CHANGING CLASSROOM PRACTICE: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF ELEMENTARY TEACHER EXPERIENCES OF A PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TRAINING PROGRAM

A doctoral dissertation presented
by
Jeffrey John Puhala

to
The School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education
in the field of
Education

College of Professional Studies
Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
March 2015
Abstract

Since the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, educator quality has become a central topic in educational reform and accountability movements. School districts are mandated to improve educator quality to meet the changing demands of teaching in 21st-century schools (NCLB, 2001, Title IIA), including the integration of digital resources into classroom instruction (Pennsylvania Common Core Standards, 2013). This qualitative study explored the experiences of elementary educators as they implemented their newly acquired blended learning skills in the classroom. Data collection included interviews, field notes, and extensive classroom notes. Analysis of the results revealed how teachers understand and make meaning of a professional development training program experience. Included are recommendations for supporting educators after formal professional development programs end aimed at K–12 professionals who desire change at the classroom level and for administrators who lead the change process.

Key Words: qualitative, professional development, blended learning, meaning making, educational change
Acknowledgements

The completion of this doctoral dissertation would not have been possible without help and support from many people.

I would like to thank Northeastern University and my doctoral committee, Dr. Jane Lohmann, Dr. Nena Stracuzzi, Dr. Sara Ewell, and Dr. Joseph McNabb. I am a first generation college student and always dreamed of earning the first doctorate in my family. Thank you to my entire committee for constantly pushing my intellectual limits and encouraging me to dig deeper into my work. I am grateful to my committee for their unending patience as I obsessively emailed them and constantly talked about completing this dissertation. You deserve a gold medal for putting up with me, and I am so glad you were a part of my life!

To my wife, Sonja, I cannot even begin to tell you how much your love and support contributed to the successful completion of the doctoral program and dissertation. You took care of our beautiful daughters, Stella and Elli, and me the entire time. You pushed me when I didn’t want to write anymore and you always believed I would finish my dissertation. For this, I will be eternally grateful.

To my daughter, Stella, you were born after I finished the second course in the program. I felt selfish for sitting at the computer for hours on end nearly every night throughout your first four years of life. I will never be able to regain those years with you, but I know I’ll have more time now. Daddy can finally go out and play.

To my daughter, Elli, you were born at the end of this dissertation. You have blessed our family in an incredible way. I am really looking forward to seeing you grow and being involved in your life. Daddy is so glad to have you as the youngest member of our family.
Several other people were important to my success. Dr. Margaret Dougherty, your enthusiasm and mentorship for the past several years kept me from not giving up. Thank you for helping me! Dr. Brianna Parsons, thank you for supporting me during the proposal stage. Dr. Telvis Rich, thank you for sharing so many resources with me and helping me to maintain a positive attitude and focus on my work. Dr. Raymond McCarthy, your continued enthusiasm and positive support greatly motivated me to keep pushing through this process. Thank you so much for suggesting that I start my own student support group early in the dissertation process. The group grew beyond my wildest imagination. Dr. Elisabeth Bennett, thank you for answering all my questions about GIA and introducing me to Dr. Merriam’s work. Dr. Michael Fullan, thank you for answering my emails regarding your scholarly work and for helping me to interpret your theoretical framework. Dr. David R. Thomas, founder of GIA, thank you for helping me to understand your method of analysis more in-depth. Finally, I would like to thank the participants of this study for contributing and allowing me insight into your professional lives.

I am grateful and blessed to have been associated with so many other great scholars, including the 128 members of Puhala’s Ed.D. “Warrior Writers II” Facebook group. Your enthusiasm and collegiality were central to my continued efforts to finish the dissertation process. Without a doubt, I will be paying it forward.

Finally, I would also like to thank God and his son Jesus Christ for giving me the intellect, strength, and courage to complete this process.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to all those who believed I could do it.
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

Since the advent of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001, educator quality has become a central topic in educational reform and accountability movements, forcing school districts to closely examine classroom practices and focus on improving educator quality to meet the changing demands of teaching in 21st-century schools (NCLB, 2001, Title IIA). As a result, teachers are now required to use 21st-century teaching practices in classroom instruction (Common Core State Standards, 2010). Twenty-first century teaching practices include teachers’ ability to integrate digital resources into classroom instruction, (Pennsylvania Common Core Standards, 2013); however, more than half of teachers nationally do not know how to effectively implement these resources (Wilhelm, 2013). For teachers to acquire these requisite 21st-century skills and meet today’s students’ needs, ongoing and consistent professional development training is needed (Prensky, 2011).

Simply providing isolated training is not enough to ensure improved practice. Rather, teachers must engage in consistent training opportunities that have relevance to classroom practice in order to develop the tools and pedagogical skills they need to teach in 21st-century schools (Morewood, Ankrum, & Bean, 2010). To sustain change, institutions must also be organized to support teachers’ training beyond formal professional development training sessions (Fullan, 2007). Institutions providing ongoing professional development support to teachers have a greater chance of sustaining change at the classroom level (Fullan, 2007). In other words, without ongoing and consistent professional development support beyond the completion of the initial training sessions, teachers may not have the ability to sustain what they have learned (Drago-Severson, 2009; Fullan, 2007).
A great deal of research has been done on professional development programs (Albirini, 2006; Desimone, 2011; Overbay, Mollette, & Vasu, 2011; Wei, Hammond, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009). What is missing is research focused on how teachers experience the process of implementing newly developed skills and ideas once training sessions have ended. Understanding how teachers experience the implementation process could provide insight into how school entities can better sustain change at the classroom level. This study explored how teachers experience the process of implementing their newly acquired skills in the classroom.

**Significance**

The issue of educator development is significant on many levels (Edutopia, 2008). For one, teachers are under tremendous pressure to improve their teaching quality in order to meet the demands of teaching in 21st-century schools (Danielson, 2010; NCLB, 2001). Current educational law requires teachers to prepare students to meet requirements on state assessment tests (NCLB, 2001), which are now used as indicators of teacher effectiveness (Race to the Top, 2009). A focus on teacher effectiveness has driven reform efforts and resulted in new teacher evaluations being implemented nationwide. Furthermore, new instructional practices in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics (CCSS, 2010) have placed additional pressure on teachers to bring their instruction and classroom practices up to date to better prepare students for college and professional careers. Teacher ability to embrace these changes will be used as an indicator of teacher effectiveness on new evaluation instruments (Danielson, 2010). As a result, teachers must engage in ongoing professional development practices that will result in meaningful change to classroom practices and also to meet new evaluation requirements.

Teachers are not the only ones at risk if they are unable to sustain these requisite skill sets; students must be provided the most up-to-date learning experiences to prepare them for
college and career readiness (PCCS, 2013). For example, colleges are assigning students increasingly complex texts. Hayes and Ward (1992) indicate that word complexity in scientific journals steadily increased in difficulty over a sixty-year period. Because college professors commonly assign readings from academic journals, it is important that K–12 educators change current classroom practices to better prepare students to read increasingly difficult college texts independently (Glazer, Kubota, Johnson, & Milewski, 2005). Indeed, such demanding requirements for teaching and learning indicate that educators need ongoing professional development and local level support to assure that these changes to classroom practices are fully implemented and sustained (Fullan, 2007). Without school-based support to ensure teachers are successfully implementing and sustaining these new practices, meaningful change at the classroom level may be difficult.

Professional development helps teachers remain current on best practices to prepare students for college, careers, and citizenship (CCSS, 2010). In order for school initiatives to become implemented and sustained, as noted above, teachers need ongoing support that has relevance to their classroom practices (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2010; Fullan, 2007). School district personnel need to identify teacher needs upon completion of formal training so that professional development initiatives are properly supported, thereby providing the best chance at full implementation and sustainability into classroom practices. Further research is needed to examine how teachers make meaning of their professional development experience so that local school districts can provide such support systems.

**Positionality Statement**

I had personal experience with the subject matter of this study. I was a member of a cohort of teachers who received similar professional development training. However, as a
member of the peer coaches’ cohort, I received advanced training. As a consequence of this added training, together with the time I have spent improving my 21\textsuperscript{st}-century teaching skills, I had a sincere interest in improving my skill level as a capable peer coach. I enjoyed supporting my peers as they mastered new skills that they could immediately apply to improve their classroom practices. Being able to help my peers was important toward realizing my overarching vision of improving 21\textsuperscript{st}-century teaching and learning.

It is important to note that I was not in a power position relative to study participants, all of whom were elementary teachers at the study site. As noted, I was a professional colleague in the same cohort group training with several of the participants. Where I differed was in my vested interest in helping my peers as a trained coach. Because I spent a considerable amount of time in training to become a peer coach, I had a moral and ethical obligation to apply that training and help my peers. Unfortunately, I was never given clear instructions on how to support my peers after formal professional development training ended, and consequently had no short or long-range plan on how exactly to apply my coaching skills. As a result, only two of the study participants had implemented the skills they learned during our professional development training into their classrooms.

It was important to study the teachers at my workplace rather than another location because I wanted to support them as they worked toward implementing the training. I had a deep interest in seeing positive change happen at the classroom level at the study site. Several key areas worked to my advantage as an inside researcher. First, the teachers seemed to be more likely to participate because I worked with them at the site, and they felt greater trust due to our prior professional relationship (Atkins & Wallace, 2012). Knowing the participants also gave me a greater chance at obtaining more candid stories in comparison to outside researchers.
Finally, since I had a professional relationship with each participant and was also employed in the setting, I seemed to be able to obtain insights into the understandings and practices of the participants that might not have been understood by an outside researcher (Atkins & Wallace, 2012).

Prior to beginning data collection, I positioned myself to be open to all findings in this study and to let the unexpected emerge. I listened closely to my participants and avoided asking leading questions to cultivate an answer. Finally, I allowed the data to speak for itself to convey the emerging story from the participants’ point of view.

**Brief Summary of Research Questions**

This study examined a group of elementary teachers who completed professional development training aimed at improving their ability to teach in 21st-century schools. The research questions were:

1. How do K-6 educators describe and understand their professional development experience?
   a. What did they hope to gain from the opportunity?
   b. How do these educators describe the changes in their practice after engaging in professional development?

2. What do these educators describe as supports and challenges associated with initiation, implementation, and continuation of skills offered in the professional development program?

3. What structures and strategies either help, or would help, participants feel successful in implementing and continuing the skills initiated by their professional development training opportunity?
Summary of Paper Contents and Organization

This dissertation consists of five chapters that create a plan for the study. The theoretical framework on educational change theory and its relationship to the problem of practice is explained in the first chapter. Chapter two, literature, provides a thorough review of prior literature on effective professional development, implementation support of professional development and supporting 21st-century learning. Chapter three, methodology, provides details as to the approach to investigation, research site, selection of participants, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness. Chapter four, results, provides thematic explanations that employ participant quotes to answer the research questions. Chapter five, discussion, examines the findings of the study in relationship to the theoretical framework and scholarly literature in addition to providing suggestions for future research, implications for K–12 education, limitations, and a conclusion. Appendices are included that provide interview questionnaires, IRB approval record, and full participant profiles.

Theoretical Framework

Educational change theory (Fullan, 2007) offered a useful theoretical framework for the study and was used as a lens to examine how teachers understand and make meaning of a professional development training experience. An overview of educational change theory will be provided, followed by an explanation of the change phases. Teacher meaning making will then be discussed as part of the theory. Finally, an explanation will be provided as to how the researcher used the theory to guide this study.

Overview. According to Fullan’s educational change theory, change is a complicated process that occurs at many levels (2007). Educational change theory (Fullan, 2007) can be applied at the local school district level to study professional development initiatives.
Change at the local school district level often begins when there is a shift in district-level goals. Changes at the local level can be either voluntary or mandated by governing agencies at the local, state, or federal level. Three dimensions exist when implementing new programs or policy at the local level: new or updated curricula, learning new pedagogical skills, and changing educator beliefs (Fullan, 2007). No dimension is more important than another because each represents the way a change goal is achieved within a school system. As Fullan (2007) noted, “…change has to occur in practice along the three dimensions in order for it to have a chance of affecting the outcome” (p. 31). In other words, change will only occur if the three dimensions are used concurrently. Educational change theory helped me to understand the relationship between how participants made meaning of their experiences and how it affected change at the classroom level.

**Phases of change.** Fullan’s (2007) educational change theory comprises three phases that form the change cycle. Phase one, initiation, consists of the process that precedes the decision to change a practice within a school system. Administrators at the central office level often launch the initiation phase. Phase two, implementation, typically occurs during the first two or three years of a change innovation. The implementation phase involves the first attempts of educators to put the change innovation into practice. Phase three, continuation, is the time in the change cycle when the new innovation either becomes part of the school system or fails. Phase three can take from two to four years for simple change to five to ten years for complex change innovations to be instituted. Each phase is as an individual complex process that also functions with each of the other phases (Fullan, 2007).

**Initiation.** Initiation is the first phase of the change cycle. The initiation phase frequently starts when new streams of funding are given to a school district from state agencies.
Initiation often begins at the local school district level when a need for improvement is identified. The school district superintendent is usually the main advocate during the initiation phase and commonly leads this phase because he or she can secure supplemental streams of revenue from outside the local school district to support the initiative. Support from the school district superintendent is critical during initiation, which almost always proceeds to the implementation phase (Fullan, 2007).

**Implementation.** Local level implementation is the attempt by educators and/or administrators to place new change initiatives into practice within their school system. Implementation most often occurs when new curriculum materials or educator skills are placed into classroom practice. Educators who attempt to implement a change initiative can have either positive or negative experiences (Fullan, 2007).

According to Fullan (2007), school district administrators are influential during the implementation phase because they “affect the quality of implementation” (p.94). For example, the superintendent serves as the school district leader to monitor whether educators are implementing the change initiative in their classroom practice. Building principals function to support teachers while they attempt to implement the change initiative in the classroom. The principal can positively influence the implementation phase by developing building-level goals, a collaborative and congenial work setting, and measures for monitoring the results of the change initiative (Fullan, 2007).

In addition, the quality of educator working relationships can be a critical component to the success or failure of the implementation phase (Fullan, 2007). Educator choice to accept or reject the change initiative is the biggest factor affecting the implementation phase; this choice is often influenced by professional relationships with other teachers. Several interrelated factors
that are important for the support of positive teacher collaboration during this phase are
“collegiality, open communication, trust, support and help, learning on the job, getting results,
job satisfaction, and morale” (Fullan, 2007, p. 97).

Outside factors such as the relationship between the local school district and state
department of education can affect the success of the implementation phase. Fullan (2007)
posits that local school systems and state departments of education have yet to establish a
“processual” relationship (p. 100). This lack of interaction between the local school district and
state department of education (that may provide the funding for the change initiative) is critical,
often resulting in little external oversight of the change process. State departments of education
who provide funding for change initiatives often do not plan to monitor the changes to a school
system. As such, the continuation phase can become a challenge (Fullan, 2007).

Institutionalization. Institutionalization, or continuation, is the final phase of the change
process. The continuation phase represents the most lengthy of the change phases and typically
starts two to four years after the implementation phase and may take up to eight years to be
instituted in the organization. The initiative can still fail even if a local school system adopts the
continuation phase (Fullan, 2007).

Many change initiatives never enter the continuation phase because funding runs out
(Fullan, 2007). Lack of support from the superintendent can also cause the continuation phase to
fail. Fullan (2007) notes that the continuation phase should not be conducted in isolation, but
should be considered during the other phases of the change process.

Fullan (2007) posits that the implementation and continuation phases are related in
several ways. The success or failure of one phase can affect the other. Effective implementation
must be based on a synergy of both phases. Focusing on just one component of either phase will not result in effective change or sustainability of the initiative. Fullan (2007) explains:

To implement and sustain programs, we need better implementation plans; to get to better implementation plans, we need to know how to change our planning and follow-through process; to know how to change our planning process, we need to know how to produce better planners and implementers, and on and on (p. 106).

Finally, meaning making must also become an integral part of any change process.

**Meaning making.** Fullan (2007) discusses that meaning making happens within each individual, but true change happens when a group of educators align their meaning making of an initiative. Educators can have problems aligning their meaning making when they have concerns about “new practices, goals, beliefs, and means of implementation” (p. 39). These concerns can be minimized by local school districts through the establishment of educator support systems. Establishing educator support systems can better the chances of meaning making alignment across a group. However, establishing these support systems often require changes at the structural level of the school district in order to help educators make both individual and group meaning of their experience (Fullan, 2007).

Fullan (2007) emphasizes that finding meaning in an experience is not equivalent to feeling better about the change initiative. Rather, finding meaning may help teachers “find the considerable energy to transform the status quo” (p. 39). Teachers need to find meaning in an experience to change classroom practices. Teachers who find meaning feel increased motivation, and making meaning allows an educator to develop better problem solving skills (Fullan, 2007).
Application to study. An exploration of teachers’ experience of professional development training through the lens of educational change theory contributed to my understanding of how educators perceive their professional development training experience. It allowed insights into the change process and helped me understand how teachers make meaning of their experience. Utilizing this framework enabled me to identify the supports and challenges associated with ongoing implementation of the new skills offered in a professional development program. Using educational change theory as a theoretical lens allowed me to understand the change process at the local level and provided me knowledge to assist my peers in the implementation and continuation of their newly acquired skills in classroom practice.
Chapter II: Literature

Meaningful professional development programs are essential for preparing K-6 educators to teach effectively in the 21st-century school environment. Three bodies of literature that address (a) the issue of professional development training, (b) implementation of skills taught in training, and (c) changes in classroom practices resulting from training are relevant to professional development and 21st-century schools. The three bodies of literature support the research questions of this study that examined how educators understand and make meaning of their professional development experience as well as the way such training affects change at the classroom level. Fullan’s (2007) educational change theory informed this review of literature dealing with the way professional development practices could influence change at the classroom level. Thus, Fullan’s (2007) educational change theory is selectively included in this literature review.

The literature review begins with a discussion of professional development literature that considers effective training programs. Next, literature dealing with implementation and support of professional development practices is reviewed. Finally, literature is reviewed that examines changing teacher practice at the classroom level. The focus of the literature is on supporting 21st-century educator learning. A summary follows that identifies gaps in the literature to justify how this study contributes to the scholarly educational research.

Effective Professional Development

Overview. Professional development, also known as professional learning (Learning Forward, 2011) is crucial to improving teaching and learning in American schools (Desimone, 2011; Morewood, Ankrum, & Bean, 2010; Wei et al. 2009). Although some argue that professional development and professional learning are interchangeable terms, for the purposes
of this study, professional learning is referred to the act of learning about education theory and practices through participation in professional development. Professional development refers to classes, workshops, and other programs for educators. Professional development programs help educators continually grow as learners and allow them to stay current on new approaches to teaching and learning (Morewood, Ankrum, & Bean, 2009).

Continuous professional learning is one of the most important factors to improving educator effectiveness (Learning Forward, 2011). Educators need to participate in school-sponsored professional development programs so that continuous learning will remain a vital component throughout their career; it brings about positive change to classroom practices, which increases academic achievement for students (Learning Forward, 2011).

Effective professional development practices include educator voices in the planning and implementation processes (Papastamatis, Panitsidou, Giavrimis, & Papanis, 2009; Wlodkowski, 2003). Sustainable change at the classroom level can happen only if quality professional development components are instituted that fully support educator learning (Fullan, 2007; Tohill, 2009).

**Definition.** Because professional development programs are varied in nature and content, defining what constitutes effective professional development is difficult. Learning Forward (2011) defines professional development as “professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students” (p. 22). Educators are defined as persons who come in direct contact with students. Effectiveness means an educator’s ability to “implement evidence-based practices by creating sustained conditions for effective learning to increase student achievement” (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 20). The majority of prior professional development studies focused on a narrow range of topics, which included teacher approval of the
training, educator attitude change and adopting a new innovation, rather than examining the processes that influence effective change at the classroom level (Desimone, 2011). This narrow focus tends to exclude investigations into how professional development programs affect change at the classroom level.

**Program design.** School district administrators have historically struggled with offering effective professional development programs (Gaytan & McEwen, 2010). Even when programs are initiated, school districts have reported that many educators were disengaged from the learning opportunity (Learning Forward, 2011).

Professional learning topics are often unrelated, short in duration, and focused on random topics (Darling-Hammond, 2011). Improved professional development programs can be more effective when focused on a single topic that includes a critical reflection component; critical reflection can allow educators to continually improve their skills as they progress through the program (Darling-Hammond, 2011; Galini & Efthymia, 2010). Programs can also be more effective when educators engage in team-based activities including planning, implementation, and evaluation of professional learning opportunities (Learning Forward, 2011; Wlodkowski, 2003).

Professional development program design can vary widely within each educational system and include both formal and informal programs. Formal professional development programs often involve educators participating in planned activities such as “seminars, workshops, in-service programs, local and national conferences, and college courses” (Desimone, 2011, p. 68). In addition, effective formal professional development programs may be lengthy and focus on a single subject (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010; Kent, 2004). By contrast, informal professional development programs are often short in duration and can be as
simple as a casual conversation between educators.

A new paradigm is beginning to emerge that emphasizes the importance of interactive and social learning during formal professional development programs (Desimone, 2011). As a result, new structures and supports are being put into practice during professional development programs. This new focus on additional structures and supports for educators enables a support system to be in place so newly acquired skills have a better chance of becoming embedded in practice (Fullan, 2007; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Having structures and supports in place throughout and beyond formal professional training programs is a drastic change from past practices where educators learned, worked, and implemented their training in isolation (Kent, 2004).

**Educator effectiveness.** Increasing educator effectiveness through professional development programs is a best practices approach to increasing and defining educator performance (Learning Forward, 2011). Increasing educator effectiveness can help change classroom practices and have a positive effect on student achievement. To increase educator effectiveness, professional development programs need to further develop educator understanding of the processes of teaching and learning so they have relevance to the classroom setting (Darling-Hammond, 2011). Professional development programs are designed to develop educators’ knowledge of teaching and learning, yet the success of professional development programs essentially depends on educator willingness to obtain new skills and change their current practices (Fullan, 2007; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). The process begins with educator willingness to participate in either informal and/or formal professional development programs. This may be problematic, because escalating student performance demands have placed additional pressures on educators to work outside of the school day to improve their
practices. After-school approaches to improving educator effectiveness may lead to improper work-life balance (Adams, 2006). Designing effective professional development programs, though, can help educators achieve the proper work-life balance and avoid additional work-related stress.

**Effective programming.** School district administrators sometimes struggle to select the best professional development program to improve both teaching and learning (Hirsh, 2005). Effective school administrators select the best type of program to help educators in their specific context (Hirsh, 2005), which can encourage a change in knowledge, abilities, and beliefs (Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). In addition, school administrators must make a commitment to offer continuous supports to teachers to enhance their ongoing learning, which may then result in changes to teachers’ knowledge, abilities, and beliefs (Darling-Hammond, 2011),

School administrators must stay current on research-based practices so that appropriate professional development programs can be offered to educators. Being knowledgeable about current practices will aid in planning and implementing educator training programs that will positively affect teaching and learning at the classroom level (Learning Forward, 2011). One of the most challenging aspects in selecting an effective educator professional development program is choosing one that aligns with current staff beliefs (Hirsh, 2005). Staff beliefs can be addressed by focusing professional development programming on the topics of “content, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation” (Desimone, 2011, p. 69). Educator professional development programs that focus on these components may more positively affect teachers’ beliefs and attitudes, resulting in improved student learning (Desimone, 2011). In addition, educators and school leaders need to be sure their assumptions and beliefs of the professional development program are continually addressed along these five areas.
The areas of content, active learning, coherence, duration, and collective participation have also been the focus of other professional development studies. For instance, Hutchins, Arbaugh, Abell, Marra, and Lee (2008) conducted a study of 47 educator professional development programs focused on science and math content. Their results are similar to earlier findings, which demonstrated that these five components support effective professional development programs. In their study, educators were most engaged in professional development when involved with hands-on activities. Programs with less content were better in terms of their effectiveness for learning, and educators learned more when the focus of the professional development program was narrower and directly related to their context (Hutchins et al., 2008). Educators learned best when professional development facilitators modeled a specific instructional strategy and involved the teachers in actually doing the activity. Practicing new skills during the training transferred to educators’ real experiences at the classroom level.

The establishment of an educator network has helped teachers to acquire new skills and avoid isolation in the learning process. Finally, the importance of long-term support of professional development training programs was emphasized as a major factor to the success of the program (Hutchins et al., 2008).

There are additional factors that add to the effectiveness of educator professional development programs. Educators can be encouraged to test new ideas in the classroom and should be allowed to practice and personalize newly acquired skills to meet student needs. Educators should be central to the staff development process by being given the opportunity to express their learning needs along with having a say as to how those needs could be met. In addition, educators should participate in a teaching community in order to receive support for their learning (Papastamatis et al., 2009).
Reminding teachers that education and training is a lifelong process helps their learning. Professional development planners must take into account educator needs and balance them with what the school leadership team wants. Effective programs introduce educators to ways of teaching that differ from what they have learned about or employed in their classrooms, and also help them realize that as student needs change, so must classroom practices (Papastamatis et al., 2009).

Effective professional development programming should include practices that motivate employees. Educators will be most motivated by professional growth opportunities that result in “intrinsic rewards out of interesting and challenging work” (Herzberg, 1987, p. 14). Providing job embedded opportunities may increase such motivation (Learning Forward, 2011). Some programs may also offer external incentives to motivate employees to attend professional development programs, but such incentives are inferior compared to experiencing personal growth (Herzberg, 1987).

Addressing educator beliefs often becomes the focus of professional development programs; however, these programs should not focus solely on changing beliefs because the results will only be temporary (Giordano, 2007). Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (2011) stated, "both new wine and old wine need new bottles, or else incentives and supports for teacher development will be counter-productive or nonexistent" (p. 83). In other words, failure to properly integrate current educator beliefs with new viewpoints will produce mixed results. Finally, school administrators must recognize that individual skill development should be the focus of the professional learning process and include pertinent supports and structures that encourage classroom implementation of newly acquired skills.
Implementation Support of Professional Development Programs

Overview. Professional development programs are often initiated to change educator practices (Learning Forward, 2011). The change process occurs over many years and requires implementation support to institutionalize new initiatives (Fullan, 2007). School administrators who are knowledgeable about the implementation process should provide adequate educator support systems to institutionalize new programs (Fullan, 2007; Learning Forward, 2011) as providing such support during and after formal training programs afford educators a chance at embedding new skills into the classroom (Fullan, 2007).

School administrators and educators must make a long-term commitment to change. Educators can meet this commitment by setting specific goals and establishing a priority for implementation of their professional learning (Fullan, 2007). School administrators need to support educator willingness to change by providing the necessary support resources to them, such as “job-embedded training during the workday, professional development support personal such as peers and coaches, added curricular materials, or supplementary technology” (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 44). Supportive school administrators should allow educators to express their concerns about implementation challenges and then help them to put their learning into practice to sustain the initiative (Fullan, 2007; Gilrane, Roberts, & Russell, 2008; Learning Forward, 2011).

Ongoing implementation support. Professional development programs have a better chance of being implemented if teachers are provided ongoing implementation support (Learning Forward, 2011). Several steps can be taken to increase the chance of educators’ implementing newly acquired skills into the classroom after formal training ends (Hutchins et al., 2008). Follow-up meetings can be conducted during the school year and can help motivate
educators to put their new skills into practice. Professional development program facilitators can visit the school district after the formal program ends and offer additional workshops focused on the professional development topic in order to “deepen understanding and refine educator practice” (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 45). Follow-up visits allow the facilitator to model instruction, work one-on-one with teachers, or answer questions the educators may have. Furthermore, additional curricular resources such as printed material or computer hardware or software can enable educators to implement the activities and instructional strategies that were acquired in formal professional development training more easily (Hutchins et al., 2008). As a final point, continuous access to professional development program facilitators may allow educators to feel supported as they implement their new skills. If the school district is using an outside program facilitator then arrangements should be made to provide post-professional development program support after the formal training sessions end (Hutchins et al., 2008).

Ongoing support is vital to the implementation of professional development programs (Fullan, 2007; Kent, 2004; Mouza, 2009). In a large participant-focused study conducted by Ingvarson, Meiers, and Beavis (2005), follow-up support of professional development was found to significantly increase the extent to which teachers reported a sense of increased knowledge. In addition, professional development programs deemed as “more effective” had classroom support built into the program (p. 17). Moreover, professional development programs which require transformational changes in educators’ teaching approaches and subject matter knowledge may require on-site follow-up support to help teachers integrate new curricula and instructional skills into existing practices (Ko, Wallace, and Ward, 2006).

Supporting professional development programs both during and after formal training programs is critical to the sustainability of the program. In a study by Heck, Brandon, and Wang
(2001), site-managed change initiatives were found to be successful at the implementation phase when the program was focused directly on the educator’s context, the principal supported the initiative, and educators collaborated with each other, which allowed them to participate in the decision making process (p. 318). In addition, educator perception relating to the worth of the program directly influenced the implementation process (Heck et al., 2001).

Researchers have also evaluated educator participant voices by examining the factors that encourage implementation and ongoing support of professional development programs. Educators’ voices can be expressed in professional learning communities when they develop written reflections, learn new skills in a group, focus on improving student academic achievement, and engage in peer collaboration (Bryk, Kruse, & Louis, 1995). In addition, five professional development program factors help educator participants in “supporting their growth, change, and reflection” (Gilrane, et al., 2008, p. 337); educator voices in the planning process; supportive structures that include additional materials, time, and collaborative planning space; support from the administration and professional development program facilitator; positive change in student performance in the classroom; and critical feedback to improve instruction using their newly acquired skills (p. 337). These five factors indicate the importance of a collegial working relationship between educators and school district administration.

Finally, constructive feedback helps educators in their ongoing implementation support efforts (Learning Forward, 2011). Peers, mentors, and school administrators can encourage educators to continually reflect on their practices and make improvements during the implementation process (Learning Forward, 2011) while providing constructive feedback in a nonjudgmental way. This helps to establish a positive relationship between the educator and person providing the feedback. Frequent, constructive feedback gives educators ongoing support
so that the implementation process is continually refined and newly acquired skills are constantly supported (Learning Forward, 2011).

**Changing 21st-Century Educator Practice Through Effective Peer Collaboration**

Supporting educator learning is a critical factor in promoting change at the classroom level (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Kwang, 2001; Penuel et al., 2007). Effective support systems allow teachers to be engaged with the learning process after formal professional development training ends and afford educators a better opportunity for sustaining change (Fullan, 2007). Peer collaboration is an effective strategy for supporting ongoing implementation efforts and can take the form of “groups, study groups, peer observation, co-teaching, and co-planning” (Learning Forward, 2011, p. 41). Educators who participate in peer collaboration groups receive support so their newly acquired skills have a better chance of being sustained into classroom practices (Fullan, 2007; Learning Forward, 2011).

**Peer coaching.** Peer coaching can be a useful tool to help educators grow as learners. Peer coaching involves two educators that teach on similar levels working in tandem with each other toward a similar goal (Bruce & Ross, 2008). Educators who have frequent and ongoing support through peer-coaching programs often struggle less during the change process (Fullan, 2007). Peer-coaching programs therefore have the potential to benefit educators as they continue to implement their skills into practice.

Peer-coaching programs are sometimes difficult to establish, and coaching sessions can be a challenge for educators to arrange due to their teaching schedules. Yet, these programs can serve as a powerful tool to supporting change at the classroom level. Effective peer coaching happens when educators “observe each other, establish improvement goals, develop strategies to implement goals, observe one and another during the revised teaching schedule, and provide
specific feedback (Bruce & Ross, 2008, p. 350). Coaching can be either one-way or two-way (Huston & Weaver, 2008) and often involves the more experienced faculty member’s helping the less experienced peer (Murray, Ma, & Mazur, 2008). In two-way coaching, also called reciprocal coaching, each peer helps the other (Huston & Weaver, 2008).

For experienced educators, reciprocal coaching provides the greatest benefit because each peer can speak in-depth about his or her subject in a safe environment (Huston & Weaver, 2008; Waddell & Dunn, 2005). Peer coaching encourages ongoing conversations and collaboration that supports the implementation and sustainability process (Fullan, 2007). As a result, schools that utilize peer coaches have been found to be more successful in teacher implementation and sustainability of newly acquired skills (Waddell & Dunn, 2005).

Peer collaboration serves several important purposes. Peers often understand other educators’ teaching assignments and can provide specific suggestions towards established goals (Bruce & Ross, 2008). They can use their collegiality to celebrate successes during peer interactions. In addition, peer coaching is helpful to both educators because one can observe the other implementing similar new skills into actual classroom practice. Furthermore, peer observations can help each educator in implementation of their own recently acquired skills (Bruce & Ross, 2008), and peer coaching can help improve educator “pedagogical and content knowledge” (Huston & Weaver, 2008, p. 13).

Effective peer-coaching programs have been used successfully at the higher education level and have potential to be effective at the K–12 level. Huston and Weaver (2008) recommend six ways to properly implement a peer-coaching program. First, a peer coach needs to set goals with his or her peer and should allow the other educator to set goals with the peer’s support. Next, a peer-coaching program should be voluntary and not be mandated by
administration. In addition, confidentiality should be maintained between the peer coach and peer, as confidentiality is important to establishing a trusting relationship that can be maintained over a long period of time. Fourth, reciprocal coaching should take place at least one time per year. Reciprocal coaching means that a role reversal takes place so that the educator has a chance to provide his or her peer coach with feedback on the coach’s instructional practices. Finally, peer coaching should be used for “formative and developmental purposes rather than summative purposes” (p. 16). Using a formative approach is important to differentiate as a growth tool in comparison to a summative approach, which is often used as a yearly evaluation of employment status.

Another recommendation concerns training. Bruce and Ross (2008) posit that effective peer coaching must involve specific training of the peer coach so that the proper coaching pedagogy can be acquired.

Indeed, effective peer-coaching programs that support professional development practices should have support from the central office level. Support can come in the form of the superintendent reallocating funds from the school budget or through Title I funds to support peer coaching programs; making the peer coaching program public; appointing peer coaches; and holding events to celebrate peer coaches (Huston & Weaver, 2008; Steinbacher-Reed & Powers, 2011). Superintendents can also arrange for university partnerships to support professional development programs, provide retired school personal a stipend to support professional development program initiatives, and advocate for “job-embedded professional development for all teachers” (Steinbacher-Reed & Powers, 2011, p.71).

Extended support. Extended professional development support is an important factor in post-professional development programs (Capps, Crawford, & Constas, 2012) and provides
educators the opportunity to interact with both program facilitators and colleagues in order to solve problems and “receive feedback” (Capps et al., 2012, p. 299). Extended program support comprises several components, including classroom visits, educators and program facilitator meetings, and online support that may include communicating through “chat” and discussion boards. Email or chat has been an effective tool for professional development facilitators to support educators during the change process. In addition, educators can support each other by meeting as a group to discuss their experiences as they try and implement newly acquired skills into practice (Capps et al., 2012).

Teacher observations and self-reflections can also benefit educators (Capps et al., 2012). Program facilitators can make use of pre- and post-program classroom observations to help educators grow during the change process. The observations can be used to assist educators as they reflect on their practice (Capps et al., 2012) and work toward sustaining newly acquired skills into their classroom (Fullan, 2007).

The role of the principal. Many schools continue to struggle with establishing adequate funding to hire full-time professional development support personnel. A lack of funding leaves the principal with the duty of establishing conditions for continual educator learning during the school day. Principals can still address the need for continual educator learning even if funding is not available.

Principals can help educators grow as learners by employing several creative avenues. First, principals can schedule common planning time for educators (Steinbacher-Reed & Powers, 2011). Common planning time means that educators who work in similar grade levels will be scheduled for lesson planning at the same time. Principals can designate specific time to be set aside for peer discussion and sharing of resources from recent professional development training.
programs. Learning walks can be another effective tool for educator growth (Steinbacher-Reed & Powers, 2011). During learning walks, teachers “browse, borrow, and build” (Steinbacher-Reed & Powers, 2011, p. 71) from other teachers so they can improve their own practices.

Finally, principals can schedule release time for educators during the workday. Release time means that educators will leave their classroom for a set period of time to engage in an activity. In order for release time to be cost-effective, principals themselves can substitute teach in classrooms. Educators would then be given the opportunity to meet with professional development program facilitators to discuss their progress on implementing new skills into practice (Steinbacher-Reed & Powers, 2011).

**Further research.** The review of the literature was specific to the topic and problem of practice of this study. Literature from the last ten years that focuses on supporting change at the classroom level was reviewed. Prior studies have identified components that comprise effective professional development practices; other educational literature has identified areas that help educators implement new skills into classroom practice. What the literature did not identify is how teachers experience the process of implementing newly acquired skills from professional development training once formal programs end. Further research was needed to explore how teachers experience the post-professional development implementation process and to identify the factors that educators described as being important to supporting their ongoing learning.
Chapter III: Methodology

The researcher used a qualitative design that was conducted primarily through multiple individual interviews. A qualitative approach was an appropriate choice to investigate teacher experiences in a professional development program because the researcher sought to comprehend how teachers understand and made meaning of their experience. Educational change theory (Fullan, 2007) served as the lens through which the researcher examined the change process as described by the teachers.

The research questions for this study were:

1. How do K-6 educators describe and understand their professional development experience?
   a. What did they hope to gain from the opportunity?
   b. How do these educators describe the changes in their practice after engaging in professional development?

2. What do these educators describe as supports and challenges associated with initiation, implementation, and continuation of skills offered in the professional development program?

3. What structures and strategies either help, or would help, participants feel successful in implementing and continuing the skills initiated by their professional development training opportunity?

The knowledge gained from this study provided insight into how one school district could improve professional development programming as it related to teaching in 21st-century schools. Understanding how teachers made meaning of their experience of professional development training was vital to supporting the implementation and continued classroom
integration of the skills introduced during the training program (Fullan, 2007).

**Research Design**

The overarching research design was a qualitative approach to inquiry. The study took place at the site where teachers completed their professional training opportunity and the researcher collected the data (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Several sources of qualitative data were collected to maintain rigor. The researcher conducted two sets of interviews with seven participants and gathered extensive field notes including rich detailed descriptions of participants’ classrooms (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). An inductive process was used to analyze the data and build themes (Thomas, 2006) in order to understand how teachers made meaning of their professional development experience (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). Likewise, the study questions reflected the researcher’s objective to understand how teachers made meaning of their professional development experience.

**Research Tradition**

**History.** Qualitative research originated in anthropology and sociology where researchers focused on studying the human experience by traveling to research sites to collect various forms of data. Researchers in education, law, counseling, health, and social work were also interested in understanding the human experience (Merriam, 2009).

In lieu of testing a hypothesis, “researchers constructed participant stories by inductively analyzing the data they collected directly from participants” (Merriam, 2009, p. 6). Between 1967 and the early 1980s, a number of books and publications began “focusing on qualitative methods” (Merriam, 2002, p. 7).

**Inductive approach.** The research tradition used was a basic qualitative study paired with an inductive approach to analysis (Merriam, 2009). A basic qualitative study provided the
researcher flexibility to understand how teachers made meaning of their experience without being constrained by rigid methodological procedures (Merriam, 2009). The basic qualitative study was also a strong choice for this study because an inductive approach to analysis was an appropriate method by which to analyze the collected data.

An inductive analysis process was useful in terms of building themes derived from the professional experiences of the participants themselves (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). Thomas (2006) refers to inductive analysis as a general inductive approach (GIA) and describes it as a “systematic procedure for analyzing qualitative data in which the analysis is likely to be guided by specific evaluation objectives” (p. 238). The objective for this study was to understand how teacher experiences in a professional development program could be used to support the implementation and continued classroom integration of skills introduced during the training program (Fullan, 2007). Specific questions related to this objective were referenced in the research questions.

In conducting an inductive analysis, the researcher closely read the transcribed interview data to construct themes and identify the most frequent or important themes directly from the interview transcripts (Thomas, 2006). The general inductive approach allowed the researcher to reduce a large amount of lengthy interview transcripts into a summary format. This allowed the researcher to determine the relationship between the research objectives and the conclusions drawn at the end of the study (Thomas, 2006). In summary, selecting the general inductive analysis approach provided a rational procedure to guide the researcher through the data analysis process (Thomas, 2006, p. 239).

Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009) was used to invite eight
elementary teachers who participated in blended learning professional development training during the 2011-2012 school year in an effort to determine whether, and in what ways, they were employing the skills to which they were introduced in their training program in classroom practices. Seven participants completed the study and provided essential firsthand, in-depth, nuanced information about their experiences in the professional development training opportunity itself as well as the meaning they made of their experiences upon completion of the training (Fullan, 2007). The participants taught in the elementary school setting at the study site in grade levels that ranged from kindergarten through sixth-grade. All participants completed the professional development program under study.

**Recruitment and Access**

The study took place at a rural school district in Pennsylvania. This location was selected because it was the site where the participants underwent the professional development training experience. Further, as one practical purpose of this study was to better understand how to support implementation and continuation of the skills and practices introduced during the professional development training at this site, it was important to talk to those teachers who were engaged in this particular training experience in an effort to understand how to better support them. The researcher received permission to conduct the study beginning in March 2012 through the 2013 calendar year. Participants were invited in person by the researcher to participate in the study after approval was received from the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The protection of human subjects was central to the design of this study so ethical issues could be identified before the study took place (Creswell, 2013). The first step taken was to
request approval from the superintendent and school board of directors at the study site to
conduct this study. The researcher appeared at a school board meeting in March of 2012, to
answer any questions that school board members had concerning the study. The school board
president asked only one question, which was satisfactorily answered by the researcher. No
other school board members asked follow-up questions. The school board then voted to
unanimously approve the request to allow the researcher to conduct the study at the study site.

Fraenkel and Wallen (2009) argue that participant identities need to be protected. Although true confidentiality and anonymity may not be possible at the local level, the researcher made every effort to mask participants’ identities by using pseudonyms and limiting identifying descriptors attached to individuals. Protecting participant identities not only safeguarded real names from being included in the study, but also kept the participants from being identified by the school administration. Protecting participants’ names from supervisors was essential so there would be no administrative repercussions as a result of answers that the participants provided to the interview questions (though it was not anticipated that any such answers would invoke a negative response). To protect the integrity and anonymity of the participants in the written dissemination of this study, the location and names of the participants were not disclosed and the school district was simply identified as “Blue River School District.”

A full written disclosure was made to each participant before this study began. A participant consent form was drafted and each participant signed a copy. A copy of the form was given to each participant at the time of delivery and the researcher explained the form to each participant. Participants were given the opportunity to leave the study at any time.

Data Collection

The data for this study were collected through two rounds of participant interviews to
explore how teachers understood and made meaning of their experiences and how their understanding informed the degree to which they implemented and continued the skills and practices introduced during the professional development training program.

**Interview overview.** In-depth interviewing provided the most comprehensive approach to collecting data for this qualitative study as the researcher was able to obtain thoughtful, descriptive data from the participants at the study site through dialogue (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). The researcher administered two sets of semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009) to each participant. Additional qualitative data in the form of field notes that included a recounting of participants’ non-verbal communication during the interviews were gathered (Creswell, 2013). The researcher compiled research memos describing the interview experience so that details could be recalled immediately after the interview had been completed. Writing research memos allowed the researcher to reflect upon his relationship with the interviewee, detail the positive experiences from the actual interview, list the specific areas that needed improved in subsequent interviews, and included any other pertinent details of the experience that could add to the thoughtful, descriptive data in the study (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2005).

**Interview protocols.** The interview protocols employed a phenomenological interviewing approach that allowed the researcher to explore participant experiences in a blended learning professional development training program (Seidman, 2006). Seidman (2006) developed the phenomenological interviewing approach so researchers using various methods could explore participant experiences by combining the interview techniques of life history interviewing and phenomenology (Seidman, 2006, p. 15). Phenomenological interviewing was an ideal choice for this study because the researcher explored how participants understood and made meaning of their experience. Seidman (2006) recommends that researchers conduct three
sets of interviews, with the first interview establishing the background of the participants’ experience in relation to the topic; the second interview focusing on participants’ “current lived experience” in the study topic; and the third interview asking the participants to reflect on the “meaning of their experience” (p. 17). In some cases, however, Seidman (2006) recommends alternatives to the three-interview approach by noting, “As long as a structure is maintained that allows participants to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure and the duration and spacing of interviews can certainly be explored” (pp. 19-20).

The alternative process for conducting interviews was used for this study. The first and second interview protocols were combined to explore both the participants’ background and professional development experiences during a single interview. The researcher only asked a few brief questions to explore participants’ backgrounds to “respect the three-interview structure” (Seidman, 2006, p. 19) and then transitioned into interview questions focused on participants’ retelling of their experience. Utilizing one initial interview allowed the researcher to respect the time the participants set aside for participating in the study and also eliminated unnecessary long distance travel costs. A second interview was then conducted to examine how participants made meaning of their experience. All interviews were digitally recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

**Length/spacing.** Considerable thought was given in advance as to planning the length of the interviews prior to the data collection phase (Seidman, 2006). Many of the study participants were parents of young children and in need of childcare services while they were interviewed. Informing participants as to the approximate length of the interviews was necessary so childcare could be arranged prior to the interview. Seidman (2006) recommends that interviews be
conducted for a period of 90 minutes. While there was no way to predict whether interviews would actually encompass the entire 90 minutes, the researcher established that each interview could range from 60 to 90 minutes. Establishing these parameters allowed participants to make adequate arrangements for childcare while not being constrained to a set timeframe that forced them to continually “watch the clock” (Seidman, 2006, p. 20). The actual length of the interviews was 30-60 minutes.

The two participant interviews were spaced between three and eight days apart (Seidman, 2006). Spacing interviews at this length allowed participants to think about their first interview, while avoiding “lost connections” between them (p. 21). Spacing interviews between three and eight days apart allowed time for the participants to reflect on their first interview experience before the second one was conducted (Seidman, 2006).

**Interview One.** During the first interview the researcher asked the participants to focus on their backgrounds prior to becoming a teacher. Participants retold their early experiences that led them to becoming teachers during the first half of the interview. Exploring participants’ early experiences provided “a foundation of details that helps illumine the next” (Seidman, 2006, p.19). Each interview was cumulative in nature so the researcher could continually build a participant’s story.

The second part of the interview focused on specific details regarding their experience in a blended learning professional development program (Seidman, 2006, pp. 17-18). Participants were also asked to provide details of the professional development experience that related to the objectives of the study. Specifically, participants were asked to describe the challenges they had both during and after the training program in regard to implementing the training and continuing to develop the skills learned in the training program. Participants were asked to describe the
structures and strategies that could have helped them more easily implement their training and were asked to describe supports that could help their ongoing learning. The details provided by the participants aided in building individual stories of the experience. The first interview was then followed by a second interview.

**Interview Two.** Participants reflected on the meaning of their professional development experience during the second interview (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). Reflecting on meaning required the participants to examine “intellectual and emotional connections” that existed between their professional lives as a teacher and their private lives outside of the teaching profession (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). The interview protocol was designed to help the participants reflect on how their professional and personal lives intersect and allowed them to come to their current position (Seidman, 2006, p.18). Exploring both past and present experiences helped lead the participants to reflect upon what they are now “doing in their lives” (Seidman, 2006, p.19). Examining how teachers are currently making use of their training opportunity allowed the researcher to look at how the participants understood and made meaning of their professional development experience.

**Data Storage**

Audio and interview transcription data were stored using password-protected accounts. Audio and transcription files were stored on the researcher’s private computer and were only accessible by the researcher. Interview transcripts were imported and manually coded using MAXQDA qualitative analysis software on the researcher’s personal computer. The researcher was the only one with access to the data within the software program and assigned a pseudonym for each participant to further protect identities.
Data Analysis

Overview. A general inductive approach was used to analyze the data (Thomas, 2006). The data analysis was guided by the researcher’s desire to understand how teacher experiences in a professional development program can be used to support the implementation and continued classroom integration of skills introduced during the training program (Fullan, 2007). Data analysis began after all interviews were transcribed and member checked (Creswell, 2013). The researcher focused on identifying themes that emerged from the transcribed interviews by reading through the interview transcripts multiple times (Thomas, 2006, p. 240). Themes began to emerge (Thomas, 2006) as the transcripts were viewed through the lens of educational change theory (Fullan, 2007). While research questions were developed for this study, the researcher did not discover that there were findings that surfaced from the transcribed interview data and field notes, which could have been unanticipated according to what was known from “prior expectations or models” (Thomas, 2006, p. 239). The researcher decided on what was most important in the analyzed data (Thomas, 2006), but was mindful to monitor his bias in the data analysis and interpretation phases (Merriam, 2009).

Inductive analysis procedure. The general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) was used to systematically organize, reduce, and analyze data. Recorded participant interviews were prepared through transcription by a professional transcription service and were formatted in the same way (Thomas, 2006). Next, the researcher completed a detailed reading of each interview transcript. Every interview transcript was then reread multiple times until the researcher gained an understanding of the emerging themes (Thomas, 2006), which were then uploaded into MAXQDA to manually create themes. Two types of themes were created that included upper-level, or more general themes, and lower level or specific themes. Using this process is referred
to as coding (Thomas, 2006; Saldaña, 2009).

**Inductive coding process.** The researcher began the inductive coding process by reading the interview transcripts and reflecting upon the abundant meanings that emerged. Constant comparison was used to continually examine all interview transcripts in order to cluster data and create themes (Merriam, 2009). A name was identified for each new theme and transcribed interview text was assigned to it (Thomas, 2006, p. 241). Fragments from the interview texts were continually added to each appropriate theme.

The researcher created themes from the interview texts that were closely related to the study objectives (Thomas, 2006, p. 241). Upper level codes were developed using in vivo and/or descriptive coding. In vivo codes are short words or phrases that were extracted from the interview transcripts and represented the participants’ own words (Saldaña, 2009). Descriptive coding differed because the code was used to summarize a passage from the interview transcripts into a short word or phrase (Saldaña, 2009). Axial coding (Saldaña, 2009) was used to further “reduce overlap and redundancy” between the themes (Thomas, 2006, p. 242). The themes identified after the axial coding procedure were further refined and the researcher searched for subtopics, other points of view or new perceptions into the objectives of the study (Thomas, 2006). Themes were “combined or linked under a superordinate theme when the meanings were similar” (Thomas, 2006, p. 242.). The following graphic illustrates the data analysis process beginning with the first reading of the interview transcripts and field notes through the final selection of themes; however, the researcher did not develop a model.
Figure 1

*Thomas’s (2006, p. 242) Coding Process in Inductive Analysis*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial reading of text data</th>
<th>Identify specific text segments related to objectives</th>
<th>Label the segments of text to create categories</th>
<th>Reduce overlap and redundancy among the categories</th>
<th>Create a model incorporating most important categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Many pages of text</td>
<td>Many segments of text</td>
<td>30 to 40 categories</td>
<td>15 to 20 categories</td>
<td>3 to 8 categories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Trustworthiness**

**Validity.** Validity has been defined as “the appropriateness, correctness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the specific inferences researchers make based on the data they collect” (Fraenkel and Wallen, 2009, p. 148). Creswell (2013) indicates several steps that a researcher can take to assure validity. The validity in this study was established through the adoption of an interview technique to provide “rich, thick description” (p 252). Thick description involved funneling ideas, drawing connections between the details, and “using strong action verbs and quotes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). With phenomenological interviewing, capturing rich description through multiple interviews with the addition of field notes added to the rigor of this study.

**Credibility.** Member checking was used as one form of credibility for this study. Member checking means the researcher requested participants’ views of the reliability of the findings and researcher understanding of the data (Creswell, 2013). The researcher provided a copy of the transcripts to each participant to check for accuracy of the data that was provided in the interviews. Following data analysis, the researcher shared the final themes with the participants so the data could be evaluated for accuracy and credibility (Creswell, 2013, p. 252).
**Researcher bias.** Researcher bias was investigated through the process of writing a researcher identity memo (Maxwell, 2005). Although it was not possible to set aside all researcher bias, the researcher identity memo helped the researcher to identify any personal bias that may have interfered with the study. Part of the researcher memo demonstrated that the researcher was actively aware of the limitations associated with having a prior working relationship with the participants in the study and helped him avoid any procedures that might imply coercion. The researcher was never in a supervisory capacity over the participants and ensured that participants were aware that they could choose to leave the study at any time without fear of repercussion.

Ultimately, the specific purpose for this study was to improve the professional development work at the site school in order to better prepare teachers for 21st-century teaching practices. It is important to note that while this study was specific to one sample of teachers at one particular site, the efforts toward ensuring this study’s credibility will allow educators from other contexts to pull relevant aspects of the findings for their own work toward training teachers in new skills for teaching in the 21st century.

**Conclusion**

A basic qualitative study allowed the researcher to gain insight into how one school district could improve professional development programming as it related to teaching in 21st-century schools. Employing a phenomenological interviewing technique (Seidman, 2006) allowed the researcher to explore how teachers understood and made meaning of their professional development training experience. Using a general inductive approach to analysis allowed themes to emerge from the interview transcripts and findings to be determined so that professional development programming could be improved to better support the implementation
and continued classroom integration of the skills introduced during the training (Fullan, 2007).

Finally, the knowledge gained from this study provided useful findings for the school leadership team to develop a plan to help teachers effectively implement and sustain the skills they learned in the training program.
Chapter IV: Results

Data analyses and results are included in this chapter. Chapter four begins with an explanation of the research context, provides participant characteristics, and presents results that emerged from data analyses to answer the following research questions:

1. How do K-6 educators describe and understand their professional development experience?
   a. What did they hope to gain from the opportunity?
   b. How do these educators describe the changes in their practice after engaging in professional development?

2. What do these educators describe as supports and challenges associated with initiation, implementation, and continuation of skills offered in the professional development program?

3. What structures and strategies either help, or would help, participants feel successful in implementing and continuing the skills initiated by their professional development training opportunity?

A qualitative methodology was used to investigate how teachers understood and made meaning of this professional development experience to better understand how participants can be supported now that the training program has ended. The researcher collected data through interviews, field notes, and extensive descriptions of classrooms. A general inductive approach to analysis was used to identify primary and secondary themes that answered the research questions.

Relevant results that emerged from data analysis are arranged into primary and secondary themes and are presented within the context of each research question below. A summary of
how each research question aligns with the themes is discussed at the end of the chapter. The study site will be referred to as “Blue River School District” and each participant has been given a pseudonym.

Study Context and Background

Blue River School District started a project in 2011 to train K–12 educators to incorporate blended learning into instructional practices. The program was funded from 2011 to 2014 by a multimillion-dollar grant for which administrators applied believing that training educators to incorporate blended learning into high school classrooms could help to improve student achievement. In this context, blended learning is defined as the incorporation of existing curricula into an online learning management system for instructional use in a traditional brick and mortar classroom. Blackboard, the learning management system that was used, is a commercially available product that some K–12 schools use to deliver online instruction.

Although the program initiative focused mainly on improving student achievement at the high school level, adequate funding was available to offer the training to all teachers in the school district, and consequently elementary educators were extended the opportunity to participate in the training program. It is important to note that the timing of participation in this ongoing program was voluntary, though school district administrators expected that the entire K–12 faculty complete the training program before the grant funding ended in 2014. At the time this study was conducted, more than half of the teachers throughout the school district had completed the training.

This research study examines the experiences of elementary educators who participated in and completed the first cohort training during the 2011-2012 school year. This cohort began their training program in August of 2011 and completed it in February of 2012. Each participant
completed a minimum of 36 hours of combined training and practice time. Several of the participants were also considered peer coaches and completed a similar, but more intensive, training program during the same time period.

The purpose of this study was to examine how elementary educators understood and made meaning of this professional development training program experience. The researcher analyzed the variety of supports and challenges participants reportedly experienced during their training. In addition, the researcher examined structures and challenges that currently help or would help participants feel successful implementing and continuing to use skills developed during the training program.

Data

Field notes. Extensive descriptions of participant classrooms were collected as a data source. Additional field notes were recorded in a paper journal during participant interviews. The researcher used the field journal to record hand-written notes during the interviews along with relevant information about the participants.

Individual interviews. Eight participants agreed to participate in the study; however, one participant decided to leave the study after the interviews were completed. The researcher traveled about 400 total miles by personal vehicle to meet with each participant at the chosen location and conducted all interviews in person. Actual interview locations included a restaurant, a coffee shop, private homes, and elementary schools within the Blue River School District. To protect individual identities, each participant chose her own pseudonym before the start of the first interview.

Participants were full-time elementary teachers at the study site who completed the training program during the 2011-2012 school year. Participant demographics in Table 1 show
all are Caucasians between the ages of 26 and 52 and had been teachers from three to 28 years at the time of their interviews. Five participants hold a bachelor’s degree while two participants have master’s degrees. Participants teach kindergarten, first grade, second grade, fifth grade, or sixth grade. The participant sample included at least one teacher from each elementary school within the Blue River School District.

Table 1

*Participant demographics*

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*Participant Profiles*

This section includes brief profiles of the participants. Each profile includes a description of the teacher’s physical teaching space that is followed by a direct quote describing her learner identity. Learner identity is a term used for how people perceive themselves in relation to the way in which they acquire new knowledge. Additionally, participants mention recent
meaningful professional development experiences. The following section provides profiles of the seven participants.

**Profile One: Ellis.** Ellis is a sixth-grade teacher. Her classroom windows overlook the inner school courtyard that sports a beautiful screened-in gazebo and a surrounding landscape filled with overgrown vegetation. Her classroom ceilings have hanging decorations reminiscent of *The Lorax* while a life-size skeleton wearing a lab coat smiles from the back of the room. Ellis arranges her desks in a large square with inner rows and a few desks separated from the pack. Colorful posters are displayed around the room with titles such as “Follow the Order of Operations.” A well-kept literacy organizational system comprised of small plastic bins is housed under the windows. Plants and growing lights for science experiments hide in the dark back corner of the room while a poster that says “101 Things to Do Instead of Drugs” is highly visible near the doorway. This is how Ellis describes her learner identity:

I think I would have to categorize myself as an attention deficit learner. I like to learn about different things here and there, but not necessarily know everything about any one thing. Something will be a passion for six months, a couple of years, and then I feel that I’m good with that, and then I move on and do something else. For example, I love to learn about history. Right now, the history of my house is very interesting to me. Sometimes I’m very focused on what I can do to make my students more engaged. I’ll research and research and do a lot and try different things with that, and then once I feel I’m satisfied, I’ll move on to something else…if that makes any sense, kind of a scattered learning, but it’s constant learning in a variety of different areas.

Recently, Ellis enjoyed attending the Pennsylvania Educational Technology Exposition and Conference and the National Science Teachers Association Conference. She loved attending
those conferences and was able to attend new topical sessions every hour, which was fitting for her attention deficit learning style. Her teaching practices were most affected by those training opportunities because she was able to easily implement her new knowledge into the classroom.

**Profile Two: Harley.** Harley is a second-grade teacher. Her room is neatly organized and filled with colorful posters covering all four walls. There is a visible bulletin board with laminated student name cards showing who will have the iPod and iPad devices for the day. Although her room is in the school basement, four windows let adequate daylight into the room. Nearly all wall space is covered with academic topics including a word wall, vowel sounds, dates, seasons, months, and weather pattern learning organizers. Individual student desks are arranged in traditional rows and each student has his or her own desk and chair. Mexican influenced decorations are suspended from the ceiling and stuffed animals adorn the bookshelves. Harley describes her learner identity:

I think the more opportunities that they give us to experience other classrooms, other districts, the more excited I get and the more I want to learn. If the district doesn’t afford us these opportunities, then I think teachers become stagnant. I like going to all these extra events and bringing back something to the district that hasn’t been here before.

Recently, Harley enjoyed attending the Pennsylvania Educational Technology Exposition and Conference. She enjoyed the experience because she was able to incorporate what she learned at the conference into her classroom. Harley eventually changed her teaching practices as a direct result of attending that conference and collaborating with a peer presenter.

**Profile Three: Jill.** Jill is a kindergarten teacher. Her room is located in the school basement and has four windows that let in adequate daylight to naturally brighten her classroom. Her room is a bouquet of color with educational posters and materials covering all four walls.
Visual stimulation is an obvious component of her room with posters and materials displaying
everything from reading and math concepts to lunch counts, bus/car rider information and a
“Great Reader Award” area exhibiting student names. Jill arranges students into three large
groups and they sit at long rectangular tables. Each student has a classroom mailbox and his or
her coat and book bag are stored neatly in an open closet. Jill describes her learner identity:

I would say that I am a fast learner and a lifelong learner. I always like to learn, but I
have to see things, and my husband jokes around with me all the time because I picture
everything. I have to see it, like numbers written down. If I’ve seen it in print I can
remember it, and that helps me as a learner. I’ll use a lot of technology too. Technology
is a big thing that helps me…I mean I use my iPad all the time for everything. I love
technology.

Recently, Jill appreciated a SMART Board training seminar that she attended at her
district. She enjoyed the training seminar because the instructor lectured for half of the training
hours and then allowed the participants to practice their new skills for the other half. Jill is the
type of learner that needs both the lecture and hands on components to grow as a learner and
appreciates visual aids to help her remember new knowledge. She appreciated the handout that
the instructor gave to her because it had buttons and pictures on it. The paper reminded her how
to use the SMART Board. She uses this sheet in her daily instruction. She has had to make
several copies of it because the reference sheet gets worn out from frequent use.

Profile Four: Suzy. Suzy is a sixth-grade teacher and her room is located at the far end
of a long hallway near the school playground exit door. The room is rather bland although she
maintains a bulletin board listing daily student jobs. Suzy’s elementary school still has slate
chalkboards and she seems to only write with yellow chalk. Print dictionaries, thesauruses,
fiction, and non-fiction books are clearly marked and organized for easy student access. The
classroom is small with 28 student desks and chairs taking up the majority of the floor space.
The classroom has adequate daylight and a prominently placed anti-bullying poster. Suzy
describes her learner identity:

I would say the way I’ve developed as a learner is when I got out to the workforce. I think my college coursework gave me my fundamentals and I don’t know if I changed that much as a learner. I don’t know that it’s necessarily needed for what I’m doing as a career. I’m more of an independent learner and don’t need someone to spoon feed me anything. I’d rather pick things up from a video instead of a face-to-face context. Being an independent learner keeps me from stagnating professionally. It keeps it fresh for the kids. It would be boring if we continued to do the same things over and over. If we are not making progress, my kids will not be interested. If I’m not coming up with new ways to do the same things, then the kids get bored. If I’m not up on new technologies, it surpassed me [sic]. That’s not okay, so by some degree I’m driven by the needs of my job.

Recently, Suzy enjoyed attending the Pennsylvania Educational Technology Exposition and Conference. Suzy found it useful because she could see teachers applying knowledge. She prides herself on applying new educational concepts but only after mentally processing learning experiences for a minimum of three months.

Profile Five: Mary. Mary is a fifth-grade teacher. Prior to becoming a regular classroom teacher, she was a reading intervention specialist at her elementary school. Mary teaches in a well-maintained room with traditional, straight rows of individual student desks and
chairs. She frequently uses a small group table at the back of her room, near the door, for conferencing with student groups. Mary describes her learner identity:

My learner identity formed when I was very young. My first-grade teacher sat me down and told me that my reading skills were behind everyone. I was determined myself to improve this. I have a younger sister that I played “school” with often at home. I would stand up and pretend I was teaching her and just kept reading. By the end of first grade, I was reading so well that my teacher wanted me to go directly to third grade. That experience shaped my learner identity for the remainder of my life. Every time I have ever struggled to learn something I just kept pushing myself until I got it. This has influenced me as a learner and a teacher because I push myself to help kids learn. Even if I try new things and fail at it the first time I keep pushing myself.

Mary appreciated the opportunity to earn her master’s degree in reading. She found the graduate classes useful because she was required to try out her new skills in the classroom. Since earning her degree, Mary has permanently incorporated small group learning into her classroom and uses rubrics to evaluate students.

**Profile Six: Patty.** Patty is a kindergarten teacher. Her room is decorated with an elegant thematic display of the children’s book *Clifford*. Each area of the room has visual displays relating to the dog theme such as counting from one to ten with dog bones, a dog themed birthday calendar, and a behavior board that says, “Dog Gone Good Behavior.” Because the room faces the front of the building, it has bright natural daylight. Patty arranges student seating in rectangular tables with no student storage area beneath. A handcrafted pine mailbox system organizes student materials, and plastic boxes are filled with classroom art supplies. Patty describes her learner identity:
Self-motivation and submersion is the key to try to stay focused. I like to stay up-to-date by reading articles and magazines, which helps keep me well rounded and motivated to continue to do what I do. I like to constantly be active in things in the classroom or online. I like to go to in-services or classes, professional development classes, and even continuing classes like at the IU. I would just constantly be doing things to try to stay with it.

Recently, Patty enjoyed attending Writer’s Workshop, guided reading, and Reader’s Workshop training seminars at her district. She enjoyed a class called “Magic.” Patty appreciated these experiences because she could use her newfound knowledge in her teaching practices. All experiences were useful to her because they were relevant to her teaching assignment.

Profile Seven: Shandy. Shandy is a first-grade teacher. Her room is a visual extravaganza of stimulating color. You immediately feel a positive vibe as you view the hanging ceiling decorations organized by student groups that include, “Brilliant Bears, Fabulous Fires, Smiling S’mores, and Talented Tents.” Posters and bulletin boards adorn the four walls of the room and include a calendar, weather patterns, a word wall, and vowel sounds. Drawers are clearly labeled and a “How We Go Home” poster reminds students of their bus number or car rider/walker status. The room is neat and organized with individual student desks and chairs arranged in rows in addition to one square pod of six desks. Shandy describes her learner identity:

I think it’s always important to continuously learn. I love going into conferences and getting new ideas and bringing them back into the classroom and teaching. There’s always new things…technology-oriented that you can bring back to the classroom. So I
think any kind of workshop or conference or something I can go to…I love to bring back
and get those things in place in my classroom. I like to do that on my own; however, we
don’t always have the opportunity. Whenever we have the opportunity to do that during
school, I like to go. The summertime seems to be when I’m able to do that because we’re
not able to go as much during the year anymore like we used to be…they don’t give us
that opportunity anymore.

Shandy appreciated the knowledge she gained in her master’s degree program. She
found self-evaluation especially useful. Shandy often reflects on her teaching now that she has
embedded that skill into her practices.

**Analysis and Results**

Analysis from this study resulted in four primary themes and two sub themes. The
primary themes were: 1.) relevance for classroom practice 2.) motivations 3.) support and 4.)
challenges. A summary of each research question and associated theme(s) is included at the end
of this chapter. Each theme will be introduced and explained followed by participant quotes as
supporting evidence.

**Relevance for classroom practice—Research Questions 1, 1b.** Relevance for
classroom practice responds to the question “How do K-6 educators describe and understand
their professional development experience?” and the sub-question “How do these educators
describe the changes to their practice after engaging in the professional development
opportunity?” Most participants reported that they understood their experience as having
relevance for classroom practice and, as a consequence, had changed their classroom practices.
Relevance for classroom practice is defined as the application of participant knowledge from the
training program that resulted in a change to classroom practice. In particular, they discovered
the relevant use of Blackboard in their classrooms after having been required to create an online course. For example, each participant was required during the training to create an online course of her choice in Blackboard. Most participants found relevance for using Blackboard in their classroom context, resulting in some type of change to their practices.

Jill intended her course to be used by kindergarten students who were absent from school so they could access the same academic material online that was being taught during the regular school day. Jill realized by the third month of the training program that her original idea would not be relevant, however, because the students’ “parents don’t have technology at home.” She found relevance in her experience and changed her classroom practices by using the Blackboard course as an instructional organizer for classroom videos. She currently uses the videos to introduce reading concepts.

Shandy also found relevance in her experience and changed her classroom practices. She said, “I incorporate a lot more technology into my routine” whereas before the training she “just plugged it [SMART Board] in here and there.” Shandy talked about how she changed her practices using the Blackboard course she developed.

My course was pretty much on money because I find that that's one of the hardest concepts in first grade. When I first started out, my whole course was going to be on math…Then I realized this is too overwhelming, so I stepped back and took a chapter and went that route…Basically, I had some journal writing options in my course. I had some interactive games and songs and activities dealing with money that they could click on and learn as they go along.

Before enrolling in the training program, Shandy taught the unit on money using a traditional paper-based approach. Now that she completed the training program she uses her SMARTboard
to project her Blackboard course where she incorporates a journal activity, interactive games, and songs into the unit, a practice that wasn’t in place prior to her completing the training program. Shandy continues to teach her unit on money as a whole group lesson using her Blackboard course in lieu of the paper-based approach.

Likewise, Patty found relevance in her experience and made a change to her classroom practices by recording her voice to build online audio books for her kindergarten students to use in literacy centers through the Blackboard program. Patty said, “I tried to use as many pictures and as much voice recording as I could just because I knew at their level they weren’t going to be able to do a lot of it independently if I didn’t.” When Patty piloted the program for a nine-week period she noted, “Once they learned what to click on, they seemed to be able to get it.” Patty reported being successful in trying out her Blackboard course as a learning center with her students.

Suzy and Mary created Blackboard courses for reading instruction and then found that, as it happened, there was relevance to their classroom practice. Suzy said, “I use Blackboard for my entire reading class which is now online.” Suzy also found relevance in Blackboard’s ability to automatically grade tests, another motivator for her to enroll in the training program, and mentioned it “saves time and makes me more productive.” Mary created her Blackboard course to instruct a group of advanced readers. She piloted the course over a nine-week period and noted, “It’s something new and it motivated the students.” At first, Mary was hesitant, but noted, “I was reluctant…until I saw the students actively engaged,” meaning that she changed her mind about Blackboard after having success using it in classroom practice. Otherwise, as noted above, Mary determined that Blackboard was relevant to her practices when she saw that it motivated and engaged students.
Harley reported finding relevance in her experience which resulted in a change to her classroom practices after the training program ended. She built a Blackboard course focused on the topic of author studies. Harley talks about how she implemented her course into the classroom.

I introduced my high achiever and my low achiever to the course. They could be on the computers while I was teaching and working with the other kids on particular subjects and projects…Because of the higher achiever, she could help out the other one. They more or less went through the whole entire course themselves. It probably would be something that I would like to take maybe a two-week stretch of time. They kind of took two months to go through it because it was something brand new. Plus it also taught me that some of the things were a little more difficult even for my lower achiever but they seemed to enjoy it.

Harley was able to teach the rest of her class while two students worked independently on their own using the Blackboard course she created, a practice that wasn’t in place before she completed the training program.

In marked contrast from the others, Ellis did not find relevance in her experience and as such did not change her classroom practices. From that start, as stated earlier, Ellis wanted to find a new balance between traditional classroom instruction and using digital technology to teach her students. After she completed the training program her teaching philosophy became explicit when she said, “I’m not motivated and I firmly believe that K-6 education needs to be more than 75 percent in your face. In my opinion it should be a 100 percent in your face.” Ellis also struggled with the idea that a computer should replace a teacher; she perceived that the
training was geared to replacing her traditional-directed teaching with computer-based instruction when she said:

We were encouraged to develop literally an online curriculum that would take the place of us. If I get hit by a bus in theory, the things that I do in the classroom should have been replicated in what I was developing online. I had a really hard time doing that with science because science is very much a hands-on. We have bought into these hands-on science modules, where you’re mixing these chemicals. Well unless you send all these things home for the kids, they’re not going to be able to do it and there’s no way to replicate…even something as simple as baking soda and vinegar bursting a zipper bag open, online. You know what I mean?

Ellis never figured out how to replicate her science curriculum in an online environment because she was unable to have students complete virtual hands-on experiments that would replace the traditional classroom experience. As a result, Ellis did not find relevant use for her Blackboard science course and did not make a change to her practice.

In sum, all but one participant understood her experience as being relevant to her practices and as a result changed her teaching practices as a direct result of professional development training. Each participant chose the content from which she built a Blackboard course, often finding relevant use for the course in her practice. Although one participant was concerned about her future role, Blue River School District did not plan to replace any teacher with computer-based instruction, but rather wanted to provide each participant with new skills for teaching and learning to supplement, not supplant, their traditional classroom instruction.

**Motivations—Research Questions 1, 1a.** Motivations further responds to the research question, “How do K-6 educators describe and understand their professional development
Motivations is defined as intrinsic and extrinsic factors that helped the participants understand their experience. For example, the participants were intrinsically motivated to learn new skills. Some of the participants were also extrinsically motivated to gain money and incentives for participating in the program. A few participants actually transitioned from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation when they witnessed a positive change to their practice. The following sections will focus on these descriptions and employ participant quotes as supportive evidence.

**New skills.** Educators described that they were intrinsically motivated to acquire new skills. New skills is defined as pedagogical approaches that the participants wanted to acquire to improve their practices. Most of the participants enrolled in the first cohort because they wanted to improve their teaching skills to better meet the changing needs of their students. Patty talks about her thoughts on learning new skills:

> Just to try to do something different, do something new, something that I wasn’t familiar with. I knew eventually it was going to be something that we all were going to have to do. I wanted to get it done. I wanted to be a co-pilot for it and just see how it went and see what it was, what was expected of me.

In other words, Patty referenced Blue River School District promoting the use of new technologies in teaching and learning. She wanted to be one of the first elementary teachers to be trained to use these new skills in her practice. Shandy echoed a similar thought:

> I wanted to be a better teacher and meet the needs of my students. I know technology is an important part, so I wanted to learn as much as I can about blended learning to be able to implement it into my classroom [sic]. It was challenging and I was back and forth about my decision whether to enroll in the program, but I decided it’s in the best interest
for the students and I to do it. I think that was just all from of a professional standpoint that I wanted to do it.

Shandy enrolled in the training program because she understood that educators need new skills to continually meet changing student needs. She was interested in the training program topic and mentioned, “I wanted to learn as much as I could about blended learning, to be able to implement it into my classroom.” Shandy wanted to learn these new skills in order to provide the best education for her students.

Mary understood her experience as a way to learn new skills, saying “I’ve also been interested in learning online. I actually got my master’s in an online program. I thought it would be neat to teach online.” Recognizing the success she had as an adult learner in an online master’s degree program, Mary reported wanting to be able to use similar teaching approaches in her own fifth-grade classroom. The training program provided the avenue for her to acquire these new skills to accomplish her goal even though she would be using online instruction in a blended fashion, incorporating the strategies into the physical classroom.

Ellis was aware that students are now using digital technologies to learn. She talks about her awareness of this trend and how she would like to acquire new skills.

I know that blended learning is a hot thing right now. I also know that students are very motivated by electronics, whether it be the gadgetyness [sic] of it… I don’t even know if that’s a word…The fact that it’s a little hand-held device and they’re so familiar with technology whereas, when I went to school, technology was just like, you didn’t know what it was; it just didn’t exist. I know that that’s engaging to students. I would like to figure out a way to balance that and what I’m doing in the classroom.
Ellis understood her experience as a way to acquire new skills to balance her traditional teacher-directed approach with technology-infused instruction.

Finally, Harley noted, in response to being personally invited to join the first cohort by an administrator, “If you would have asked me three years ago how I felt about teaching, I would have said ‘I’m exhausted and I’m ready to retire.’” Despite being initially unsure whether to accept the invitation, she reported that she eventually enrolled, saying, “I thought this might be good for me to give something else a try and maybe spark some interest in me, period, and to better myself.” While Harley did not mention new skills per se, that she reported it would be good to give something else a try and have some interest sparked suggests that she was indeed interested in learning something and hoped that the blended learning professional development program might energize her.

As evident from the responses, the participants described that they were intrinsically motivated to acquire new skills. Each participant had various reasons for wanting to improve her instructional skill level to better meet the needs of students. For most participants, intrinsic motivation lasted the duration of the training program.

*Incentives as motivators.* Initially, some participants described money and technology incentives as what extrinsically motivated them to enroll in the opportunity. Incentives as motivators is defined as monetary and technology incentives that the participants received for completing the training program. The participants were paid 20 dollars per hour for up to 42 hours of combined training and personal practice time. They received technology incentives that included an iPod, an iPad 2 and a Macbook Pro or Dell Tablet PC. While these incentives motivated some participants to enroll in and complete the program, they became secondary motivators for others as the acquisition of new skills in the classroom became the primary
motivator. Beyond these initial incentives, however, several participants reported transitioning from being motivated by the money or technology incentives to applying their skills into practice.

When Mary was asked what motivated her to enroll in the program, her first response was, “We were offered incentives.” After exploring her response further, Mary talked more about the incentives and personal motivation:

I just think it made it prettier. It just made it more inviting that there were incentives, but I still think I would have…I mean, I have applied for online teaching positions before, so I don’t think that would have changed much.

For Mary, the technology incentives were her initial motivator, but she was also strongly motivated to learn how to teach online.

After completing the training program, Mary implemented her skills into the classroom by having her advanced reading group use the online course she designed in the training program. Mary stated, “The students loved it…They were very into it and were very open to the experience.” Her students apparently conveyed their excitement to their parents because Mary received positive parental feedback through email. Mary reported that parents told her, “Hey, the kids loved this…My student showed me the course and I think this is great.” Given Mary’s initial comments about what motivated her, her implementation of her newly developed skills into the classroom, and her reporting on students’ enthusiasm as well as parental feedback, certainly it can be inferred that Mary transitioned from being motivated from incentives to being motivated by application of new skills into practice.

It is clear that Suzy was also initially motivated by the incentives. She enrolled in the training program for one reason, saying, “Money. It was paid.” Suzy later added:
There were motivators within the program that encouraged me to try something new, and those motivators were monetary and incentive-based. I mean, that’s the truth, and having those incentives based on the hours that I worked sort of forced me to really dive in and try it out. I figured if I was going to put 60 hours into it, I was going to get my money’s worth, and I was going to learn something, and I was going to make something useful out of it, and I did, so I think that was the motivator there. I mean, money. It became more than that, though. I mean, eventually, the motivator became wanting to improve my classroom instruction, wanting to make my life easier, wanting to raise the quality of my students’ education, so maybe the initial motivators weren’t so hot, but the final motivation is better.

It is clear that Suzy transitioned from being initially motivated by money and technology incentives to actual application of new skills into practice.

In contrast to Mary and Suzy, Ellis and Jill eventually became purely motivated by the incentives to complete the training program even though that was not their original intention. When asked about what motivated her to enroll in the training program, Ellis described the training topic and incentives saying, “I think they were equally motivating…They were offering incentives and of course, incentives are always nice motivators. I certainly didn’t sneeze at the opportunity to earn a free computer, because you know…I probably still would have done it.” Ellis wanted to acquire new skills and the incentives motivated her to enroll in the after-school training program. At some point during the training experience, Ellis felt that the way the facilitator delivered the training program indicated that computer-based instruction, such as blended learning, may replace her as the traditional classroom teacher. Ellis shared her concern about this when she said:
If anything…going through this whole process really firmly cemented in my mind that K-6 education primary delivery method should never be through a computer…I think because it doesn’t mesh with my personal philosophy, that I mean to be in kids faces, it fell by the wayside.

Because of her concern about computers taking her place, Ellis never transitioned from incentive-based motivation to being motivated by the chance to use her new skills in the classroom.

Likewise, Jill, who joined the program to provide her students with the best education possible, was ready to quit after two months and remained in the program “purely for the incentives.” Jill added, “At the time I thought I always want to do what’s best for my kids but I found it wasn’t very useful for my kids, so then that was a motivator then that didn’t succeed as a motivator.” Otherwise, Jill remained in the training program only for the incentives when she realized she would not be able to apply her new skills in the classroom noting, “…it wasn’t something kindergarten could do on their own,” and therefore she realized that that since students could not make use of Blackboard at school, having absent kindergarten students use Blackboard at home would not be possible. Jill was not able to envision any other use of blended learning beyond what she originally thought at the beginning of the program. As a result, Jill did not transition from incentive-based motivation to classroom application of skills.

As demonstrated above, results indicate that some of the participants described they were extrinsically motivated to enroll in and/or complete the training program because the Blue River School District offered incentives. Both money and technology incentives initially motivated two of the participants to enroll in the program, but eventually became secondary motivators to actually applying new skills into practice. For two other participants, the incentives motivated
them to enroll in and complete the program, although they never transitioned to being motivated by the acquisition of new skills into practice. In summary, incentives served as an important extrinsic motivator for some of the participants before and during the training program while they became secondary motivators for others in comparison to actually applying newly acquired skills into the classroom.

**Support—Research Question 2.** Support responds to the research question “What do these educators describe as support and challenges associated with initiation, implementation, and continuation of skills offered in the professional development program?” Support is defined as adults who helped the participants during the training program. In particular, the participants reportedly felt that the program facilitator who conducted the training was effective. Additionally, local technical support for computer hardware and software problems came from a full-time employee assigned to the elementary school setting. Participants also mentioned peer support in the form of peer interaction during the training program as being effective in aiding their learning. The following sections employ participant quotes as evidence of this theme.

**Program facilitator support.** Some participants mentioned that the program facilitator was supportive. Program facilitator support is defined as support received from the person who trained the participants during and after the professional development opportunity. Blue River School District employed a full-time outside program facilitator named Ben. While Ben was specifically assigned to Blue River School District, he also serviced other school districts throughout Pennsylvania where he trained faculty at K–12 institutions to integrate blended learning into their classroom practices. Ben’s primary assignment was to facilitate the professional development program and ongoing support at the Blue River School District from 2011 through 2014. The participants mentioned Ben as an important support person to their
learning both during and after the training program. Ben continues to provide ongoing support on an as-needed basis to the participants.

Some participants stated that Ben supported their learning. Jill said, “I think we had 100 percent support. Ben was always available anytime we asked. Any concern I took to him he tried to find an answer, so I thought he was awesome.” Mary agreed saying, “He did provide some one-on-one if the time was available. There was one-on-one support.” Suzy echoed Mary:

He answered my questions. I mean it wasn’t anything major. When he was talking, I usually worked ahead and got my assignment done, but I needed him to help me with that exam issue. He helped me and pointed me in the right direction. He had a positive attitude about it and was encouraging.

Suzy mentioned a problem she experienced with a software program called Exam View. She was frustrated when she could not export tests from Exam View into Blackboard. Ben helped Suzy overcome that barrier while maintaining a positive and encouraging attitude. Jill also praised Ben for his continued support of her after the program ended:

I had voiced my concerns about [the training] not being applicable. He then went and found some kindergarten lessons for me to use or to show me what things I could do. That’s where I got the idea for the voices and all that stuff. I see him coming in and out of the building and he always asks how it’s going and if I need anything. Also, the peer coaches…he hooked us up with them, like Harley. He would say, “Harley is a good one to go check with. She has lower grades, too, so you guys get together and she can show you.”

Some participants mentioned Ben, the professional development program facilitator, as being supportive to their learning. He supported the participants both during and after their
formal training experience. He continues to support these educators on an as-needed basis now that the formal training program ended.

**Local technical support.** Some participants mentioned they were supported by local technical support. Local technical support is defined as a Blue River School District employee that provided one-on-one support to participants to troubleshoot computer software and hardware problems. Two participants needed support during the implementation and continuation phases, specifically when they tried to use school-owned hardware and software in their classroom with students. The participants mentioned that Luther, the elementary technical support person, helped them when they were in need. Luther supports all of the elementary school buildings in the Blue River School District. He installs, maintains, and repairs all computer hardware and software products for grades kindergarten through sixth-grade.

Speaking about her new mobile technology, Harley mentioned Luther supporting her when she initiated a new program:

He was the one that helped me initially set up the iPads and the iPods with the account. He showed me how to add the new apps and as of late showed me how to streamline the cameras on to all the devices because he took them off. It would have been a huge barrier because there would have had to be somebody that would have had to have show [sic] me how to get the accounts.

Harley implemented a mobile device program in 2012 where she integrated six iPod Touch and six iPad devices into classroom practices. Luther supported her by setting up the devices and mobile device accounts so Harley could use them for instruction in her classroom.

Suzy also mentioned that Luther provided technical support while she worked to implement her training:
He just helped me with the day-to-day working…the day-to-day-use-type things. [He got the software]…working to the point that I could use Blackboard with my classes. He really helped me with to [sic] sort the nuts and bolts operation.

The two participant responses above indicate that Luther helped them when they were in need. Luther was able to solve both hardware and software problems. As a result, these two participants were able to overcome challenges to hardware and software implementation.

**Peer support.** Some participants benefited from peer interaction during the training program. Peer support is defined as informal peer interactions that include conversations, collaborating at a computer, or informally observing each other during the training program. Participants indicated that peer support helped them to implement and continue to develop their skills from the training program plus experiment with new approaches. Harley mentioned, “I enjoyed the opportunity to be able to share what others were doing, which I think is so valuable.” Harley obviously appreciated the sharing experience during the training sessions. As an example, Harley had the opportunity to share her Blackboard course with a group of peers and the district administrative team. She mentioned:

> It was kind of nice just saying this is what I’m doing in music and Susan is doing in business. That camaraderie is nice. I think we need more of that where we get together and say, “Well, I did this and it didn’t work,” or “I tried this and it did work,” and “Look what my kids are doing on the iPads and the iPods. Look what my kids are doing on the laptops.” I think teachers need more of that time instead of the busy work that they give us at faculty meetings.

Harley obviously enjoyed sharing her project with the peer group. Mary agreed with Harley about peer sharing:
I think just the fact that knowing that there were other people also experimenting that you could bounce your ideas off of…we didn’t have a whole lot of time to work together, but when we did, we were able to be sounding boards for each other. You could see some of the things that other people were using, so you thought, “If they can do I can do it…” If we had our training with Ben and we had the five or 10 minutes to work collaboratively with our peers, you would see some of the things that they were doing and it may interest you or it may not. Then, if you felt comfortable, you could ask them to show you how they were using it. Then you would kind of get an idea as to how you could also use it in your classroom as well.

Shandy agreed that peer support helped her adding, “I may ask my coworkers again if I didn’t remember how to do something specifically. They would come show me what I forgot or what I didn’t need and I made some notes myself.” Shandy also spoke about her co-worker Harley, mentioning how peers supported her during the implementation and continuation phases:

Well, actually she shared her course with me, as far as me what she did. I didn’t really get to use her course, but I had maybe borrowed like some books that went along with it and maybe some of her ideas…She was in a separate cohort than me. So we didn’t get to work together as much as we usually do, but she did help me with certain questions I had here and there. I had a couple of other coworkers who I attended the trainings with. We would sit together and help each other, implement things and share ideas in different sites, like some kindergarten teachers. We would share different things that we found online to put in our course.

Suzy similarly found a peer with whom to collaborate while creating a Blackboard reading course for her classroom. Suzy said, “I did have someone that I worked together with to
develop a reading course. We worked together to upload pieces of that course so we could have a clear course, so there was less duplication of that course.” Suzy decided to find a grade-level peer with whom to collaborate. The person did not attend the training program but nonetheless provided peer support for Suzy.

Ellis also talked about peer support being an important component of her learning during the training program:

Not so much from the instructor but definitely from those around me, because I found it easier to ask fellow students in the class, “Hey, where’s that found again?” or, “What are we on right now?” or, “I couldn’t get this to work, how did you get it to work?” I found it easier to work with peers than it was to ask the actual trainer because they made me feel less self-conscious than the trainer did. (Laughs)

Participants found peer support to be important to their learning both during and after the training program. Participants reported benefiting from both structured interactions with peers during the training program as well as informal interactions with peers after the program ended. Peer support was also important to the participants in order to experiment with new approaches to teaching and learning.

**Peer coaching support—Research Question 3.** Peer coaching support was in response to the question “What structures and strategies either help, or would help, participants feel successful in implementing and continuing the skills initiated by their professional development training opportunity?” Although no participants indicated an existing support that helped them at the time of the interviews, a few participants discussed peer-coaching support as a needed support structure to their ongoing learning and implementation efforts. Peer coaching support is defined as trained peer coach educators providing blended learning pedagogical and instructional
support to other teachers at their respective elementary building. Two of the participants said that a peer coach would help them feel successful as they implemented and continued to use their skills in practice. Three additional participants were also considered peer coaches and wanted to provide help to their peers but did not know how. Peer coaches learned advanced Blackboard skills and were assigned the additional duty of helping designated peers with their course development. Although the peer coaches training program was more advanced than the regular participant group, no special training was provided to the peer coach participants to prepare them for what they were to do as actual coaches. In addition, peer coaches were unsure of not only how to effectively coach their peers, but exactly what was expected of them after they completed the training program.

**Peer coaches.** Harley, Ellis, and Suzy were part of the peer coach group. Brittney, one of the elementary principals, supervised the peer coach group and unexpectedly, in December 2012, accepted a new position and left the district. The Blue River School District did not appoint another principal to supervise the peer coach group, leaving them at a loss of what to do in terms of supporting their peers.

Harley, a peer coach, was proud that she completed the peer-coaching training but was unsure what to do afterwards. She discussed being unsure of what to do with her coaching duties and was afraid there would be no follow-through from the school district:

> I do feel that when we came back and we were supposed to be coaching people…I don’t think I coached anybody because I don’t know all that any people were doing anything [sic]. I worry that again here we were putting our hearts into something and it’s just going to go by the wayside.

Although Harley was satisfied that she completed the training, she was unsure of how to use her
skills to help other educators in her educational setting. While she was able and willing to help others in need, she did not know what to do nor did she know of any other educators who needed help. When asked about what she was supposed to do as a peer coach, she responded:

I was to be in charge [of] a few teachers at this building and help guide them through the courses that they were creating. I think they created courses but not to the extent that we did. I don’t know of any of them that are using them. I know Jill was doing something with math but it was more or less she was finding websites for the kids to go out to. I know she was trying to create something but I don’t know that it ever [was] finished. I don’t know. I never saw their classes.

Harley said she was “…fortunate to be part of the peer coaching” but did not know how to help Jill because she was unaware of what she was doing.

Harley indicated, “Nobody’s come to me and asked for my help” and added the following about the lack of peer-coaching structure after the training program ended:

The only thing that I was concerned about was that we, all of the sudden, one day we were given these people that we were supposed to be their trainer, their mentor, and I didn’t feel…all along with the class I felt, “Okay, I’m being taught how to create this class.” I didn’t feel that I was being taught how to be a trainer for my staff, for my peers. When I was told you this person, this person, this person [to supervise], I thought what am I supposed to do with them? When they come to me, I’m not going to know all these answers. I’m just learning myself. So that’s when I kind of threw my hands up in the air and was a little frustrated with that but then I realized nobody came to me and asked me anything.

It was obvious that Harley was frustrated as a peer coach because she did not know whom to
help or how to actually help them.

**I need help.** Equally frustrated were both Shandy and Patty who were not peer coaches, but would have liked to have help from a peer coach. Wishing she had help, Shandy noted:

I’d like to have my own private tutor, maybe…I also know that a few other teachers had the option. I think they were actually a coach in the Blackboard training. They got to go out to other school districts and see how those things were being done in other districts, which I didn’t have that option, either.”

Shandy was referring to Harley’s experience of observing another teacher in a different school district, and although she envied her, was not permitted to do the same. Shandy did not seem to be aware that a peer coach might be available to help her nor did a peer coach know that she was in need of help. Echoing Shandy, Patty also mentioned wanting a peer coach to “...be able to be a support to us and assisted [sic] us if we needed it depending on how much we were using it in our classroom.” Patty continued to speak in depth about the need for having access to a peer coach at the building level:

I know each building had a peer coach that [sic] was supposed to be in charge, which was not a bad thing. They also have their own classrooms. They also have their own things. They’re coaching. They’re essentially over multiple people, trying to help different people. I wouldn’t want to…I would think whatever my issue may have been maybe wasn’t important enough. Sometimes only having that one person outside of Ben; having that one person in my close proximity. Ben was one of those things [sic] that if I needed something, I would always have to wait ’til after school that I could go see him [sic]. I had to e-mail him and then wait for a response. It wasn’t always immediate. Having somebody, or if something happened in my classroom, if I was doing whole
group instruction, something happened…I didn’t know how to fix it. I would have to stop what I was doing. There wasn’t anything right there readily available for me to say, “This is how to fix this.” No troubleshooting. “This is what I need to do.” I would just have to end what I was doing.

Patty spoke about her need for immediate support at her building. Since the peer coaches were also full-time teachers and assigned to a classroom, she was not able to receive immediate support from a coach or the program facilitator if she experienced a problem with Blackboard while using it in her kindergarten classroom. She would have appreciated if someone were available when she needed them.

Some participants mentioned that peer coaches would be a helpful structure to their learning. Both the peer coaches and participants would appreciate a more formal support structure so they can interact more productively now that the formal training program has ended.

**Challenges—Research Question 2.**

Challenges further responds to the research question “What do these educators describe as support and challenges associated with initiation, implementation, and continuation of skills offered in the professional development program?” Challenges is defined as barriers that the participants described that prevented them from fully implementing and continuing to use their Blackboard course skills in practice. Participants experienced challenges when the administrative team was not working together to promote the blended learning initiative. Participants also experienced time challenges because the training program was held after school. Finally, computer access was a challenge for the participants because they described that there was not enough computer hardware available for student use. The following sections describe the challenges that these participants experienced and employ evidence to support each
section.

**Administrative challenges.** Participants mentioned being challenged during both the training program and implementation phase because they did not know what their supervising principal expected of them in terms of continuing to use their skills from the training program in their classroom practices. Administrative challenges is defined as barriers that prevented the participants from knowing exactly what their building principal expected of them in terms of using their new skills in practice. For example, Fred and Dana, the elementary building principals, were implementing a new reading program. They did not focus on supporting the blended learning initiative, which created a challenge for several of the participants.

These participants seemed to receive varying levels of support from the building principals. Mary said, “No one is checking to see if I need any help or are you using this course or was there anything we can help? I guess they’re not proactive about it. You have to be the proactive one.” Harley noted a time when the participants and cohort members gathered to view each other’s Blackboard course:

The only interaction that we had with them seeing what we were doing was that one evening where we sat around the table and we talked a little bit about what we created. I was the one that said why don’t they [administration] get up and come around and look instead of talking about it? That was the only interaction that I saw between me and the elementary principals. They never came in to see it being used, never asked about it. Bill did. Bill wanted to see it. Bill was so encouraging.

Several participants perceived that Fred and Dana were not only disengaged from their training experience but were reluctant to offer any type of encouragement to them as they tried to implement their skills into practice. Shandy reported that she was challenged when she asked
Dana a question concerning her training experience saying, “I did ask a couple of questions to my principal and they [sic] did not understand or have a clue on what I was doing, so no. They [sic] were unable to help me at all.” Jill added, “I am not sure that they even know what we are supposed to do.” Mary noted, “...as far as [the] district in itself, there isn’t much there as far as support and encouragement and motivation.” Jill then reinforced what Mary said:

They should have told us at the end, now we want you to do this and this with these. I feel like I am not doing what I was supposed to. I feel guilty for having the incentives and I am still not using it to the full potential, but I don’t know how to. My concerns about applicability never were met. Nobody ever told me what to do better about that so it is kind of just hanging there [sic].

Other participants mentioned that Fred and Dana were not even involved with the training program nor did they actively promote the use of Blackboard in elementary classroom practices. Mary added, “I have to be the proactive one to go out and seek out the resources. The district really isn’t providing me with anything other than the personnel that I can go out and seek out if I need to.” It seems, according to the participants, that Fred and Dana were not proactive about encouraging them to use Blackboard in their classroom nor did they provide any additional resources to help them continue to develop their skills after the formal training program ended. Shandy reinforced the others saying:

No, no, no support that I can think of from administration...never came in to observe anything as far as Blackboard training goes, never asked if I needed anything as far as asking like for equipment failure [sic]. My projector is gone...done. You know, no support really other than the instructor of [the] actual course.

Shandy perceived that Dana did not take interest in her project.
After the training program was complete, Jill was reportedly unsure of what Dana expected in terms of continuing to use her skills in the classroom. She said, “They were just, ‘Thank you for doing it.’ That was it.” Mary seemingly agreed, stating that because of a lack of direction from Fred, “…there’s no motivation for me to do it especially when I’m not using that particular course.”

When asked about his involvement with the program, Fred reported that he was never directed by the superintendent to become actively involved with the training program or monitor the implementation process (personal communications, 2013). He noted that whereas participant efforts at implementing blended learning were not hindered, he also did not actively promote the program because, for him, initiating and monitoring the piloting of a new reading curriculum in the elementary setting was a higher priority. In addition, Fred reiterated that because the grant was more focused on reform efforts at the high school level (although elementary educators participated in the training program), he maintained his focus on the new reading curriculum initiative. It seemed as if different members of the administrative team were promoting separate initiatives which created confusion for the participants as described above.

As demonstrated above the participants perceived a lack of engagement from Fred and Dana as they tried to implement new skills into their classrooms. Fred clarified that he was never directed by his superior to be involved with the program but that he did not hinder any progress that the participants made toward using Blackboard in practice. This was an ongoing issue for most participants at the time of the interviews, because they did not know what Fred or Dana expected them to do with their skills after the training program ended. The participants were naturally concerned because Fred and Dana were their immediate supervisors.
**Time challenges.** Time was a challenge for the participants during the formal training program. Time challenges is defined as barriers that occurred when the participants had to allot enough time after-school to attend the training program and balance it with their personal lives. They reported that it was hard to find enough time, given family and personal obligations, to attend the after-school training program and practice their skills outside of the school day. The following section employs participant quotes as evidence of time challenges.

Participants mentioned that using personal time outside of the school day was a major challenge during the initiation phase of the training program. The training program was held after school and participants were expected to continue to develop their Blackboard course on their own personal time. Several participants had challenges with this requirement. Shandy mentioned:

> I don’t feel like I had enough time to play around and learn…like I got it in a one-shot deal there and then it was over and done, and I had to make time for it on my own which was very difficult for me. I think if I would [have] had, like, time during the school day, you know…maybe giving you time to…like some planning time to be able to implement it or to be able to work on it.

According to Shandy’s account above, her after-school availability was limited and she needed extra time during the school day to work on her skills. Patty reportedly felt challenged, saying, “…trying to fit everything in that you needed to within the week, or just trying to get your hours sometimes could be challenging, too. Just making sure that you were doing what you were supposed to…” Harley agreed, saying, “The hours. It was above and beyond my normal school day.” Ellis also talked about time being a challenge when she said,

> There’s no time provided for us during the workday to go and do anything like that. I’m
sure the person who was running the open labs would have been available during the day, I believe, but no such substitutes or time was provided for us to do that…You’re just tired by the end of the day…It would have better, I think, to offer it throughout the day when I’m still fresh and can think about it.

Much like Shandy, Ellis would have appreciated time during her workday to practice new skills from the training, emphasizing the fact that the district would not provide substitute teachers or release time during the school day for them to attend professional development training.

Participants also had challenges practicing their skills outside the workday. Patty talked about having challenges with practicing her skills at home:

You were supposed to go home and work on it throughout that week or whatever and then come back. If you went home, and you couldn’t remember something exactly, then you needed to e-mail, or you needed to go back in. That would sometimes be time-consuming.

Patty reports struggling with remembering details from the training at home when she needed to practice her skills and seemed to find this problematic.

Additionally, several participants mentioned that family obligations were a challenge during their formal training program. Harley mentioned her family challenge:

I have a household and I like to put hours into my household. My husband and I both love to cook. To come home and to be able to take care of the house inside, outside, cook a nice meal, be able to have time with my husband but then I have to sit down and do even one or two hours every night…it got to be very overwhelming. I don’t think the class per se was an issue as much as time because when I’m sitting in the TV room with my husband in the recliner and I’m on the computer for three hours, I’ve got him saying
“That’s enough!” I don’t have children but I have one big child in him. He is the kind of person that even though we’re in the same room, he wants me doing what he’s doing. If he’s watching TV, he wants me watching TV. He’s a baby.

Harley struggled with family obligations because when she wanted to practice her skills at home and her husband wanted to spend time with her. Shandy mentioned her challenge saying, “…having two children of my own, I feel like, when would go [sic] to these classes after school, I didn’t have the time to go home then and work on it more.” Family obligations limited Shandy’s ability to practice her skills at home due to her busy after-school schedule with her children. Mary agreed, saying she is “drained after school” and added, “I had a child at the time; I had other things, church-related activities; I was tutoring. Just your everyday home activities. I have to go home and get dinner. I have to do this, laundry…” Patty echoed Mary saying, “…keeping motivated to stay with it. I also have a classroom. I have a family. I have other responsibilities. That was a primary concern for me.”

Many participants struggled with using personal time outside of the school day to attend the training program, practice their skills at home, and balance family obligations with meeting the requirements of the program. Participants had a wide variety of challenges that ranged from taking care of a household to caring for children. Time seemed to be a clear challenge for most participants because the training program was held after-school as demonstrated by the above reports.

**Computer access challenges.** Participants noted that computer access was a challenge at their elementary schools. Computer access is defined as desktop or laptop computers being available for participant use in the classroom. While all participants teach in elementary buildings that have several mobile laptop carts and a newer computer lab, participants still
reported challenges with obtaining laptop or desktop computer access to aid them in consistently implementing their Blackboard course into classroom practice. The following section will focus on descriptions of this theme using participant quotes as supporting evidence.

Describing this challenge, Shandy said:

The accessibility to the equipment is a big challenge...they weren’t working. There weren’t network connections; there was no sound [sic]. Our computer carts are probably five to six years old and the warranties have run out. They’re not being replaced and they’re not being fixed.

Shandy was able to gain access to computer hardware, but the equipment did not always work.

Mary also talked about a similar challenge:

I guess just the technology issues and not knowing if I’m going to have enough hardware for the day. Even though you have a lab or a cart signed out, not all of the computers are always there and they’re not always working. Everything is pretty much there. If everything is working...when technology is working it’s great, when it’s not it’s horrendous.

Mary and Ellis work in the same building and share the same computer hardware. Ellis mentioned unavailable and nonfunctional computer hardware being a limiting factor to technology-based initiatives. She notes the lack of availability of the laptop carts in her elementary building and also functionality concerns regarding the new desktop models in the school computer lab:

The other thing that we’ll be eliminating is the fact that we have a wonderful new computer lab, but there are how many classes in the building? Fourteen? They’re all vying for that lab and there’s only four carts available or three carts available. I forget
how many computers are available in the building. The computers are aging. They don’t always…not only that they’re not always available, but they’re not always updated. They don’t have the latest Flash player or the latest Java or we can’t get on this site because it’s blocked or you can’t do this. Oftentimes, I find that the technology itself is limiting, so that’s another factor.

Suzy, who works in yet a different elementary building, also experienced challenges with accessing functional computer hardware. Suzy tells the following story of how she almost quit the training program when she experienced hardware and software challenges during an implementation attempt:

After I had my Blackboard course running, the laptops that we had in the classroom were too slow to run Blackboard and we had some login issues where it took my students 10-15 minutes to logon. Well…to login into the school system and then 15-20 minutes to login to Blackboard when the test only took 15-20 minutes. So, at that point I almost quit…So, I tried and I tried and I tried and I kept working with Luther to get it squared away so that some things were on the machines to get over the technology hurdle…to get surpassed…I had a large class and there was not quite enough machines for my large class…not quite enough laptops… That was a major challenge and it is still is a challenge because there are more kids than computers [sic]. Availability.

Finally, even though Harley implemented a different technology project in her classroom using iPod Touch and iPad devices, she discussed her frustration with the computer hardware when she thought about using it. Harley, talking about the school laptop computers, said, “The kids destroyed them. They pick the keys off. They put the headsets in and break the tips off so sounds cannot be used…period!” Harley uses her iPod Touch and iPad devices in her classroom
in lieu of the school laptop computer hardware. She does not use her Blackboard course on the mobile devices.

As evidenced above, many of the participants experienced challenges with computer access. It seemed as though no additional computer hardware was purchased for the elementary setting so that the teachers would have ample access to computers to actually implement their courses. There were also vandalism issues resulting in student destruction of the machines themselves. Broken hardware also remained unrepaird in some cases and included a SMARTboard with which one participant planned to project her Blackboard course. According to the participants’ reports, lack of computer access, in combination with inadequate hardware and software at the study site, was an ongoing problem at the time of these interviews.

Summary of Research Question One

The first research question examined how the participants described and understood their experience in a professional development training program. Two sub-questions examined what they hoped to gain from the opportunity of participating in the program and how they described changes, if any, to their classroom practice due to the relevancy of the information gathered during the training. Overall, participants described their experience as an opportunity to learn new skills to meet changing student needs and were able to find relevance in the experience whereby they became intrinsically motivated to tryout the acquisition of new skills with their classroom. For some participants, intrinsic motivation surpassed in its significance compared to extrinsic motivation from monetary and technology incentives. Changes to practice occurred for the majority of participants when they tried out these new skills in their classroom.

Summary of Research Question Two

Participants described supports and challenges associated with initiation, implementation,
and continuation of knowledge offered in the professional development program. Positive experiences dominated the initiation phase where most participants described supportive adult interactions that helped them to successfully complete the training program. However, the timing of the training program was a constant burden to them as they completed the initiation phase.

The program facilitator, elementary technical support person, as well as formal and informal interactions with peers supported participants as they attended the training program and tested out their Blackboard course. A plethora of praise was offered to these individuals who seemed to provide the supportive backbone that allowed participants to successfully complete the program.

Despite this support, participants faced time constraints and it was indicated as a major challenge to attend the after-school training program. Some of the participants had to constantly arrange childcare in order to attend the training program and find the time in the evening hours to practice their skills at home. All participants tried to balance work-related tasks with family responsibilities and tasks.

Participants reported several challenges during the implementation and continuation phases. Conflicting focus on implementing a reading program from the district administration seemed to be a major challenge. Most participants described two specific elementary principals, Fred and Dana, as being disengaged in monitoring the training program or classroom implementation efforts. The lack of focus on the blended learning program at the district level was also reflected at the school level where elementary principals’ interest was on a new reading program and not on participants’ training program. Since two different change initiatives were being implemented simultaneously, it seemed as though school administrators were working at
cross-purposes with each other, causing confusion for the participants. Another challenge highlighted by most participants was limited technological resources, such as available computer hardware devices. Due to these challenges, after a short period of experimenting with trying out these skills in the classroom, none of the participants continued to implement knowledge and skills acquired during the training in the subsequent implementation and continuation phases.

**Summary of Research Question Three**

Participants did not describe any existing structures or strategies that would help them feel successful in practice; however, they mentioned that the peer-coaching support structure that began during the initiation phase benefitted them while they implemented and tried to use their skills in the classroom. The peer-coaching sub-theme was complex because three of the participants were actually trained peer coaches. They described the coaching program as being unstructured, which created confusion for them because they did not know how to help peers that needed support. The coaches themselves also felt that they had not received specialized training on how to coach their peers. Likewise, two other participants wanted the peer coaches to help them with their Blackboard course implementation and continued use of skills in practice, but they did not know how to receive support or access a peer coach. As evidenced from the sub-theme the peer-coaching structure would benefit the participants during the implementation and continuation of skills phase if some structure were provided to the peer-coaching program.

The next chapter discusses the ways in which the results are interpreted through the theoretical framework used to guide this study. Additionally, findings from this study are compared and contrasted with the literature presented in chapter two. Finally, chapter five will reveal the researcher’s next steps and the limitations of the research.
Chapter V: Discussion

This research captures the experiences of seven teachers who completed a professional development program about using blended learning in the classroom at a rural school district in Pennsylvania. The researcher collected the data for this study through two rounds of participant interviews. The seven participants provided in-depth descriptions about their experiences in a professional development program that was offered through the school district.

The researcher formulated three research questions to guide this study:

1. How do K-6 educators describe and understand their professional development experience?
   a. What did they hope to gain from the opportunity?
   b. How do these educators describe the changes in their practice after engaging in professional development?

2. What do these educators describe as supports and challenges associated with initiation, implementation, and continuation of skills offered in the professional development program?

3. What structures and strategies either help, or would help, participants feel successful in implementing and continuing the skills initiated by their professional development training opportunity?

The research questions were designed to explore how teachers understood and made meaning of their professional development experience. The questions focused the exploration of how teachers’ understandings informed the degree to which they implemented and continued using the new skills and tools introduced during professional development training.

In-depth interviewing provided the most comprehensive approach to collecting data for
this qualitative study (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2009). A basic qualitative study provided the flexibility to understand how teachers made meaning of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Participants described their incorporation of Blackboard into the classroom and subsequent changes to teaching practice because of participation in the training. The training program focused on teaching the participants to use blended learning as an innovative pedagogical approach to classroom instruction. The process of inductive analysis was used to identify the emerging themes from the interviews. The following chapter presents the findings through the lens of the theoretical framework and the empirical literature.

**Discussion of the Research Findings**

Educational change theory (Fullan, 2007) serves as a lens through which the researcher examined the change process as described by the participants. According to Fullan (2007), educational institutions need to go beyond organizing professional development programs for teachers. In order to sustain change, teachers need to integrate the concepts learned from professional development opportunities into the classrooms, and there needs to be institutional support for teachers throughout the professional development process. Without ongoing and consistent professional development support from school administrators beyond the completion of the initial training sessions, teachers may not have the ability to sustain what they have learned (Drago-Severson, 2009). Moreover, isolated training sessions are not enough to ensure improved practice in the classroom. Teachers must engage in consistent training opportunities and have access to adequate follow-up support in order to develop the tools and pedagogical skills they need to teach in 21st-century schools (Darling-Hammond, Morewood, Ankrum, & Bean, 2010).
Participants in this study described their experiences in a professional development program funded through a multimillion-dollar grant to train K–12 educators to incorporate blended learning into instructional practices. This research captures both the similarities and differences in the participants’ experiences, and it paints a portrait of how varied teachers’ experiences can be within the same, small school district, even when engaged in a common professional development program.

**Initiation, implementation, and continuation.** Through this study, the researcher found that the district superintendent, school building administrators, and the teachers were not adequately aligned about what it would take to implement the blended learning professional development program. Moreover, there was not adequate alignment about whether this particular professional development focus was a priority. The findings of this study showed mixed support from the participants’ principals, which contributed to the challenges of transitioning to classroom implementation after the initial training sessions were completed. In order for school initiatives to be implemented and sustained, teachers need ongoing support to ensure that they have what they need to implement new tools and strategies to improve their classroom practice (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2010). Some of the participating teachers in this study struggled because, although they were invited to participate in the blended learning training, they later found that the attention of their two building principals were focused on different initiatives. The principals’ focus on different initiatives illustrates the lack of clear district alignment, ultimately undermining the superintendent’s agenda. Fullan (2007) suggests school administrators have the strongest influence on a change program when goals are aligned; however, incorporating blended learning in the classrooms was undermined because the administrators’ goals differed. Despite participants expressing a need for school administrators
to provide more structure and support, the school district administration never provided explicit
directions regarding their expectations of all stakeholders in the transition from initiation to
implementation of the blended learning program. As such, the lack of support and shared vision
meant the implementation of the blended learning program was incomplete.

Superintendent. Fullan’s (2007) educational change theory explains the role of the
superintendent in the change process, and suggests that the superintendent serves as the school
leader to monitor whether educators are implementing the change initiative into classroom
practice and ensuring a shared district vision. In this case, the participating superintendent
advocated for change in the district and to classroom practice. He consistently supported the
participating teachers during the training, which was reportedly a positive factor that added to the
participants’ motivation. Most participants mentioned that the superintendent was a supportive
figure to their learning. The fact that the superintendent supported the participants during the
initiation phase aligned with Fullan’s (2007) position that the superintendent serves as the main
advocate for change during the initiation phase.

However, the participants’ responses did not suggest that the superintendent monitored
the implementation process, despite being supportive during the initiation phase. The
superintendent was not directly involved with leading the implementation process, and as a
result, the participants noted that the principals no longer seemed to provide the necessary
supports for the program’s implementation. According to Fullan (2007), it is the
superintendent’s responsibility to ensure continued focus throughout all change phases.

Principals. Heck, Brandon, and Wang (2001) suggested that site-managed change
initiatives are successful at the implementation phase when the principal supports the initiative.
Similarly, Fullan (2007) indicates a need for administrative support, planning, and
implementation of a continuation plan for the learning experience after the initial training phase of professional development. In line with this idea, according to participants, strong support from one elementary principal at the beginning of the program helped them achieve ongoing success during the initiation and training phase. Upon completion of the initial training, however, the principal’s support waned, and, as a result, the teachers’ engagement with the program diminished. The administrator’s expectations for implementation were never made clear.

As noted above, one out of the three principals at the participating schools reportedly prioritized a different initiative that was not aligned with the blended learning program from the very beginning. This lack of support translated into participants’ experiencing negative feelings and disengagement with the supervising principals and with the blended learning training program altogether. Fullan (2007) emphasizes that the principal plays a key role in the implementation process. Other studies have likewise demonstrated the importance of building-level principal support during the implementation phase of a professional development program (Gallucci, 2008; Lu & Overbaugh, 2009). Steinbacher-Reed and Powers (2011) for example, illustrated the important role principals play in helping educators to change their practices by providing supportive working conditions such as common planning time, opportunities for learning walks, and release time. Clearly, as noted by Fullan (2007) and evidenced above, school district administrators are influential during the implementation phase because they “affect the quality of implementation” (p.94).

According to Fullan (2007), educators who find meaning in an experience feel increased motivation. Meaning for the educators in the present study, however, fell short of their expectations because none of the requisite aspects of the implementation phase were ever met,
including principal support. While there was one principal in the present study who supported the teachers’ learning experiences early on, as described in the preceding paragraphs, her support reportedly diminished at the point at which teachers were attempting to implement new skills into their classroom practices. For the teachers whose principals never engaged with the training process from the beginning, their interest in the program never really got going. As one participant noted for example, she had to be the proactive one to seek support whereas she felt the principal should have been actively supporting her. There was really no confidence on the participants’ part that this training program would progress into long-term use due to constant change at the school district that was accompanied by the lack of support from the principals. As a result, the participants followed the lead of their principal and as such lost focus on the technology initiative. Consequently, the blended learning initiative never transitioned beyond the initiation phase and into the implementation phase.

**Teachers.** School district administrators have historically struggled with offering effective professional development programs (Gaytan & McEwen, 2010). Even when programs are initiated, school districts have reported that many educators are disengaged from the learning opportunity (Learning Forward, 2011). The teachers in this study were divided into two groups with regard to their engagement in the training program: some were fully engaged from the beginning, while a few were less so, because of inadequate and inconsistent support beyond the initiation phase; therefore, teachers’ engagement with the initiative varied.

The group of teachers that felt more supported by the superintendent and one of the elementary principals reportedly felt more engaged with the training program and put effort to make the content meaningful to their context. They were willing to exert the work necessary to develop new skills and try them out in practice because they had reason to believe the
momentum toward incorporating these practices would continue. These teachers voluntarily tried out their evolving Blackboard course in practice even though they were not required to do so or ultimately supported by the principals for their efforts.

Another, smaller group of teachers simply did not understand how the training could help improve their existing practice. They reportedly put forth little effort during the training program when they decided that the training topic was not relevant to their context. They took away less from the training program than what they had originally expected prior to beginning the training sessions. Additionally, as detailed several times above, they reported that the principals failed to support their efforts during or after the training program which contributed to their decision not to put a lot of effort toward implementing the limited skills that they developed. As Fullan (2007) states, support from the superintendent and principal and the educator’s choice to accept or reject the initiative can be major factors in the success of the implementation phase. Essentially, some of the teachers engaged with the change initiative while others rejected it, and these differences came down to the degree of support they received from the administration. All participants experienced a general lack of support from the principals after the training program was completed, and a combination of these factors, as described by Fullan, further explained why the program never transitioned to the implementation phase.

**Peer collaboration as support and learning.** According to Fullan (2007), collaboration among peers can be a positive force in the change process. Peers who collaborate with each other during professional development training can experience forward momentum toward change. Peer collaboration enhances educators’ understanding of new skills and increases the likelihood that they will be embedded into practice (Bruce & Ross, 2008; Bryk, Kruse, & Louis;
Fullan, 2007; Hochberg & Desimone, 2010). Desimone (2011) suggests that social interaction during formal professional development programs emphasizes the importance of peer interaction to the processes of teaching and learning, suggesting that social interaction between peers after formal training programs end is critical to long-term implementation success.

In a similar vein, findings from the present study suggest that peer collaboration was beneficial to the participants and increased their understanding of new skills that they were learning. Participants in this study reported that their training sessions were collaborative and noted that working together to critique and support one another while learning new strategies and techniques was helpful. This in turn increased the likelihood these skills would have been embedded into practice, had the initiative been successful, because some participants actually tried them out in their classroom. This is much as described by Murray, Ma, and Mazur (2009), who claim that the peer group setting during a professional development program allows teachers to discuss and elaborate upon ideas and concepts received during training, and that peer interactions encourage critical thinking through peer questioning. All participants reportedly appreciated the cohort style training in which they collaborated with their peers and most felt that such peer support enhanced their learning experience.

**Peer coaches.** Research has demonstrated that schools using peer coaches have been more successful during the implementation and sustainability phases of teacher professional development (Waddell & Dunn, 2005). Likewise, according to educational change theory, educators who have frequent and ongoing support through peer coaching programs often struggle less during the change process (Fullan, 2007). This means school districts that train and utilize peer coaches during and after the change process establish needed support systems to help
educators during initiation, implementation, and continuation phases, which may increase the success and sustainability of the professional development program.

Unfortunately, those educators selected to be peer coaches for the professional development training in the present study explained that they never received training about how to be peer coaches, per se. They were reportedly invited to voluntarily enroll in a separate training cohort from the study’s participants and began their training program with the ambition of obtaining specialized training about how to help their peers. Instead, what they experienced turned out to be not much different from what the participants who did not plan to be peer coaches experienced. As a result, by the time the training program ended, the coaches did not know how to help their peers because they were never trained on anything beyond overcoming technical challenges when authoring the Blackboard learning management system. Consequently, the coaches never transitioned to actually knowing how to help any of their peers.

*Support through specialized training.* Bruce and Ross (2008) argue that effective peer coaching must involve specific training of the peer coaches so that they develop the capacity to support the teachers with whom they are working. Teachers invited to participate as coaches in the present study were not equipped with the proper skill sets to effectively coach their peers. The coaches in this study were never really trained in strategies that could have been used to help their peers focus on achieving their teaching goals.

Moreover, there were structural barriers to establishing effective peer coaching relationships. The participants reportedly wanted to have a peer coach available to them during the school day but did not know how to access one. The coaches were also not available to the participants outside of the training sessions to help them in actual practice. This posed a
challenge for the participants because they did not have enough support during the implementation phase of the training in practice.

Fullan (2007) indicates that an organized support system needs to begin by making structural changes to the school system in order to help educators make both individual and group meaning of their experience. In this case, the school administration needed to create structures that allowed for collaboration between coaches and participants during the school day. The findings from this study showed that no such structural changes had been made to the school system, which limited the ability of the peer coaches to provide any support to the participants. The absence of effective peer coaching impacted the potential for ongoing implementation of the particular skills developed during the training program.

**Establishing an organized system for coaching.** For a peer-coaching program to be a useful component of a professional development program, the program needs to be structured prior to the professional development program’s implementation phase. Huston and Weaver (2008) recommend that a peer-coaching program should have a proper structure in place that involves several steps proceeding from one to the next in succession:

- Peer-coaching programs should be voluntary.
- Goal setting between the coach and peer should take place.
- The peer should observe the coach once per year.

The current study indicated that the coaching program was voluntary, which is where the program stopped in terms of aligning with prior research. Further, beyond Huston and Weaver’s recommendations, as put forth by Fullan (2007), the coaches must be adequately trained and prepared to assume their roles.
This study showed that the peer coaches did not receive specialized training and were not prepared to assume their roles. Additionally, while the coaches were assigned a small group of educators to support at the end of the training program, neither the coach nor the teacher knew how to access one another because no system had ever been established during or outside of the school day for such collaboration to take place. This posed an ongoing challenge for both the coaches and the participants because they did not know how to access each other due to everyone’s busy schedules during the school day, teaching their own classes, and their ongoing family commitments outside of the school day.

These findings further showed that a structure for ongoing conversations between the peer coaches and participants had not been established during or after the training program ended. The peer-coaching component remained undeveloped from the initiation to the implementation phase, and at each stage of the initiative different types of support could have been offered to encourage the development and incorporation of new skills. To be effective peer coaches needed a structured implementation of the peer-coaching program. The coaches could have been introduced to their assigned peers early on in the training program so that they could set goals. Coaches and peers could have set a time when the peer could observe the coach in an instructional setting. Since two of the three conditions did not exist at the study site the coaching program never really developed into a useful structure.

**Summary.** The change initiative was incomplete because it did not include a plan for the implementation and continuation phases nor share vision between the administration and the participants. The superintendent and principals were not aligned because they were focused on separate change initiatives. The participants did not know what was expected of them after the training program ended. The peer coaches received no specialized training focused on how to
coach their peers even in the peer-coaches training cohort. Indeed, the change initiative lacked many essential elements to ensure long-term success.

**Suggestions for Future Research**

This study captures how these educators experienced the process of implementing professional development programming into practice. Further research showing what a fully developed and implemented professional development process looks like from the perspective of the teachers is recommended. Moreover, future research could focus on examining teacher experiences of a professional development program once the program reaches the continuation phase. Using educational change theory (Fullan, 2007), it will be helpful to identify factors that may help to expand on the knowledge gained from this study and provide knowledge on how educators can be best supported once professional development programs enter the continuation phase.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study showed that two simultaneous initiatives resulted in misaligned agendas and created a perceived lack of support as reported by the participants. A lack of sufficient support following professional development initiatives from initiation, through training, and into implementation can hinder the long-term success of district initiatives that are key to educators’ improvement and effectiveness in teaching in 21st-century schools. While teachers may successfully acquire the intended skills during training, inadequate planning for implementation and continuation phases interrupts the initiative’s success. Thus, it is critical for school district administrators to take the time to systematically plan each phase of the change process *before* training educators. Attempting to foresee educators’ needs prior to beginning the training process will help to provide the necessary resources for teachers to acquire knowledge
and implement new skills into practice. Identifying needs, such as establishing structured, ongoing educator support systems may facilitate teachers’ access to continuous and meaningful professional development opportunities as they work to improve their effectiveness in preparing students for a life and career in the 21st-century. Indeed the blended learning program, had it been successfully implemented, is an excellent example of what could have been a valuable professional development opportunity for preparing teachers and students to utilize advanced technology while they continue to grow and face new challenges. The following recommendations are for K–12 administrators who would like to successfully implement and sustain similar change initiatives in their districts.

**Educational change theory.** Fullan’s (2007) educational change theory provides a useful framework for guiding district-wide initiatives, focusing in particular on how initiation, implementation, and continuation function as a continuous and interwoven cycle. A careful consideration of Fullan’s theory prior to the initiation of professional development training may avoid problems that administrators and teachers at the study site experienced with implementation.

**Initiatives need structured support during each phase.** The initiation phase of the professional development program was supported in such a way that teachers were motivated to implement the change initiative; however, the entire initiative lacked a foundational structure to provide continuous professional support, which caused the initiative to fail at the beginning of the implementation phase. Administrators work more efficiently with teachers if they focus on a common goal and single change initiative. Aligning administrative and educator efforts to implement change would help avoid contradictions, confusion, and a loss of financial resources reserved for a change initiative.
Prior to the initiation of a change initiative, the superintendent and district office-level professionals need to create a structure for each phase of a change initiative: initiation, implementation, and continuation. During each of the three phases, a voluntary team that includes administrators, educators, and peer coaches should meet periodically to discuss objectives and needs in order to ensure the alignment of goals that positively benefit all stakeholders.

**Collaboration and sharing opportunities.** Participants in an initiative could be invited to present their training products at faculty meetings, in-services, and during pre- or post-instructional times, when faculty is required to be at their workplace. Sharing time should be provided for educators to showcase individual products, such as Blackboard courses that were developed from attending professional development training programs. Peer sharing times would help to cultivate ongoing collaboration and collegiality between educators and capitalize on educators’ motivations to implement personalized products developed from professional development training opportunities into practice.

**Organized system for peer coaching.** Peer coaching programs need to be carefully pre-planned by the administrative team and include specialized pedagogical training for peer coaches beyond the acquisition of advanced skills targeted in the professional development program. Peer coaches need organizational leadership support from central office and building-level administrators so they can offer embedded support to their peers. This task should have an incentive, such as a stipend from grant-funded resources, to support embedded coaching duties after formal training programs end.
Limitations

The location of the study was limited to a single site and small group of elementary educators. The researcher conducted this study at one school district in Pennsylvania, where seven elementary teachers participated in two individual interviews, which limited the demographic sample. The participant sample represented approximately one-fifth of the elementary teachers at the study site; therefore, the findings from this study captured only the experiences of the seven participants. However, the researcher described the context and participants so that practitioners in other settings can determine what aspects of these findings might be relevant. Moreover, the researcher used one main approach to collect data for this study by incorporating two individual interviews per participant. Utilizing additional methods of data collection could have further strengthened the results of this study.

Conclusion

Supporting educators after a formal professional development program is critical to the success of any initiative. School administrators should limit their planning practices to a single initiative to ensure alignment throughout a district to affect change across all grades. Educators should be provided with ongoing support structures, such as structured peer coaching programs and peer sharing times, to help insure educators’ success as they work together to institutionalize new practices in the classroom.

Educators need to improve their effectiveness to teach in 21st-century schools. Meaningful and effective professional development initiatives can help educators achieve this goal through training that has been carefully created, systematically planned, and directly monitored by the administration at the district and school level. Administrative personnel at both levels should collaboratively plan all phases of the change process, which includes initiation,
implementation, and continuation, so that educators’ needs, such as structured, ongoing support systems, can be adequately conceptualized and implemented before, during, and after the training.
Appendix A – Interview Protocols

(Start Recording Here)

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. We have reviewed the consent form together and you have been provided a copy of the form for your records. You have given your verbal consent to participate. This interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes and is being audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only. The information shared in the interview will be confidential. Your name and school’s name will not be included in this study to protect your privacy. Next, we are going to talk about the role of learning in teaching and your history as a learner. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

Interview One

A focused history of the participant’s role of learning in teaching and their history as a learner

(Seidman, 2006).

1. If you were to describe yourself as a learner, how would you tell that story?
   a. How has your learner identity evolved over time?
   b. Describe some characteristics that help you grow as a learner.

2. What aspects of your professional experience, including formal learning activities and day-to-day aspects of the work, have helped you grow as a learner in your professional context?
   a. How did those activities affect your teaching practices?

3. Thinking back to the teachers you appreciated, what were some qualities that stood out?
   a. How have those qualities influenced your own teaching?

4. Describe the most engaging and useful formal training and learning opportunities that have been available to you through your current or previous teaching positions.
a. What made them engaging and/or useful?

Now we are going to begin the second part of this interview, which will focus specifically on your experiences in the blended learning professional development program.

Population provides the details of their experience in a blended learning professional development program (Seidman, 2006).

5. Thinking back to when you first heard about the opportunity to participate in blended learning professional development training, what originally motivated you to enroll in the program?

6. What were the biggest challenges you encountered while participating in the professional development program?

   a. How about after formal professional development training ended?

7. What types of support did you receive during formal professional development training?

   a. How about after formal professional development training ended?

8. What challenges have you had, if any, with continuing to develop your skills since professional development ended?

   a. Describe any supports that you may have received in your ongoing efforts to develop your skills from your professional development training.

9. Describe any attempts that you have made to implement your professional development training into your classroom.

   a. What challenges have you had with implementing your training?

   b. What successes have you had with implementing and continuing to develop your skills into your classroom?
10. What structures or strategies has your school district provided to you to support your ongoing efforts at implementing your training?
   a. Are there any particular structures or strategies that have been the most helpful to you?

11. What structures or strategies were missing from your professional development experience that could have been useful in helping you implement your training and support your ongoing development?

   Thank you for taking the time to complete this interview. Once your interview is transcribed, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy.

   (End Recording Here)

**Interview Two**

   (Start Recording Here)

   Thank you for taking the time to participate in this study. We have reviewed the consent form together and you have been provided a copy of the form for your records. You have given your verbal consent to participate. This interview will last approximately 60 to 90 minutes and is being audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only. The information shared in the interview will be confidential. Your name and school’s name will not be included in this study to protect your privacy. Next, we are going to talk about how you have made meaning of your professional development training opportunity. We will also try and get a sense of how your practice has been or has not been informed by the training. Please understand that I am asking these questions to understand the training process better and not to judge the degree to which you have or have not been “successful” in your professional development. Before we begin, do you have any questions?
Participant will describe the meaning of their professional development experience. (Seidman, 2006)?

1. Thinking back to before you began the blended learning professional development training program, describe a typical day in your classroom.
   a. What guided your teaching practice?

2. Describe what a typical day currently looks like in your classroom. Please think about this as it relates to your participation on the blended learning training. How has your practice changed?
   a. What are a few particular examples of things you might have tried out that specifically resulted from your participation or from ideas that formed during your participation?
   b. What are some of the practices that you might use less or not at all now that you’ve participated in the blended learning training?

3. What structures or strategies would you identify that are related to the training (either among colleagues or from other sources) that have helped you to experiment with new approaches?
   a. Examples?

4. What did you appreciate most about this particular professional development opportunity?
   a. What did you enjoy about the experience itself?
   b. Examples from your experience?

5. What did you enjoy or appreciate least about the day-to-day training experience?

6. Describe a time when you felt your understanding or ideas changing.
a. Please be specific.

7. How have those ideas made you think differently about teaching?

8. What aspects of what you discussed/learned/thought about during the training did not resonate with you?
   a. What aspects of your practice have you decided not to change?
   b. What are those decisions based on? E.g., I can imagine if something felt confusing that I might not try to work with it. I can also imagine that if I find one way particularly successful, there might not be a pull to change it.

9. Is there anything else you would like to discuss in terms of your professional development training experience?

   Thank you for taking the time to complete this interview. Once your interview is transcribed, you will be provided with a copy of the transcript to check for accuracy.

   (End Recording Here)
Appendix B – IRB Approval Record

Northeastern

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: May 16, 2013
IRB #: CPS13-05-06

Principal Investigator(s): Nena Straczuzi
Jeffrey John Puhala

Department:
Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address:
20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project:
A Qualitative Study of Elementary Teacher Experiences of a Professional Development Training Program

Participating Sites:
School District Superintendent's Permission Letter on file

DHHS Review Category:
Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents:
One (1) signed consent form

Monitoring Interval:
12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: MAY 15, 2014

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

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection
APPENDIX E

Telephone or Personal Conversation Invitation to Participate Script

1. Hi, this is Jeff Puhala and we work together as teachers. I'm inviting you to participate in a study that I'm conducting to complete my dissertation and Doctor of Education degree at Northeastern University. The study will explore your experiences in a professional development program you participated in during the 2011-2012 school year at the [School District]. You will be asked to complete two interviews where you will describe your experiences in the blended learning professional development training program. This study has been approved by the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board, and it will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete each of the two interviews. This is completely voluntary and even if you begin, you may quit with no repercussions.

   I was wondering if you would have any time to help me out by participating in the study? (If yes, go on. If no:) Thank you for your time. Good-bye (or thank you).

2. I have openings on [date, day] at [time]. Could you make it then, [name]? (continue until we have an agreed-upon time and day). Where would you like me to come for the interview [participant selects the location].

3. If for some reason you’re unable to make it, please call me at 814-542-8631, or email me at puhala.j@husky.neu.edu. I’ll call you the night before with a reminder [unless appointment is scheduled for the next day].

   Thank you very much, [name]. I will count on seeing you at _____ on _____ then, ok? [Wait for response.]

Follow Up Phone Call

Hi, this is Jeff Puhala, and I'm calling from Northeastern University. I'm just calling to remind you that you agreed to participate in my dissertation study that focuses on exploring your experiences in the blended learning professional development training program. We will meet tomorrow at [time]. We have agreed to meet at [specific location]. Can you still make it tomorrow?

(After positive response) Great. See you tomorrow.

(Or after negative response) Okay, that's too bad. Do you want to reschedule?

(If yes, go back to #2 above.)

(If no:) Thank you for your time. Good-bye.
Appendix B

Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Principal Investigator: Dr. Nena F. Stracuzzi, Advisor – n.stracuzzi@neu.edu
Student Researcher: Jeffrey J. Puhala – puhala.j@husky.neu.edu
Title of Project: A qualitative study of elementary teacher experiences of a professional development training program

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 student investigator will explain it to you first. You may ask the person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the student investigator 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 student investigator will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you were an elementary teacher at the [School District] School District who participated in a blended learning professional development training opportunity during the 2011-2012 school year.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to: explore how elementary teachers understand and make meaning of their professional development experience; and how that experience affects the implementation and continuation of skills acquired during the training. The results of this study will help the student investigator understand how you made meaning of your experience. This study is also a requirement to complete the Doctor of Education in curriculum leadership program at Northeastern University and will aid the student investigator in completing the degree requirements.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to complete two in-person interviews. You will also be asked to read both your interview transcripts and the analyzed data to check for accuracy. The interviews will be conducted at convenient and private location of your choice and will be conducted at a mutually convenient day and time. Each interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be digitally recorded. A professional transcriptionist will transcribe the interviews. You will then be asked to review the interview transcripts for accuracy and will be invited to make any corrections to it. This is called member checking and is important to validating the research data.

APPROVED

NU IRB 12-08-01
VALUE 15-15
THROUGH 15-15
Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

This study will take place between May 2013 and May 2014. You will be interviewed at a time and location that is convenient for you, after you complete your workday. You will be asked to complete two personal interviews and it will take approximately 60-90 minutes to complete each interview. After your interview you will be asked to review your two transcripts for accuracy that could also take two hours. You will also be asked to review the final themes and conclusions of the study. Your time commitment for this study is approximately five hours.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

You will be asked to retell your experiences of blended learning professional development training at the School District. This experience should pose no discomfort.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

You may benefit personally by reflecting on the meaning of their professional development experience. This may help you reflect on how you may continue to implement and sustain the skills learned in the training opportunity if this is something in which you are interested in doing. Your responses to the interview questions may also help to improve professional development training programs at your school district.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study is confidential. Only the student investigator and transcriptionist working on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way. The study site is described as, “a public school in Pennsylvania.” Your personal information will be protected by the use of a pseudonym.

Your personal information will be protected using a variety of procedures. Your name will be protected because you will be assigned a pseudonym. Should a professional transcriptionist transcribe your statements, only your pseudonym will be revealed. You will also be asked to check each transcript for accuracy and ask to correct any inaccuracies. Your information will then be entered into www.dedoose.com, a qualitative, web-based data analysis tool, and the researcher’s password-protected personal computer. Only your pseudonym will be revealed in electronic documents as well as the narrative descriptions that will follow.

All audio and electronic data will be stored in password-protected files on the student investigator’s password-protected personal home computer, Dropbox account located at www.dropbox.com, and a backup flash drive, and will only be accessible by the student investigator. Following the close of this study by Northeastern University the files will be stored in a locked file cabinet at the student investigator’s home and destroyed after a
period of three years.

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

After reading this consent form you may choose not to participate in this study. Please inform the student researcher of that choice should that be your decision.

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 study.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study, you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee of the school district.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

If you have questions or problems, please contact Dr. Nena F. Stracuzzi, College of Professional Studies (CPS), Doctor of Education Program, Northeastern University, Mailstop 42 BV, 360 Huntington Ave., Boston, MA 02115. Dr. Stracuzzi’s email address is n.stracuzzi@neu.edu. If you need to want to connect with the student investigator, please contact Jeffrey J. Puhala, Elementary Music Teacher, Mr. Puhala’s email address is puhala.j@husky.neu.edu.

Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?

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

Will I be paid for my participation?

You will not be paid for your participation in this study.

Will it cost me anything to participate?

There will be no cost to you to participate in this study.
Is there anything else I need to know?

The student investigator, Mr. Jeffrey J. Puhala, is an elementary music teacher at [redacted].

I agree to take part in this research study.

Signature of the person agreeing to take part

Date

Printed name of the person above

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

Date

Printed name of person above

[Approved stamp]
Appendix C – Participant-Focused Life History

Profile One: Ellis

Ellis is a sixth-grade teacher. Her classroom windows border the inner school courtyard that sports a beautiful screened-in gazebo and a surrounding landscape full of overgrown vegetation. Her classroom ceilings have hanging decorations reminiscent of Dr. Suess’s *The Lorax* while a life-size skeleton wearing a lab coat smiles from the rear of the room. Ellis arranges her desks in a large square with inner rows and a few desks separated from the pack. Colored posters are plastered around the room and have titles such as “Follow the Order of Operations.” A well-kept literacy system comprised of small plastic bins is housed under the windows. Plants and growing lights for science experiments hide in the dark, back corner of the room while a poster that says, “101 Things to Do Instead of Drugs” is highly visible as you wait to leave the room.

Ellis describes herself as a learner in the following paragraphs.

I think I would have to categorize myself as an attention deficit learner. I like to learn about different things here and there, but not necessarily know everything about any one thing. Something will be a passion for six months, a couple of years, and then I feel that I’m good with that, and then I move on and do something else. For example, I love to learn about history. Right now, the history of my house is very interesting to me. Sometimes I’m very focused on what I can do to make my students more engaged. I’ll research and research and do a lot and try different things with that, and then once I feel I’m satisfied, I’ll move on to something else…if that makes any sense, kind of a scattered learning, but it’s constant learning in a variety of different areas.
I think it came from childhood. We lived way out in the country and there was nobody to play with, so we always had a set of encyclopedias. I would sit and read the encyclopedias. Tell me of any other seven, eight, nine, or ten-year-old kid that would sit there on a summer day and choose to read the encyclopedia versus being outside. That was me and I think that’s where my love for all kinds of different things came from. “Hmm, the E-volume looks interesting today. Let’s start reading. We’ll go from Electricity, Electric Eels, to Electronics, to Electrons; to all kinds of stuff.” I think that’s where my interest in learning about a variety of things comes from.

Computers weren’t really a factor too much in my high school years. I did spend a lot of time in the library. I remember researching things that I was interested in. For example, there was a period of time when I desperately wanted to learn Japanese Brush Painting, and how to draw in the Japanese style, and Japanese Zen gardens and things like that. I remember bugging the librarian, can you please borrow these books from this library, and this library, and this library, and they would always humor me because nobody had ever done that.

In my professional life, I really enjoyed going to the Pennsylvania Education Technology Exposition and Conference and the National Science Teachers Association Conference. I loved going there mostly because it fits my attention deficit learning style. There are so many opportunities, I’m like, “Oh, I want this one, and oh, I want that one.” I just get a smattering from each, but what I liked best about it is, it’s not just a, “Here, you too can do it.” It’s a nitty-gritty, 30-minute or one-hour session of, “This is how you do it.” I come from the same kind of public school that you do; no support, no funding, no equipment, nothing, no technology, but this is how you can do what we’ve done. That’s what I like best about it, because if some Jack like me says, “You know what? This is what we did, you really can do it.” I find that very helpful.
My teaching practices were affected by those experiences because I like to present it to the students as, “Well, we don’t have the fanciest equipment. We don’t have the most expensive things, whatever, but we can still get the same results by doing this.” You don’t necessarily have to have a commercially available green screen, because you could still do a realistic video broadcast by putting up green butcher paper like I saw another teacher do, or several other teachers do. You could do DNA testing with a soap dish and paperclips and a nine-volt battery, or simulated DNA testing. It’s not real DNA testing. But you know, enough that they can still see the stuff move like, “Wow.” It’s very cool, and I think by showing them, by allowing kids to discover that these kinds of things can be done with pretty much everyday materials. Hopefully, it will encourage them to say, “You know what? There are no obstacles to my learning.”

Hopefully they’ll go on and be the inventors, the creators in the future.

When I was in school, I appreciated the teachers who were very encouraging. They were also consistent and fair in their interactions with all students. They had great integrity. The teachers that I can remember weren’t the kind of teachers that would…if you told them something or if you did something that was a little off for you, they would be the first one to rush to them, “Uhhuh, did you know what Ellis did today? Ellis did this or whatever.” I mean, they would take it as, “Okay, well. It’s an off day, no big deal.” Whereas, the teachers that I didn’t feel have that integrity or the ones that I could trust, would be the first ones to be like, “Oh well, Ellis was doing this or whatever.”

I try to imitate them in my own teaching style. I try to have fair and consistent interactions with my students. I try to give everybody the benefit of the doubt, “Well, today’s just an off day.” Like I said, I really encourage those kids that think out of the box because those
are going to be the next Thomas Edison, the next Sally Ride, the next…anybody that you can think of that’s done anything great or unusual or different.

Profile Two: Harley

Harley is a first-grade teacher, but recently served as a second-grade teacher for one year. Her room is extremely organized and is full of colorful posters on each of the four walls. She has a bulletin board with laminated student name cards that depict who will have the iPod and iPad devices for the day. Although her room is in the basement of the school, four windows allow for adequate daylight to enter the room. Nearly all wall space is covered with some academic topic, which includes a word wall, vowel sounds, dates, seasons, month, and weather. Students have mailboxes and parent communication folders. Student desks are arranged in traditional seating with three long rows and each student has their own desk and chair. The ceiling sports suspended Mexican influenced decorations and stuffed animals guard the bookshelves.

Harley describes herself as a learner in the following paragraphs.

Thinking back to how I would describe myself as a learner, I didn’t want to be a teacher. I loved numbers and math and wanted to be an accounting major. I didn’t want to go to college. In high school I took an accounting class and didn’t do well. My parents said, “Do accounting or be a teacher.” I liked learning activities that were manual and hands-on but I did not want to be a teacher.

Eventually I selected Plan B and went into teaching because I had no other choice. I would tell you that I enjoy my job but I don’t love it. I’ve had an obsession since childhood on arranging and rearranging things. Often my husband is out of town and he comes home and the living room furniture is completely rearranged. In my teaching, this has developed into creating
themes. I do what makes kids happy and gets them excited. I like to create things on my own and like my home, I like to rearrange things at school. I like ideas that are fresh and new and I am always open to change. I realize that the way I like to learn is the way I’m hoping that the kids like to learn. I think because we’re in such a high functioning technological society anymore, including these little guys, that they need to have that method being instructed to them and that allows for them to explore and to experience. It can’t be the brick and mortar anymore, it can’t.

I would admit to having attention deficit disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder. My attention doesn’t last too long but my obsessive-compulsive disorder…I’m fixated on things being perfect and things being freakishly neat. However, when I get into that mode, for instance cleaning, if I’m going to specifically do one room and I have to take this out of that room and go into another room, I’ve already started over here. My attention is here and that’s where my attention deficit disorder comes into place, at least that is how a coworker describes I bring my obsessive-compulsive disorder into the classroom. I want everything to be perfect. My attention in class whether it was back to high school, back to elementary school…I wasn’t a problem child but I found it very difficult to focus just on lectures.

In my professional growth, I enjoyed going to the Pennsylvania Educational Technology Exposition and Conference and that’s what wound me up about incorporating devices into the classroom. I was able to go out and observe a second-grade classroom at another school district. I think the more opportunities that they give us to experience other classrooms, other districts, the more excited I get and the more I want to learn. If the district doesn’t afford us these opportunities then I think teachers become stagnant. I like going to all these extra events and bringing back something to the district that hasn’t been here before.
What I liked about my own teachers is that they were energetic. They were fun. You could tell that they cared. They had a very nurturing heart. I guess probably if I go back to elementary school it would go back to my first male teacher in third grade. He was the most fun teacher that I had up to that point in time. There were a lot of games. There were a lot of interactive things that he had us doing, up and moving. Again it wasn’t lecture as much as…or maybe that’s what I’m remembering, just the fun things. If I think back to junior high I would say it probably would have had to been my English teacher. He was one of my dad’s best friends in high school and he always joked around with me. He joked around with the kids but he demanded respect. He had a good rapport with everyone. I don’t remember him having crossed words with anyone. Everybody had that line of fear and respect that never went beyond it. English, I just recall enjoying being in his class. In senior high, I remember my math teacher. He was a grump but there was just something about him that I really liked. He was approachable for me because there were so many others that just couldn’t stand him. Maybe he just reminded me of my grandfather but he was approachable. He took the time if I was confused on something and I don’t recall too many high school teachers taking that one-on-one time. College …nobody really stands out.

In my own teaching, I would like to think I’m a caring teacher. I would like to think that I can joke around with the kids. I also would like them to know that when Harley’s buttons have been pushed then that’s it. I guess it’s just being a well-rounded person. I always want them to know that they’re important to me.

Profile Three: Jill

Jill is a kindergarten teacher. Her room is located in the basement of the school and has four windows that allow in adequate daylight. Her room is a bouquet of color with educational
posters and materials covering all four walls. Visual stimulation is obvious in her room with posters and materials displaying everything from reading and math concepts to lunch counts, bus/car rider information and a “Great Reader Award” area for display of student names. Jill arranges students in three groups of long rectangular tables. Each student has a mailbox space for organization and coats and book bags are stored neatly in an open closet.

Jill describes herself as a learner in the following paragraphs.

I would say that I am a fast learner and a lifelong learner. I always like to learn, but I have to see things and my husband jokes around with me all the time because I picture everything. I have to see it, like numbers written down. If I’ve seen it in print I can remember it and that helps me as a learner. I’ll use a lot of technology too. Technology is a big thing that helps me…I mean I use my iPad all the time for everything. I love technology.

My fast learning style is only useful if the instructor is using a visual aid. So, if am sitting through learning experiences where someone just lectures, it means nothing to me. If they are teaching me something new I need to have a visual to help me learn. It also helps me remember things, like “Oh yeah, I remember that time that lady had that thing on the screen or the wall.” That’s what clues me back in to what we were talking about. Even as a kid, I always wanted to see something and now as an adult when I can attend trainings that have visual aids I get excited about learning.

Recently, I think the SMART Board training we had that one summer where he actually told us stuff, now go try it, was one of the best. That one training was so much more then just standing up there and just telling me for an hour what it’s able to do and then go home. I got to try it out, I got to explore and that made more sense to me. To me it was almost 50-50. He would explain it and then let us do it for the same amount of time, almost like square it all away.
We all got to try it. That was like the best training I’ve ever been to as an educator. I referred to his visual sheet. It had the buttons pictures on it so I use that. I always have to make a copy of it. I’ve used it so much because I can go back to that picture and remember exactly that day, doing those buttons and knowing what they meant now because I had that experience. As he introduced them to me we did it, so he gave us a handout that came with it, with actual pictures of the buttons and it’s like shredded almost, I’ve used it so much.

Another useful training was when I was in West Virginia still teaching and we had a graduate level class, but it was more of a new teacher training. The trainer asked us to tell her what our concerns were so she could help us figure things out. It was the most real life kind of class or training that I’ve ever been to. We wrote the curriculum almost as we went because there was a new class they were trying to start. We told them new teacher issues and they helped us with that. That was very beneficial to me. You know, you go to a college class and you hear all this stuff that you know you’re never going to use. I don’t know I can’t think of an example, like new kids coming in, because we were a transient school district. What can we do? So we made up packets to have them ready as soon as a kid walked in. We had everything they needed to know. We did that kind of stuff, so that was very useful to me. It was relevant. Here’s our concerns, here you go…let’s figure them out, you know, it was an actual teacher from our school district and another professional person of some sort. I can’t remember her exact title, so it was a person that’s in the trenches with us everyday, who knew our concerns, who knew that they were legitimate, who said new teachers aren’t staying here…why? Let’s figure this out and then she helped us figure it out, so it was relevant. I guess that was the biggest reason.

I appreciated teachers who had a caring attitude, like if people actually care if I do well or not. I think that was the number one thing. You could always tell when a teacher is just there,
just because, if they genuinely cared about if I was succeeding or not...if they put in the extra time...if I had a question, to actually answer my question or something. I had a teacher in high school ask every day what we had for dinner and that made me feel like he actually cared about what we had for dinner. He went around to every single person that day and that was just a way to let us know he does care what happens. I think that’s most important. The teachers that did work the different modalities like the visual learner and who varies those types of things I appreciated. I had teachers who just lectured and that didn’t do anything for me but then it helped other people. I had other teachers who did it all different, who tried to work with all those modalities, so that it was very helpful to me, too.

I definitely think I care almost too much for my kids. I worry about them all the time, especially because I have kindergarten. I’ll worry, if they come in dirty. If I get an email over the weekend I’ll worry about them until I see them on Monday morning. I really do care about my kids a lot and that’s probably because I don’t have any of my own kids. Those are like my little babies and I do try to vary learning styles, like we do technology, we do hands on, I don’t do much lecture, but as much as you can do with a kindergarten class, but we do a lot of visual. You’ve seen my room. There’s lots of posters everywhere trying to show them exactly what I’m talking about and to remind them. I don’t even have to say anything more. I just point to a certain poster and they know what I mean. They remember whether it’s a rule or use spaghetti as a spacer. That means nothing to you. They remember that and if they see it and it’s like, oh yeah! Then they go do it. I don’t even have to talk anymore.

Profile Four: Suzy

Suzy is a sixth-grade teacher and her room is located at the far end of the third through sixth-grade hallway near the exit door to the school playground. Her room is neatly painted and
she maintains a bulletin board listing daily student jobs. Suzy still has an old slate board and seems to prefer writing with yellow chalk. Print dictionaries, thesauruses, fiction, and non-fiction books are clearly marked and organized. The room is rather crowded with 28 individual student desks and chairs that take up the majority of space in the room. The classroom has adequate daylight and an anti-bullying poster is visible.

Suzy describes herself as a learner in the following paragraphs.

The educational world comes very naturally to me. It’s in the real world things get practical that I struggle. Higher education is as simple as breathing; it’s not complex at all. So, I would say the way I’ve developed as a learner is when I got out to the workforce. I think my college coursework gave me my fundamentals and I don’t know if I changed that much as a learner. I don’t know that it’s necessarily needed for what I’m doing as a career. I’m more of an independent learner and don’t need someone to spoon feed me anything. I’d rather pick things up from a video instead of a face-to-face context.

Being an independent learner keeps me from stagnating, professionally. It keeps it fresh for the kids. It would be boring if we continued to do the same things over and over. If we are not making progress, my kids will not be interested. If I’m not coming up with new ways to do the same things, then the kids get bored. If I’m not up on new technologies, it surpassed me. That’s not okay, so, by some degree I’m driven by the needs and requirements of my job. I get engaged, to get the students engaged. For some reason, technology has come to me extremely quickly. My memory related to those things far surpasses my memory related to almost everything else. Pretty much if I see something related to a program, using a program or looking at technology or program language, I can do it. Other aspects of my life are just not that way, so I think my technology background has got to be that way.
Usually when somebody else motivates me I do the least amount of work possible. When I motivated [sic] myself, then I’m willing to, but someone has to catch my interests or I’m not going to do it. I’m not going to do a good job. I have to spark an interest in something. That leader sparks interest in me by forcing me to do something, sometimes, but not very often… maybe, you know, one time out of 20. I have a literacy-based background. It’s easy for me to create something. As a learner, I will go to books, but I much prefer video. I would much rather see it. I think it’s a superior technology, plain and simple.

Technology is interactive. I can learn, if the video is static and it doesn’t change, just fine. I can move on and do anything I want to do. But sometimes I’m better that way, unless they leave something out, but you fill in those gaps with prior knowledge. I’d much rather quickly skip to the parts I need, because it’s what we do in school. In a tutorial, I just looked at the parts I needed because I had the background knowledge to do it. I wasn’t going to spend three to six hours watching some ridiculous video, when all I needed was five minutes of it. Why would I waste my time? So, I am pretty much motivated by not wasting my time. It’s inconvenient to me. When it does not serve the purpose, it does not get me a desirable… I am not going to do it or I’m going to find a way around it. Maybe it’s cheating, but that’s just the way I learn. I don’t like to waste time.

Education has maybe made me that way. I think the teaching profession has made me that way more so because there is so much fluff. There is just so much overload and useless information, so the advent of the Internet in this information surrounds you at all times. Maybe after we find out the important things, so you don’t waste important time to get to significant facts. You have to be a fool to waste your time with things other than significant facts. It’s
important that you go to the heart of the matter and attack it. That saves you time and it makes you look productive.

I don’t really know the trainings that we have had helped me grow as a learner. What they have done is exposed me to new technologies and ways to use prior knowledge that I might not thought of otherwise. I don’t know that I’ve ever really learned something, that I can use, but it’s obvious structure that I know in a way that I haven’t thought of before, if that makes sense. I don’t think that they have the time in one day to really teach you anything. They almost never give you a chance to apply it. In fact, you simply don’t. I mean they seem to think that it’s an education thing; seem to think that they should tell you this information, with five pounds of handouts and never give you a chance to apply it. And if they gave you a chance to apply it, like half a day, they trust you that you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing. They should trust me to be doing what I’m supposed to be doing and practicing that skill because chances are it’s going to take me three months for the idea to percolate in my brain to the point where I can go, “Oh here’s a way it can be useful for the classroom.” Nobody tells you the practical application in these trainings. They don’t say, “Hey, this is how I use it in my classroom.” It’s always, “Hey, there is the set of concepts and ideas here.” They talk about them, but how do you use them? There’s just not a lot of application. Other ideas get lost and thrown away by the trash.

I did appreciate the Pennsylvania Educational Technology Exposition and Conference, though. You have teachers who are applying knowledge. You watch the ways that they use them, and again as far as ideas it gives you a sort of chance to use them. As far as ideas you sort of copy that. In education, being a teacher in a very isolated career, very isolated, at least in our district, where people are going to say you are going to do it. It’s nice to see a teacher led
demonstration to show how they do technology in the classroom. Those are useful. The flip side and you didn’t ask me this but I will tell you this, the Ph.D’s that come in, and drive boring presentations that do not show any application of concepts, are useless to me. I think I get isolated from good ideas. I think there’s a lot of duplication of effort…a lot of people doing the same job and not sharing advancements.

I appreciated the teachers who didn’t skip steps. A perfect example is math teachers. They have so much prior knowledge that they come right out and say “A, they apply B, and expect to get to C…” but they never really come out and discuss and talk about B, because of prior knowledge. They don’t even think about mentioning it to you as a learner. So, I like teachers that can really step back, look at the process and apply the process. I like teachers that can come up with rules for things. Rules that work out lots of things so you would learn that concept and that concept would apply to things. People can rule things out to their simplest parts, and create rules and concepts and apply it to lots of things. That saves work as you apply that rule and concept and you will really begin to understand and master that idea. I don’t like fact memorization at the core of the class. I think memorization is absolutely essential so often now that even when I was in school the idea was to memorize these facts.

We are not guaranteed any concepts. The test shows these facts and you go by your way and you didn’t learn anything. So now, the ideas I read and teach you some concepts. I don’t need to learn facts anymore. You can’t understand the concept until you understand the basic facts associated with the concept. If you have not memorized I can read some prophecy, the concept, because there is memorization involved. Yet they memorize that idea. They understand the idea to begin to apply it, frequently.
I think that good teachers do all three. They don’t give up on the memorization, they teach the memorization, not the point that it becomes busy work, but they teach concepts, but that is not good enough yet. The best teachers, teach memorization, teach the concept of rule that applies to things, and have you apply it, drill it, drill it, drill it, to understand the concept. I don’t know why…there are a lot of intelligent people and I fairly seldom hear that in education.

Profile Five: Mary

Mary is a fifth-grade teacher. Her room borders the edge of a forest where a rapidly growing weeping willow tree serves as memoir of a former student. Her room is arranged in traditional rows with a kidney shaped group table at the back of the room. Near the door sits an old, but sturdy rocking chair.

Mary describes herself as a learner in the following paragraphs.

My learner identity formed when I was very young. My first-grade teacher sat me down and told me that my reading skills were behind everyone. I was determined myself to improve this. I have a younger sister that I played “school” with often at home. I would stand up and pretend I was teaching her and just kept reading. By the end of first grade I was reading so well that my teacher wanted me to go directly to third grade. That experience shaped my learner identity for the remainder of my life. Every time I have ever struggled to learn something I just kept pushing myself until I got it. This has influenced me as a learner and a teacher because I push myself to help kids learn. Even if I try new things and fail at it the first time I keep pushing myself. I would consider myself to be determined, persistent, and insistent. All of this developed when I fell behind the other students in first grade and I started teaching my sister.

I think your students help you to develop who you are. I know I didn’t understand a lot of things until I became a teacher. When I’m trying to teach it to the kids, I break it apart and I
find myself saying, “Oh, that’s how this happens” or “That’s why it is the way it is.” So I think you just develop and I think the older you get that maturation sets in and you figure out who you are and how you do learn. When you teach it to someone else it makes it much easier to understand it yourself.

I grow as a learner by having to make the material meaningful to the students. Just being able to take the material and break it down to some of their levels. Having to teach a diverse group of learners, not everyone is going to get it the way it’s taught in the curriculum or in the books. So you have to adapt it so that you know that you’re reaching all of your students. I think that that has been very beneficial to me to see that’s exactly how it works. Or if I’m having to break it down for lower ability group, you see how it works and you can put what you already know with what you’re trying to teach them and collectively see how to do something or how something works or how something comes about.

The best learning opportunity I had as a teacher was when I got my Masters [degree] in reading. I was required to use skills from the coursework in a classroom. Even though it was an early literacy program I was able to use a lot of those strategies right in my small group instruction. When I first started teaching I had all ability levels in my classroom. I was happy to make lessons that were adaptable for the stronger learners as well as the medium and struggling learners. So basically, I would implement those and I just picked and chose what I wanted to use. Some of the things I wouldn’t use and some of the things I would and what worked I kept. A lot of the things are things that I learned around college that I’ve already been using. I’ve used several. For one, organization, just using more rubric style things with these students, because my professors were using rubrics with me. I wanted them to see what a rubric was so I started out just by showing them that I’m a learner too. Actually, I just put it on the SMART Board and
said, “Here’s one of my papers. Here’s a rubric that my professor is going to use to score me.” I introduced it that way. I use a rubric for almost everything I grade so that they can see [how they were graded]. So rubric was one big thing that I used with them. Another one is small group instruction. Right now I’m teaching ability leveled groups of math and reading students where when I first started it was a collective diverse group of learners so you had them all together. Now I’m able to focus on, okay, I have this group of learners that’s about the same level so I don’t have to do so much leveling in my lessons right now. Basically, you’re just putting things together for small groups. I have all of that organized. I was talking about organization, I guess I lost my train of thought, but just using the rubric and having binders and using that to organize all of the student data whether it be they organize their binder or I keep their binder and organize it for them.

I remember teachers who were charismatic and sympathetic towards your needs. I think that the teachers that I had weren’t as able to adapt to things, like teachers are today, but they were still caring and met your needs. It wasn’t such a fast-paced environment. They could pay close attention to your needs whereas now we’re so fast-paced and dedicated to meeting all of the state standards that it’s difficult to get in those character development-type things. It’s very difficult for me to stop a lesson because someone is crying or because someone needs my attention even though you have to. It’s a struggle, whereas back then they weren’t held accountable for making sure that this standard was taught, this standard was taught. They were able to be compassionate and be able to work through it with us and make sure that we understood. If we needed a minute to cry they were there supporting us, whereas now it’s like, oh…so I just think basically compassion.
I would say that I hope that I’m compassionate and charismatic; however, like I did say, it’s hard to combine those and match them with teaching the way that we’re expected to teach today. I struggle with getting in everything that needs taught as well as teaching character development and being able to be a character model, I guess I should say.

Profile Six: Patty

Patty is a kindergarten teacher. Her eloquently and meticulously organized classroom is themed-based using the red dog Clifford. Each area of the room has visual displays related to the Clifford theme and includes counting from one to ten with dog bones, a dog themes birthday calendar, and a behavior board that say, “Dog Gone Good Behavior.” The room is bright with natural light from windows that face the front of the building. Much like Jill, Patty arranges student seating in rectangular tables with no student storage area below it. A handcrafted pine mailbox system organizes student materials and plastic boxes organize classroom art supplies.

Patty describes herself as a learner in the following paragraphs.

Self-motivation and submersion is the key to try to stay focused. I like to stay up-to-date by reading articles and magazines, which helps keep me well-rounded and motivated to continue to do what I do. I like to constantly be active in things in the classroom or on-line. I like to go to in-services or classes, professional development classes, and even continuing classes like at the Intermediate Unit.

I am constantly doing things to try to stay with it. It’s one of those things. If you just totally tune yourself out for months at a time, especially when I was subbing, that was easy to do. Even day-to-day was one thing. If I didn’t sub over that summer or even for long breaks or whatever, it would be hard to get yourself back into it. You didn’t have your own classroom. Just keeping yourself caught up...when you’re teaching full-time they give you opportunities.
When you’re subbing, it’s different. You don’t have that exposure like a regular education teacher does. I was asked to do some things. Other things I would volunteer to go to. I volunteered to tutor after school. Obviously, I was paid. I asked if I could do that. I asked if I could teach during summer school. I was always trying to put myself out there, just trying to keep myself within the school system somehow.

That’s how I got in with the blended learning project. It was a voluntary thing. I was e-mailed an invitation and just volunteered. I was one that jumped on it right away. I wasn’t uncomfortable. I don’t get uncomfortable in those situations. The more you expose yourself to things, the better you’ll be in the long run. Being out of my comfort zone sometimes is good for me. I like to try new things, things that I’m not familiar with. Out of all things, I would say that technology is probably one of my weaker areas. Even when I was hired, I took an information technology class when I was in college. I’ve just never…I only did the bare minimum of what I had to do.

I wasn’t one of those people that were spending a lot of time on the computer. I didn’t have Facebook until about six months ago. I’m not that computer literate person that just can get on there and navigate around. I’m getting better now that I’ve had more experience with things. Up until then…it was just an opportunity for me to say, “Wow. You know, I want to try something new.” Podcasting I’d never done. Any of that stuff, I didn’t know what he was talking about, the Wiki. I had no idea what any of that was. It was just a good chance for me to grow as an individual.

I enjoyed the Writer’s Workshop, the guided reading, the Reader’s Workshop, just the different opportunities from my school district. We just did one, Crisis Management, even the ones that I’ve taken outside of the school toward my instructional two certification. I’ve taken a
lot of credits, grad classes, anywhere from early literacy trainings, to classes at the Intermediate Unit. I’ve done health, wellness, and fitness. I’ve tried to put myself in little things, in different things, different areas. I don’t know that I have a specific focus. It’s early childhood, just different things that I could do to help them all around. I’ve done the Standards Aligned Systems trainings. There’s a class called, “Magic” that I took that was meaningful activities generated toward the kids; just little things that I could do to enhance my learning.

I’ve gone to several science trainings in Pittsburgh as part of the ASSET modules that we’re doing. Those were extremely helpful. I’ve done those modules without the trainings. It’s a completely different experience to try to go through the manual and to get all of the materials and put it together without really being trained in it beforehand. Trying to put it together yourself and trying to learn as you go is a completely different experience than when you have that. When you go to those…you go to those trainings they’re…a lot of them are hands-on. That’s for kindergarten. There are a lot of…you take the notebook. You experience the kit yourself. You go back and you train with it. The more exposure you have to those types of things, it makes your teaching better.

I remember teachers who had compassion, just being able to listen, being able to adapt to different situations, accommodating whatever need that you may have, being organized themselves. Behavior management even with other teachers is key…even when I was younger and I try to do that myself now.

I look back and try to…I see those qualities in certain teachers that I had. Just making sure that I’m compassionate toward the kids or that I always go that extra step with them; trying to make sure that I meet the needs of all of them. It goes back to different kind [sic] of learners, trying to make sure that you can reach everybody in the room. Trying to have that time
management or that classroom management…behavior management. All those types of things are key to your room.

Profile Seven: Shandy

Shandy is a first-grade teacher. Her room is a visual extravaganza of stimulating color. You immediately notice a positive vibe as you look at the hanging ceiling decorations named after groups of students that include, “Brilliant Bears, Fabulous Fires, Smiling S’mores, and Talented Tents.” Posters and bulletin boards adorn the four walls of the room and include a calendar, weather, word wall, and vowel sounds. Drawers are clearly labeled and a “How We Go Home” poster reminds students of their bus number or car rider/walker status. The room is neat and organized with chairs arranged in rows with one square pod of six desks.

Shandy describes herself as a learner in the following paragraphs.

My identity started to form back when I was a child. My father was a teacher and my aunt was a teacher…actually, I had two aunts that were teachers, so it’s definitely in the family. I watched my father growing up, going through classes and teaching and all that which made me have an interest in teaching right off the bat; however, he was social studies-oriented and I was not. But I think growing up in that field kind of pushed me towards that way. I’ve always loved kids and I’ve babysat. I was involved with park services in the summertime, helping out children when I was little. So I think family and experience with kids pushed me in the direction of teaching.

I think it’s always important to continuously learn. I love going into conferences and getting new ideas and bringing them back into the classroom and teaching. There’s always new things…technology-oriented that you can bring back to the classroom. So I think any kind of workshop or conference or something I can go to. I love to bring back and get those things in
place in my classroom. I like to do that on my own; however, we don’t always have the opportunity. Whenever we have the opportunity to do that during school, I like to go. The summertime seems to be when I’m able to do that because we’re not able to go as much during the year anymore like we used to be. I don’t have that…they don’t give us that opportunity anymore.

Time changes kids. You know, when I first started teaching, it wasn’t all the video games and that kind of stuff. You have to keep up with the time. So if you’re stuck in that mode what worked 10 years ago, you’re going to lose the children and you’re not going to have that attention span. So you have to adapt, whether you like it or not, into these new styles or you won’t have their attention. If you don’t have their attention, they’re not going to learn. So yeah, when I first started I thought, “Okay, this is what I believe and this is what I’m going to do,” but once you get in the classrooms and start teaching the kids, it doesn’t necessarily work that way. You have to adapt your teaching styles to meet the children’s needs.

When I learn I like them to show me how to do it and involve me so I have the experience myself. For instance our science curriculum, we go out and get trained on how to do it and I’m sitting in the conferences and doing it myself. When I bring it back to the classroom, I know how to do it because I’ve been through it and I’ve already done it. It’s just not reading the manual and doing it. It makes it more meaningful and I think, “Hey, I remember when I was doing this,” so this is what I want you to get out of it. Those are probably the most important things.

I feel like I learned a lot throughout my Master’s degree. I went for educational leadership and some of those little tactics and hints they gave us, as far as evaluating yourself like teacher evaluations. I learned a lot about calling on boys versus girls and where you stand to
teach from and those kinds of things. I think I learned a lot in those classes on how to evaluate yourself as a teacher. I’d sit down sometimes after the lessons and go back and think, “Did I do this, this, this?” You know, just like they had taught us in those Master’s classes. I feel like I learned a lot there too…from the teaching aspect. I think they have affected my practices tremendously because I’m very cautious and conscious about how I’m calling on students.

Technology, I think, is a huge deal nowadays because children love the video games and computers. So I think I learned a lot in those courses as far as putting that into my classroom and trying to do things. You know, the SMART Board and technology-oriented activities to try and get them motivated and involved.

Other trainings I liked were ones on the reading series, new math series, Writer’s Workshop…those are all beneficial because you have to teach those. To get the training, you know, it’s optional a lot of times, but if you don’t take it, I feel like you have to read the right manual and you’re kind of forced to do it anyway. I think trainings are very beneficial for teachers. So just going in there and doing it. Again, you adapt it your own way to fit your students’ needs, but I think it’s good to have that experience and be able to talk with co-teachers and other people that are teaching it.

If I think back to my former teachers I remember doing…Those teachers stick out to me that did those things and were caring and actually talked to us. You could tell they cared about you because they would ask you about your weekend and how you did. You know, if you had a softball game, they’d asked you how your game went. Just caring. I remember those teachers that had us do plays. I remember my fourth-grade teacher having us memorize poems and then we acted them out. Just those kinds of things stick out to me. Encouraging. They would say, “Hey, why don’t you go out for the newspaper team, or yearbook staff or whatever.” I think
encouragement from teachers help. Sometimes you don’t realize you have the qualities that you
do and your teacher realizes it. I think it’s important to point out to the children their strengths
too, so they know it. Even first graders…they might be good at something and they don’t even
realize they’re good at it. But if you say, “Hey, you’re a really good drawer,” that kind of stuff
makes them feel important.

My teaching practices were affected by these qualities because I do the same things when
I’m teaching. I stand up there and think, “If I’m boring myself, I know I’m boring them.” If I
stand there and keep talking and talking, I look around and they’re all over the place and looking
up at the ceiling, then you know you have to change something. So I think I try my best to meet
those needs, you know, I try to meet the auditory learner. I still talk to them, you have to, to be a
teacher. But you also can use visual aids to bring into the lessons and finish with a hands-on
activity like a musical. I try to bring music into their lessons even though I can’t sing at all. But
trying to bring music and art, even if I don’t have them, bring them into the lessons because
there’s others…you know, that’s how the other students learn. So I think just remembering those
things on how I was taught. It’s a lot different now, but I try to adapt to all those needs and it is
how I present the lessons.
Appendix D – List of Figures and Tables

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References


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