or too late to prove helpful.

Teacher four, in sharing her sentiments about mandatory professional development, stated, “I have felt frustrated in that, in two ways, it just was totally not something that we needed or it came at the wrong time.” She went on to provide an example:

I just did a Science A to Z training the other day… It was the best PD I’ve had on the program, ever. The lady (trainer) was able to tailor it to us. It was at the beginning of the school year, she was able to answer our questions, just kind of guide us though just how awesome this program is. But when Science A to Z first came out… we got an e-mail we’re signed up for Science A to Z, go use it. It’s a website. I know. I get it. You can click around and figure it out. But, all this stuff the lady told us we could do… we’ve had this how long and we haven’t used it.

Teacher one, in speaking of a training she took this past summer, prior to the start of the school year similarly stressed the importance of timing in aligning what she learned to her needs. Said teacher one, “the professional development I took this summer was how to use the reading program that we have that we are implementing throughout the county.” Both teacher four and
teacher one noted a lack of initial professional development on curriculum as hindering their ability to effectively implement said curriculum. In teacher four’s case, she lacked full awareness of the benefits of a particular program, Science A to Z, because the program was merely introduced to her via an e-mail providing her login credentials. Had she not independently pursued further information and training on the program, she would not have fully realized its benefits. The timing of her training on the program, over a year after it was introduced, cost her some benefits of the program.

In teacher one’s case, she had been expected to implement a particular reading curriculum but felt she had struggled to do so due to a lack of initial training on the program. Said teacher one:

I have implemented it (the reading program) the last two years as a pilot program and I didn’t feel I was adequately trained. When this opportunity came up, I seized it because I know my weakness is in reading and teaching reading and there is an opportunity to learn the program from the people that know the most about it.

Drawing a further contrast, teacher one, later in the interview, discussed the timing of a recent mandated professional development experience. Describing her current class as “under control” and her relationship with them as “positive”, the timing of a schoolwide, mandated professional development on crisis prevention did not seem as good of a fit to her:

Do I see crisis prevention interventions necessary in my classroom? No, not now…. I think that’s going to be… helpful, with some of the children that we’ve had that we’ll encounter. I don’t think I have any right now….

Related to timing, teacher two harped on what she described as the often repetitive nature of mandatory PD, starting, “we continue to get the same kind of thing over and over and over.”
In contrast to that, she shared her experience with a self-selected math training that she felt met and even exceeded the goals she had for herself and her students. Said teacher two:

So then the math foundations came up… I feel like I brought so much more back to myself than I ever would have expected on things that I don’t necessarily teach in my own classroom but it’s a skill that can take them (her students) even further.

Teacher three noted a correlation between the needs and interests of her students and the timing of the professional development she received. Said teacher three:

I know my group I have this year loves technology, loves to be on the computer, and so I’ve reached out to our technology coordinator and said I need help because I don’t know what I’m doing. So when my kids, when they are showing this huge interest, and I don’t have a clue, I’ve got to get help.

Teacher three also floated a proposition for a means to help teachers better align the timing of the professional development they take to their needs and their students’ needs. Currently, teachers in North Carolina are required to complete eight credits or 80 hours of professional development every five year renewal cycle (North Carolina Department of Instruction, 2018b). There is no requirement, however, for a certain number of those hours to be self-selected or mandatory, that those hours be evenly distributed over the five year renewal cycle, nor that those hours align with any of the goals teachers may set for themselves throughout each of those years. It is, therefore, possible for a teacher to frontload their hours at the beginning of their cycle, put off taking any PD until the final year of their renewal cycle, and fail to align any of the PD they take with their goals or student needs.

Teacher three proposed the following remedy:
I will say that I think it should be mandated that you have x number of professional development, even a year, not just over the course of, okay you only have to have 5 credits in the next 5 years. But… to be a requirement to have some amount, because everyone, just like our students grow, we need to grow, too.

Requiring teachers to spread their professional development hours out over the course of a renewal cycle could play a role in the theme of timing which emerged from this research. As teachers establish their annual goals mandated by their evaluation instrument (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2015) they may be more inclined to time their self-selection of professional development to better coincide with the goals they establish. Such a requirement would not address the potential problem of mandatory professional development not being timed to coincide with teacher needs. It could, however, create a greater likelihood teachers would invest more time and energy in seeking out opportunities to meet their needs, each year, while eliminating the probability teachers would wait until the end of their renewal cycle to load up on professional development to fulfill their requirement.

**Self-selected professional development theme two: Greater choice in self-selected professional development leads to greater teacher satisfaction.** Teacher three’s comments highlighted another important theme that emerged from the data from this study – choice. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, most of the teachers in this study expressed a degree of trust in their district or school to select professional development topics that aligned with what they identified as the general needs of a district or a school. Even when discussing their dissatisfaction with some of the professional development, they cited reasons such as the repetitiveness of a particular training or an alignment of a topic with a school, in general, but not as much with them, as an individual.
Similarly, the very fact that all teachers in North Carolina, as part of their yearly evaluation (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2015), are required to set goals for themselves, identify actions they will take to achieve those, and identify resources, such as professional development, to aid in their achievement of those goals, leads teachers to be more reflective in their practice. Though some districts and schools mandate one or more goals, teachers are still expected to set at least one autonomous goal. And, if the participants in this study are to be used as any indication, teachers tend to be earnest in identifying goals that center on a self-identified area of weakness.

Choice, then, plays an important role in teachers both finding satisfaction in the professional development they attend and also deriving benefits from it. As teacher three described, if a teacher is attending a self-selected training it is because they have chosen to be there, the training seemingly aligns with goals or areas of need they have identified for themselves, and they are expecting to get something meaningful out of it. Teacher six describes the role choice plays in her satisfaction with professional development and its potential benefits when discussing her district’s teaching and learning conference, an optional PD experience where teachers get to self-select all courses they wish to participate in:

… like teaching and learning conference this past year, as soon as the information went out about registration last year, I had already registered for it. So, I got to look through all the courses and choose, you know, based on what I did last year, what I thought was going to be best for my class. And, so far, it’s worked out really, really well. I got to choose either areas I thought I could use help in or areas I thought, again, would help grow my students. And I’ve used everything from that conference that I went to classes for.
Elaborating further, teacher six described one such professional development that she took that she felt aligned well with her needs as a second year teacher:

… when I did the teaching and learning conference, that was completely optional and, so, that for me was great because I got to choose if I was going, but then, I got to choose the specific courses…. one of the courses I took was about culturally responsible teaching which I feel, at our school, is really important because of our population of African American students and Latina students and Mexican students…. for me, I wanted to be able to connect with those students and those families more and so that was a perfect fit.

Teacher one, when discussing her experiences with self-selected professional development described a recent reading workshop she had attended as “the best professional development I have had”, following up by noting that she was “excited”, “motivated”, and “driven” to implement what she had learned in this training in her classroom. Teacher two echoed this sentiment, describing a recent self-selected training she had attended by saying, “I feel I got more out of that math foundations training than I have in seven years of professional development.” Elaborating on why she enjoyed this particular training so much, teacher two stated:

It was something, one, I was interested in, I wanted to get better at, but it was also something that wasn’t just for the general mass, everybody. It was more specified to one subject, one area and how we could teach it in a different light. So I feel like the ones I choose on my own, not always, but generally speaking, I feel like I gain so much more out of it and I can actually apply and use them in my classroom on a daily basis, not just once in a while.
Teacher four highlighted the important interconnectivity between the ability to align professional development to her identified goals and needs, the timeliness of such training, and having the autonomy to choose what she took. Said teacher four:

The ones I have selected myself have been the best ones because, I think, I knew what I needed and I knew that I needed it right then, so I took more away from it. And because I knew it was a need and I wasn’t being forced to go to it, it was something that I chose to go… that still plays a big part in how much you take away from it. But it also, when you select your own PD, there are things you look for. I need to make sure this is going to hit my needs. Because if I’m selecting to do this, I’m taking the time to do this, especially if I have to write sub plans to do it, than I’m going to make sure that it is really aligned to what I need and where I am.

**Self-selected professional development theme three: Self-selected professional development offers teachers more opportunities for quality collaboration.** In addition to a better alignment with their individual and student goals and needs, timeliness, and choice leading to better satisfaction with self-selected PD, a third of quality collaboration emerged from participant data. While it should be assumed and noted that there was a collaborative component to both mandatory and self-selected professional development, it was the quality of this collaboration which rose to the forefront when participants spoke of their self-selected experiences. Drilling into the data of participant responses regarding their self-selected experiences, part of the enhancement of the quality of collaboration in these settings is predicated on the commonality that all participants had willingly chosen to take part in the PD. Teacher five described this best:
Personally, I’ve enjoyed being able to network and talk with other teachers from other schools about what may be going on in their building or what they may be doing with their students. This is particularly true if it is a professional development or training we have selected for ourselves. Obviously, if we are there together it is because we have all identified this as a common area of need. So, being able to be in a training together with others who may be experiencing some of the same things I am experiencing and being able to share ideas with each other is one of the things I have enjoyed most about the professional development I have taken.

Teacher seven described the positive effects, as a second-year teacher, of being able to collaborate with colleagues both inside and outside of her building:

There’s just so many things that I’m still learning and will continue to learn, so it’s the opportunity for me to, you know, kind of soak in as much as I can. But I also think it’s (professional development) been a great way for me to get to know my colleagues.…. But, on top of it, there have been some professional developments that have allowed me to get to know other teachers from other grade levels and other teachers from other schools and… getting insight from everyone and different advice and different things that they do…to, again, collaborate with them and take different ideas from different people and apply it in my classroom.

Teacher two echoed some of the same sentiment as teacher seven, while adding the important role self-selected trainings played in providing teachers with a forum for being able to run ideas past colleagues. Said teacher two:
I feel like when I have professional development that just talking to other teachers and using them as a sound(ing) board and them using us as a sound(ing) board, I feel like you get a lot more insight than just watching a PowerPoint up on the board.

Teachers two, four, and six all also spoke about a more quality and intimate collaborative relationship with the instructors of professional development they had selected for themselves. For teacher two, this manifested itself through an instructor who had “shown us how you would implement something in the classroom” and then been available to support teachers through the implementation process. For teacher four, the quality of the instructor-teacher relationship had been enhanced by the specificity of the self-selected training and small class size, thereby allowing the instructor to better tailor the training to the individual needs of the teacher(s). For teacher six, the quality of the collaborative relationship with the instructor was enhanced by the “connection” she made with the instructor and her willingness to keep the lines of communication open and support teacher six well past the conclusion of the class.

Teachers four and six also spoke about the networking opportunities created by self-selected professional development and the channels of communications, with other teachers, that often remained open even past the conclusion of the trainings. Said teacher four:

So, if I’ve learned things and you have a really good presenter, somebody that you can then (say), hey, I want to this, how would you think about it? So, for me, that’s what I’ve enjoyed. Just the take-aways from the networking.

Teacher six, in describing the quality collaborative opportunities created by professional development, spoke of her recent experiences with an online training. Said teacher six:

So, the courses were still great, but I found I was talking to a lot of teachers about some of the activities and how I could make them a better fit for my students…. So, then,
you’re posting ideas and bouncing ideas off of each other and talking and having conversations, so it wasn’t just people in the county or even people just in the state; it was nationwide. So it was great to hear ideas from other educators from all walks of life and also from all different groups of students and experience levels.

**Summary.** As it relates to their ability to improve their teaching practice, desired student outcomes, and their relationship with students, self-selected professional development was perceived as better than its mandatory counterpart. In particular, study participants cited a better alignment and timeliness of self-selected professional development to individual goals and desired student outcomes. This alignment and timeliness was tied closely to teachers’ abilities to be able to have a degree of choice in what trainings they took and at what times with the presumption, of course, being that they chose PD that was closely aligned to their perceived needs and desired student outcomes. The self-selected professional development experience was enhanced by teachers’ ability to collaborate closely with the training presenter(s) as well as their peers. These self-selected experiences were perceived to be of a higher quality given the commonality that a majority of the PD participants had similarly selected this particular training to address a comparable self-identified need or desired student outcome.

**The Central Research Question**

The central research question for this study was *How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as it relates to improving their teaching practice?* Based on the findings and answers to the sub-question, *How do teachers at Grace Elementary school apply the skills and information received from professional development toward improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their students?*, the answer to the central research question is as follows:
Teachers at Grace Elementary School perceived the professional development they receive as:

(1) Coming in a variety of different forms.

(2) An opportunity for improvement.

(3) A means for them to grow professionally and progress toward addressing both individual goals and needs as well as the goals and needs they have for their students.

Teachers at Grace Elementary School perceived their greatest areas to improve their instructional practice and desired student outcomes as:

(1) The holistic improvement of their students in not just areas of academic achievement but also in their affective, social and emotional development.

(2) Students showing growth or improvement in both their academics and areas of affective, social, and emotional development, not the achievement of an arbitrarily identified proficiency.

Specifically, as it related to their relationship with students, teachers at Grace Elementary School perceived:

(1) A degree of love for, of, and from students as mattering most in the teacher-student dynamic.

(2) The strengthening of relationships with their students, over the course of a school year, as their primary goal.

Leveraging professional development as a means for accomplishing the goals of improving instructional practice, meeting desired student outcomes, and strengthening relationships with students, teachers at Grace Elementary School perceived mandatory professional development as a poorer means for accomplishing these goals due to:
(1) Mandatory professional development being too broad to meet individual teacher needs.

(2) Mandatory professional development being too repetitive, often covering material they had previous knowledge or experience in while, simultaneously, failing to address their identified areas of need.

Self-selected professional development, by comparison, was perceived by the teachers of Grace Elementary School as a better means for improving their instructional practice, meeting desired student outcomes, and improving teacher-student relationships due to:

(1) Self-selected professional development being better aligned to individual goals teachers had set for themselves based on their perceived needs and desired student outcomes and better timed to meet those needs and goals.

(2) Teachers having choice in what self-selected professional development they attended which, in turn, invariably led to teachers selecting trainings they felt better aligned to their needs which led to a greater degree of satisfaction with such PD.

(3) Teachers being able to engage in higher-quality collaboration with their peers and PD instructors that often extended beyond the initial professional development experience and provided teachers an additional degree of support as they attempted to change their instructional practice and meet desired student outcomes.
Chapter Five: Conclusions and Implications

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

As was discussed in Chapter One, this problem of practice was rooted in three important premises. First, when schools hire teachers they are making an important investment. Second, the success and learning of students is predicated on the effectiveness of teachers. And third, effective professional development is essential for improving teachers’ instructional practice, achieving desired student outcomes, and improving teacher-student relationships. While professional development continues to be the most sensible means for improving instructional practice, achieving desired student outcomes, and improving teacher-student relationships, identifying, designing, and implementing what constitutes effective PD continues to be a challenge. This study was undertaken in an effort to identify what teachers at an urban elementary school perceived to be the qualities of effective professional development and how such PD might be utilized toward improving their instructional practice, achieving desired student outcomes, and improving teacher-student relationships.

Revisiting the Purpose of the Study and Methodology

The purpose of this study was describe how teachers at an urban elementary school experience professional development and perceive its impact on improving their teaching practice, achieving desired student outcomes, and improving teacher-student relationships. To achieve this purpose, the teachers in this study were asked to define and describe their perception of what constitutes professional development, what desired outcomes they had for themselves and their students, and their perceptions of their relationships with their students. This study used a descriptive, single case study approach to explore how several teachers at an urban
elementary school perceived the professional development they received and its effect on their teaching practice, desired student outcomes, and relationship with their students.

To achieve the purpose of this descriptive case study, seven current teachers at Grace Elementary School completed a questionnaire and participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews were designed to provide participants the opportunity to address questions regarding their professional development experiences, goals for themselves and their students, and their relationships with their students. Data from these interviews was then gathered and analyzed using a systematic inductive process of data analysis. Participant responses resulted in several common themes and patterns emerging that were later classified into five major categories. The research questions guiding this case study were:

**Central research question.** How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as it relates to improving their teaching practice?

**Research sub-question.**

3. How do teachers at Grace Elementary school apply the skills and information received from professional development toward improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their students?

**Review of the Theoretical Framework**

This case study employed Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change as a means for framing this problem of practice. Guskey (2002) asserts that for meaningful, lasting change to occur in teachers’ attitudes and beliefs as a result of a professional development experience they have received teachers must first witness or experience positive change in their students. Guskey’s model runs contrary to most conventional wisdom within the realm of professional development which tends to hold that a change in teachers’ beliefs and
attitudes needs to precede a change in teachers’ classroom practices which, in turn, should lead to a change in student learning outcomes. In such a contrary model, buy-in from teachers is often inorganically compelled from teachers at the onset of the professional development experience. Attempting to change teachers’ beliefs and attitudes in an effort to compel a change in teachers’ classroom practices can often prove problematic and, in many cases, backfire and result in covert or even overt opposition (Guskey, 2002).

Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change follows a more natural evolution toward soliciting changes in teachers’ beliefs, attitudes, and buy-in. In his model a change in teachers’ beliefs and attitudes is not pushed for at the onset of a professional development experience. Rather, teachers are encouraged or, even to a certain degree, required to apply what they have learned from a professional development experience to change their classroom practice. If and such a change is undertaken with fidelity, it then stands to reason that the change in a teachers’ instructional practice will then lead to positive changes in student learning outcomes. According to Guskey (2002), it is these positive changes in student learning outcomes, witnessed and experienced firsthand by the classroom teacher, that leads to a change in that teachers’ beliefs and attitudes and, ultimately, a greater degree of buy-in to that premise of that particular professional development and PD in general.

Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change was used to guide the researcher in the development of the interview questions for this study. This theory was also used to guide the coding and data analysis process, particularly as it related to teachers’ perceptions of the professional development they received, their desired student outcomes, and their attitudes and beliefs. This theoretical framework was particularly helpful in explaining why study participants found certain professional development experiences to be beneficial or not
beneficial and why some experiences result in changes in instructional practice and student outcomes, while others did not.

This chapter will synthesize the research findings outlined in chapter four. This chapter will also discuss how the research findings relate to many of the major ideas derived from the literature and the theoretical framework which guided this study. Further, this chapter will highlight the implications for practice that arose, make suggestions for avenues of future research, and discuss the limitations of the study. Finally, this chapter will conclude with a personal reflection.

**Summary of Findings**

This study investigated the perceptions of professional development that teachers at an urban elementary school have and how their perceptions influence their teaching practice, achievement of desired student outcomes, and teacher-student relationships. The researcher conducted a qualitative case study to address the central research question: *How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as it relates to improving their teaching practice?* In order to address this central research question, each of the seven teachers in this study completed a questionnaire and participated in semi-structured interviews. Questionnaire responses and qualitative data were utilized during the analyzing and coding of the data. Through the qualitative process, the researcher was able to answer the research questions from the emerging themes. From the data that was collected and analyzed, twelve key themes emerged (Figure 4).

**Figure 4. Key Findings**

- Variance in how professional development is defined
- Professional development = Opportunity
- Professional development = Teacher growth
- Teachers desire holistic improvement in their students
• Teachers desire student growth over proficiency
• Teachers perceive their relationship with students in terms of love
• Teachers desire to strengthen their relationship with students
• Teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too broad
• Teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too repetitive
• Teachers perceive self-selected professional development as better aligned to their goals and more timely
• Greater choice in self-selected professional development leads to greater teacher satisfaction
• Self-selected professional development offers teachers more opportunities for quality collaboration

Interpretation of Thematic Findings

As discussed above, the data from this study was analyzed using a systematic process that produced five distinct categories and twelve emerging themes. The first category, professional development defined, had three emerging themes: (1) variance in how professional development is defined, (2) professional development = opportunity, and (3) professional development = teacher growth. The second category, teacher goals and desired outcomes, produced two emerging themes: (1) teachers desire holistic improvement in their students and (2) teachers desire student growth over proficiency. The third category, relationships with students, produced two emerging themes: (1) teachers perceive their relationship with students in terms of love and (2) teachers desire to strengthen their relationship with students. The fourth category, mandatory professional development, produced two emerging themes: (1) teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too broad and (2) teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too repetitive. The fifth category, self-selected professional development, produced three emerging themes: (1) teachers perceive self-selected professional development as better aligned to their goals and more timely, (2) greater choice in self-selected professional development leads to greater teacher satisfaction, and (3) self-selected professional development
offers teachers more opportunities for quality collaboration. The following section will interpret these findings based on the study’s categories.

**Professional development defined.**

*Variance in how professional development is defined.* In an effort to more deeply explore the relationship between teachers’ perceptions of professional development and its effect on instructional practice, desired student outcomes, and student relationships, it was first important to understand how the teachers in this study perceived professional development. One of the first themes that emerged from the data was a lack of consensus on what constituted professional development. For one participant the mere mention of professional development elicited thoughts of another meeting she would have to sit through or endure. For another participant, professional development equated to courses she needed to complete to strengthen her knowledge of and keep current with ever-changing educational topics such as content knowledge and behavior management practices. Yet another participant likened professional development to tools provided to her to help her strengthen different areas of her practice. For one of the beginning teachers in this study, professional development was defined in terms of opportunities for her to collaborate with and learn from her peers.

In light of the variance in participants’ perceptions of professional development, it was important to note some of the things that were not mentioned. For example, despite an emphasis on professional learning communities (PLCs) as a means for teacher growth and the fact that each of the seven participants in this study actively participated in a PLC at Grace Elementary that met at least once a week for over 90 minutes (see Appendix K for a sample schedule of the Grace Elementary PLCs) none of the teachers in this study mentioned PLCs in their perception of professional development. Similarly, Grace Elementary was in its second year of a “lab site”
professional development experience whereby teachers were observing their peers and reflecting upon those observations (see Appendix L for an example of the Grace Elementary lab site schedule). Again, none of the teachers in this study mentioned this experience as part of their perception of professional development, with only one participant slightly alluding to it when she cited collaboration in her definition of professional development. Thus, the participants in this study remained highly varied in their individual perceptions of professional development with several key components of PD, as identified by literature, being left unsaid by all or nearly all participants.

**Professional development = Opportunity.** While there was a great deal of variety in how the participants in this study defined professional development, one commonality that emerged from the data, particularly during the emotion coding process, was that all of the teachers perceived professional development optimistically as an opportunity. Two participants in the study described professional development as an opportunity to learn and improve as teachers. For one of the beginning teachers in the study, professional development presented an opportunity to collaborate and learn from her colleagues. Two participants in this study drew parallels between the benefits of professional development on them, as teachers, and the growth and achievement of their students, noting that as they improved and grew so did their students.

In addition to the opportunities to learn, improve, collaborate, and achieve desired student outcomes presented by professional development, one participant spoke at length about the relationship between professional development and her personal goals and needs. This participant, sounding a bit frustrated earlier in the study when defining professional development as repetitive meetings and trainings, noted that she perceived self-selected trainings as an opportunity and that she was more optimistic about this variety of PD. For her, self-selected
professional development was an opportunity to identify a particular area of weakness and then “gain skills or insight” into that area that would allow them to improve.

For another beginning teacher, professional development fulfilled the important role of helping teachers stay abreast and current in an ever-changing, ever-evolving field. This participant noted the ever-changing standards and objectives teachers were being asked to be equipped to teach, changes in technology that affected how teachers delivered content, and other ideas that emerged within the field as reasons teachers needed to constantly participate in professional development. For her, professional development represented an opportunity to stay current within an evolving profession.

**Professional development = Teacher growth.** Another common term that was repeated quite frequently by nearly all of the participants in this study was “growth”. Unlike, however, the more nuanced definition of growth embedded in the value-added calculations of student standardized test performance discussed in the literature review, teachers in this study defined growth more holistically. In discussing their desire to see their students grow, participants in this study cited their desire to see their students improve academically, socially, affectively, and in other areas such as demonstrating more responsibility and improving their relationship with their teacher and peers. The participants in this study did not, however, merely speak of the growth they hoped for from their students. Most also spoke at length about the growth they desired in themselves and their perception of professional development as an important means for generating such growth.

Teacher one, for example, took both a historical and futuristic perspective on the correlation between professional development and growth noting, “if we, as educators, don’t take more professional development and keep learning we’re not going to get better and we’re not
going to be able to grow with the changes that are coming in education.” Teacher seven, a beginning teacher in her second year, equated her first year of teaching to survival and, having successfully persevered, touted her desire to grow in her understanding of curriculum and ways to meet the diverse needs of her students. For one of the veteran teachers in this study professional development was not viewed as a means for better understanding curriculum, since she felt comfortable in her content knowledge, but rather, as a means for innovating and improving her instructional delivery.

Teacher three drew a connection between the growth she was expecting from her students and her own personal growth stating, “as a teacher, I want to grow. I have goals that I have set for myself that I want to grow and, in return, it helps my students, too.” Teacher four, similarly, noted the relationship between her personal goals and the growth she hoped to experience as a professional. Teacher four’s experience was unique in that she came to Grace Elementary from a smaller school district that had only four schools: a primary (K-2), an elementary (3-5), a middle, and a high school. While one might think the opportunities for teacher growth might be more abundant in a school system with 55 schools, teacher four noted a paradox stating, “(in the smaller school district) there was a huge push for you to go out and find the PD that would benefit you and your students the most”. Therefore, while the quantity of readily-available professional development opportunities was greater in the larger school district, more trainings were mandated and it was easier to simply fulfill one’s PD requirement without ever, necessarily, meeting one’s individual goals. In contrast, in the smaller school district teachers had to self-select nearly all of the professional development they took, most frequently from venues outside of their school district and, therefore, were more inclined to opt into opportunities they felt would grow them as a professional.
While all teachers are required to set and work towards goals throughout the course of a school year, as part of their yearly evaluation, how those goals are set and managed is left to the discretion of school districts, individual schools or departments, and, oftentimes, the teachers themselves. Similarly, the resources provided to teachers in support of their goals can vary significantly from one school district to another and even from one school to another within the same district. For example, some districts or schools like to adopt a theme or focus for the school year, often based on district or school test score outcomes, and require teachers to align one of their goals to that theme or focus. Those districts or schools then often provide professional development opportunities aligned to that theme or focus thereby allowing teachers to use their participation in such trainings as part of their actions toward completion of their goals.

Other districts and schools provide teachers more autonomy in setting their goals and identifying resources to support their completion of their goals. Teacher four described the process for identifying professional development opportunities aligned to her goals and needs employed by her previous school:

So, there was like a huge push for you to go out and find the PD that would benefit you and your students most…. I would just go to my principal and say, hey this is what I need… they continually sent us things that were going on around the state and around our area that you could pick; things that were going to be most meaningful to your kids…. even in your conversations after an observation, my old principal would be like, okay, so what PD are you looking for? What do you need?

Elaborating a bit further, teacher four explained that much of the autonomy in selecting professional development was an outgrowth of the size and limited resources of her previous
school system stating, “we only had four schools in our system, a K-2, a 3-5, a middle school, and a high school.” Whether a district or school encourages teachers to identify and set growth goals for themselves or requires teachers to set one or more goals aligned to a specific theme or focus coupled with the degree of autonomy they afford teachers in identifying and participating in professional development gives rise to another important theme from this study.

**Teachers goals and desired student outcomes.**

*Teachers desire holistic improvement in their students.* In order to answer the central research question in this study, it was important to gain a clearer understanding of the goals teachers had for their students and their desired outcomes. Much of the attention that is publicly given to student learning outcomes tends to focus on student achievement results from standardized tests. Data from this study, however, revealed two themes that had only seemed to touch upon the student test scores that tend to dominate the educational headlines. The first of these two themes was that teachers in this study took a more holistic perspective on the outcomes they desired from their students.

When discussing their desired outcomes for their students, most participants in this study stressed the affective qualities they hoped students would show improvement in over the course of the school year. These qualities ranged from “to be nice, good kids” to “support each other and respect each other” and grow “socially and emotionally”. One participant in this study noted a difference between what she deemed the “academic world” and the “social world”, placing the emphasis on growing her students socially noting, “I don’t want them to grow just academically. I feel like I fail the student if that’s all I do….” This participant, along with two others, spoke more holistically of their aspirations for their students. They emphasized their desire for each
student to be a “better person” or the “best person they can be”, noting that their academic performance was only one of the characteristics they were hoping to improve.

As will be discussed later in this section, this theme was a particularly important one as it related to the central research question of this study. Given the prevalent emphasis on student performance on standardized test scores (Smith, 2014; Smith & Kubacka, 2017; Steedle & Gorchowalski, 2017) as measures of student “success”, much professional development tends to focus on improving teacher content knowledge and/or teacher pedagogy (Koretz, 2017; Smith & Kubacka, 2017) with the hope that improvement in teaching practice in these areas will lead to gains in student performance on standardized tests. Yet, as this study revealed, such a sole emphasis on improving content knowledge and pedagogy toward the goal of improving student standardized test scores may be misplaced. Given the desire of the teachers in this study to improve their students holistically, an argument can be made for professional development that aids teachers in achieving these goals and desired outcomes.

**Teachers desire growth over proficiency.** An additional theme which emerged from the data from the study, as it related to teachers’ goals and student outcomes, was the desire by all participants to see growth in their students over the course of the school year. While participants varied in their definition of growth, each expressed a desire for their students, both collectively and individually, to show improvement in a range of different areas. For three of the teachers in this study, growth was defined in terms of an improvement in student engagement in the learning process. Teacher two defined growth as students realizing “that learning can be a lot of fun” while teacher seven stated, “no matter what grade level they’re in (she wanted students to)... to just feel engaged and love to be in school.”
This emphasis of student growth, particularly in academics, was also quite surprising considering the unequal weight placed on student proficiency in North Carolina, the state in which all seven participants in this study taught. In the state of North Carolina, individual schools are publicly rated and assigned letter grades (A-D and F) on the basis of student performance on standardized tests (North Carolina General Statute §115C-83.15). In deriving their school grades, North Carolina disproportionately weights student proficiency, a distinction awarded to all students who score a 3, 4, or 5 on end-of-grade (EOG) or end-of-course (EOC) assessments, over growth, as measured by how students score on their EOG or EOC compared to how they were projected to score. In North Carolina’s rating or school “report card” system, student proficiency is weighted as 80% of a school’s “grade” while student growth accounts for only 20% of that same grade.

While teachers themselves are not officially rated on the basis of how many of their students achieved proficiency, they are under an inordinate amount of pressure to both maintain proficiency in those students who have achieved this status in previous years as well as increasing the number of proficient students in their classroom. Additionally, given the significant impact student proficiency has on a school’s overall rating, the publicity given to such school ratings, the stigma that may be attached to working at an F, D, or even C-rated school, and the fact that such ratings are only handed out once per school year, it is safe to say that teachers may feel enormous pressure to ensure they maintain or increase the number of proficient students in their classroom each year. Therefore, it was quite surprising to see that all of the teachers in this study emphasized student growth over student proficiency.
Teacher four was one of the most adamant of the participants in this study about valuing student growth over proficiency, going so far as saying, “I don’t care about proficiency. I don’t really care about test scores… I like to celebrate a child’s growth.” To reinforce her point, she went on to share the story of a particular school year during which a majority of her students had shown growth on their end-of-grade (EOG) standardized test. Teacher four was particularly pleased to have had so many of her students make their first “3” on an EOG, the threshold set by the state of North Carolina for students to be deemed “proficient”. She, however, vividly recalled one particular student who had spent the entire school day taking her test and, when all was said and done, had grown from a Level 1 (the lowest score students can receive on an EOG) to a Level 3 (proficient). While that student had demonstrated academic growth as measured by a standardized test, teacher four was prouder of the growth in confidence, perseverance, and resiliency that had been exhibited by this student over the course of the school year.

Teacher four’s epiphany regarding the growth she saw in her students that particular school year aligns closely to Guskey’s (2014) theoretical framework that teachers are more likely to buy into a change when they noticeably see the benefits of that change in their students. This rings particularly true for student proficiency versus growth. While student proficiency is an ultimate goal for all students, it is the change in student proficiency, discernible as either student regression from a passing score to a failing score or improvement in their score, that often garners attention from teachers.

Lending further weight to Guskey’s (2014) theoretical perspective, upon seeing positive growth in her students during that particular school year, teacher four credited a professional development class she had taken on infusing more dialogue into her class as part of the rationale for the growth her students exhibited:
And, when I look back at those kids, all we did that year, that was the first year I started conversations in math time, math class. It was such a different class. We had built this culture about, that math was our conversation time; we just had this back and forth kind of thing. … When they came to math, they were like a totally different set of kids and I feel like it was because we knew each other, we respected each other, and we were just able to talk about math.

Another participant in this study, teacher five, expressed similar sentiments about the educational journey of her students. For teacher five, expecting all students to be proficient, as measured by a standardized test, by the end of the school year was an unrealistic goal. A more realistic goal, in her mind, was for her students to be “learning more” and “becoming more proficient.” She spoke of this goal for her students both in terms of academic proficiency as well as in a holistic improvement in her students’ initiative and desire to learn saying:

I want them to grow as learners, to read more and want to read more and to be better in math. Now will they all be considered proficient in all areas by the end of the school year? No. But I at least want them to be further along than where they came to me at….

Another participant in this study equated student growth to a series of “light bulb moments” that culminated in students having a better understanding of concepts that had previously alluded them. Teachers three and one emphasized the growth they hoped to see in their students in socially and more holistically. For teacher three, this meant such things as “do I treat others the way I want to be treated” and her desire for each student to “just be a better person.” Teacher three went as far as placing an emphasis on the social growth she expected from students stating, “I don’t want them to grow just academically. I feel like I fail the student if that’s all I do.” Teacher one, similarly, expressed that academic growth, exclusively, was not
sufficient and that her ultimate goal was to “prepare them as people and successful citizens in society after school.” To achieve this goal, according to teacher one, overall growth would be necessary such that each student becomes “a better person all-around, academically, socially, emotionally, (and) physically.”

Teacher six posited that student growth had the capacity to help students improve exponentially. According to her reasoning, as students grew or improved in one area the success they would begin to feel would help them to grow more confident, in general, which would lead to additional growth in all other areas. She recounted the story of one of her students who was deemed “not proficient” on a standardized test at the beginning of the school year. When that same student took her EOG, at the end of the school year she, again, did not pass, but this time was within one or two correct answers of passing. While an outsider might continue to view this student as a “failure” for her inability to achieve “proficiency” on her EOG, teacher six stressed the need to celebrate student growth and the potential it serves to beget further improvement and success from students:

I know I can’t grow all of them in every single subject. So, finding what motivates them and what ways that we can show growth is key because I think they need those successes to really set them up to continue to succeed as students.

**Relationship with students.**

*Teachers perceive their relationship with students in terms of love.* Whether teachers are desiring to holistically improve their students, derive a degree of academic or social growth from them, or place them on a path of success, an argument can be made for the important role teacher-student relationships plays in each of these desired outcomes. This study endeavored to gain deeper insight into how teachers perceive their relationships with students, what goals they
have for improving these relationships, and the ways in which professional development might be utilized to help teachers reach those goals. The first of two themes which emerged from the data is that teachers in this study perceived their relationships with students in terms of love.

For most of the participants in this study it was important, not only, that they loved their students unconditionally but, also, that students recognize, understand, and feel that they are loved by them. This finding was somewhat surprising since most participants in this study did not explicitly express a need for students to reciprocate the love they were giving to their students. One participant summed this up best, saying, “I, like, love them unconditionally” and need for them to “feel that love and security from me.”

For four of the participants in this study, love for students went hand-in-hand with having and holding students to high expectations. Teacher six described this as “tough love” noting, “I love my kids” while, at the same time, espousing that as an outgrowth of that love, “I’m pretty hard on my kids sometimes… I have high standards for them and I let them know that….”

Teacher one described her love for students in terms of a “two-way street” noting that it was important to her for her students to know that she was “there for them,” would “fight for them,” and that she would “work for them”; at the same time, however, teacher one expected students to “work for me.”

Teacher four equated the love she had for her students to her high expectations for them and her desire for them to show growth. One of the ways in which she expressed her love to her students was through the efforts she made to get to know each of them including such things as “home visits, church visits, and a lot of outings.” Teacher four made these efforts with her students to open up lines of communications such that students “can come to me about everything.” In return for her love, though, came high expectations for growth. Said teacher
four, “loving them means I’m going to want them to grow which means I’m not going to be okay with them staying where they are right now.” To illustrate this dichotomy, teacher four shared the story of one of her students whose family had experienced a great deal of trauma. Aware of what her student was going through, teacher four wrote him a personal note that conveyed her understanding of his situation and love and support of her student through this difficult time, but punctuated her sentiment by expressing to him that she still had high expectations for him. Describing the impact of that note, teacher four observed, “He was on it. He participated. We have had such a huge shift in our relationship and that’s important to me.”

**Teachers desire to strengthen their relationship with students.** While each of the participants in this study described their relationship with their students in terms of the love they had for them and their desire that their students recognize that they are loved, each participant also expressed a desired to strengthen their relationships with students over the course of the school year. For two of the participants in this study, strengthening their relationship involved striking a delicate balance between continuing to make their students feel loved and cared for while, at the same time, conveying their high expectations for their students. For one participant this balance involved helping students to realize that part of the rationale for her being stern with them, at points, was not because she did not love them or care for them, but rather, because she did love them and had high expectations for what they could do and achieve.

For another participant strengthening her relationship with students involved finding a means for remaining consistent in her relationship with her student as well as her expression of her high expectations. For this participant, consistency was about communicating her love to students, celebrating student achievements, but remaining true to her high expectations. Another participant echoed many of these sentiments noting that she wanted her students to “feel
comfortable” in their relationship with her because it is through that comfort that students were “willing to take risks” and “put themselves out there.” Striking that balance and strengthening the student-teacher relationship involved such things as “building trust,” “finding common ground,” and “just figuring out who my kids are.”

While some participants in this study equated the need to strengthen their relationship with students in terms of consistency, balance, and comfort, two other participants focused on their ability to connect with their students and give them individualized attention. Teacher seven, a beginning teacher in her second year, noted how attention throughout the course of her first year was unevenly distributed to a smaller percentage of her students. In reflecting on the ways in which she hoped to strengthen her relationship with her students, she stated her goal to make more of an effort to make small gestures, such as a positive note, to let her students know “that I’m here and I love them and I love that they’re working so hard….” For another participant, strengthening her relationship with her students involved finding ways to continually give students her “best.” For her, the student-teacher relationship was predicated on being a positive role model for her students, something she perceived was lacking for many of her students. In her words, “I need to be the best that I can possibly be so that they (her students) are the best that they can possibly be.”

**Mandatory professional development.**

*Teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too broad.* Having gained a better understanding of participants’ definitions of professional development, desired outcomes for their students, and perceptions of their relationships with their students and goals in this area, attention in this study turned to teachers’ perceptions of the professional development they received. It became readily clear that teachers perceived mandatory professional development
differently than the trainings they self-selected and that their perceptions, within each of these
two categories, played a role in whether they felt that variety of PD would help them reach their
goals. One theme that emerged from participants understanding of mandatory professional
development was that they felt it was too broad.

In noting the broadness of mandatory professional development, several participants
conceded that while they felt PD organizers had good intentions, it was often difficult for such
trainings to be applicable for all involved. As one participant noted, mandatory professional
development is often catered toward what is perceived as a broader goal a district or school
administrator may have for their respective organization based upon a general perceived need.
Implementing broad, mandatory professional development can be, as one participant described it,
“more hit or miss” in practice. This can be especially true as it relates to a training’s alignment
to a teacher’s identified goals or their current reality. For example, one participant shared her
experiences with a mandatory professional development she received that was tailored toward
helping her improve instruction for her English language (EL) students. This particular training
aligned well with her needs for this year, given she happened to have a high population of EL
students in her class. However, as she remarked, “Not every professional development I may
take in a given school year aligns well with the goals I have for myself.”

Another participant noted the correlation between broad, mandatory professional
development and buy-in, an important prerequisite for effective PD identified by the literature in
this study (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Lee & Min, 2017; Sandholtz et al., 2016; Taylor et al.,
2011; Yoon, 2016). This participant noted the lack of buy-in both on the part of the teachers,
who are being required to attend the training, and also the presenter(s) who may sense a degree
of apathy from those in attendance. As this participant explained, “… sometimes I feel like even
the people presenting (are thinking) I’m doing this because I have to and, so, they don’t see us as being there electively, so neither are the.” The dual apathy, on the part of participant and presenter(s) alike, combined with a topic that may be too broad or misaligned to a teacher’s goals and needs can often lead to foregone failure on the part of a mandatory professional development.

*Teachers perceive mandatory professional development as too repetitive.* Coupled with the broadness of many mandatory professional developments, most of the participants in this study also expressed a disenchantment with what they felt was often the repetitive nature of many of these trainings. One participant referenced how one recent training she took was a repetition of a PD she had taken that same summer. Another participant remarked how the same professional development was often repeated each year and, thus, she was being expected to sit through and endure repetitive trainings. More specifically, “I feel like a lot of the mandatory is something that is mandatory every year, so we continue to get the same kind of thing over and over and over. It might just be said with new vocabulary, but it is the same thing.”

While it might be expected that professional development might repeat on occasion, particularly as there is teacher turnover within the profession or a specific school and the need to orient new teachers to certain content or practices, the perception that the teachers in this study found PD to be repetitive is problematic for two important reasons. First, it speaks to a failure to differentiate professional development, one of the key characteristics of effective PD espoused by the literature (Gabriel, 2010; Hill et al., 2013). Second, if it is assumed that teachers spend a finite amount of time in professional development and mandatory trainings are given priority over ones they self-select, since teachers have no choice but to attend required PD, than we are wasting valuable time mandating teachers endure trainings they find repetitive. To address the
central research question of this study and design professional development that teachers perceive as improving their instructional practice, one of the first steps we can take is to look for ways to better differentiate PD and make it less repetitive.

Of interesting item of note regarding the repetitive nature of mandatory professional development that was not expressed by any of the teachers in this study was any mention of empowering teachers as leaders, deliverers of, or experts on professional development as a result of their experience. Best practices in professional development (Lee & Min, 2017; Taylor et al., 2011; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011; Yoon, 2016) advocate for teachers who have particular experience in given topics taking on leadership roles as a means for enhancing their buy-in and participation level in said trainings. This could be theorized as one means for better engaging teachers in PD and as a way to combat their perception of such trainings as being repetitive since they may be participating in a similar training but from a new perspective. Despite, however, a total of 62 years, an average of nine years, and a range of different backgrounds and teaching experiences, none of the teachers in this study made mention of being asked to be involved in putting on professional development, even on topics which they were previously trained.

**Self-selected professional development.**

*Teachers perceive self-selected professional development as better aligned to their goals and more timely.* While it did not come as a big surprise that the participants in this study favored self-selected professional development, some of the themes that emerged from the data were important not just in answering the central research question of this study but also in considering ways for making PD more effective. One of the important themes which arose from the data was that teachers perceived self-selected professional development as more timely and better aligned to their goals and desired student outcomes. For many of the participants in this
study, the alignment between their needs and self-selected professional development stemmed from the goals teachers are asked to set for themselves as part of the yearly North Carolina evaluation process (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2015) described in chapter four. As one participant described it, her goals were based on “personal needs I have identified” while self-selected professional development was “things that I have sought out that I felt would address those needs.”

Another participant specifically referenced her professional development plan (PDP) stating, “The goals I am setting for myself and as part of my PDP are needs I have identified and things I’d like to improve in… related to the needs of my students and the goals I have for them.” Given that part of a teacher’s yearly evaluation is predicated on demonstrating progress toward or completion of their goal, completing professional development aligned with their goals was important. In addition, one participant described the self-reflective process she had undertaken that led her to identify a particular area of weakness, set improvement of this area as a goal, and seek out professional development in an effort to achieve this goal. Said this participant, “… I knew I was not teaching (math) as effectively at I could…. So I knew I needed to revisit why math is done different now….”

In a similar fashion, another participant described her general knowledge of the curriculum taught in her grade level as well as the needs of a particular students as driving forces that led her to take the PD she had taken. Speaking of these trainings, one on fractions and another on executive functioning, this participant shared, “I knew I would be doing fractions in the fourth grade… and because I had a student in my class that I just couldn’t seem to make anything work…. The alignment between what she identified as her goals and the needs of her students, in turn, led to a greater degree of satisfaction with the self-selected professional
development or, as this participant stated, “… it did work for what I needed it to do.” Teacher seven who had identified a better understanding of the content she was teaching described self-selected professional development as being the “just for me” variety and described its purpose as “to make sure I’m doing all I can and learning all that I can with specific content areas that I feel I’ve kind of struggled with….”

Timeliness. One of the factors related to the theme of alignment that arose in this study was the timeliness of self-selected professional development. For example, in some instances participants found a mandatory training to be well done, but poorly timed, occurring after a teacher had already independently sought out resources to address a particular goal or need. In other cases, a mandatory professional development was considered good the first time it was presented, but repetitive and pointless when participants had to sit through the same professional development in subsequent years. As one participant surmised, “we continue to get the same kind of thing over and over and over.” Another participant summed up the importance of timeliness of a professional development to its effectiveness stating, “I have felt frustrated in that…it just was totally not something we needed or it came at the wrong time.”

Elaborating on her comments and frustration, this participant shared the story of her school district’s adoption of a new online learning platform called “Science A to Z.” According to this participant, when the program was first adopted it was rolled out in an e-mail to teachers informing them of their enrollment on the website and their login credentials. No professional development was offered on how to best utilize this resource or integrate it with other aspects of their science instruction. Having set a goal to improve her science instruction, this participant signed up for an optional professional development opportunity on this program, later describing this training as “the best PD.” The misalignment of the PD to both the rollout of the program
and this teacher’s goals and needs was best summarized by her comment, “all this stuff the lady told us we could do… we’ve had this (program) how long and we haven’t used it.”

Teacher one expressed a similar degree of frustration with a misalignment between her needs as a teacher, desired student outcomes, and professional development opportunities. She described being asked to pilot a reading program for the school district, but feeling inadequately trained in this program. Sensing this was a weakness she had, she pursued a professional development opportunity to improve in this area, later describing the training she took as one of the best she had taken. Not only did she feel the training had improved her pedagogy, she felt a renewed sense of motivation and excitement toward teaching reading. Again, however, the professional development was ill-timed, having occurred after teacher one had struggled for nearly two years to teach a program she felt inadequately prepared with.

Further supporting her point, teacher one also described a mandatory crisis prevention intervention training taking place during the current school year. While her self-identified goal for the school year was to improve her instruction and desired student outcomes in reading, she did not perceive of crisis prevention as an area of need for the current school year: “Do I see crisis prevention interventions necessary in my classroom? No, not now….” Consequently, a percentage of teacher one’s finite professional development time for the current school year was being taken up by a mandatory training in an area that she felt she had little to no need in.

Teacher three also talked about the significance of the timeliness of professional development aligning to her needs and desired student outcomes. In her case her biggest weakness was being able to meet her students’ interest in technology. As she described it:

I know my group I have this year loves technology…so I’ve reached out to our technology coordinator and said I need help because I don’t know what I’m doing….
when they (her students) are showing this huge interest, and I don’t have a clue, I’ve got to get help.

*Greater choice in self-selected professional development leads to greater satisfaction.*

Another theme that emerged from the data in this study was the importance of providing teachers with choice in the professional development they undertook. Data from this study supported the notion that greater choice in professional development leads to greater satisfaction with a heightened satisfaction potentially leading to a greater likelihood teachers will implement what they gleaned in their classroom. It is important to note that greater satisfaction with self-selected professional development is preceded by a positive predisposition to such training based on the alignment between the training and teachers’ goals as well as positive expectations on the part of teachers. As one participant in this study described it, if a teacher has self-selected to attend a training they have gone through the steps to identify the PD topic as an area of need seemingly based on their goals or desired student outcomes. They may have also spent time and effort identifying the training opportunity, set aside the necessary time in their schedule to attend, and may have had to secure a substitute teacher and create lesson plans for their absence. As a result of this, teachers are predisposed to anticipate a positive and meaningful experience from their self-selected professional development. As one participant described it, “…because I knew it was a need and I wasn’t being forced to go to it…plays a big part in how much you take away from it.”

By contrast, the lack of choice in mandatory professional development may leave teachers predisposed to expect a negative experience from such training. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, teachers perceive of mandatory professional development as “another meeting,” “repetitive,” and ill-timed to meet their needs. Thus, there may be cause for concern
that required professional development may present a self-fulfilling prophecy whereby it is difficult to overcome teachers’ anticipation that the experience will be a negative one.

When given a choice in their professional development, most of the participants in this study expressed an alignment of the PD they selected with what they perceived as their needs and goals. One participant, for example, spoke of a reading foundations professional development she had taken prior to the start of the school year that she felt addressed a glaring weakness she had. This participant felt empowered not only with the choice to attend an optional teaching and learning conference but also with the ability to select the trainings at this conference she felt would best address her needs. After attending, this participant described feeling “motivated,” “driven,” and “excited” to attempt to improve her teaching practice.

Two other participants in this study used similar descriptors when speaking about a math foundations training they had each attended. Though this training required each of them to miss multiple days of school, prepare plans for their substitutes on the days of their absences, and complete course-related homework, they both described the PD as one of the most beneficial they have taken. Said one participant, “I feel I got more out of that math foundations training than I have in seven years of professional development.”

Choice, alignment, and timeliness figured prominently into another participant’s satisfaction with professional development. In describing her preference for self-selected professional development, she stated, “I knew what I needed and I knew that I needed it right then.” This participant also emphasized how choice afforded teachers the ability to consider their needs, desired student outcomes, the timing of the professional development, and also their preferences in PD delivery. As she stated, “when you select your own PD, there are things you
look for. I need to make sure this is going to hit my needs…. I’m going to make sure that it is really aligned to what I need and where I am.”

**Self-selected professional development offers teachers more opportunities for quality collaboration.** In addition to better alignment to teacher needs and desired student outcomes and greater choice leading to greater satisfaction, participants in this study also spoke highly of the quality of collaboration they observed in the self-selected professional development they had taken. What is interesting about this theme is that while some degree of misalignment can be expected between mandatory PD and teacher needs and a lack of choice in the mandatory trainings a teacher is required to take can certainly be presumed to lead to dissatisfaction, it can also be assumed that collaboration takes place in both mandatory and self-selected professional development settings. Thus, the fact that the participants in this study found the collaboration that took place in the self-selected setting to be of higher-quality was quite interesting.

Teacher five cited a commonality amongst the participants in self-selected professional development as her reason for rating the quality of collaboration higher. Unlike mandatory PD, which the participants in this study observed was most commonly too broad to meet their needs, teachers in a self-selected training typically share a goal or need which they hope will be addressed. As teacher five observed about self-selected professional development, “obviously, if we are there together it is because we have all identified this as a common area of need.” This commonality not only enhanced the quality of the collaboration for teacher five, but also improve the overall effectiveness of the training itself:

Personally, I’ve enjoyed being able to network and talk with other teachers from other schools about what may be going on in their building or what they may be doing with their students. …being able to be in a training together with others who may be
experiencing some of the same things I am experiencing and being able to share ideas
with each other is one of the things I have enjoyed most about the professional
development I have taken.

Another participant shared similar sentiment, stressing the value of being able to share
experiences with her colleagues that could more directly guide her instructional practice and
decision-making. One of the more valuable aspects of self-selected professional development,
according to this participant, was “to get to know other teachers from other grade levels and
other teachers from other schools.” From these interactions, she could then garner “insight from
everyone and different advice” and, finally, “take different ideas from different people and apply
it in my classroom.”

For another participant, self-selected professional development often offered a forum for
teachers to be able to bounce ideas off of each other and benefit from both the experience in the
room and also the unity derived from a common need or goal that had brought everyone
together. For this teacher, the benefit of the enhanced quality of the collaboration of a self-
selected professional development often outweighed the information or expertise dispensed by
the PD presenter. As she observed, “… just talking to other teachers and using them as a
sound(ing) board… I feel like you get a lot more insight than just watching a PowerPoint up on
the board.”

Teacher six seized upon the benefits of exchanging experiences and ideas with colleagues
as enhancing the quality of collaboration and her overall experience in her remarks as well, even
when the training took place online. As she noted, even though the PD participants were diverse
in experience, where they taught, what level of student they worked with, and the make-up of
their respective classes, the common need or goal that brought them together, at that moment, in
that particular class, led to more quality collaboration and a greater benefit from the class. As she stated:

…the courses were still great, but I found I was talking to a lot of teachers about some of the activities and how I could make them a better fit for my students. …you’re posting ideas and bouncing ideas off of each other. …it was great to hear ideas from other educators from all walks of life and also from all different groups of students and experience levels.

Three other participants spoke of a higher quality and more intimate collaborative relationship with the instructors in self-selected professional development. Whereas, as was previously mentioned in this chapter, one participant had observed a degree of shared apathy by participants and instructors alike in mandatory professional development, the opposite seemed to be true of self-selected PD. Perhaps due to a more positive predisposition toward a training they had opted into, each of these three participants described a positive quality in the collaborative relationship between themselves and their instructor. For one participant it was the presenter tailoring their instruction to better meet the needs of their audience. For another it was a connection she made with the instructor as well as the instructor’s willingness to stay in touch and serve as a resource for this participant even after the training had concluded. For the third participant collaboration was enhanced by the instructor’s willingness to show, rather than just tell, them how to implement something and then being willing and available to support teachers throughout their implementation of the strategy she had taught them.

**Summary.**

The participants in this study described in detail their understandings of what constitutes professional development, their goals and desired student outcomes, their perceptions of their
relationships with their students, and their perceptions of the professional development they have received. While participants viewed professional development as opportunity and a means for showing growth, there was a great deal of variance in how each of them defined PD. The participants in this study did share two important commonalities related to their goals and desired student outcomes. First, the participants in this study desired for their students to improve holistically in a variety of different areas ranging from academically to socially to more generalized qualities such as their relationship with their peers and general maturity. Second, the participants in this study desired for their students to show growth, particularly academically, with the understanding that not all of their students would achieve the standard of grade-level proficiency the end of a given school year.

Participants in this study described their relationship with their students in terms of love and all expressed a degree of desire to strengthen their relationship with their students as the school year progressed. When discussing the professional development they had received, the participants in this study described mandatory trainings as being too broad and too repetitive. When discussing those trainings they had self-selected, they viewed them as better aligned to their needs and goals and more timely. The participants in this study equated the autonomy and choice they had in choosing the self-selected professional development they took as leading to greater satisfaction and also spoke more positively of the quality of collaboration which took place in self-selected PD.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This study was based on Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change. As a reminder, Guskey (2002) posits that in order to positively change teachers’ beliefs and attitudes, following a professional development experience, changes in teachers’ classroom
practice and student learning outcomes must precede. According to Guskey (2002), only after teachers have experienced the benefits of an improvement in student learning outcomes will their beliefs and attitudes change. In Guskey’s (2002) theory, the experience teachers feel as a result of a gain realized from the successful implementation of something they learned in a training is the most critical part of professional development. This experience will then go on to shape teachers’ beliefs and attitudes. Figure 5 shows each of the twelve themes from this study represented in each of the different parts of Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change.

Figure 5. *Themes and Theoretical Connections*

*Professional development.*

*Participants perceptions of professional development.* In order to progress along Guskey’s (2002) continuum toward changing teachers’ classroom practices, student learning outcomes, and beliefs and attitudes, it was first important to understand how the teachers in this study perceived the professional development they received. The themes that emerged were helpful not just in understanding how participants perceived their professional development but also in identifying ways in which PD could be better designed and implemented to help teachers progress along the continuum. One theme from the data helped inform participants’ general
impressions of professional development. The other themes that arose presented themselves as either “barriers” that could impede teachers from implementing changes in their classroom practices or “boosts” that could encourage and make it more likely that teachers would implement what they learned.

Variance in how professional development is defined. Participants in this study lacked a general consensus in how they viewed the professional development they received. For some of the participants, PD was confined to courses or trainings they attended, often with the goal of strengthening their content knowledge or instructional practice. In some cases, according to one participant, professional development was intended to keep teachers apprised of current trends and advancements within the field. For another, professional development was defined as a meeting or series of meetings, she was often required to attend. Though only one participant perceived of the role of professional development as providing and encouraging a forum for growth through collaboration, it was evident, in later participant responses, that all of the participants perceived of a benefit from collaboration when the PD was well-executed.

Two omissions from the variance in participants’ perceptions of professional development presented themselves as important when considered in relationship to Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change. First, none of the participants in this study mentioned their weekly PLCs as a form of professional development. It is still possible teachers altered their classroom practices and realized changes in student learning outcomes as a result of PLC collaboration. The categorization of professional development as meetings that needed to be endured and a lack of mention of PLCs as means of PD, however, sowed doubt a degree of doubt that participants in this study perceived of PLCs as a means for changing their classrooms practices and, therefore, changing student learning outcomes.
Second, none of the teachers in this study mentioned the labsite PD experience that was being undertaken at Grace Elementary in their definitions of professional development. Guskey (2002) theorizes that in order for teachers to change their beliefs and attitudes they must first change their instructional practices and, as a result of this, see positive changes in student learning outcomes. One might expect that by observing the classroom practices of their grade-level peers, through Grace Elementary’s labsite initiative, teachers might be more inclined to adopt and try out some of their colleagues’ practices in their classroom.

Barriers. Two of the themes identified by the study participants in their perceptions of professional development presented themselves as possible barriers to the likelihood the teachers would follow through on changing their classroom practices to reflect what was presented to them in PD (see Figure 6). First, teachers perceived the mandatory professional development they received as being too broad. Applying Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change, it can be surmised that if participants perceived trainings as too broad to meet their needs and desired student outcomes, it remains unlikely teachers would put such practices into place in their classroom. Second, participants in this study perceived the mandatory professional development they received as too repetitive. In some cases, the repetitive nature of mandatory trainings resulted in teachers feeling like their time was being wasted on topics they already felt sufficiently competent. In other cases, PD was repeated to meet the needs of beginning teachers or new staff members. In either case, the repetitive nature of some mandatory professional development posed a barrier to the likelihood teachers would actually change their classroom practices and therefore impeded the probability of these teachers progressing through Guskey’s (2002) continuum.
Figure 6. Barriers Impeding the Likelihood Teachers will Change Classroom Practices

Boosts. While some of the perceptions participants in this study held of the professional development they received posed barriers to the likelihood they would change their classroom practices and progress through Guskey’s (2002) continuum, other perceptions served as “boosts” and may have increased the likelihood teachers would change their practices (see Figure 7). The first such boost was a greater degree of choice in the professional development participants selected for themselves. When afforded the autonomy to choose their own PD, study participants tended to use terms such as “motivated,” “driven,” and “excited” to describe their feelings toward such trainings. This motivation, drive, and excitement resulted in participants describing specific examples of their implementation of strategies derived from self-selected professional developments in their classroom practices, thus helping teachers progress along Guskey’s (2002) continuum.

In similar fashion, teachers described the quality of collaboration present in self-selected PD as being higher than that of mandatory PD. The perception of higher-quality collaboration was rooted in the common need or goals that led teachers to self-select a particular PD to begin with as well as the ability to draw on a diverse wealth of range of experiences and expertise in both the PD instructor as well as the other participants. Participants in a self-selected
professional development seemed more likely to trust in the expertise of the training instructor but also derived benefit from being able to better shape their implementation of the PD strategy on the basis of the experiences of their peers. The resulting higher-quality collaboration not only made it more likely that participants would change their classroom practices but also provided teachers with a support structure of instructors and peers to guide them through their change in classroom practice and towards more positive changes in student outcomes.

![Diagram: BOOSTS]

Figure 7. *Boosts Increasing the Likelihood Teachers will Change Classroom Practices*

*Change in teachers’ classroom practices.*

*Desired change in teachers’ classroom practices.* Despite a degree of variance in their perceptions of professional development, the omission of two key categories of PD, and some negative views of mandatory trainings, all participants in this study regarded professional development in generally positive terms. This was important as it related to Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change as all of the participants in this study expressed a desire to change aspects of their classroom practices in the hopes such a change would lead to the achievement of their goals and, ultimately, desired student outcomes. Guskey (2002) theorizes that before teachers will adjust their attitudes and beliefs they must first realize positive changes in desired student outcomes and those changes must come as a result of them
changing instructional practices based on what they have learned in professional development. Several of the themes derived from the data in this study reinforced the notions that study participants both desired to change their classroom practices and also put in place some of the strategies they picked up in PD (see Figure 8).

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 8. Desired Change in Teachers’ Classroom Practices as a Result of PD**

First, despite some of the reservations participants had, particularly regarding mandatory professional development, all of the participants in this study expressed that they viewed PD as an opportunity. Additionally, growth was another big theme that emerged from the data in this study, both as a desired student outcome and also as a goal participants had for their own professional development. When considered in concert with each other, these two themes implied that the participants in this study went into professional development hoping to come away with something they could put into practice in their classroom. Even more encouraging was the fact that if the PD was a self-selected one, teachers were not just hoping but, rather, expecting that they would come away with something that could be used to change their classroom practice as they felt the trainings they picked better aligned to their goals. As one
participant put it, “if I’m selecting to do this, I’m taking the time to do this, … if I have to write sub plans to do it, than I’m going to make sure that it is really aligned to what I need….”

A positive outlook not only played an important role in affecting participants’ changes to their classroom practices but also in teacher-student relationships. While Guskey (2002) does not specifically speak of teacher-student relationships within his continuum, this dynamic can be lumped under classroom practices with the impetus being that if teachers can improve their relationship with their students it is highly likely that they will see positive changes in student learning outcomes. The data from this study uncovered two important themes related to student-teacher relationships. First, study participants perceived their relationships with their students in terms of love. More specifically, teachers desired to show each of their students a degree of love, even if that degree was classified as “tough love,” and for their students to recognize that their teacher loved them. As part of this teacher-student love dynamic, study participants were not, necessarily, expecting students to reciprocate this love. Second, study participants desired to strengthen their relationship with students over the course of the school year. Therefore, participants in this study were predisposed actively seeking out opportunities to acquire, through all forms and varieties of professional development, knowledge and skills that would help them build upon the love they showed their students and strengthen their relationships.

**Change in student learning outcomes.**

**Desired change in teachers’ classroom practices.** Data from this study demonstrated that most of the participants were optimistic and even desiring to change their classroom practices as a result of professional development they had received. This was especially true if that professional development was self-selected and, therefore, more likely to align to their goals and needs. In order to assess if teachers felt the change in classroom practice they put in place
led to a positive change in student learning outcomes it was important to determine what teachers deemed as their desired student learning outcomes. While the current trend within primary and secondary education tends to be on measuring student learning outcomes based on how students perform on a standardized test, most typically in math or reading at the elementary level, it would be short-sighted to assume all teachers merely desire for their students to be deemed proficient on a standardized test as their sole desired student learning outcome. In fact, the data from this study produced two themes that seemingly contradicted this notion (see Figure 9).

**Figure 9. Desired Change in Student Learning Outcomes**

First, academic improvement was only one area in which study participants desired to see a change in student outcomes. Overwhelmingly, the teachers in this study also expressed desires to see their students improve in more holistic ways, ranging from academic achievement to social skills to students showing increased responsibility and being able to cooperate and function within a classroom dynamic. Thus, merely expressing a change in student learning outcomes as a factor of student performance on a standardized test was too narrow for the participants in this study.

Second, teachers in this study expressed they wished to see growth in their students over a desire to see them achieve an arbitrarily set standard of proficiency. Examples abounded qualifying how study participants perceived growth. For one teacher it was seeing a student who had previously scored a “1” (failing) on an EOG demonstrate grit and determination (holistic growth) as she spent the better part of a school day completing her test and achieved a “3”
(passing), therefore demonstrating academic growth. For another teacher, it was seeing a student rise from a low “1” to a high “2”, coming within mere points of passing her first EOG. And for yet another teacher it was observing a student who had been faced with poverty and homelessness rise above these conditions to put forth a solid effort in school each day.

**Change in teachers’ beliefs and attitudes.** Given this study’s focus on professional development and its effects on teachers’ classroom practices and desired student outcomes, it was not expected that themes would emerge related to a change in teachers’ beliefs and attitudes. In Guskey’s (2002) model, a change in teachers’ beliefs and attitudes serves as both the final stage in his continuum and also a catalyst to incite teachers to pursue more professional development opportunities in the hopes of furthering improving their classroom practice which, in turn, drives additional positive changes in student learning. Thus, in one regard, Guskey’s (2002) theory might be better represented as a cycle rather than linearly (see Figure 10). And while specific themes did not emerge tied to changes in teachers’ beliefs and attitudes, it was evident from the data in this study that when a professional development was done well teachers were more likely to change their classroom practice. This, in turn, led to teachers seeing a positive change in student learning outcomes, such as the examples of growth and holistic improvement described below. And while a change in teachers’ beliefs and attitudes was not specifically looked for, it can be inferred that some such changes, indeed, took place on the basis of study participants continuing to express optimism toward professional development and perceiving it as a means for them to grow and improve in their practice.
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature

The findings from this study closely align with the research presented in chapter two’s literature review. This section presents these connections.

**Definition of professional development.** Professional development comes in various formats, sizes, configurations and durations. While much current and historical literature has tended to highlight qualities of ineffectiveness of PD (Ball & Forzani, 2011; Goldstein, 2014), several qualities have emerged that have come to define professional development. Two of these qualities include a culture of collaboration (Malone & Hargreaves, 2017), professional learning communities (Bausmith & Barry, 2011; DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Stoll et al., 2006). Learning Forward (2010), in its definition of professional development, stresses collective responsibility, frequency (several times per week), a continuous cycle of improvement, job-embedded coaching, and the support of external assistance. Other scholars (Borko, et al., 2010; Guskey, 2014; Prenger et al., 2017) concur with many of Learning Forward’s (2010) key qualities while also
advocating that professional development’s definition include such qualities as being long-term, incorporating active learning, encouraging collegiality, and emphasizing analysis and reflection.

What was most striking about how the participants in this study perceived of and defined professional development was the degree to which it contrasted to the literature in this study. Participants in this study were just as varied in their understanding and definition of professional development as the scholars and perceived of professional development as both an opportunity and a chance to grow. When expressing the more tangible qualities they associated with the professional development they had participated in, however, the participants in this study shared very few of the qualities stated in the literature. For example, only one participant included collaboration as a key characteristic in their definition of professional development. Similarly, none of the participants in this study referenced PLCs in their definitions of professional development. Other omissions from study participants’ definitions of professional development included stressing of collective responsibility (most experiences they referenced seemed “top-down” in nature), job-embedded coaching, and analysis and reflection (this despite the school’s Labsites initiative). Thus, despite a body of research representing an evolving understanding of professional development’s definition and purpose, the participants in this study perceived their experiences, described in terms such as “meetings” where presenters read to them from their PowerPoints, as more akin to the ineffective practices highlighted in the literature.

**Teacher and student growth.** Another key similarity between the literature in chapter two and the perspectives of the participants in this study was an emphasis on growth. How growth was defined, however, varied vastly between the literature and participants’ perspectives. Much of the literature from chapter two emphasized the statistical quantification of growth as a comparative measure of student performance on standardized tests over the course of their
schooling (Gargani & Strong, 2014; Hanushek & Rivkin, 2010; Klassen & Tze, 2014; Marzano, 2012; Sass et al, 2014). In such a statistical model growth, often expressed as “value-added”, is used as a means for determining and expressing whether or not students have shown progress in specific subject areas from year to year. Over time, this growth model has also been appropriated as a means for measuring the relative effectiveness of the teachers of these students. As the literature from chapter two has pointed out, however, there are several flaws in attempting to draw generalizations of teacher effectiveness using a value-added model (Harris, Ingle, & Rutledge, 2014; Sass et al., 2014).

The participants in this study also referenced growth as a desired outcome for both themselves and their students. Their definition of growth, however, did not evoke statistical measurements comparing students’ standardized test results. Rather, the participants in this study viewed growth as a progression toward a more desired outcome. For students, this ranged from higher attainment on a standardized test to improvement in holistic areas such as getting along with their peers in a classroom community or showing increased responsibility. Participants were not merely desiring growth from their students, though, as most also expressed a desire for personal growth in their effectiveness as a teacher. As the literature in chapter two highlighted, how teachers perceive themselves can play an important role in their effectiveness (Aloe et al., 2014; Collie et al., 2012; Klassen & Chiu, 2011; Thoonen et al., 2011; Zee & Koomen, 2016). While a baseline for teacher self-efficacy was not established in this study, all of the participants did express a desire to improve in their craft and to grow through their participation in professional development.

**Qualities of effective professional development.** In addition to offering definitions of professional development, chapter two’s literature review also detailed the qualities other
scholars and researchers have identified as being associated with effective professional
development. As Desimone and Garet (2015) point out, all professional development, in
concept, has at its core the desire to improve teacher performance. Yet in practice, a great deal
of professional development falls short of that goal for various reasons. Perhaps the biggest
reason for this shortcoming is a disconnect between the identified qualities of effective
professional development and what PD continues to look like in practice. Some of the key
qualities discussed in the literature review for this study include the need for teacher buy-in,
differentiation, collaboration, professional learning communities, and a bottom-up approach.

**Teacher buy-in and a bottom-up approach.** Several scholars (Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012;
Lee & Min, 2017; Sandholtz et al., 2016; Taylor et al., 2011; Yoon, 2016) noted the importance
of teacher buy-in to professional development. Feuerborn and Chinn (2012), for example, found
that change efforts driven by professional development were more lasting when teachers were
bought into the initiative. Yoon (2016), more specifically, compared a reading professional
development effort, finding those schools that had a higher degree of teacher buy-in to the effort
were also more likely to have higher reading achievement. Lee and Min (2017) found that even
when different professional development strategies were employed, the one constant affecting
the change in academic achievement related to the PD remained the degree to which teachers
were bought into the change effort. Sandholtz et al. (2016), in following an extensive, district-
wide change effort over a few years that even when the resources for this effort were plentiful,
teacher buy-in remained the driving force behind the success of the initiative. Ironically, in the
case of Sandholtz et al. (2016), one of the stated goals of the reform effort was to encourage
teacher participation and buy-in. Yet again, in practice, the professional development was
mishandled as outside experts were brought in to supervise and advise the initiative, thereby
diminishing the very buy-in that was so sought after.

Findings from this study reinforced the important role teacher buy-in plays in a
professional development’s success. Participants in this study expressed a higher degree of
satisfaction with professional development they had selected for themselves, perceiving those
PDs as being better aligned to their goals and needs and timelier. Choice played an important
role in participant satisfaction with professional development. When teachers were empowered
with the ability to choose what they attended, in essence all of their self-selected PD, they
expressed a greater degree of satisfaction with the professional development, both initially and
following the conclusion of the training. This, in turn, led to a greater degree of buy-in to the PD
and a greater degree of the likelihood the teacher would actually implement components of what
they learned, thereby working their way through Guskey’s (2012) continuum.

Teacher buy-in to professional change efforts is especially important when it comes to
veteran teachers (Taylor et al., 2011). Research on new teacher induction (Allen & Wright,
2014; Ingersoll, 2012; Meijer et al., 2011) highlight the fact that beginning teachers have an
entirely different set of needs than veteran teachers. Not discounting the need to elicit buy-in to
the training they receive from new teachers, it can often be expected that these teachers will
require more mandatory professional development to get them up-to-speed on some of the
foundational practices associated with teaching, than veteran teachers. Veteran teachers, on the
other hand, crave the opportunity to offer input and guidance on the creation of PD opportunities
and assume leadership roles in the implementation of professional development (Lee & Min,
2017; Taylor et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2011; Yoon, 2016). Despite four of the teachers in this
study meeting the criteria to qualify them as veteran teachers, none of these teachers referenced
having assumed leadership roles in implementing professional development. While this omission may not have been intentional as there was not, specifically, a question to probe for this detail, it was still a bit concerning that the veteran teachers in this study did not reference having opportunities to share their expertise of assume leadership roles in the implementation of professional development.

**Differentiation.** Quite often the buzzword within education, teachers crave differentiation in the professional development they take in much the same way as students desire it in the instruction they receive (Gabriel, 2010; Hill et al., 2013). Participants in this study craved professional development that was aligned to their self-identified goals, noting they felt “motivated” and “driven” to both attend and implement the PD when it was aligned to their goals. Mandatory professional development, however, was most often perceived as being too broad, too repetitive, or ill-timed to suit their needs. Teacher four, for example, recounted her experience when she first came to Grace Elementary School. Though she was already a veteran teacher at this point, her elementary teaching experiences had been focused on exclusively teaching math and science. In accepting a position that also required her to teach reading and writing, teacher four had a significant gap which she needed to address through professional development. Yet, when designing and implementing its school-wide PD program, Grace Elementary did not offer teachers the choice in what school-wide trainings. A certain degree of mandatory professional development intended to inform teachers of changes in policies and practices or to reinforce school or district aligned goals can be expected. The participants in this study, however, reinforced the findings from the literature that teachers prefer PD that is differentiated and, therefore, better aligned to their needs.
Collaboration and professional learning communities. Several researchers (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Pedder & Opfer, 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Sandholtz et al., 2016) have supported the notion that instruction improves when teachers are provided opportunities to collaborate with each other through professional development. Teachers, specifically, and adults, more generally, tend to learn more from engaging in meaningful and productive dialogue with their peers than they do from the traditional “sit and get” format when an “expert” is brought in to train teachers (Pedder & Opfer, 2011). One of the rationales for the preference of collaborative learning expressed by several of the participants in this study is the commonality of shared experiences that has brought particular teachers together, in the first place, especially in self-selected PD settings. As teachers two and six discussed, teachers often attend self-selected professional development out a desire to gain knowledge, skill, or improve in a specific area. Gathering in a room with other educators who are experiencing the same challenges provides a forum for teachers to be able to bounce ideas off of each other or gain insight from the collective experiences of their peers.

Ronfeldt et al. (2015) found an increase in teacher collaboration to have a positive effect on both teaching practice and student learning outcomes. They, however, clarified that this only occurs when the collaboration is high-quality in nature (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Simply gathering teachers together in a room is not sufficient to expect positive changes in instructional practice and student outcomes. On the other hand, if teachers are gathered together and engaged in collaboration towards a meaningful purpose, such as analyzing student data in an effort to change instructional practice to meet student needs, higher achievement gains often follow (Ronfeldt et al., 2015).
One of the primary mediums through which teachers can be engaged in higher-quality collaboration is professional learning communities (PLCs). PLCs, by their very nature, are meant to be collaborative experiences for teachers with a distinct set of characteristics that are intended to help teachers focus on improvements in instructional practice and student learning (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Prenger et al., 2017; Stoll et al., 2006). As Watson (2014) has discovered, however, as PLCs have become more commonplace in education, their implementation has not always aligned with their intention. Similarly, DuFour and DuFour (2012) have noted that the growth in popularity of PLCs has cause the term to be generalized to indicate any group of teachers with a shared characteristic such as a grade level or content area team.

This certainly appeared to be the case with this study. One theme that emerged from the data was teachers’ desire to engage in more high-quality collaboration. Yet, despite the fact that each of the participants in this study were members of a PLC that met on a regular basis, none of the teachers referenced their PLC as a means of professional development or improvement. This was particularly disconcerting given the researcher’s observations of each of the team’s PLCs left the impression that Grace Elementary’s PLCs align closely with the ideals of high-functioning PLCs espoused by the research (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Watson, 2014). It is certainly possible, though, that study participants omitted PLCs from their understanding of professional development due to their ongoing and repetitive nature or because they lumped it into another category such as “meetings”. Whatever the case for the omission of PLCs may be, it is still concerning they did not immediately spring to mind when participants were asked for their definition and understanding of professional development.
Professional development and student learning outcomes. Progressing through the stages of Guskey’s (2012) theory of professional development and teacher change, one can draw a connection between the professional development teachers receive and changes teachers make in their instructional practice. Research supports the idea that high-quality professional development can lead to teachers experimenting with or trying out new practices in their classrooms (Borko & Klingner, 2013; Hill et al., 2013; Desimone & Garet, 2013). This is especially true if there is a degree of accountability in the implementation of a PD initiative whereby an administrator or instructor routinely follows up with teachers to ensure skills or content knowledge from the training are being routinely applied (Borko & Klingner, 2013). At the same time, though, it can be difficult to ascertain the impact of professional development received by teachers on student learning outcomes (Penuel, et al., 2010; Wallace, 2009). While a variety of different studies have shown the impact teachers can have on student learning outcomes (Desimone & Long, 2010; Desimone et al., 2013; Goldhaber, 2015; Kanter & Konstantopoulos, 2016; Konstantopoulos, 2014; Meissel et al., 2016) it can be difficult to distinguish natural characteristics of a particular teacher from those characteristics which may change as a result of professional development (Akiba & Liang, 2016).

Rather than aid in the resolution of this challenge, this study exasperated the matter even more. Most studies attempting to link professional development and student learning outcomes tends to focus on quantifiable means of measuring this relationship typically embodied in standardized achievement test results. In this study, however, teachers were asked to self-identify the desired student outcomes they were hoping to enhance through professional development. The data that emerged signaled two important things. First, the participants in this study desired for their students to show improvement in more areas than simply those measured
by a standardized test. Second, when academic achievement was referenced as the stated goal for students, the participants in this study were more interested in their students showing improvement than they were in them achieving an arbitrarily set standard.

Given that both of these areas, holistic improvement and academic growth, are difficult to both measure and quantify, this study created an added layer of complexity to the task of linking professional development to improvement in student learning outcomes. At the same time, though, the qualitative case study nature of this research did provide plenty of examples of professional development that teachers expressed a greater likelihood of implementing and for which they reported seeing benefits. Additionally, having greater insight into what teachers perceive of as the goals of the professional development they participate in can aid in better analyzing whether or not such PD helps them realize such goals through future studies.

**Summary**

The interpretation of the findings from this study was consistent with both the theoretical framework applied as well as the review of pertinent literature. In regard to the theoretical framework, this study supported Guskey’s (2012) theory of professional development and teacher change while adding additional detail to some of the components of his theory. Guskey (2012) theorizes a continuum teachers progress through in their meaningful application of professional development toward improving student learning outcomes and adjusting teachers attitudes and beliefs. This study identified characteristics of effective professional development which made the implementation of PD practices more likely, referred to as “boosts”, and other characteristics that impeded the likelihood teachers would apply what they learned in PD, referred to as “barriers”. In addition, this study aided in identifying how teachers define professional development, the first stage in Guskey’s (2012) continuum, and also expanded upon
the understanding of what changes teachers desire in both their classroom practice and student learning outcomes, stages two and three, respectively, of Guskey’s (2012) theory.

Comparing the findings from this study to the literature identified several similarities in how professional development is defined but, ironically, omissions in how PD is implemented. For example, both the literature and the participants in this study expressed the benefits high-quality collaboration has on improving teacher instruction. Yet, in practice, only one of the participants noted this as one of the qualities of the PD she receives on a consistent basis. Similarly, study participants expressed a desire for professional development that was differentiated and aligned to their goals and needs, another effective PD quality supported by the literature. In practice, though, this study highlighted the fact that study participants spend the bulk of their time in mandatory trainings that typically do not align well with their needs. Consequently, one big takeaway from this study is the need to better align professional development practice with the PD best practices identified in this literature review.

Implications for Practice

The primary objective of this study was to look at the ways in which teachers currently perceive the professional development they receive with the goal of applying this information towards designing PD that was more likely to positively change teachers’ instructional practice, student learning outcomes, and teacher-student relationships. While the literature review identified several qualities of effective professional development, the research from this study demonstrated that these identified traits were not consistently put into practice. Additionally, while the participants in this study identified they were spending the bulk of their professional development time in mandatory trainings, they reported a higher degree of satisfaction with the trainings they selected for themselves. These self-selected trainings also better aligned with
many of the characteristics of effective professional development identified in the literature review, such as higher-quality collaboration and a bottom-up approach. As a result of this, several important implications arose from this study.

**Implication one: Professional development needs to offer more choices that better align with teacher needs.** Participants from this study expressed a great deal of satisfaction when they were afforded a degree of choice in what professional development they took and when they felt such trainings aligned with their goals and needs. At the same time, as part of the North Carolina teacher evaluation process, teachers are asked to establish goals for themselves each year and then pursue means to achieve those goals (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning, 2015). Yet, the participants in this study reported the majority of their professional development time was spent in mandatory trainings that did not align with the goals they had set for themselves.

Assume, for a moment, teachers have only a finite quantity of time to commit to professional development in a given year. If, as was the case in this study, teachers spend the bulk of their professional development in mandatory trainings which they perceive of as “just another meeting,” too broad, too repetitive, and misaligned to their needs and goals. In this all-too-common scenario, we have squandered teachers’ precious PD time on endeavors that do not stand a strong chance of empowering teachers to try out new classroom practices that may positively change student learning outcomes as well as teachers’ attitudes and beliefs. This is especially disheartening when you consider that the participants in this study perceived professional development as an opportunity for professional growth.

While it may not be feasible, or even sensible, to merely do away with mandatory professional development altogether, there are some steps that could be taken to improve PD to
afford teachers more choice and better align what is offered to teachers’ goals and needs. First, given study participants’ satisfaction with self-selected professional development, efforts should be made to allow teachers a greater percentage of choice in what trainings they take. In this study, for example, teachers reported that 65%, or nearly 2 out of every 3, of the trainings they took were mandatory, while only 1 out of every 3 PDs were chosen by the participant themselves. Given participants’ greater satisfaction with self-selected professional development, this percentage should be reversed (1/3 mandatory; 2/3 self-selected). It is theorized that this will not only increase teacher satisfaction, overall, but may also increase teacher satisfaction with mandatory PD given these will represent a smaller percentage of the trainings they have to take and may, consequently, be easier to endure or benefit from the residual effects of teachers being generally more satisfied with their professional development experiences.

Second, efforts should be made to reduce the broad and repetitive nature of many mandatory trainings expressed by the participants in this study. It should not be assumed, for example, that all teachers need or should be required to take a particular training. For example, some training topics may be most applicable to new or beginning teachers or teachers that have more recently joined a school’s faculty. Other topics may be more applicable to specific grade levels or content areas. And, for yet some other trainings, it is possible some teachers have already been amply trained in that particular area. While it is certainly much easier to simply mandate an entire faculty be present for a training the extra time that might be spent upfront better identifying exactly which teachers should be mandated to attend a training could send positive waves rippling through a faculty as teachers feel their time is respected.

Finally, it is also possible to meld aspects of mandatory and self-selected professional development together to create hybrid models of PD that also improve teacher choice and
alignment to goals and needs. Teacher three, for example, suggested that teachers be required to
spread the credit hours they are required to take to renew their license more evenly across their
renewal cycle (which is typically five years). Instead of waiting until the fifth and final year of
their renewal cycle to amass 40 of the 50 credit hours they need, teachers would be mandated to
complete 10 hours each year and, thus, be more apt to seek out opportunities that align to their
goals and needs. Similarly, schools could offer several professional development trainings tied
into a particular topic, theme, or identified area of need, with teachers being mandated to take a
certain number of those PDs. Grace Elementary actually experimented with this model of
professional development the year before this study was completed, offering monthly “Tech
Tuesday” classes teachers could attend to learn about some digital tools available to them to
improve their classroom practice. A similar approach could also be taken with any number of
topics whereby a school identifies an area of need or focus and then works to create and offer
trainings that teachers could self-select to attend.

Implication two: Professional development is most effective when it stresses high-
quality collaboration. The era of “sit and get” professional development is seemingly over.
The literature (Butler & Schnellert, 2012; Pedder & Opfer, 2011; Ronfeldt et al., 2015; Sandholtz
et al., 2016) and data from this study supports the notion that teachers learn best when they are
able to engage in meaningful collaboration with instructors and their peers. Yet, old habits die
hard and the data from this study seemed to reinforce the idea that many teacher trainings
continue to be of the “meeting” variety whereby teachers are gathered in a room together while
an instructor speaks at them or reads to them from a PowerPoint they have prepared.

The good news is that all hope is not lost. There are several models of professional
development that stress its collaborative nature currently in practice that, if done correctly, could
swing the pendulum in the direction toward higher-quality collaboration. The first, and perhaps most powerful, of these tools are professional learning communities (PLC). A body of research (DuFour & DuFour, 2012; Prenger et al., 2017; Stoll et al., 2006; Watson, 2014) has been conducted on PLCs and schools and school districts across the United States have embraced the PLC model. Like any other model, though, if not implemented correctly, PLCs can be as ineffective as all other varieties of PD. Some schools and school districts, for example, have adopted the PLC nomenclature to replace terms such as grade level team, but have not embraced the guiding tenets of PLCs trumpeted by DuFour and DuFour (2012) and others (Prenger et al., 2017; Stoll et al., 2006; Watson, 2014). Thus, these collectives of teachers may be a PLC in name, but they are not a PLC in practice.

Labsites, like those implemented at Grace Elementary school, also have the potential to increase the collaborative nature if done correctly. In the labsite model, teachers observe in their colleagues’ classrooms, watching a lesson or part of a lesson. If executed effectively, the labsite process typically involves a pre-observation planning session where a grade level team identifies areas in which they would like to collectively improve and establishes “look-fors” for their observation. Following the observation, the grade level team gathers again, reflects upon what they saw, and discusses changes to their classroom practice that can be put into place as a result of what was observed.

Much like poorly implemented PLCs may do more harm than good, the same can be said for labsites. If, for example, trust and respect is not in place among the members of a PLC, the conversations which precede and follow a labsite observation may lack ample substance to drive meaningful conversations that result in teachers altering their instructional practice. Or, in the case of Grace Elementary, if labsites are spread equally among all teachers, so as not to offend
any one teacher, the point of highlighting the instructional practices of a handful of high-performing teachers may be lost. In either scenario teachers, much like the participants in this study, may fall back to perceptions of labsites being “just another meeting” and a waste of their time.

One additional means for encouraging quality collaboration within the realm of education are professional learning networks (PLNs). PLNs take advantage of technology by offering teachers the opportunity to learn and collaborate with their peers digitally, often from the comfort of their classroom or home. In this model of professional development, which was in its infancy at Grace Elementary, teachers log on to a videoconferencing platform at the same time on a specific date. PLN participants are then able to connect with their peers across a school district, state, or even the country. PLNs are organized by a shared commonality among participants. For example, a PLN may be open up to all fourth grade teachers within a school district. Or, more specifically, PLNs might be organized for third grade teachers who wish to improve their math instruction. The key to establishing high-quality collaboration PLNs, according to the data from this study, is the organization of such collaboration around teachers’ self-selected goals or needs thereby creating the support structures and “sounding boards” participants from this study craved.

Regardless of the form collaboration through professional development takes, the important implication from this study is that teachers crave this high-quality interaction among their peers as a mean for improving their instructional practice and desired student outcomes. Gathering a group of teachers in a room for professional development is not sufficient, particularly if that PD merely involves a presenter lecturing at teachers. If school and district leaders hope to improve teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and teachers attitudes and
beliefs, they need to ensure that each and every professional development opportunity they provide their teachers includes a component of high-quality collaboration.

**Implication three: More professional development teacher-leader opportunities need to be offered.** In addition to affording teachers more opportunities to engage in high-quality collaboration, data from this study also implied that teachers need to be provided more chances to assume leadership roles within the realm of professional development. In describing their experiences with professional development, none of the participants in this study mentioned being asked to assume a leadership role with a PD offering nor within a PLC or Labsite. On the contrary, the participants in this study tended to describe professional development as something being done to them, using terms such as “another meeting” they had to attend or “a course” they had to take. Thus, despite research (Lee & Min, 2017; Taylor et al., 2011; Thomas et al., 2011; Yoon, 2016) showing a bottom-up perspective that is more inclusive of the collaborative nature of professional development and teachers learning from each other as preferred over an “expert” brought in to talk to about a topic, nearly all of the participants in this study perceived their experience as being top-down.

Sandholtz et al. (2016), in their work on professional development, caution against always bringing in “outside consultants” to deliver PD. Such a model can often make it difficult for teachers to buy into the PD which, in turn, can decrease the likelihood of teachers implementing what was learned in their training. Applying Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change, there will be no changes to desired student outcomes if teachers do not put into practice what they have learned in PD. Therefore, eliciting buy-in from teachers is critical in progressing teachers through the stages of Guskey’s (2002) theory and towards a change in attitudes and beliefs.
While beginning or novice teachers may likely expect to be the recipient of much of the professional development they receive, at the hand of either an outside consultant or via more experienced teachers, not valuing teachers as PD leaders may be most detrimental to veteran teachers. Taylor et al. (2011) note that veteran teachers are often neglected in the PD planning process. This was reinforced in this study, with the veteran teachers complaining about the broad and repetitive nature of many of the trainings they were mandated to attend. At the same time, the research (Lee & Min, 2017; Taylor et al., 2011; Thomas, Sargent, & Hardy, 2011; Yoon, 2016) also indicated veteran teachers appreciated opportunities to assume professional development leadership roles, with the benefit being twofold – veteran teachers get to strengthen their leadership qualities while beginning and novice teachers gain from the expertise offered by their veteran counterparts.

Despite the research supporting the need for professional development to serve as a tool to offer veteran teachers leadership experience, the data that emerged from this study portrayed a top-down implementation of PD. None of the participants in this study mentioned having been asked to provide professional development nor serve in a PD-related leadership capacity. This despite the fact that all seven participants were active members of a PLC which met on a weekly basis. The seven participants in this study totaled 62 years of teaching experience. Four of the participants in this study had amassed over ten years of teaching experience. Those same four teachers had each been recognized as a Grace Elementary teacher-of-the-year. Several study participants cited high-quality, self-selected professional development experiences they had participated in, using words like “motivated” and “driven” to describe their feelings at the conclusion of this PD. Yet none of the participants in this study mentioned ever being asked to share anything about these trainings with their colleagues. Failing to tap into the leadership
potential exuded by the participants in this study appears to be a glaring need presented by this study and may be implicit of a continuing need for the more broader implementation of professional development.

**Implication four: More explicit professional development offered on strengthening teacher-student relationships.** Two important themes related to teacher-student relationships emerged from the data in this study. First, study participants described their relationship with their students in terms of love. Second, study participants expressed a desire to strengthen their relationships as a goal they had.

According to the literature (Allen & Wright, 2014; Polly et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2011) the majority of professional development focuses on either improving teacher content knowledge or teaching practice. While elements of PD in these two areas may touch upon pedagogical practices that aid in improving teachers’ relationships with their students, this is not typically the explicitly stated goal of most professional development. This finding was confirmed by the participants in this study; while nearly every participant mentioned a variety of different trainings they had attended, none explicitly referenced a training that overtly addressed the strengthening of teacher-student relationships.

Teacher one referenced a crisis intervention training she was currently participating in as addressing teacher-student relationships. The focus of this training, however, was primarily on deescalating students when they were being combative, not on building upon the love most teachers referenced as being at the core of their perceived relationship with their students. Teacher four mentioned several tips and tricks she picked up from professional development that she felt applied to her relationship with her students such as permitting students to work more in partners and ceding more control of classroom conversations to students. Teacher four did
confess, however, that it was “not always the easiest to find” professional development that addressed teacher-student relationships.

Teacher five, similarly, felt her relationship with students had improved as a second-hand result of trainings she had attended on various different topics. In her case, she cited a PD designed to help her improve instruction for her EL students. In the process of improving her instruction in this capacity, she felt she had gained a better understanding of this population of students which, in turn, helped strengthen her relationship.

Guskey’s (2002) theory of professional development and teacher change posits that changes to teachers’ classroom practices which lead to improved student learning outcomes will drive overall changes to teachers’ attitudes and beliefs. His theory places an emphasis on teachers’ instructional practices and does not explicitly mention the strengthening of teacher-student relationships as a practice which can or should be improve through professional development (Guskey, 2002). The data from this study, however, supports the notion that strengthening of teacher-student relationships is a classroom practice which can be positively influenced by professional development. Applying Guskey’s (2002) continuum, it can be further theorized that if teachers see positive changes in desired student outcomes as a result of the practices they learned and put in place from PD geared toward improving teacher-student relationships, than they will be more likely to adjust their attitudes and beliefs. In order for any of this to occur, however, more professional development geared explicitly toward strengthening teacher-student relationships needs to be offered.

Areas for Future Research

In conducting this study, the researcher desired to better understand how teachers perceived the professional development they received as it related to improving their teaching
practice. The researcher further hoped to better understand how teachers applied the skills and information received from professional development toward improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with students. The research in this study was conducted at one specific mid-sized urban elementary school. It is hoped, however, that the findings from this study could help better inform professional development practices in all sizes, shapes, and levels of elementary and secondary schooling.

This study represented an extremely small sample size, seven teachers at one mid-sized urban elementary in a large school district in North Carolina. The researcher hopes that, in the future, the sample size of this type of study is expanded to encompass a larger group of teachers across a variety of different educational settings. It is important, for example, to understand if teachers in a rural setting perceive of professional development in similar manners. To better inform professional development decision-making particularly at school district, state, or national level, it is also important to ascertain if the perceptions of middle and high school teachers differ from those of elementary school teachers. Thus, future researchers on this topic should consider expanding the parameters of this study to gather input from these populations.

Additionally, expecting that such expansive data can be gathered through qualitative means is not wholly realistic. Qualitative, descriptive case studies tend to take a lot of time. Therefore, the researcher recommends that this topic continues to be explored through quantitative means. Pushing out questions related to the findings of this study in quantitative questionnaires to a larger population of teachers with a variety of different experience levels in a diverse ranges of settings presents a more realistic means for ascertaining whether the results from this study can be generalized and transferred to different educational settings.
One content-related topic from this study that the researcher feels deserves additional exploration is that of professional development tailored toward improving teacher-student relationships. Much of the current research shows professional development (Allen & Wright, 2014; Polly et al., 2015; Taylor et al., 2011) tends focus on improving teachers’ content knowledge and teaching practice. This trend was reinforced in this study as participants made mention of their desire to strengthen their relationship with their students but did not cite specific trainings they had attended that focused on teacher-student relationships. This lack of PD opportunities on teacher-student relationships opens the possibility of a breadth of research ranging from what training opportunities exist within this realm, how are they perceived by teachers, and what effect do they have on teaching practice and student outcomes.

**Limitations of the Study**

This research study was undertaken at a mid-sized urban public elementary school within one of the ten largest school districts in North Carolina. The sample for this study included seven of over 45 certified teachers at Grace Elementary School. While the research site and sample size met the parameters of a typical descriptive case study there were limitations to the findings from this study.

The primary limitation of the findings from this study were their generalizability and transferability. The teachers selected from this study were pulled from a mid-sized elementary school within a school district of over 30,000 students and nearly 2000 teachers. While care was given to select participants with different backgrounds and a range of experiences results of this study may not be transferable between schools or across different school districts both within and outside the state of North Carolina. Additionally, the results from this study may not be generalized to draw conclusions about all mid-sized urban elementary schools. Further research
into this topic in other schools, school districts, and across states is necessary to be able to draw more generalizable and transferable conclusions related to this topic.

**Personal Reflection as a Scholar Practitioner**

Having spent an immeasurable number of hours in professional development myself, I can personally attest to the powerful effect it can have on instructional practice and student learning outcomes. At the same time, this study confirmed many of my own reservations about professional development that led to my desire to tackle this topic in the first place. Namely, that despite a breadth of research that has identified key characteristics of effective professional development, there continues to be very little change in the way PD is implemented. Couple this with the facts that there are only a finite number of days, hours and minutes to spend in professional development and the bulk of this time is devoted to mandatory trainings and we have a recipe for disaster. We, as educational leaders, have created a perfect storm of disastrous proportions when it comes to professional development. While we all, teachers and educational leaders alike, desire to improve instructional practice and student learning outcomes we, instead, waste teachers time on mandatory trainings that are too broad, repetitive and not aligned with teachers’ goals and students’ needs. In such a scenario we cannot begin to even examine the impact professional development has on instructional practices, student learning outcomes, and teachers’ attitudes and beliefs because there are no new strategies or skills for teachers to implement.

I do not, however, believe all hope to improve professional development practice is lost nor do I think we will forever be trapped in the cycle of continuing to implement PD according to an antiquated model that has long been proven to be ineffective. Instead, I was pleasantly encouraged by many of the findings from this study, particularly the fact that teachers continue
to view professional development optimistically even despite each of them citing one or more negative experiences they had had. This optimism is an extremely powerful tool. None of the teachers in this study were accepting of the status quo nor did any profess feeling content with how their students had historically performed or were currently performed. Each teacher expressed a desire to improve in their practice and to be able to better help their students through this self-improvement. Professional development, of course, remains one of the best means to help teachers improve their practice and, as an outgrowth of this, help students improve.

As I reviewed the literature related to my topic, I grew increasingly frustrated by the disconnect between what is known about professional development and what remains as current practices. While the research identified clear characteristics of meaningful and effective professional development, my experiences with PD had been closer in comparison to many of the ineffective practices that had plagued our profession for eons. These ineffective practices include such as “outside experts” being brought in to lecture to faculty, presenters reading from PowerPoints, and trainings that are repetitive or not applicable to most staff members. It was, then, disheartening to have all of the participants in this study describe their experiences with professional development in terms similar to what the literature identified as ineffective professional development practices. Equally disheartening was the lack of mention of the more progressive and effective professional development practices such as learning through collaboration, the important role PLCs play in PD, and having veteran teachers assume leadership roles in the implementation of professional development.

Guskey’s (2012) theoretical framework was instrumental in framing, understanding, and interpreting the data from this study. I was initially overloaded by the sheer volume of data generated by this study. As I went back through the transcriptions and played them over and
over in my head I struggled, at first, to make meaningful sense of the data. It was only when I began to apply Guskey’s (2012) framework to the information I had gathered that the relevance and importance of what was said became clearer. I felt fortunate to have had Guskey’s (2012) theory to help me better understand the data I collected but also pleased that I felt this study, and the responses of the participants, built upon Guskey’s (2012) work.

On a personal note, as a current assistant principal and aspiring principal, both the product and process of this dissertation have been enormously helpful to me. As a result of what I learned in this study I feel better equipped to design and implement professional development that will ultimately improve teaching practice and student learning outcomes. I also have a clearer understanding of what factors motivate teachers, when it comes to professional development, and how to leverage that understanding to develop a PD plan for the school I am leading. As a result of the multi-year process that it has taken for me to get to the point where I am typing these sentences, I have learned that nothing comes easy. I am more personally and professionally fulfilled now than I was a few years ago, prior to starting this dissertation, but getting to this point has not been without its struggles. Going forward, I anticipate similar degrees of strife, hardship, and struggle with any major endeavor I undertake, particularly those related to school leadership. But I am more confident today in my ability to approach those challenges with patience, endurance, and perseverance as a result of this experience. More than anything, though, I share the optimism of the teachers in this study and am excited to be able to do my part to bring about meaningful change in education through professional development.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this descriptive study was to identify how teachers at an urban elementary school experience professional development and perceive its impact on improving their teaching
practice, achieving desired student outcomes, and improving teacher-student relationships.

While this study was limited to a small number of participants at a specific elementary school in a particular district in North Carolina, the findings from this study offered a great deal of insight into professional development practices.

Among the findings from this study it was learned that teachers perceive of professional development quite differently but, generally, see it as an opportunity to grow and improve. Additionally, the teachers in this study were most interested in their students improving holistically and seeing growth in them. The teachers in this study perceived of their relationships with students in terms of love while, at the same time, desiring to strengthen those relationships. Self-selected professional development was preferred by study participants due to its timeliness and aligned to their goals. Mandatory trainings, on the other hand, were considered too broad and repetitive. In general, when it came to professional development teachers were more invested if they had choice in what PD they took and preferred self-selected trainings that offered them greater opportunity for higher-quality collaboration with peers experiencing similar dilemmas as they.

In this chapter, the findings of this study were integrated with the theoretical framework to clarify and expand upon the understanding of professional development practices. This chapter also compared and contrasted what researchers have concluded about professional development to how the participants in this study perceived it. Implications for practice, limitations, and future research opportunities were discussed in this chapter. The results of this study offer a great deal of insight that should be used to aid schools and districts in creating professional development plans that align to teachers goals and needs and increase the likelihood skills and strategies from trainings will be implemented with fidelity.
Additional insight from this study can also be used to guide the implementation of such professional development through to changes instructional practice and toward changing student learning outcomes and, ultimately, teachers attitudes and beliefs.

**Personal Reflection**

My interest in the topic of professional development first grew out of my own frustration with training experiences I have taken part in after I joined the teaching profession. I, too, have found many such experiences to be redundant, a waste of time, or ill-suited to what I knew I needed, at that moment in time, to further myself as an educator. It was not merely frustrating to be sitting in a class or meeting where what is being discussed is not relevant to me but also to be ruminating that entire time as I go over in my head my perceived shortcomings and how my time is being wasted without any improvement in those areas. At the same time, I have participated in some incredibly beneficial professional developments and been excited to bring back all I have learned from those experiences to share with my colleagues only for there never to come a time or opportunity for me to share all I had learned. Those experiences, coupled with research-backed notion that our greatest opportunity to improve educational outcomes is directly related to the investment we make in our teachers once we hire them into the profession, is what led me to this journey and this topic.

Now that I am at the end of one chapter of this journey I can see that we have only begun to scratch the surface of this intricate and perplexing topic and though I feel this dissertation both adds to the canon of work on this topic and, with any luck, also advances the dialogue, I am certainly cognizant that we have only begun to scratch the surface of possibilities. Like a crack in a window that splinters out in every direction, addressing one aspect of the topic of professional development only raises different questions and possible topics for further research.
on this topic. This dissertation, for example, zeroed in on teachers’ perceptions of professional development. Yet, as was alluded to within the body of this dissertation, teachers are only one stakeholder in the professional development process. How, then, do administrators perceive professional development and what role does their perceptions play in the trainings they offer at their school? Similarly, decisions related to professional development offerings in large school districts are often made at a district level. What roles do perceptions play at the district level? Given the perceptions of teachers uncovered in this dissertation, are there means to bring the “voices” of teachers together with those of the other stakeholders that often make the most critical decisions about professional development in such a way to create a better model for professional development that benefits all stakeholders?

One additional avenue of thought raised during the defense of this dissertation was the role a school’s status or standing might play in both the perception of professional development and in what trainings are offered. For example, if a school is classified as “low-performing” or is rated as either a “D” or an “F”, it stands to reason that the increased scrutiny placed on such a school by such a label will have an impact in what professional development is offered, what trainings are mandatory, and how such PD is delivered. Conversely, it would be interesting to examine a more highly-rated (“A” or “B” or “high-performing”) school to determine what role professional development might play in that school’s rating. Do teachers at such a school have more freedom and autonomy to self-select what professional development they wish to take part in or are such schools merely better at providing trainings that align to the needs of their faculty?

All of these questions and distinct possibilities pose an exhaustive list of variables that can be explored as we delve more deeply into the topic of professional development. The good news is that while we may have only begun to scratch the surface of this important topic we are
already on a path to better understanding professional development, what works and what does not work. While it will be fascinating to explore this topic in more detail, following the cracks along the window should not impede us from making changes to the ways in which we deliver professional development on the basis of what we have learned and know already. It is these two endeavors, making changes to professional development delivery while simultaneously continuing to research the different facets of this topic, that most excite me about the future.
References


Conn, K. J. (2011). Designing case studies. [Screencase slides]. Retrieved from http://www.screencast.com/users/NUOnline/folders/Camtsasia%20Relay/media/0e7ed0ee-76c0-4b76-9a7a-5e290e10c9f9


Hirsh, S. (2012). Student outcomes are the driving force behind professional learning decisions. *Journal of Staff Development, 33*(5), 72.


Ponterotto, J. G. (2005). Qualitative research in counseling psychology: A primer in research
paradigms and philosophy of science. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 52(2), 126-136


meaning and power-resistance relationships. *Organization Science, 22*(1), 22-41.


SAGE Publications.


Appendix A: Letter of Support from the Research Site

September 3, 2018
Re: Doctoral Research Project

Dear Mr. Barber,
I am writing this letter to inform you as well as the Institutional Review Board at Northeastern University that you, Dan Barber, have my support and permission to complete your doctoral research at [Redacted] Elementary School in [Redacted]. For your research, [Redacted] will grant you permission to access and contact our teachers. As part of your research, you are also permitted to conduct interviews as well as questionnaires.

Sincerely,

[Redacted]
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: September 27, 2018    IRB #: CPS18-09-01
Principal Investigator(s): Sara Ewell
                          Dan Barber
Department: Doctor of Education Program
            College of Professional Studies
Address: 20 Belvidere
        Northeastern University
Title of Project: How to Make it Matter: Teacher Professional Development
Participating Sites: Gardner Park Elementary School permission in file
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: SEPTEMBER 26, 2019

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Jan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix C: Example Recruitment Letter/E-mail

(DATE)

Dear (Teacher),

My name is Dan Barber and I am a doctoral candidate at Northeastern University under the guidance of Dr. Sara Ewell. I am preparing to conduct research for my dissertation and would like to invite you to take part in my study. The title of my study is *How to make it matter: Teacher professional development* and the purpose of my study is to gather and analyze information about teachers’ perception of the professional development they receive. The information learned from this study may help inform school administrators and other policy makers about what constitutes effective, impactful professional development and may assist in driving changes in what and how professional development is presented. Specifically, this research will involve two different stages of participation:

1. A professional development needs assessment
2. One-on-one interviews with select teachers

Teachers selected for an interview will be interviewed on two distinct occasions – once at the start of the study and once over the course of the school year as you are receiving professional development. Each interview will last approximately 30-40 minutes and take place at locations each participant chooses. Prior to commencing the interview you will be given a consent form that will explain the process of taking part in the research. The interview will consist of questions related to your experience with professional development over the course of this current school year.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may withdraw from the research at any time. Additionally, for the purpose of the research you will be identified as Teacher followed by a number, such as Teacher 1. The only individual’s privy to the recordings (audio) of this interview will be myself, the doctoral candidate, and Dr. Sara Ewell, my doctoral advisor. After the audio has been transcribed, it will be destroyed to ensure confidentiality.

If you are comfortable with the purpose of this study and willing to participate, please let me know by (Date) by e-mailing me at XXX@husky.neu.edu. If you have any questions, please contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or via e-mail at XXX@husky.neu.edu.

Thank you,

Dan Barber
Doctoral Candidate, Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
Appendix D: Professional Development Needs Assessment

Professional Development Needs Assessment
* Required

1. Name *

2. Total years of teaching experience *

3. Years of teaching experience at schools other than Gardner Park *

Part I. Professional Development Needs

Please rank how beneficial the following professional development topics might be to you on a scale of 1 (least beneficial) to 5 (most beneficial)

4. A. Classroom management *
   Mark only one oval.

   1 2 3 4 5

   Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial

5. B. Effective teaching practices *
   Mark only one oval.

   1 2 3 4 5

   Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial

6. C. Assessment *
   Mark only one oval.

   1 2 3 4 5

   Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial

7. D. Data analysis and usage *
   Mark only one oval.

   1 2 3 4 5

   Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial

8. E. Technology usage and/or integration *
   Mark only one oval.

   1 2 3 4 5

   Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial

9. If you identified technology as a beneficial topic, what specific technology topics might you be interested in receiving professional development on?

10. F. Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) *
    Mark only one oval.

   1 2 3 4 5

   Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial
11. G. Teacher-Student Relationship Building *
Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

12. H. Content/Subject Specific *
Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

13. If you identified content/subject specific as a beneficial topic, what specific content or subjects might you be interested in receiving professional development on?

14. I. Strategies for working with EC students *
Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

15. J. Strategies for working with EL students *
Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

16. K. Personal development (e.g., time management, stress reduction) *
Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

17. L. Leadership development *

18. M. Teamwork/group dynamics *
Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

19. N. Parent Communication/Conferencing *
Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

20. O. Differentiated Instruction *
Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Least Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Beneficial ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐

21. P. Other (Please specify if there are other topics you are interested in receiving professional development on that are not specified above)

Part II. Professional Development Delivery Preferences

Rank how preferred the following professional development
delivery methods are to you on a scale of 1 (least preferred) to 5 (most preferred)

22. A. Instructor-led *
   Mark only one oval.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Least Preferred ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Preferred

23. B. Active/Hands-On/Participatory *
   Mark only one oval.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Least Preferred ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Preferred

24. C. Virtual or Web-Based Learning *
   Mark only one oval.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Least Preferred ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Preferred

25. D. Book Study *
   Mark only one oval.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Least Preferred ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Preferred

26. E. Personalized Coaching/Mentoring (e.g., working individually or in a small group with a mentor, facilitator, or specialist) *
   Mark only one oval.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Least Preferred ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Preferred

27. F. Learning from Peers (e.g., through PLC discussions, site visits, or observations of other teachers) *
   Mark only one oval.
   1 2 3 4 5
   Least Preferred ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ Most Preferred

28. G. Other (Please specify other preferences you have for receiving professional development)
Appendix E: Scheduling E-mail

Interview for dissertation project

Daniel Barber

Hi Ms. 

Thank you for your willingness to participate in my dissertation research. I was wondering if you might have some time in your schedule one night this weekend for a phone interview (8:30pm-on usually works best for me as the baby usually goes down around 8). I am anticipating the conversation would last no more than 30 minutes. If this weekend doesn't work for you, no worries. I am also available most nights next week if that might work better for you.

Thanks again!
Dan
Appendix F: NIH Certificate of Completion

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Daniel Barber successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants."

Date of Completion: 07/22/2018

Certification Number: 2867572
Appendix G: Consent Form

Northeastern University, Education Department
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Sara Ewell, Principal Investigator & Dan Barber, Student Researcher
Title of Project: How to make it matter: Teacher professional development

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are 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?
We are asking you to participate in this study because you are either a beginning, experienced, or veteran teacher at the elementary school selected for this study.

Why is this research study being done?
The purpose of this study is to determine how the perceptions teachers have of the professional development they receive influence their teaching practice, student learning outcomes and their relationships with students.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study we will ask you to:
1) Complete a professional development needs assessment
2) Participate in two short one-on-one interviews throughout the course of this study and the school year:
   a) A one-on-one interview at the start of the study
   b) A one-on-one post-interview at the end of the study
3) Complete a post-study questionnaire

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
The professional development needs assessment should take roughly 15 minutes to complete. Each short interview should take 30-40 minutes to complete and will be conducted at a location you choose. The post-study questionnaire should take roughly 15 minutes to complete.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
This study will ask you to reflect about your teaching experiences as well as your experiences with professional development over the course of your career. It is possible, though not likely, that some of the questions you will be asked over the course of this study may cause you discomfort.

Will I benefit by being in this research?
There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information learned as a result of this study may help school administrators and other policymakers to better understand teacher professional development which may lead to beneficial changes to the professional development you are offered and receive.

Who will see the information about me?
Your participation in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. To minimize any potential risk to you, your name will never be recorded on any of the written or electronic materials involved in this study. Rather, you will be identified as "Teacher" followed by a designated number, e.g. "Teacher 1". Thus your identity and participation in this study will not be revealed to anyone.

All audio recordings collected from the personal interviews conducted in this study will be downloaded, secured on the researcher’s password-protected laptop, and backed-up on a password-protected cloud service called "Box". Additional digital files, such as e-mails and electronic copies of materials, will be
similarly downloaded, saved on the researcher’s laptop and backed-up on Box. All physical data collected as part of this study will be stored in a locked file cabinet.

In rare instances, authorized people may request to see the research information about you and the other people involved in this study. This is done to ensure that the research for this study was conducted properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**
Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**
No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of your participation in this research.

**Can I stop my participation in this study?**
Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study, you may resign from the study at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to resign, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**
If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dan Barber at [email protected] or [email protected], the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Sara Ewell at [email protected], the Principal Investigator.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**
If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 490 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
You will not be compensated for your participation in this study.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
You will not incur any costs as a result of this study.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**
No.

I agree to take part in this research.

---

Signature of person agreeing to take part ______________________ Date __________

Printed name of person above ______________________

Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent ______________________ Date __________

Printed name of person above ______________________
### Appendix H: Interview Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Beginning of Study (Interview #1) Past</th>
<th>End of Study (Interview #2) Present &amp; Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1) What do you think of when you have professional development?</td>
<td>8) What did you enjoy most about the professional development you took this school year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2) What do you perceive the goals of professional development are?</td>
<td>9) What did you enjoy least about the professional development you took this school year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13) What have you enjoyed most about the professional development you have participated in?</td>
<td>10) What do you feel is the ideal design for effective professional development?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14) What have you enjoyed least about the professional development you have participated in?</td>
<td>11) If you had an unlimited budget and an infinite number of resources to pool from, what would be your proposal for the most ideal professional development?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3) On average, how often do you engage in professional development in a given school year?</td>
<td>1) What professional development did you participate in this school year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>a) How often do you engage in mandatory or required professional development?</td>
<td>2) On average, how many times did you spend time in professional development this school year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b) How often do you engage in self-selected professional development?</td>
<td>a) How much of the professional development you have taken this school year has been mandatory or required?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4) What goals do you have for yourself as an educator? (Both “in general” and also “for this specific school year”) (1-2 very specific goals)</td>
<td>b) How much of the professional development you have taken this school year has been self-selected?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>5) (To this point in your career) How well do you feel the mandatory or required professional development you have participated in has aligned with your goals and needs as a teacher?</td>
<td>3) Do you feel the professional development you took this year aligned to the goals you set for yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for</td>
<td>6) (To this point in your career) How well do you feel the self-selected professional development you have participated in has aligned with your goals and needs as a teacher?</td>
<td>If yes, in what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td></td>
<td>If no, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7) What goals do you have for your students? (Both “in general” and also “for this specific school year”)</td>
<td>4) Do you feel the self-selected professional development you took this year has helped you progress toward the goals you have for yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goals</td>
<td>8) (To this point in your career) How well do you feel the mandatory or required professional development you have participated in has aligned with the needs of your students or the goals you have set for them?</td>
<td>If yes, in what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for</td>
<td>9) (To this point in your career) How well do you feel the self-selected professional development you have participated in has aligned with the needs of your students or the goals you have set for them?</td>
<td>If no, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students/</td>
<td>10) How would you describe your relationship with your students?</td>
<td>Follow-up: Do you feel there was a difference in the alignment and progression to your goals between the mandatory and self-selected professional development you took this year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>11) In what ways do you hope to improve your relationship with your students over the course of this school year?</td>
<td>5) Do you feel the professional development you took this year has aligned with the needs of your students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>12) Do you perceive professional development as a means for helping you to improve your relationship with your students?</td>
<td>If yes, in what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outcomes</td>
<td>If so, how?</td>
<td>If no, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If not, why not?</td>
<td>6) Do you feel the professional development you have taken this year has led to better student learning outcomes?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If yes, in what ways?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If no, why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Follow-up: Do you feel there was a difference in the alignment and achievement of student learning outcomes between the mandatory and self-selected PD you took this year?</td>
<td>Follow-up: As it relates to your perceived improvement or lack of improvement in effectiveness as a teacher this year, has there been a difference between the mandatory professional development you took versus the PD you selected for yourself?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Relationships</td>
<td>12) How would you describe your relationship with your students now?</td>
<td>11) Do you feel professional development helped you improve your relationship with your students?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13) Do you feel professional development helped you improve your relationship with your students?</td>
<td>If so, how?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If not, why not?</td>
<td>Follow-up: As it relates to your perceived improvement or lack of improvement in effectiveness as a teacher this year, has there been a difference between the mandatory professional development you took versus the PD you selected for yourself?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Follow-up: As it relates to your perceived improvement or lack of improvement in effectiveness as a teacher this year, has there been a difference between the mandatory professional development you took versus the PD you selected for yourself?
Appendix I: Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol

Institution: Northeastern University

Participant:

Interviewer: Dan Barber

Central research question. How do teachers at Grace Elementary School perceive the professional development they receive as it relates to improving their teaching practice?

Research sub-questions

1. How do teachers at Grace Elementary school apply the skills and information received from professional development toward improving their teaching practice, student learning outcomes, and their relationships with their students?

INTERVIEW #1

Part I: Introductory Protocol

Good afternoon (Participant’s Name). Thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. My research project focuses on professional development. Through this study, we hope to gain more insight into topic. I assure you anything you say will be confidential. In order to ensure accuracy in this interview I would like to record it. Would that be okay with you? Thanks.

Part II: Interviewee Background (5-10 minutes)

1) Can you start by telling me a little bit about your background in education.
2) What is your own educational background?
3) When did you decide to become a teacher?
4) What were some of your greatest joys in teaching?
5) What were some of your greatest challenges and frustrations?
6) In what ways do you think your training in education prepared you to teach?
   a. Follow-up: In what ways do you feel your training in education might have left you unprepared?
7) What unanticipated challenges do you feel you encountered once you started teaching?
Part III: Topic Specific (30-40 minutes)

1) What do you think of when you hear professional development?

2) What do you perceive the goals of professional development are?

3) On average, how often do you engage in professional development in a given school year?

   Follow-ups:
   a) How often do you engage in mandatory or required professional development?
   b) How often do you engage in self-selected professional development?

4) What goals do you have for yourself as an educator? (Both “in general” and also “for this specific school year”)

5) (To this point in your career) How well do you feel the mandatory or required professional development you have participated in has aligned with your goals and needs as a teacher?

6) (To this point in your career) How well do you feel the self-selected professional development you have participated in has aligned with your goals and needs as a teacher?

7) What goals do you have for your students? (Both “in general” and also “for this specific school year”)

8) (To this point in your career) How well do you feel the mandatory or required professional development you have participated in has aligned with the needs of your students or the goals you have set for them?

9) (To this point in your career) How well do you feel the self-selected professional development you have participated in has aligned with the needs of your students or the goals you have set for them?

10) What have you enjoyed most about the professional development you have participated in?

11) What have you enjoyed least about the professional development you have participated in?

Thank you, again, for your time. Your input has been extremely helpful and I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. Would it be okay with you if I contact you if I have any additional follow up questions or need to clarify any of your comments? Once I have transcribed our interview, I
will be sharing it with you to check it for accuracy and offer additional input or clarification.

INTERVIEW #2

Part I: Introductory Protocol

Good (morning, afternoon, or evening) [Participant’s Name]. Thank you again for taking the time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. I assure you anything you say will be confidential. In order to ensure accuracy in this interview I would like to record it. Would that be okay with you? Thanks.

Part II: Topic Specific (30-40 minutes)

1) What professional development did you participate in this school year?

2) On average, how much time did you spend taking professional development this school year?

   Follow-ups:
   a) How much of the professional development you have taken thus far this school year has been mandatory or required?
   b) How much of the professional development you have taken thus far this school year has been self-selected?

3) Do you feel the professional development you took this year aligned to the goals you set for yourself?
   a. If yes, in what ways?
   b. If no, why not?

4) Do you feel the self-selected professional development you took this year has helped you progress toward the goals you have for yourself?
   a. If yes, in what ways?
   b. If no, why not?

   Follow-up: Do you feel there was a difference in the alignment and progression to your goals between the mandatory and self-selected professional development you took this year?

5) Do you feel the mandatory professional development you took this year has aligned with the needs of your students?
   a. If yes, in what ways?
   b. If no, why not?

6) Do you feel the professional development you have taken this year has led to better student learning outcomes?
   a. If yes, in what ways?
   b. If no, why not?
Follow-up: Do you feel there was a difference in the alignment and achievement of student learning outcomes between the mandatory and self-selected professional development you took this year?

7) Do you feel the professional development you took this year has made you a more effective teacher?
   a. If yes, in what ways?
   b. If no, why not?

Follow-up: As it relates to your perceived improvement or lack of improvement in effectiveness as a teacher this year, has there been a difference between the mandatory professional development you took versus the PD you selected for yourself?

8) What have you enjoyed most about the professional development you took this school year?

9) What have you enjoyed least about the professional development you took this school year?

10) What do you feel is the ideal design for effective, professional development?

11) If you had an unlimited budget and an infinite number of resources to pool from, what would be your proposal for the most ideal professional development?

12) How would you describe your relationship with your students now?

13) Do you feel professional development helped you improve your relationship with your students? If so, how? If not, why not?

Thank you, again, for your time. Your input has been extremely helpful and I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me. Would it be okay with you if I contact you if I have any additional follow up questions or need to clarify any of your comments? Once I have transcribed our interview, I will be sharing it with you to check it for accuracy and offer additional input or clarification.
Appendix J: Example of Debriefing Statement/Member Check E-mail

(DATE)

Dear (Teacher),

Thank you for your time and willingness to share your experiences with me on (Date). I appreciate the time you spent with me and I also enjoyed hearing about your experiences with professional development. As we discussed, I am sending you this follow-up e-mail so you can review the transcription of our interview for accuracy (please see attached). Please feel free to edit the transcription as necessary, as well as to offer any additional though, ideas, or reflection you may have had since our interview.

When you are finished, please send the transcription back to me as soon as possible. If you have nothing to change or report, please send me an e-mail to let me know. You can also contact me by phone at [redacted] Again, thank you for your valuable time.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Dan Barber
Doctoral Candidate, Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
### Appendix K: Grace Elementary PLC Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monday</th>
<th>Tuesday</th>
<th>Wednesday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kindergarten</strong> 8:30-10:00</td>
<td></td>
<td>First Grade 8:20-9:50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Second Grade</strong> 9:50-11:20</td>
<td></td>
<td>Exceptional Children 11:15-12:15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fourth Grade</strong> 12:10-1:40</td>
<td>Third Grade 12:10-1:40</td>
<td>Fifth Grade 12:10-1:40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix L: Grace Elementary Lab Site Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Class A</th>
<th>Class B</th>
<th>Class C</th>
<th>Class D</th>
<th>Class E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10/1/18</td>
<td>9-10:30</td>
<td>9-10:30</td>
<td>9-10:30</td>
<td>8:45-10:15</td>
<td>9-10:30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fourth Grade</td>
<td>Fourth Grade</td>
<td>Fourth Grade</td>
<td>Fourth Grade</td>
<td>Fourth Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>Class D</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fifth Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/23/18</td>
<td>10/24/18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10-11:30</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Third Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/29/18</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11:15-12:45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/8/18</td>
<td></td>
<td>10/00-11:30</td>
<td></td>
<td>12:45-2:15</td>
<td>10:15-11:45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Second Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>Second Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/13/18</td>
<td>8:30-10:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/15/18</td>
<td></td>
<td>10:15-11:45</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/15/18</td>
<td></td>
<td>8:30-10:00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Class A</td>
<td>Class B</td>
<td>Class C</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
<td>Kindergarten</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>