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PROFESSIONAL GROWTH: INFORMAL PEER OBSERVATION

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of
the College of Graduate and Professional Studies
at the University of New England

8 April, 2017

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ABSTRACT

The practice of peer observation has recently gained attention as educational and political leaders examine teacher effectiveness. Prior research studies about peer observation were mostly conducted in secondary universities or in schools where this practice was voluntary. Since this practice has recently become mandated, this qualitative case study examined how teachers perceived the experience of informal peer observation in relation to their professional growth. The study was conducted in a Pre-K-8 public school for three months while teachers participated in informal peer observation rounds. When teachers completed their informal peer observation, they filled out the peer observation documentation forms and answered questions about their experience either in a questionnaire or through an online focus group discussion. The collected data were coded, analyzed, and organized in relation to the research questions. Six themes emerged from the data: *choice, collaboration, time, autonomy, observational learning, and professional growth*. This research revealed that teachers felt that informal peer observation had a positive impact on their professional growth. As school leaders continue to examine teacher effectiveness, researchers studying professional development are listening more carefully to teachers' perspective of this practice. This study offers recommendations for school leaders and educators involved with informal peer observation.

Keywords: *peer observation; peer review; formative evaluation; teacher effectiveness*

DEDICATION

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

In an effort to enhance teachers' professional growth, the Maine Department of Education passed Chapter 180: Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth Systems. Section 12, item 4 (peer review and collaboration) indicates that school systems must include observation of peers (Maine DOE, 2015). In Maine, this practice is referred to as informal peer observation and is formative in nature (Mason & Tu, 2015). It is expected that all public schools in Maine will have their professional growth systems fully implemented by 2017.

School leadership teams are expected to examine current practices and make the necessary changes to ensure that mandates are met. Due to available funding, size of the school, and leadership, this mandated practice would inevitably look different from school to school. According to Mason and Tu (2015), lack of state funding is potentially putting smaller districts at a relative disadvantage. In Shortland's (2004) research study, *Peer Observation: A Tool for Staff Development or Compliance?*, she found that even though participants reported that there were limited resources and training, that the educators continued with the practice on their own due to the positive impact it had on their practice.

Statewide, it will be important to collect evidence and input from teachers about the practice of mandated informal peer observation and if teachers view this practice as beneficial to their professional growth. As the opportunities for professional growth continue to evolve, it will be important to understand how to best support teachers.

Statement of the Problem

Efforts to improve teacher effectiveness have educational leaders hopeful that new mandates, including peer observation, will benefit teachers' professional growth. School leaders are charged with implementing and sustaining this state mandated school-wide initiative. As school leadership teams create a culture to support this practice, they are encouraged by prior researchers to address trust, choice, scheduling (Bell, 2001; Brix, Granger, & Hill, 2014), how to use student data, and how to provide quality peer feedback. Some districts can afford outside consultants to provide the necessary supports, but due to the costs, most districts are implementing mandates without outside support (Archer, Cantrell, Holtzman, Joe, Tocci, & Wood, 2016; Mason & Tu, 2015).

School leadership teams are developing peer observation training sessions to support teachers as they engage in this new practice with their colleagues. Teams also need to address how to support teachers so they have enough time to participate in the peer observation cycle during the school day. Since this is a new initiative, there are few studies that address the role that school-wide observations of colleagues play in teachers' learning (Reinhorn, Johnson, & Simon, 2015). Although there have not been many studies on this topic because it is new, there is some research to support the benefits of peer observation. The benefits for schools participating in the practice of peer observation include increased collaboration, idea sharing (Bell, 2010; Mason & Tu, 2015), and improved student outcomes (Archer, et al., 2016; Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2013). It will be important to understand how teachers perceive informal peer observation as a professional learning tool.

Purpose of the Study

The review of the literature (Calvert, 2016; McMahon, Barrett, & O'Neill, 2007; Richardson, 2000; Reinhorn, Johnson, & Simon, 2015; Robbins, 2015; Robinson, 2010) supports the idea that informal peer observation is an effective tool enabling teachers to examine their practices and use each other's expertise to strengthen their instruction. Killion (2016) argues that finding time for job-embedded learning is often noted as a challenge when implementing change. She concludes that high quality professional learning is intensive, collaborative, includes opportunities to practice without risk, and incorporates ongoing learning to refine new practices (Killion, 2016). Another expert in the field, Calvert (2016), stresses the importance of teacher agency in this process. She asserts that when school systems involve teachers in decisions about what and how they learn, that teachers will develop their craft, ultimately benefitting student learning (Calvert, 2016). This qualitative case study seeks to fill a gap in the literature by investigating how classroom teachers perceive the practice of mandated school-wide informal peer observation in a mid-sized Pre-K-8 school district in Maine.

Research Questions

Each school district in Maine is responsible for structuring the implementation, and training of informal peer observation. The researcher wanted to know what teachers think about informal peer observation and if this practice enhances their professional growth. To achieve this purpose, there was a primary question. How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as an opportunity for professional growth?

Questions guiding this study are:

1. How do elementary and middle school teachers perceive their own participation the practice of informal peer observation?

2. How do teachers perceive the administrator's role as part of the informal peer observation process?
3. How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as a tool that improves their instruction?

Conceptual Framework

The practice of informal peer observation offers opportunities for colleagues to ask questions about their practice, observe each other, and collectively problem solve. Two theories guide this research about the practice of informal peer observation: social constructivism and adult learning theory.

Social constructivism emphasizes the role that culture and context play when understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Kim, 2001). Meaning or knowledge is derived from the interactions of members of a society and the environment where they coexist. Vygotsky and Bruner are considered the founders of social constructivism (Theorists Related to Vygotsky, n.d.). They proposed that learning happens as a result of social interaction (McLeod, 2007). In the practice of peer observation, colleagues have the potential to learn from interacting closely with their peers in their own working environment. Peers are encouraged to seek someone who has a stronger understanding of the concept they are trying to problem solve. This concept is known as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). This type of relationship helps a teacher to develop skills based on guidance and direction from a colleague.

Adult learning theory is equally important to this work. The practice of informal peer observation begins with the teacher reflecting on their instruction and choosing an area of practice that they would like to improve. The teacher invites a colleague into their classroom for the purpose of improving instruction. This process empowers teachers' practice and is grounded in adult learning theory. Knowles (1980) four principles of adult learning (andragogy) include:

- Adults need to be involved in the planning and evaluation of their instruction
- Experience (including mistakes) provides the basis for learning activities.
- Adults are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their job or personal life.
- Adult learning is problem-centered rather than content-orientated.

Building on the four principles of andragogy, Merizow's (1997) work suggests that in order for adults to experience transformative learning, adults need the freedom to openly discuss issues and engage in reflective discourse (Calvert, 2016). The pre and post conferences of the informal peer observation cycle allows the teachers time to ask questions, converse about the observation, link resources, and engage in conversations about instruction and student learning. Vella (2002) argues that in order for adult learning to be effective, the learners need to name what is to be learned. When teachers have choice of self-directed learning in a nonjudgmental environment, deep and equitable change in an educational setting is possible (Shields, 2010). It is important that teachers are provided with opportunities to engage in informal peer observation, a practice that is grounded in social constructivism and adult learning theory. Reinhorn, Johnson, and Simon (2015) found that school-wide peer observation provided opportunities for professional growth. Now that it is mandated, it will be important to understand how to create an environment where teachers are able to learn and grow as professionals.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope

As Maine public schools of similar size and design begin the practice of mandated informal peer observation, the assumption is that what is learned from this study may help similar schools to better understand this practice. There are an approximated 50 Pre-K-8 teachers who vary in experience and educational backgrounds. The administration team consists of a Superintendent, Principal, Assistant Principal, and Special Education Coordinator. Based on this researcher's experience in education, it is assumed that adults learn best when they are included in determining the focus of their learning. At the proposed time of the study, this researcher was employed in the school where the research was conducted. Though this allowed for valuable insight, it also created biases. First, the research design and the interpretation of the findings may be impacted due to the researcher being a peer with the participants being studied. The researcher is part of the leadership team that is implementing the practice of informal peer observation and may be partial due to the level of involvement. To strengthen the credibility of the research, safeguards, such as triangulation of data, will be utilized. The reader should consider the following limitations of this study:

1. The school selected to participate in this study was chosen based on the proximity to the researcher; therefore, a convenience sample, not a random sample, was used;
2. The school selected to participate in this study was selected from one district in the state;
3. The teachers who volunteer to participate may be more invested in the practice of informal peer observation, therefore may not represent the opinions of all teachers in the school; and

4. Teachers at the elementary and middle level assisted in providing a small sample representative of central Maine; however, this sample does not represent the opinions of all teachers in the state.

Significance of the Study

Since this is a new practice and systems of school-wide informal peer observation are being developed, school leaders have a lot to learn about how to ensure that teachers are experiencing professional growth. Small schools are particularly at risk with less funding and resources. Though they face these challenges, improving instruction is pertinent to student success. As schools shift professional learning opportunities, involving teachers and listening to their input will be key. It will be important to understand and document teachers' experiences as they practice new reforms. The findings from this research will inform policy makers, school leaders, and teachers as more is learned about the practice of mandated informal peer observation.

Definitions of Terms

Choice: Individuals who “make their own choices and decisions collaboratively” (Knight, 2011, p. 31).

Collaboration: “Groups [of teachers] within the same school, same grade, or department ... [who] work together in a focused environment while dealing with issues of common interest” (Donaldson, 2015; Colbert et al., 2008, p. 138).

Formal assessment: referred to as summative or evaluative “it is a snapshot, an evaluation intended to indicate a level of competence measured against a standard... allows administrators to make decisions on such things as promotion, tenure, raises, awards, etc.” (Franchini, 2008).

Informal observation: referred to as formative “teacher observed has full control over what happens to information about their observation” (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014).

Peer observation: includes a pre-conference, classroom observation, and post conference.

“... seen as providing an additional independent perspective on a teacher's performance in the

classroom, but also seen as a tool for encouraging discussion, collaboration, and idea-sharing among teachers” (Mason & Tu, 2015).

Job-embedded professional development: “...refers to teacher learning that is grounded in day-to-day teaching practice and is designed to enhance teachers’ content-specific instructional practices with the intent of improving student learning” (Croft, 2010; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Hirsh, 2009).

Teacher agency: “the capacity of teachers to act purposefully and constructively to direct their professional growth and contribute to the growth of their colleagues” (Calvert, 2016).

Conclusion

This chapter presents an overview of informal peer observation as a professional growth model. The practice of peer observation has great potential to enhance the professional growth of teachers (Reinhorn, Johnson, & Simon, 2015). As school leaders design trainings and adjust schedules to provide time for peer observation, it will be important to examine teachers’ perspectives as to how it improves their instruction. By providing teachers with a culture of trust, reflection, choice, and collaboration, the outcomes of peer observation seem hopeful. This study examined teachers’ perception of their experience while participating in informal peer observation. Chapter II reviews current and relevant literature in relation to the study. Chapter III provides a proposed methodology for investigating teacher’s perceptions of informal peer observation. A proposed research design, data collection and methods of analysis are included in Chapter III. Chapter IV summarizes and highlights the results of the case study. Chapter V reviews the analysis of findings, draws conclusions, and proposes recommendations. Appendices include interview questions and documents relevant to the study.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is based on the premise that when teachers participate in collaborative learning opportunities, like informal peer observation, it allows them to reflect on their daily practice, improving instruction. The practice of informal peer observation has recently gained attention as educational and political leaders examine teacher effectiveness (Coe, Aloisi, Higgins, & Major, 2014; The Aspen Institute, 2016). As student test scores show a lack of improvement nationwide (2012 Nation's Report Card), the U. S. Government enacted new regulations in effort to improve teacher effectiveness. Maine developed The Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth (T-PEPG) system under the Maine Law Chapter 180. Schools are expected to implement a new teacher evaluation system by 2017.

Administrators are responsible for evaluating and rating teachers' performance and growth based on criteria approved by the state. As part of the new mandates, school leaders are implementing either formal or informal peer observation (Mason & Tu, 2015). Peer observation consists of a pre conference, observation, and post conference. Formal peer observation is evaluative while informal peer observation is formative. The American Institute for Research (AIR) published *Leveraging Teacher Talent: Peer Observation in Educator Evaluation* (2014) to address the benefits and challenges of implementing formal (summative) peer observation. In the District of Columbia Public Schools, the estimated cost of one peer observer was approximately \$1,500 per evaluated teacher (Jacques, 2013). Due to the costs of training and implementation of formal peer observation, many schools are implementing district-wide informal peer observation.

Reinhorn, Johnson, and Simon (2015) found that there is a great potential for learning among educators when new and experienced teachers have systematic opportunities to participate in informal peer observation. Informal peer observation empowers teachers in the decision-making process creating collaborative, job embedded practice that impacts instruction (Danielson, 2015; Kaufman & Grimm, 2013; Robbins, 2015). How to best structure the implementation and training of informal peer observation is left up to each district.

To date, there are few studies that address the role that observations of colleagues play in teachers' learning (Reinhorn et al., 2015). Therefore, a case study focusing on how teachers experience and perceive school-wide informal peer observations in a mid-sized district is going to be timely as all public schools will be implementing either formal or informal peer observation to fulfill the newly required mandates.

This qualitative case study examines how teachers perceive mandated school wide informal peer observation as a practice to grow professionally. The theoretical frameworks that guide this study are based on inquiry, collaboration, and learning. The practice of peer observation is grounded in adult learning theory and social constructivist. These two theories provide a framework for school leaders as they embed professional learning opportunities, like informal peer observation, that promote inquiry, collaboration, and reflection in an educational setting to improve instruction.

Online databases, books, and websites were used to collect current research and thinking on the topic of informal peer observation. Descriptors such as peer review, peer coaching, observation, professional development, and collaboration provided a rich investigation into understanding why informal peer observation is finally making its way into the daily practice of teachers. Within this chapter, a review of scholarly sources related to

teacher effectiveness, creating a school culture for professional growth, peer observation and informal peer observation is presented.

Measuring Teacher Effectiveness

As student test scores continue to flatline nationwide as indicated by 2012 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) results and most recently the American College Testing (ACT) scores (Heitin, 2015), educational leaders are determined to improve teacher effectiveness (Jacob & McGovern, 2015). Researchers, Sanders, William, and Rivers (1996) found that students who have three effective teachers in a row make significant progress. For years, educational leaders have been conducting research to better understand what makes a teacher effective.

Two noteworthy studies have been instrumental in providing insight about teacher effectiveness. In 2012, The American Institutes for Research (AIR), commissioned by the U.S. Department of Education researched student achievement and observations of classroom practice. During the same time period, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation supported The Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project. In attempt to measure the effectiveness of a teacher, they studied thousands of classroom observations that were scored by highly trained administrators and peers. The results of these studies led to defining certain qualities of what makes an effective teacher. Even with these qualifications, measuring what makes a teacher effective remains elusive. Archer, Kerr, and Pianta (2014) state, “But measuring teaching is hard. Teaching is a complex interaction among teachers, students, and content that no single measurement tool is likely to capture” (p 25). The findings from both studies have armed educational leaders with volumes of data and learned outcomes that are guiding decisions at the national and local level. Teachers’ effectiveness will now be rated by student achievement

outcomes, observations, and professional growth per new mandates in order to address teacher equality. With new measures of accountability, professional development sessions need to better support teachers so they can best meet students' instructional needs.

Improving Professional Development

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act mandated high quality professional development for teachers following these criteria:

- Is sustained, intensive, and content focused
- Aligns with state academic content standards, student achievement standards, and assessments
- Improves teachers' knowledge of subjects they teach
- Advances teachers' understanding of effective instructional strategies based on scientific research
- Is regularly evaluated for effects on teacher effectiveness and student achievement (Paige, 2002)

Even though these guidelines were in place and large amounts of funding were spent on professional development, studies found that the professional development efforts were not effective (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Pianta, 2011). In 2011, Learning Forward published seven new Standards for Professional Learning to improve professional development sessions that would increase teacher effectiveness (Quick Reference Guide: Standards for Professional Learning, n.d.). Calvert (2016) found that even though "The standards call for professional learning that is on-going, embedded, connected to practice, aligned to school and district goals, and collaborative" (p. 3), teachers are still feeling disconnected from what they really need to improve professionally. In order to learn more about this disconnect, the National Commission

on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) and Learning Forward interviewed former teachers and school administrators who were involved with developing professional development. They found that teachers must be engaged in learning opportunities that are purposeful for adult learners (Calvert, 2016).

Current research, including a 2014 report, *Teachers Know Best: Teachers' Views on Professional Development*, from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, found that professional development was not focused on strengthening instructional techniques that would help students learn. *The Mirage* (2015), published by The New Teacher Project (TNTP), found that an average of \$18,000 is spent yearly on one teacher's professional development. This PD was characteristic of one-shot workshop/conferences where there was little carry-over back into the classroom. The discrepancy that exists between the amount of money being spent on PD and the minimal change in student success has educational leaders examining what types of professional development are most effective for improving instruction.

Yoon, Duncan, Lee, Scarloss and Shapley (2007) propose that in order for professional development to maximize student gains, it must follow a sequence starting with teacher knowledge and skills linked to classroom teaching and student achievement. This type of professional learning is grounded in Adult Learning Theory and Social Constructivism. There is a strong case for changing professional learning from the traditional approach. As districts enforce the new mandated teacher evaluation models, it will be beneficial for leaders to examine what is being provided for professional growth opportunities and to incorporate what is being learned from the latest research.

Creating a Culture for Professional Growth

Kraft and Papay (2013) findings show that “Teachers who collaborate frequently, receive meaningful feedback about their instructional practices, and are recognized for their efforts become more effective at raising student achievement at faster rates than those in schools where such practices are absent” (p. 5). This section reviews how leadership, climate, growth mindset, and embedded professional development set the stage for effective informal peer observation.

Leadership

Amid the many pressures facing school leaders, Glickman (2002) reminds us that successful schools keep their number one focus on student learning. The literature confirms that school leaders who provide teachers opportunities to engage in discussion about student data and instruction are noticing improved student outcomes (Archibald, Coggshall, Croft, & Goe, 2011).

Calvert (2016) makes a strong case for leaders to develop professional development sessions similar to how we want teachers to provide instruction for students. These experiences of professional learning need to be creative, collaborative, and lead to mastery. She cautions education leaders to ask for feedback from teachers when acting upon state and local reforms (2016). When trust and respect is reciprocated, the professional learning is more apt to meet the needs of teachers and support continuous learning. Archibald, et al. (2011), identified several features of successful Professional Growth (PG) systems that successful school leaders have implemented. Systems promoting teacher investment during the planning process include opportunities for active learning of new teaching strategies; providing opportunities for collaboration among teachers; and embedding follow-up and continuous feedback were most likely to improve student learning. DuFour and Mattos (2013) agree and conclude that effective

leaders look for ways to align the process of professional learning by creating a culture of collective responsibility based on the student learning outcomes.

District and school climate

Gruenert (2008) suggests that school climate represents the collective attitudes of people within the group. As accountability and evaluation continue to be the focus for educational and policy leaders, it can easily create a climate of us (teachers) against them (administration and state). Fortunately, Maine provides districts choice when implementing peer observation. Administrators need to consider the benefits and challenges that are created in an environment where teachers evaluate teachers. Kaufman and Grimm (2013) discovered through many conversations with teachers, that teachers are feeling isolated and shared they were looking for shifts that would allow them to work “in an environment of inquiry and collaboration within their school” (p. xi). Professional development activities such as Professional Learning Communities and informal peer observation have been found to engage teachers in their practice and increase student achievement (DuFour & Fullan, 2012; DuFour & Mattos, 2013; Robbins, 2015).

Growth mindset

Dweck (2007) has written extensively about growth mindset and its impact on learning. This work is based on the premise that “ individuals who believe their talents can develop (through hard work, good strategies, and input from others) have a growth mindset” (Dweck, 2016). Because of this belief, those who have a growth mindset are able to put more effort into learning and because of this effort, it helps them to achieve more. She reminds organizations that growth mindsets evolve with experience, that it is important to be deeply engaged in the process by asking questions, reflecting on what is working or not, and making

changes as needed, and that risk taking is part of the process. When organizations work collaboratively and adjust to the outcomes of risk taking (whether positive or negative) it will strengthen the organization instead of pitting individuals against each other. This concept can be applied to the education system. Hall (2013) encourages school leaders, as they fulfill the state's mandates, to use growth mindset principles to empower teachers. She argues that teachers should be involved in the decision-making process when implementing the chosen teacher evaluation model. School leaders and teachers need to make sure there are ample opportunities for dialogue, observations, feedback, and investment (Hall, 2013). One important practice that contributes to this type of learning is informal peer observation. When teachers are encouraged to examine their practice, they may try out new instructional practices with a peer watching to help provide feedback with how students responded during the lesson. When teachers feel comfortable to take risks, it promotes opportunities for reflection, collaboration, and engagement.

Job-embedded PD. The U.S. Department of Education recommends ongoing, high quality, job embedded professional development to help schools improve instruction (Croft, Cogshell, Dolan, Powers, & Killion, 2010; Guskey, 2000; Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). Job-embedded professional development provides teachers opportunities to improve instruction by learning new methods, applying them, and observing the results as a team. This type of collaboration sends a strong message to teachers that learning and professional growth is valued. When teachers feel safe to study their practice, ask each other for ideas, and reflect on their work, it boosts job satisfaction (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2004).

Unfortunately, a study found that U. S. schools offer teachers fewer opportunities to participate in collaborative and content focused learning than were offered in 2000 (Wei, Darling-Hammond, & Adamson, 2010). This is concerning as research indicates that professional development that improves student learning is sustained over time and is content focused with a substantial number of contact hours (Wei, et al., 2010). Learning that is relevant, reflective, and allows participants to transfer new skills into practice, captures the essence of effective professional development (Zepeda, 2012).

Now, more than ever, is the time for school leaders to investigate the direction their school is moving. Looking at student data, surveying teachers, and asking the right questions will be key in developing effective professional learning during these transitional years of new initiatives. Wragg (2012) calculates that teachers often teach approximately 50,000 lessons in the course of their career. Most of these lessons are completed mostly in private and without input from administrators or colleagues. Classrooms are filled with rich opportunities for teachers to learn from one another.

Observation As Key To Practitioner Growth

“Knowing is using what we observe. Some put it into practice and let it change their lives. Others don’t. That’s the difference between a novice and an expert” (Borich, 2015, p. xvii). Borich (2015) argues that teachers must be able to identify the strategies that effective teachers utilize. This is learned through observing more experienced teachers. Many authors agree that the main purpose of observation is for self-improvement (Borich, 2015; Danielson, 2015; O’Leary, 2014; Wragg, 2012). Observations can be categorized as either quantitative or qualitative according to Wragg (2012). He defines quantitative observations when comparing a teacher’s performance based on an established body of knowledge. Qualitative observations

tend to be based on meaning and impact and is harder to observe because of what the observer may or may not see based on their experiences (Wragg, 2012).

When observing a classroom lesson, it can be challenging to capture and record what happened accurately. A teacher may ask for feedback regarding frequency of questions, classroom design, facial expressions, body language, and classroom climate. This requires the teacher to be aware of what type of observation the teacher prefers and what is needed to provide detailed information in return. Teachers will need experience, training, and practice to develop observational skills.

Importance of feedback

When teachers have opportunities to use feedback in a meaningful context, it can improve performance and achievement (Robbins, 2015). Feedback is the process of identifying the progress that is being made in relation towards a goal.

Bransford, Brown, & Cooking, 2000; Hattie, 2008; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001 claim that teaching time given up for time spent providing feedback produces greater learning results (as cited in Wiggins, 2012). Given the importance of feedback, many researchers are evaluating classroom observation rubrics to help focus the feedback. Reform Support Network (2015) point out that rubrics are most effective when they are coherent (aligned with state teaching standards), concise (brief and easy to use), clear (use language to describe teacher and student behavior), and focused (indicators are related to student outcomes). In the report, *What makes great teaching?*, Coe, et al. (2014) suggest that feedback is best when shared in *an environment of trust and support* and when professional learning is structured and supported by leadership (p.6). Danielson (2016) suggests that feedback during peer observation cycle needs to *timely and specific* and *against clear standards*, in order to improve performance (p. 9). Since

peer observation is a new practice, teachers will require some amount of training to learn how to provide feedback that is helpful with improving instruction and student learning.

History of observations

Education in the 1700's was mostly taken care of by local governments and was not yet seen as a profession (Marzano, Frontier, & Livingston, 2011). At that time, most often clergy members were used to oversee instruction and were considered to be a servant of the community (Marzano et al., 2011). Burke and Krey (2005) as cited in Marzano et al., noted that the criteria for instruction was left up to supervisors who could hire or fire based on discretion (2011). Eventually, due to the industrial boom and continuing into the 1800s, the role of a principal became necessary and took on the role of helping teachers improve instruction and by the late 1950's, a variety of clinical supervisory models were being used to work with student teachers (Marzano et al., 2011).

Introduction to supervisory models

In the U.S. during the 1960's, Morris Cogan and Robert Goldhammer at Harvard University, were the first to apply the term "clinical supervision" to describe how university supervisors helped beginning teachers to develop knowledge and skills (Pajak, 2003). During the 1980's, Thomas McGreal outlined supervisory options, including observations, to focus on new non-tenured teachers and those teachers needing intensive developmental supervision (Brandt, 1996). At the same time, Dal Lawrence developed Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) in Toledo, Ohio (Johnson, Fiarman, Munger, Papay, Qazilbash, & Wheeler, nd). PAR's premise started with experienced teachers observing the non-tenured teacher as part of teacher induction. This became part of many schools mentoring programs as a way to provide support and evaluation for new teachers (Johnson et al., n.d.).

Role of classroom observation in education

Today, classroom observations are used more than any other tool to collect evidence and provide feedback for teachers (Coe et al., 2014). Up until a few years ago, administrators and mentors completed observations. States and school systems varied on the number of required observations depending on the experience or needs of the teachers. Many states such as North Carolina, Delaware, Louisiana, Ohio, Kentucky, Colorado, New York, and Cincinnati have participated in similar studies examining methods in relation to teacher evaluation. In the report, *Using Observations to Improve Teacher Practice* (McMahon, Barrett, & O'Neill, 2007), several concerns were highlighted: the ineffectiveness of observations; alignment of observation to standards; types of observation rubrics being used (if any), principals not having enough knowledge about content or time to conduct the necessary observations, and the number of observations.

Reinhorn, Johnson, and Simon (2015) studied six urban schools where teachers were using informal peer observations. The schools were selected because they had recently received the highest level in the state accountability system. Even though each school varied in their approach to peer observations, all viewed peer observations as having great potential and hoped to continue with the practice (Reinhorn et al., 2015). They reported that teachers found peer observation to be productive and part of their professional learning in the schools where there were protocols that addressed scheduling and embedded this practice in other structures. As peer observation continues to evolve, it helps to look at work conducted by experts in the field. David Gosling (2002) helped clarify the different types of observations that were most frequently being used during the turn of the 21st century.

Types of observations

Gosling (2002) depicted the practice of peer observation into three models to provide clarification about the roles and purpose of this practice. The three models are the evaluation model, development model, and the peer review model. The first two models are summative and used for quality assurance (formal) measures, while peer review is used for quality enhancement (informal).

Evaluation model. The evaluation model is when a senior staff (authority) observes another staff member to identify underperformance, promotion, or appraisal (Gosling, 2002). The educator is rated on their teaching performance with a quality assessment of either passing or failing. Risks include alienation, lack of cooperation, and opposition. The role of the observer is one of power or authority. The institution is considered to benefit from this model as it can make personnel decisions based on the observation. This model would be classified as summative and a quality assurance measure. The observation could possibly lead to dismissal making this a high stakes interaction between the two participants involved. Most administrators evaluate teachers yearly using this model (Gosling, 2002).

Developmental model. The developmental model (Gosling, 2002) is designed for educational developers or expert teachers to observe a staff member. The purpose of this model is to improve teaching competencies or can be used as an assessment. The expert may pass, fail, or institute an action plan for the observed after taking into consideration the teaching performance and learning materials. There is no shared ownership within this model and therefore impact may be low. This type of observation is summative and may take on the roles of both quality assurance and quality enhancement.

One popular developmental model design is called Peer Assistance and Review (PAR). PAR is costly and requires extensive collaboration between the union and administration (PAR Panel). Districts train Consulting Teachers (CT) to evaluate colleagues using summative peer observations. CT's attend a rigorous program and are given release time and a stipend to work with either novice or identified ineffective teachers. They work with the teacher for a specified amount of time and present a final report to the PAR Panel with recommendations for rehire or dismissal. Drawbacks include costs and misrepresentation from the CT. Costs range from \$4,000 to \$7,000 per participant and some districts pay more to compensate CT's and PAR Panel members. Craig (2010) followed five districts that were part of a five-year reform using summative peer observations. When teachers were interviewed, they revealed that they had little trust in their evaluators and felt that the CT's reports did not accurately reflect interactions.

Craig (2010) cautions that "it is nationally and internationally important to probe how summative evaluation is made sense of from the often overlooked teacher perspective" (p. 2). If teachers do not trust the process, it is likely that little progress will be made in the classroom or within the school.

Peer review model. The third model, called peer review, is one that Gosling (2002) highlights as the most effective of the three due to its formative characteristics. Teachers observe teachers with the purpose of engaging in discussion about teaching with time for individual and collective reflection. The outcomes include analysis and discussion about teaching methods facilitated by peers. Due to the peer relationship, feedback may be less judgmental and more constructive. The results are confidential and stay between the two participants. Peer observation is referred to as peer coaching, peer review, peer feedback, and peer evaluation. The main objective of peer observation is to help educators examine their teaching for the purpose of self-

improvement and to establish good practice as a means to enhance student learning (Lomas & Nicholls, 2006, p. 138).

Robbins (2015) found that all too often teachers are evaluated, but not given the professional development or time to develop strategies for improvement. Peer coaching encourages teachers to analyze their teaching practice by examining data, observing instruction, and developing goals to improve student outcomes. Research conducted within a number of schools in Pennsylvania and Virginia provided a strong case for non-evaluative and formative observations as part of the peer coaching structure (Robbins, 2015).

Informal Peer Observation

Collaboration

In 2009, The Center for Teaching Quality (CTQ) reported that collaboration is key to closing the effective teaching gap. When teachers are provided opportunities to problem-solve together, both students and teachers benefit. The results of an extensive survey along with interviews found “collaboration among teachers paves the way for the spread of effective teaching practices, improved outcomes for the students they teach, and the retention of the most accomplished teachers in high-needs schools” (Berry, Daughtrey, & Wieder, 2009, p. 2).

Informal peer observation provides structured and purposeful opportunities for collaboration. In contrast, collaboration and reflective feedback will not be achieved in an environment where peers are making summative judgments that may result in a peer’s dismissal

Collaborative Inquiry. (CI) Research shows that when teachers have opportunities to collaborate, schools are more likely to attain higher levels of academic achievement (Robbins, 2015, p. 4). Collaboration is foundational to the success of informal peer observation. Peers invite each other into their classrooms to look deeper into how students are responding to instruction. This level of collaboration requires trust and training, as evidenced in these studies.

In 2012, a group of educators from a community college in the northeast United States adopted Collaborative Inquiry (CI). CI promotes equally shared input and engagement from students and educators. Teachers met every four to five weeks to ask questions about data and instruction, and to observe each other to challenge their practice. These three topics kept the momentum of the study alive: presentation, work with students, and relationships. The experience of peer observation, problem solving, and reading articles together in order to improve in one area of practice helped them to realize that what was lacking in their students' practice was directly related to what was missing in their instruction. As conversations around observations and instruction took place, they were able to see where there were problems and how to improve their practice as a result (Glisson, McConnell, Palit, Schneiderman, Wiseman, & Yorks, 2014).

Lomas and Nicholls (2006) highlight researchers Bell (2001), Ferren (2001), and Keig and Waggoner (1995) who argue that peer review will be accepted if the process is non-judgmental and the department heads lead the implementation, monitoring, and managing the peer review process. They reviewed peer review documents that included over 100 interviews. The majority of the interviewed staff found the process of peer review to be highly valuable because of the constructive criticism provided within a safe environment. They highly recommend training and keeping the process informal as a way to promote collaboration (Lomas and Nicholls, 2006).

Building trust

Parker (2006) maintains that trust is essential in order to have the level of communication where members are able to share aspects about themselves without fear of reprimand or embarrassment. He suggests for leaders to model nonjudgmental responses if

teachers are probed to discuss areas they would like to improve in as a professional. When participants are encouraged to work together in small groups, each holds a vital role in the group, relieving the leader from becoming overwhelmed and giving teachers an equal voice (Parker, 2006). This balance of ownership and leadership empowers the team. Calvert (2016) recommends supporting teachers as they analyze student data and work to identify challenges in an environment that encourages continuous growth rather than evaluation. This type of environment encourages an atmosphere where teachers can safely problem solve colleagues' and students' issues. Dennis Sparks, former executive director of National Staff Development Council, claims that when teachers observe teachers, it allows them to exchange ideas and develop trust and develop professionally (Isreal, 2003).

Sandt (2012) conducted an action research project at a high school to investigate if peer observations contributed to higher levels of collaboration and professional growth. Participants noted the importance of having a protocol of how to conduct supportive peer observations in order to help alleviate judgmental interactions. They suggested linking peer observations to their professional development goals in order to keep the focus on improving practice (Sandt, 2012). It will be important for school leaders to implement guidelines and structure to support a safe working environment where teachers are comfortable and trust the process. This will enable them to focus and strengthen practices that need improvement.

Reflective feedback

Wiggins (2012) proposes “helpful feedback is goal-referenced; tangible and transparent; actionable; user-friendly (specific and personalized); timely; ongoing; and consistent” (p. 2). As informal peer observations are implemented, school leaders would benefit from using Wiggins’s eight recommendations to guide successful interactions.

Kaufman and Grimm (2013) recommend that teachers should be a driving force to improve their learning. When teachers have voice, they will be more comfortable to ask for feedback from others that will help them to reach their goals. In agreement, Flom (2014) argues, “Teachers are more likely to fully embrace the opportunities afforded by peer-to-peer observations when they have played a role in identifying the essential questions to be investigated and observed—that is, when a bottom-up approach is used” (para. 9). Bramschreiber (2012), an assistant principal in Colorado, implemented “Campus Crawl” where teachers agree to observe two teachers throughout the year. They train teachers how to provide constructive criticism in a safe environment that supports the learning process. The feedback is intended to enhance effectiveness making the process both a source of encouragement and productivity. Teachers keep a professional journal tracking their growth using an observer’s feedback as part of their progress towards meeting their instructional goals. These strategies led to improved instruction and student achievement (Bramschreiber, 2012).

Questions that remain regarding informal peer observations

These are a few of the challenges that schools may face with implementing informal peer observation: providing adequate training (Mason & Tu, 2015) ; ensuring inter-reliability as peers work with each other (Ho & Kane, 2013); allocating time for teachers to participate in the practice of informal peer observation within the school day (Bell, 2001; Brix, Grainger, & Hill, 2014); and sustaining the practice with other initiatives such as standardized assessments and curriculum (Reinhorn et al., 2015).

Depending on the training that the school district provides, teachers’ expertise will vary in this practice. It will be important to survey teachers to see how they perceive this practice and if they feel it is improving instruction. A study by Murray and Xin Ma in 2009 found that

although conversations during the peer observation conferences were positive, they lacked the elements needed to challenge and improve instructional practice (Sandt, 2012). In 2013, Ho and Kane published a study based on the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) project, sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The purpose of the project was to help school leaders provide accurate and reliable classroom observations. It included approximately 3,000 teachers who allowed videos to be taken during classroom instruction for two years. They trained and certified peers to rate observations at specific grade levels. Results comparing peer and administrative observations, found that peers were less likely to rate peers using the top or bottom categories (unsatisfactory/advanced) than administrators. Due to inconsistent ratings among the observers, they suggested more effective training and certification tests to help calibrate scores. Some schools are using external observers to avoid bias; this research found that multiple observers provided higher reliability and it mattered little whether they were internal or external observers. One issue that was addressed several times in this report was the importance of training. Schools will want to investigate available training programs and choose one based on the needs of their district.

Another consideration is how to structure the protocols for creating the partnerships for the peer observation cycles. Bell's (2001) participants reported that they were more engaged in the process when they had choice. The interaction was more meaningful when they were able to choose someone they trusted and respected. White (2010) argues, "As far as possible, pairs should have the freedom to choose their own partners. Clearly, if there is trust and respect on both sides, the outcome is likely to be more useful for both participants" (para. 3). In a recent study involving six schools in New York (Reinhorn et al., 2015), each school varied in their approach to matching partners. In one school, teachers were assigned peers based on grade level

or content. Another school left the decision up to teachers, while one had participants videotape a lesson and peers watched and provided feedback. Teachers from the schools that were more structured and intentional with peer observations, spoke more highly of the process and outcomes. Unfortunately, all six schools by the end of this study were struggling to sustain peer observations due to other pressing initiatives (Reinhorn et al., 2015).

There is much to be learned about informal peer observation, as it becomes a valuable tool for professional learning in schools. Schools will want to develop protocols for informal peer observation that enhance collaboration, reflection, feedback, and problem solving. These factors are key in creating learning environments where teachers and students thrive.

Conclusion

Mandated informal peer observation is a relatively new practice that has the potential to improve instruction and student learning. This practice may bring schools one-step closer to improving teacher effectiveness. Professional development that is relevant to the teacher, non-judgmental, focused on student outcomes, and job-embedded has great potential (Calvert, 2016; Reinhorn, et al. 2015).

This review of the literature supports the ideal that informal peer observation is one reform where teachers are able to examine their practice and use each other's expertise to strengthen their instruction. When looking at the research, it is important to address both the positive and negative aspects of this practice. The research addresses issues nationally and within Maine as it builds on the work of others in the field of informal peer observation as a means to support instruction and student learning. Catherine Beck sums it up best: "I learned that my staff had not been the problem. Each teacher had a strength to share, and together they became a think tank of creativity and innovation that has helped turn our school around" (2015, p.1). She

implemented informal peer observations four years ago and their school, Summit County (Colorado) School District, has won the state award for growth in student achievement every year. This study looks to examine teachers' experience of informal peer observation and provide insight into their perception of how it impacted their professionalism.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to understand how teachers view and experience the mandated practice of informal peer observation. The researcher believed that a better understanding of this phenomenon would allow for school leadership teams and teachers to proceed from a more informed perspective in terms of designing and participating in school-wide mandated informal peer observation. There is supporting research for informal peer observation in the areas of implementation and potential benefits (Reinhorn, et al. 2015; Robbins, 2015). However, research that explores how teachers perceive school-wide mandated informal peer observation is limited.

Case studies are popular in education because they allow for an analysis of a single, bounded unit providing a holistic account that explores the needs of participants (Merriam, 2009). This research is intended to provide a descriptive account of the experience and perceptions of teachers who participated in mandated informal peer observation in a school setting. To acquire an in-depth understanding of how teachers perceive the experience of informal peer observation as an opportunity for enhancing professional growth, it is important to use a research design that allows for deep discussion and review of relevant documentation from teachers who are currently participating in informal peer observation. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) recommend the use of case study methodology when the purpose of the research is to provide an “intensive description and analysis of a bounded social phenomenon” (p. 31). A qualitative case study involving the use of an on-line focus group discussion, on-line individual questionnaire, and documentation artifacts will be utilized. Using multiple sources of data collection is a procedure known as triangulation. Triangulation allows for multiple perceptions of

the data in an effort to reduce misinterpretation (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). In seeking to better understand this phenomenon, the study addressed this central research question: How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as an opportunity for professional growth? According to Yin (2014), case study research helps to answer “how” or “why” questions about an event (p. 14). To be able to answer this primary question, the following secondary questions will be used as a guide for data collection and analysis:

1. How do elementary and middle school teachers perceive their own participation in the practice of informal peer observation?
2. How do teachers perceive the administrator’s role as part of the informal peer observation process?
3. How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as a tool that improves their instruction?

As teachers begin the process of studying each other’s classroom instruction and providing feedback to each other, there is a great deal to be learned about how to support this practice.

By using a case study approach, it allows the researcher to collect data in a natural setting, use multiple methods for collecting data, use reasoning to look for themes and take into consideration the people and places that are being studied (Creswell, 2013). Prior research conducted (mostly at the secondary level) on the topic of peer observation primarily utilized case studies as a way to understand teachers’ perceptions (Brix, Grainger, & Hill, 2014; Byrne, Brown, & Challen, 2010; Shortland, 2004). Now that this practice is mandated, current research will help inform teachers who participate in informal peer observation and school leadership teams who make decisions that impact this practice.

This chapter will explore the setting of where the research was conducted, the participants involved with the study, the type of data collected and how it will be analyzed, participant's rights, and conclude with how the researcher will address limitations.

Setting

A mid-sized rural school in the Northeast was selected as the site for this study. There are approximately 600 students from Pre-Kindergarten through 8th grade from four surrounding towns. The teaching staff includes approximately fifty teachers Pre-K-8. A Superintendent, Principal, Assistant Principal, and Special Education Coordinator comprise the administrative team along with nine school board members.

Since the organization is a Maine public school, it abides by the *Maine Learning Results* (2011) and uses *Danielson Framework for Teaching* (2013) as its Teacher Evaluation Model. This research will be conducted in the second year of piloting informal peer observation. The researcher is part of the Teacher -Performance Evaluation and Professional Growth (T-PEPG) team involved with training and implementing the new teacher evaluation model. This team includes the administration team and seven teachers: Special Education teacher, Pre-K teacher, Music teacher, Middle School Math teacher, Middle School S.S. teacher, Grade 2 teacher, and this researcher.

During the time frame when this research will be conducted, the researcher will not hold a position of power. The researcher holds a position of a Literacy Coach and Kindergarten interventionist and is considered a colleague who will be experiencing mandated informal peer observation as well. The researcher obtained IRB permission from the University of New England and from the Superintendent and Principal. The researcher sent an email to all teachers informing them of this dissertation study.

Participants/Sample

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select this study's sample. This type of sampling is typically used with case study methodology (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The researcher sent an email to all teachers to inquire if they would be interested in participating. Patton (2002) recommends that the researcher specify a minimum sample size that will provide reasonable coverage of the phenomenon (as cited in Merriam, 2009). For the purpose of this study, twelve participants were used to provide insight to this research. If more than 6 pairs of participants volunteer, a procedure called non-probability purposeful sampling will be used to help determine the 12 participants. Merriam (2009) supports the use of nonprobability sampling when the intent of the research is to "...discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which most can be learned" (p. 77). The researcher designed the demographic table based on teacher's years of experience, grade level, and content to attain typical representation. The Typical Representation Table (Appendix F) is a modified version from Donaldson's work (who modified Rucinski and Bauch's (2006) demographic table (2015). Since twelve participants volunteered, the table was not utilized. These teachers represent 24% of the school population. As noted in Table 1, teacher's experience range from 2 to 38 years. Grade levels that are represented range from Kindergarten up to Grade 8. A Reading Recovery teacher, Elementary, Unified Arts, and content specific teachers are represented as well.

Table 3.1

Individual Participants' Demographics

Participant	Years Experience	Grade Level
1	5	K
2	30	1
3	33	1
4	38	2
5	2	2
6	3	3
7	12	3
8	4	5
9	12	5
10	10	8
11	4	K-4
12	5	5-8

Participants will complete either a questionnaire or participate in an online focus group discussion to help the researcher understand how participants experienced and perceived this practice. There are many variables involved with school-wide mandates and a participant's experience or perception of this practice may vary considerably depending on the peer they ask, how many years of experience in teaching, level of comfort with the peer observation cycle, the focus of the observation, and the discussions involved. This type of sampling will help to provide a typical representation of teachers within this bounded study.

Research design

When designing research, Yin (2014) proposes that there is a logical plan that is used as "blueprint" throughout the study (p. 29). The following list indicates steps that will be used when carrying out this research.

1. Researcher will collect and review relevant literature about peer observation.
2. Following the proposal defense, the researcher will attain approval from the IRB. This approval will include participants' confidentiality and informed

consent forms.

3. Potential research participants will be invited by email to participate. If they are interested, they will be asked for the following demographic information: years of experience, grade level and content they are currently teaching.
4. Online focus group discussion will include 6 teachers.
5. Online questionnaire will be conducted with 6 teachers.
6. Questionnaires, on-line focus group discussion, field notes, and documentation artifacts will be collected and analyzed as a method to triangulate the information.

Table 2 presents an overview of the research questions and what methods the researcher will use to collect information during the study.

Table 3.2

Overview of Information Needed

<i>Research Questions</i>	<i>Information Needed/What the Researcher Wants to Know</i>	<i>Method</i>
1: How do elementary and middle school teachers perceive their own participation in the practice of informal peer observation?	Teacher perceptions about the role they play in the outcomes when participating in informal peer observation for professional growth.	Questionnaire Focus Group Documentation artifacts
2: How do teachers perceive the administrator's role as part of the informal peer observation process?	Teacher perceptions about administration when it comes to completing informal peer observation if there is no accountability.	Questionnaire Focus Group Documentation artifacts
3: How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as a tool that improves their instruction?	Teacher perceptions about whether informal peer observation supports their instructional practices	Questionnaire Focus Group Documentation artifacts

Creswell (2013) alludes to the importance of researchers bracketing or suspending their preconceived notions. The researcher asked one reader who is not in the education field

and several readers, in the education field (but not in the same organization), to ensure that the questions were not leading. Yin (2014) cautions researchers to ask good questions, be a good listener, stay adaptive, have a firm grasp of the issues, and avoid bias. Since the researcher may have preconceptions, it will be important to conduct research ethically by reviewing the evidence and being careful when interpreting the results.

Data

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of the proposed research questions, Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) assert that the use of multiple methods and triangulation adds depth to a case study and provides corroborative evidence of the data obtained. Multiple methods will include a questionnaire, an online focus group discussion, and related documentation.

Yin (2014) suggests using *how* questions in order to remain unbiased and conversational. Online questionnaires will be used to collect a rich account of 6 participants' perspectives of their experience. The questionnaire and focus group questions were modified from recent dissertations published by Bolen, 2009; Donaldson, 2015; Morrow, 2010; and Hirsch, 2011. These studies focused on a variety of topics about professional development in education. The questionnaire and focus group questions were tailored towards the experiences at the organization site since the researcher is an active participant in this process. The questionnaire form will be electronically sent out to six participants as participant 1, participant 2, in order to maintain confidentiality.

Six of the teachers, not completing the questionnaire, will participate in an online focus group discussion. Focus groups provide a discussion that is open to a range of opinions helping to promote a comprehensive understanding of the issues (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). An

online focus group discussion will allow for 6 teachers to interact and respond to the questions provided. Participants will be given a color to type with throughout the document. Names will not be shared and participants will be reminded about the importance of confidentiality when answering questions or responding to each other.

Related documents will include documentation of the pre and post conferences and observation notes. These documents will provide insight to the conversation between the peer observers and notes taken during the observation. Yin (2014) proposes that case studies are strengthened when multiple sources of evidence are used. This triangulation of data allows for the development of *converging lines of inquiry* (Yin, 2014, p 120). He goes on to state that reference points from each of the sources can be used to create findings that are based on all three accounts increasing confidence on the case study (2014). Since the researcher serves as a staff member in the organization being studied and has had a role in some of the decisions related to implementing informal peer observation, field notes will play an important role. These field notes will be kept in a journal and will support what Yin (2014) calls the chain of evidence that helps to increase reliability.

Analysis

The researcher intends to use the following steps of data analysis as suggested by Creswell (2013). He emphasizes the importance of analyzing and organizing the data as it is being collected. This will help when it comes time for the intensive analysis step when all data is collected. By taking meticulous notes as the data is collected, Creswell (2013) suggests that tentative themes may emerge. Due to the volume of data that will be collected, it is important to inventory the entire data set. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) address the importance of relying on the conceptual framework as a way to sort the large amounts of data. The researcher will

sort the data into labeled folders in a locked cabinet to help with this process. Since the primary focus of data analysis is to answer the research questions, the researcher will reread and examine the data multiple times (Creswell, 2013).

When looking at the raw data, the researcher will start with open coding and assign words or phrases to relevant quotes or significant information that may lead to possible categories or themes. This process allows for inductive and deductive analysis. Initially the researcher deducts information from the literature and as research is performed, the researcher utilizes inductive analysis in the form of coding (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). More importantly, the researcher will send the findings to participants to review and provide feedback in regards to how the researcher interpreted their responses to the questionnaire or discussion. This practice is referred to as member checking and ensures accuracy.

Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) highly recommend three charts to help with the process of visualizing and understanding the data. Data summary tables will help present the findings to reveal similarities or differences. Creswell (2013) recommends narrowing the information to five to six themes in order to keep the focus manageable. This is also referred to as axial coding and is recommended for qualitative researchers (Saldana, 2013). Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) strongly encourage the researcher to provide a detailed description of this process and to synthesize the data. By synthesizing the data, the researcher will show how the answers to the research questions were found, how the data from the questionnaires, focus group, and documents relate to each other and to the literature, and how the findings relate to initial assumptions. From this information, the researcher will be able to make naturalistic generalizations that provide new understanding for the participants or for a similar population (Creswell, 2013).

Participant Rights

This study focuses on the perception of teachers as they adapt to the mandated practice of informal peer observation in a Pre-K-8 school setting. In order to minimize potential harm, the researcher will follow the institutional reform boards (IRBs) protocols. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) emphasize informed consent as being central to ethical research. The researcher will address issues that may arise due to the complexities of conducting research in his or her organization by informing the participants of the risks. The participants will be asked if they would be willing to be a volunteer in conversation and in writing. If the participant agrees, they will sign the informed consent documents. Their identities will be protected by keeping the names of participants confidential and by taking cautionary measures to keep materials safe. The data and materials will be either password protected on a computer or stored in a locked file cabinet so that only the researcher will be able to access the information.

Biases. When it comes to qualitative research, it is imperative that the researcher present documentation of how they attempt to prevent potential bias. The researcher will address credibility, dependability, and transferability throughout the research process as proposed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012).

As the data is collected, analyzed, and reported, the researcher will take the following steps outlined by Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) to organize and accurately represent gathered information. The data needs to be organized so that it provides an “audit trail” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 113). This organization contributes to understanding how and why the information was derived from the data. Along with organizing the data, the researcher will reflect within a journal to monitor biases throughout the research. The researcher will examine

her position and involvement regarding the participants and the site, providing a detailed description. Member checking, used for reliability, can be used to address bias, as well. Participants will read my interpretations of their work and will have the opportunity to provide feedback if my interpretations were inaccurate. This process helps to avoid bias and ensures that the researcher is conducting the research ethically.

Dependability. In order to strengthen dependability, colleagues will be asked to review coded responses to questionnaires to increase inter-rater reliability. This collaborative work will provide opportunities for questioning and deeper thinking to enhance the findings. The researcher will use multiple sources of data (triangulation) as a way to corroborate the findings and strengthen credibility. By providing a detailed description, the reader will decide if the lessons learned from this study apply to their own setting. The transferability of information depends on how well the researcher establishes the context of the issue within the research site. Merriam (2009) proposes that by maintaining an audit trail, providing a detailed account of the researcher's position, and utilizing peer examination will ensure consistency, dependability, and reliability. These three strategies are necessary for qualitative research.

Potential Limitations of the Study

Qualitative researchers must take into account and look for ways to minimize the impact of limitations that are common to qualitative studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The first limitation considered is the subjectivity of the study. At the time of the proposed study, this researcher is employed in the school where the research is conducted. Though this allows for valuable insight, it also creates biases. First, the research design and the interpretation of the findings may be impacted due to the researcher being a peer with the participants being studied. The researcher is part of the leadership team that is implementing the practice of informal peer

observation. This involvement impacts the questions, design, and literature collected that will guide this study. Participants may be influenced by the relationship with the researcher and offer responses that they may perceive to be helpful to the research. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) refer to this as participant reactivity. To address these limitations, the researcher will make an attempt to create an environment where participants feel they can be open and honest. They will be informed that their names will be removed from documents that are shared for the purposes of data analysis. The reader should consider the following delimitations of this study:

1. The school selected to participate in this study was chosen based on the proximity to the researcher; therefore, a convenience sample, not a random sample, was used;
2. The school selected to participate in this study was selected from one district in the state;
3. The teachers who volunteered to participate may be more invested in the practice of informal peer observation, therefore may not represent the opinions of all teachers in our school.

In summary, this chapter presents a detailed description of the study's research methodology. Qualitative case study methodology will be used to illustrate the phenomenon of how teachers experience and perceive the practice of mandated school-wide informal peer observation. Questionnaires, on-line focus group discussion, field notes, and relevant documentation materials will be used for data collection methods. Conclusions will offer recommendations for education practice around peer observation and for further research. The intent of this study is to make a contribution to understanding how teachers perceive and

experience mandates. It is hoped to be of value to educational leaders who make decisions that impact the professional growth of teachers.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to explore teachers' perceptions of mandated informal peer observation as an opportunity for professional growth. The research from the literature review demonstrated that there are many benefits for educators who voluntarily chose to participate in this practice (Archer, et al., 2014; Bell, 2010; Daniels, Pirayoff, & Bessant, 2013; Kaufman & Grimm, 2013; Reinhorn, et al. 2015; Robbins, 2015). Now that teachers are mandated to participate, this researcher wanted to learn if teachers viewed this experience as beneficial to their practice. The following research questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do elementary and middle school teachers perceive their own participation in the practice of informal peer observation?
2. How do teachers perceive the administrator's role as part of the informal peer observation process?
3. How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as a tool that improves their instruction?

As the data was collected and analyzed, patterns evolved that emerged into themes. Themes were examined in relation to the research question. Rereading and examining the themes, research questions, and the literature review formed the findings of this study. The findings from the data analysis were organized to correspond with the research questions. Specific examples from all three sources of the data are used to exemplify the findings.

This study examined how twelve teachers from a mid-sized Pre-K-8 school in Maine viewed the experience of mandated informal peer observation. Last year, all teachers completed the newly mandated peer observations. In our district, teachers have the school year

to complete a peer observation. Paperwork is shared between the two participants and is not turned in to the administration. For the purpose of this study, data collection occurred during the months of January to March, 2017. According to Creswell (2013), twelve participants are considered a realistic number for a case study. A representative table (Appendix F) was designed to help choose teachers if too many teachers volunteered. Fortunately, the table was not needed and twelve participants (Table 1) agreed to participate. Of the teachers participating, 50% were within the first five years of teaching, 25% with 6-20 years of experience, and 25% with 30 or more years of experience. Only one teacher was new to our district (not to teaching) so this was her first experience participating in peer observation. Teachers were asked their preference of either participating in the focus group or the questionnaire.

Analysis Method

The following data collection procedures were used to guide this study: a questionnaire, an on-line focus group discussion, and artifact documentation. To provide a reliable and valid analysis, all data was analyzed through coding techniques. Open and descriptive coding was used in the first round of analysis. Merriam (2009) describes open coding as a process for identifying useful data. During the first round, the researcher highlighted prominent words and phrases in attempt to see if any patterns emerged. Descriptive coding is a technique used to summarize a passage in a word or phrase (Saldana, 2013). These words or phrases were collected from all three sources of data: observation forms, questionnaires, and focus group and examined in various tables. For example, tables were used to organize the data. One table was used to look at one participant's data in full and another table looked at all the data collected (from all participants) focusing on one question. Bloomberg and Volpe (2012)

recommend data summary tables to help examine and present the findings from the data. After the researcher completed one data set, analytical memo writing was used to help synthesize the information and keep biases in check. Saldana (2013) recommends analytic memos as a way to contribute to the quality of the data due to the rigorous reflection involved. For the second round of analysis, the author used axial coding. Axial coding helps to sort the words and phrases into categories (Saldana, 2013). These are the following thirteen categories that emerged from the data.

Table 4.1

Categories and Words/Phrases From Axial Coding

Categories	Words/Phrases
Authentic	Genuine True representation
Benefits of observing and being observed	Visual learner Seeing it in action Seeing how others set up resources for students Treasure chest of ideas
Choice	Choose area of focus Choose person whom you respect
Collaboration	Equal Teachers teaching teachers Less isolation Sharing ideas Sharing techniques Alleviate isolation
Inquiry based	Ask questions Problem-solving
Positivity	Helpful Validating Affirming Builds confidence Self-monitoring Motivational Engaging
Professional Growth	New ideas New strategies New techniques Constructive feedback New resources
Reflective	Reflective discourse
Relevance	Embedded Visual learner
Stress-Free	Safe Trust Comfortable Non- evaluative Learn from mistakes Conversational Risk taking
Targeted	Focus on one area Intentional Personal
Time	Challenging for participants
Vertical Content Insight	Content bridging with either grades above or below

Once the thirteen categories were established, the third phase of coding (selective coding) was used to identify themes in relation to the corresponding research questions.

Table 4.2

Themes Aligned With Corresponding Research Questions

Research Questions	Themes
<i>1. How do elementary and middle school teachers perceive their own participation in the practice of informal peer observation?</i>	Choice Collaboration Time
<i>2. How do teachers perceive the administrator’s role as part of the informal peer observation process?</i>	Autonomy
<i>3. How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as a tool that improves their instruction?</i>	Observational Learning Professional Growth

Analysis Results

The overall guiding question was, “How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as an opportunity for professional growth?” Overwhelmingly, the responses from teachers were positive about the impact of peer observation in regards to their professional growth. When examining the findings from the data, these themes evolved; *choice, collaboration, time, autonomy, observational learning, and professional growth.*

Research Question 1

The first research question, “How do elementary and middle school teachers perceive their own participation in the practice of informal peer observation?” was designed to develop an understanding of how teachers view their role in this practice. Although not required, teachers from last year were encouraged to refer to their new Teacher’s Evaluation Model (Danielson’s Framework for Teaching) when completing peer observations. The domains headings are: Domain 1: Planning and Preparation, Domain 2: Classroom Environment, and Domain 3: Instruction. Many of the participants (8 out of the 12) asked their peer to provide feedback on

Domain 3 and a few participants asked for feedback in more than one domain. Three participants asked for feedback in Domains 1 or 2 and two of the participants did not indicate a domain.

About 80% (10 out of the 12) teachers referred to the new teacher evaluation model as a source to guide their peer observation work.

Choice. Teachers reported that choice of peer allowed teachers to work with a peer whom they trusted and respected. Experts in the field, Kaufman and Grimm (2015), emphasize trust as being essential for teachers to have meaningful conversations about their practice. Most of the teachers (10 out of 12) preferred to ask a peer whom they thought would provide them with feedback in the area they wanted to improve in as a professional. The following quotes articulate these findings.

- *The teachers I have chosen to be observed by I have done so because of my deep respect for their craft, or for their shared content and knowledge. I consider these times to be ones of great personal growth. I have learned different ways to handle organization and management that I adapted for my own use. It has given me a chance to see how I measure up against the people I admire. Finally, the praise that one receives from a peer is some of the highest praise given. They know what the real deal is and know what is worth praising and what is not. It is very motivational.*
- *I have found the teachers' value and respect each other and invite colleagues in that can offer a certain expertise to the area they are looking to improve or enrich.*

Although one teacher suggested that assigned colleagues may instigate opportunities for learning as well.

- *However, if I were assigned a colleague or a colleague was assigned to me, I would perhaps be forced to visit those that I may not consider, be exposed to a situation that I*

would otherwise would not have been aware of, and see things that I didn't know that were there. In addition to this, having an assigned someone's eyes in my room could have the potential to open up a dialogue that might not have taken place. There are pro's and con's to both scenarios.

By having choice of both peer and topic, teachers conveyed a strong sense of engagement due to the immediate relevancy to their work. Flom (2014), a leader in education, found that when teachers identify their own area to improve, they are more likely to be invested in the outcomes. Teachers felt that the observation was meaningful because it focused on one or two areas rather than being observed on all aspects of the lesson that they are used to with administrative observations.

- *From this year's observation I was able to hear more tips about what I asked my peer to look for. I wanted advice on my questioning while reading and my peer was able to give me beneficial ways to help that I never even thought of. This helped me refocus my questioning and gave me ideas for next time.*
- *I believe it is of utmost importance that teachers choose their own topic to be observed. As professionals we know where we need and want to improve our teaching practices.*

Collaboration. All teachers referred to the collaborative nature of this work. Robbins (2015) noted that in the schools where she completed her research, collaborative work helped to develop a level of comfort where teachers could focus on the importance of teaching and learning. In this study, the concepts of sharing, trust, and reflective discourse were mentioned throughout the teacher's comments.

- *With a peer observation a conversation between equals can be had. Improvements can be discussed more at length, and praise for “new discoveries” have a more genuine feel to it.*
- *I think the reasons for participating in a peer observation is to drive our own teaching, co-worker collaboration, and sharing positive teacher practices. It should be less about the evaluation of teaching by the administrative team and more about teacher collaboration.*

Time. As far as challenges go, time was mentioned by 10 of the 12 participants. Most teachers found that the pre and post conferences were manageable but the observations were difficult to schedule. A study published in 2004 by Hammersly–Fletcher & Orsmond advocated the need for structures to be put in place to help teachers manage the challenges of finding time to complete observations. Unified specialists who have their students once a week found this to be particularly challenging.

- *I only see students one time a week and I really do not want to be absent during class time, if I do not have to be. I know how busy I am and I just don’t want to take someone else away from their work, as well. It is my suggestion that time be set aside for teachers in order to support a culture where peer observations become an important and regular part of the school system.*

Research Question 2

The second research question, “How do teachers perceive the administrator’s role as part of the informal peer observation process?” was designed to examine teachers’ perceptions of administration in regards to this practice. When our district piloted informal peer observations last year, it was decided that administration would set time frames for completion of peer

observations and offered to provide coverage for teachers if needed. The T-PEPG team questioned whether teachers should pass in their observation forms to ensure that everyone completed their observations. After further discussion, we felt it best to use the honor system so that teachers were not micromanaged. We also felt it might make the process feel more evaluative and teachers would not be as comfortable to ask for specific areas of help if they knew an administrator would be reading their work.

Autonomy. The majority of teachers (10 of the 12) responded with a resounding *no* to having their paperwork turned in to administration. Robbins (2015) encourages schools to provide opportunities for teacher autonomy. She found that teachers were more motivated when administrators supported the practice and conveyed a non-evaluative approach. Two of the teachers felt that it would not make a difference to their practice if the forms were turned in or not. However, most of the teachers alluded that the work would feel less personal and that it would stifle their work.

- *With an administrator, you often feel as you are performing/justifying what you do, where as with a peer you feel more like you are being helpful, informative rather than just evaluated.*
- *If the informal peer observation forms were submitted to administration for review it would change the process. The pressure would once again be on the teachers to make things perfect and take away the feeling of trust between peers. In a sense the peer teachers would be evaluating each other for administration. I feel that I would not be as willing to try new teaching techniques during an observation. The process of learning from each other would not be there. I do not believe that the informal peer observation would be more meaningful if the forms were submitted to administration for review.*

Research Question 3

The third research question, “How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as a tool that improves their instruction?” captured teachers’ reactions to whether or not they felt the practice of informal peer observation helped them to improve. When completing the cross analysis of all data, this question yielded the most information. Last year, the T-PEPG team asked teachers to complete two observations: observe a peer and ask a peer to observe them. This year, due to a number of other initiatives, teachers were asked to complete one observation where they invited a peer to observe them. Due to the nature of this study, participants completed the two types similar to last year.

Observational Learning. All teachers referred to the benefits of being in a peer’s classroom or being observed by a peer in their own classroom. They signified the importance of seeing teaching in action and how this experience also helped alleviate the feeling of isolation. Richardson (2000) revealed the importance of new discoveries that are possible when the observer used the opportunity to observe as a student of teaching. Two teachers commented on how they would read about a practice in a book, but to see the practice in action helped them to understand how it could work in their own classroom.

- *We can read professional text after professional text, but I feel it more beneficial when we can actually see it in action. We work alongside our colleagues every day and do not get the opportunity to see all of the wonderful things that are happening within classrooms each day.*
- *Being able to see another teacher do it would encourage me even more to try it. I also feel that it keeps us on our toes and reminds us of everything we should be doing. I feel that informal peer observation helps us gain respect for our peers and builds a team.*

Professional Growth. All teachers noted that they improved instructionally, and more importantly all teachers shared that the experience was affirming and validating. Kaufman, Grimm, and Doty (2014) assert that traditional approaches to professional development must change. They believe that by embedding professional development in the classroom, it will activate the voice of the teacher which they feel is often too absent in professional development efforts (2014). In one analytical memo, the researcher reflected on being surprised by the number of positive reflections made by participants. Teachers reported that this experience helped build their confidence, strengthened engagement, felt validating, and motivated them as professionals. All of the teachers felt that they had come away with more understanding about their practice in the area(s) of content, instructional techniques, classroom management, or classroom environment.

- *After observing a colleague I found a renewed excitement in my profession. I was thrilled to witness some techniques I could use in my classroom at the same time I was able to offer suggestions that might work in my colleague's classroom.*
- *We will teach better for having reflected on how and why we do certain things. For example, when trying to be explicit in teaching reading strategies, reflecting on what I say and why will help me be more specific in the future which hopefully be more powerful for my students.*
- *I was looking vertically to second grade for affirmation that I'm doing all I can to teach editing skills so that kids can edit independently. While most of the feedback centered around a Writer's Workshop Model, I did come away with one suggestion to help with editing- pairing up students to share 3 errors they found within their own writing.*

Summary

The purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how teachers perceived informal peer observations now that they are mandated. This chapter is a compilation of the data collected from the focus group, questionnaire, observation forms, and analytical memos. Data were thoroughly examined through multiple coding techniques to provide a complete analysis of the results. Six themes emerged from this data providing a strong framework to understand teacher's perceptions. Based on the data collected, there was evidence throughout this study to support that teachers perceived this practice to be beneficial to their professional growth. The next chapter will provide a detailed discussion about the findings and implications for further study.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

When starting this study three years ago, the researcher was part of the district's new T-PEPG teacher evaluation committee. This committee was formed to pilot and implement new mandates from the state. As evaluation of teachers has become a national focus, questions about teachers evaluating teachers became an area of interest to this researcher. Two types of peer observation were discussed as part of the educator evaluation models. One position was to train teachers to evaluate peers and the other position was to have teachers provide formative feedback as equals (Jacques, 2013). Since the practice of informal peer observation has recently been mandated, there is little research that explores how teachers view this experience in relation to their professional growth.

This qualitative case study allowed the researcher to better understand how teachers perceive mandated informal peer observation and if they view it as a means to develop their professional growth. Three guiding questions led this work:

1. How do elementary and middle school teachers perceive their own participation in the practice of informal peer observation?
2. How do teachers perceive the administrator's role as part of the informal peer observation process?
3. How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as a tool that improves their instruction?

This research study consisted of twelve teachers (K-8) who completed an informal peer observation cycle and then answered questions, either in a focus group or by filling out a questionnaire, pertaining to their informal peer observation during the months of January to

March, 2017. The findings represent these teachers' perspectives of how they view this newly mandated practice and the impact it has on their professional growth. Merriam (2009) emphasizes the importance of examining and interpreting the findings in relation to relevant theories and current literature. The interpretations, based on teachers' perspectives, provide a deeper understanding of their experience. This chapter provides an interpretation of the findings, explores the implications of these findings, and ends with recommendations for further studies.

Interpretation of Findings

Choice and Collaboration. An analysis of the data clearly showed that teachers highly valued choice of both peer and topic and indicated that it enhanced their experience. In their reflections, teachers noted that they chose a peer based on who they thought was more knowledgeable in the area they wanted to improve. In most cases, teachers chose a peer who teaches the same content area or a peer that was one grade above or below their grade level. Many articulated that it allowed them time to explore content and resources with someone new. These type of interactions align with Vygotsky's work and is referred to as social constructivism. The student or in this case, the adult learner, is able to learn a new skill or technique from someone who is more knowledgeable (Vygotsky, 1978). This interaction between adult learners strengthens the learning environment (Stoll, 2009). It creates an environment where teachers are comfortable to ask for help in an area they would like to improve in as a professional. Even though one teacher was open to having an assigned peer, she valued the option to choose. Choosing the topic was also important to teachers for several reasons.

All teachers reported that they felt more at ease with the observation because they chose someone they trusted. This sense of trust helped them to feel safe and comfortable to share with a peer an area of weakness they wanted to improve. By choosing the area or topic to focus on, teachers were able to apply new learning into their practice. This immediate relevancy is referred to in Knowles (1980) Adult Learning Theory. He found that adults learn best when they are able to apply their learning by solving real-life problems (TEAL, 2011). Current publications affirm the importance of teachers teaching teachers and the positive impact it has for enhancing student learning (Kaufman & Grimm, 2013; Robbins, 2015).

Many teachers reported that they felt comfortable to take risks while teaching in front of their peer to improve instruction. The theme of collaboration was highlighted, underlined, or referred to over 30 times. Cranston (2016) prompts school leaders to create professional learning opportunities where teachers can observe each other, share their work, and their student's work. In her report, she determined that these collaborative environments lead to learning that positively impacts teachers and students (2016). Her report supports the concept that choice allows teachers to approach peer observation with an outlook of inquiry and problem solving. It was evident in this research that teachers felt safe and many mentioned feeling validated from the work with their colleague.

Time. When researching this topic, many studies including Bell, 2001; Brix, Granger, & Hill, 2014; Reinhorn et al., 2015; Shortland, 2004, alluded to the challenges of finding time to schedule and complete peer observations. This study also found time to be a negative factor when conducting peer observations. Although two teachers reported no challenges with this experience, 10 teachers found it difficult to find the time. They either missed lunch, planning time, or completed the conferences before or after school. Teachers reported having to

reschedule observations multiple times or give up instructional time with their students to observe a peer. Due to this challenge, teachers may not take the time to complete all parts of the peer observation or to complete it at all. Reinhorn et al., (2015) stated that even though teachers found the experience of peer observation to be valuable, because there were so many other initiatives and time was a challenge, peer observations were not utilized. Flom (2014) asserts that teachers are already stretched thin for time and that it cannot be expected that they will complete this work during their limited planning time.

Autonomy. One teacher vehemently defended the professionalism of teachers and their ability to learn from this practice without administrative input. Although all 12 teachers were in agreement, one teacher suggested that it would be favorable if administration could figure out a way to hold teachers accountable for completing the practice while keeping it non evaluative. More than half of the participants commented that the observations were truer representations of their day-to-day teaching. In Carroll and O' Loughlin's (2014) study, participants reported feeling comfortable with critical feedback because they knew the process was confidential and that they "could trust their peer not to disclose negative aspects of the learning observation to others" (p. 449). Carroll and O' Loughlin's findings aligned with the teachers in this study who felt they could make mistakes and learn from them instead of being judged or negatively evaluated. Teachers reported feeling highly engaged and motivated. A leading factor in Knowles (1980) adult learning theory is that adults learn best when they have ownership of their learning. His theory suggests that adult learners are able to evaluate their own learning and make adjustments to improve when necessary (TEAL, 2011). Calvart's (2016) report suggests that there are many factors that impact professional learning including the level of motivation that comes from the teacher and how the school is structured for

delivering and sustaining professional development. Current school leaders recommend that this practice is most effective when leadership is supportive, yet non-evaluative (Beck, 2015; Hall, 2013).

Observational Learning. In his book, *An Introduction to Classroom Observation*, Wragg (2012) points out the thousands of lessons that are being taught daily and how only a few are being observed by adults within one year's worth of time. More than half of the participants brought up the importance of seeing the teaching in action. One participant stated, "There are literally hundreds of ways to run, organize and deliver content" (Participant 9). She emphasized how each observation can provide a treasure chest of ideas for the first time observer. This is supported by Vygotsky's (1978) work where his finding showed that learning occurs when there are opportunities to work with someone who is more knowledgeable. When teachers invite a peer into their classroom with the intent to learn, there are endless possibilities for learning. In the article, *Peer Observation: Learning From One Another*, Richardson (2000) conveys how learning naturally occurs for both participants through peer observation. The Reform Support Network (2015), sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, challenges leaders at the state level to provide structure, resources, and policies to help districts take better advantage of using observations to improve teacher practice. Croft, Coggshell, Dolan, Powers, and Killion (2010), proponents for job-embedded professional development, propose that peer observation is one type of practice that is highly conducive to adult learning because it requires active participation.

Professional Growth. In the report, *Teachers Know Best: Teachers' View on Professional Development*, teachers reflected that, "professional learning needs to be more relevant, personalized, sustainable, and delivered by someone with similar experiences" (Bill

& Melinda Gates Foundation, 2014). All of the participants in this study perceived professional growth from participating in the practice of peer observation. It is apparent from these findings that these twelve teachers hold this practice in high regard. Many of the teachers reflected that if they improved in a certain area, for example improved their questioning, that students were bound to benefit from their (the teachers) growth. Since peer observation during this study was a one-time event, it was difficult to gauge student impact. Archibald, Coggshall, Croft, and Goe (2011) reported five characteristics of high quality professional development:

1. Alignment with school goals, state and district standards and assessments, and other professional learning activities including formative teacher evaluation
2. Focus on core content and modeling of teaching strategies for the content
3. Inclusion of opportunities for active learning of new teaching strategies
4. Provision of opportunities for collaboration among teachers
5. Inclusion of embedded follow-up and continuous feedback (p.3)

In light of this information, it appears that informal peer observation may prove to be an extremely valuable practice that positively impacts teachers' professional growth.

Implications

The findings from this single case study provide a number of implications. Most importantly is that all the teachers in this study viewed informal peer observation as a practice that developed their professional growth. As school districts implement this practice, it will be important for leadership teams to consider teachers' perceptions. Wei, Darling-Hammond and Adamson (2010) researched teachers' perceptions of what types of professional development they perceive as being effective in changing their practice. They recommend that schools

provide more time for professional development sessions that are sustained, connected to practice and school initiatives, focused on academic content, and supportive of strong working relationships among teachers (Wei et al., 2010).

During this study, the majority of teachers felt that choice of peer provided a safe environment but as one teacher mentioned, they may learn just as much from a teacher who is assigned. Calvert (2016) speaks to the importance of teacher agency. She maintains that teachers, who are given opportunities for professional growth, will contribute to their own goals and their colleagues, as well. It will be important to learn if teachers are finding the choices of peer or topic to be beneficial as they continue with this practice.

Killion (2016) recommends that school leaders be creative and committed to providing ample time for collaborative professional learning opportunities. She outlines a seven-step process to help schools find time to provide educators with collaborative professional learning opportunities. She suggests putting together a team who examines how time is used and explores options to implement more efficient techniques for managing time. Since time was mentioned as a challenge by most of the participants, this school and others that are similar in design may want to investigate the time involved with peer observation and if there are more effective ways to implementing this practice.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings from this study indicate numerous opportunities for possible research studies in regards to informal peer observation and the impact it has on teachers' professional growth. For example, more case studies examining teachers' perceptions about informal peer observation impacting professional growth would reinforce the validity and reliability of this study.

Surveys, conducted at the school and state level would allow researchers to collect quantitative data from a larger population sample in regards to teachers' perceptions about this new practice. This would allow for school leaders and educational leaders at the state level to examine this practice and respond with needed structure and resources based on the outcomes of the data.

Another research study could explore the role of leadership within the practice of informal peer observation from the perspective of school leaders. As school leaders are an integral part of providing professional development, this type of study may provide insight to how leaders feel peer observation impacts the learning environment. Since this practice is newly mandated, there is limited research in regards to student growth being impacted by the practice of informal peer observation. Although teachers perceived growth, it would be informative for teachers and school leaders to see a study that collected student data in relation to this practice. Studies previously published that showed student growth in relation to peer observations, were performed in schools where the practice was voluntary.

Finally, research is needed to examine how to best implement informal peer observation within the school day. Since there are so many factors within a school day that make it difficult to complete observations, more studies are needed to help schools problem solve the challenge of finding enough time to complete informal peer observations.

Limitations

The design of this case study included limitations, which may have affected the outcomes. The school selected for this study was chosen based on proximity to the researcher; therefore, a convenience sample, not a random sample was used. Although the number of participants is adequate for a case study, they do not represent opinions of all teachers in the

state. Although this researcher used data triangulation to reduce bias, it may still be an issue due to the researcher's position in the school and involvement in the committee overseeing peer observation. To address this bias, analytical memos were written to better understand the data and to ensure that the data was being examined from many different angles. A peer from an outside source read through this work as a preventative measure against bias as well.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, teachers perceive informal peer observation as an opportunity for professional growth. The emerging themes: *Choice, Collaboration, Time, Autonomy, Observational Learning, and Professional Growth* support current research in regards to the practice of informal peer observation.

Currently in Maine, leadership from the state level offers school districts an open policy of how to implement peer observation as part of their teacher evaluation plan. This provides school leaders with multiple decisions about how to best support this mandate. Research will help guide school leadership teams as they put this practice into action.

The findings from this study indicated that choice allowed teachers to focus on an area to improve upon with a peer who they felt would provide them honest feedback. The pre and post conferences made time for reflective discourse where teachers shared resources, instructional techniques, content knowledge, and support. This study corroborates recent research that found that this type of collaborative work is improving teachers' professional growth. The challenge of time must be examined in detail and addressed as schools transition to implement these new mandates. As informal peer observation becomes the norm, school leaders will be faced with these types of questions. What is the role of leadership when it comes to these types of mandates? How do school leaders provide the support and resources so

that this practice has positive results for students? When there are so many factors involved in the practice of informal peer observation, how will professional growth be measured? These are important questions to consider for the future.

One quote from the research speaks to the importance of providing professional development opportunities like informal peer observation. It is evident through this study that the practice of peer observation validates teachers for their knowledge and provides them with opportunities to learn from each other.

I learned that even as a veteran teacher I can learn something new every time I step into a colleague's classroom. Even teaching beside or in the same building with other teachers doesn't mean we all know what each other are doing. I wish there was more time to visit our colleagues. I also learned that I have colleagues that value what I do, how I teach and feel comfortable asking my advice.

As school leaders and educators become more comfortable with the important role that informal peer observation has on teachers' professional growth, it is my hope that they will make time, provide resources, and encourage the practice of teachers learning from teachers.

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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

Project Title: Professional Growth: Informal Peer Observation

Principal Investigator(s): Carolyn Clark
8 Edes Avenue
Dover-Foxcroft, ME 04426

Advisor: Dr. Grania Holman
gholman@une.edu

Introduction:

- Please read this form, you may also request that the form is read to you. The purpose of this form is to provide you with information about this research study, and you choose to participate, document your decision.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions that you may have about this study, now, during, or after the project is complete. You can take as much time as you need to decide whether or not you want to participate. Your participation is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

- The purpose of this study is to understand how teachers experience and perceive the practice of mandated school-wide informal peer observation in relation to their professional growth.

Who will be in this study?

- Twelve teachers (six for focus group, six for individual interviews)

What will I be asked to do?

- If chosen for the interview, there will be interview questions sent to six teachers via Google forms to be completed by January 31, 2017.
- If chosen for the focus group, there will be a focus group Google document for six teachers to work within and complete by January 31, 2017.
- The documents used during the observation and pre/post conferences will be collected and analyzed.
- After an analysis is written, you will be allowed to read it and respond to it before the final draft.

What are the possible risks of taking part in this study?

- There are no foreseeable risks associated with participation in this study.
- The analysis of the study will be shared with you before the final report is finished.

What are the possible benefits of taking part in this study?

- There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this study. There may be a benefit to others as this research could identify actionable steps for schools to undergo as they implement informal peer observations.

What will it cost me?

- There will be no financial costs. The interviews will be at school and after instructional hours.

How will my privacy be protected?

- The school will not be named.
- Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym.

How will my data be kept confidential?

- No individually identifiable information will be collected.
- Similar data is collected for each of the teachers.
- A copy of your signed consent form will be maintained by the principal investigator for at least 3 years after the project is complete before it is destroyed. The consent forms will be stored in a secure location that only members of the research team will have access to and will not be affiliated with any data obtained during the project.
- Audio recordings of the interview will be kept on a password-protected computer.
- All research findings will be presented to participants.

What are my rights as a research participant?

- Your participation is voluntary. Your decision to participate will have no impact on your current or future relations with the organization you work in.
- You may skip or refuse to answer any question for any reason.
- If you choose not to participate there is no penalty to you. You are free to withdraw from this research study at any time, for any reason. If you choose to withdraw from the research there will be no penalty for you.

What other options do I have?

- You may choose not to participate.

Whom may you contact with questions?

- The researcher conducting this study is Carolyn Clark. For questions or more information concerning this research you may contact her at 207-717-9488.
- If you choose to participate in this research and believe you may have suffered a research related injury, please contact Dr. Grania Holman gholman@une.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you may call Chair of the UNE Institutional Review Board at (207) 221-4171 or irb@une.edu.

Will I receive a copy of this consent form?

- You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Participant's Statement

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Participant's signature or
Legally authorized representative

Date

Printed name

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in tis study.

Researcher's signature

Date

Printed name

Appendix B
Invitation to Participate

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND
PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH INVITATION

December 2016

Project Title: Professional Growth: Informal Peer Observation

Principal Investigator(s): Carolyn Clark, Doctoral Student, University of New England

Dear Potential Study Participant:

As a doctoral student completing her dissertation research through the University of New England, I am inviting you to participate in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to provide you with information about this research study and, if you choose to participate, document your decision. You have been identified as a potential participant because you expressed interest in supporting or voluntarily participating in this research and you are available within the timeframe allotted for this study. Your participation is completely voluntary. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions about this study, now, during, or after the project is complete.

Study's Purpose:

The purposes of this qualitative case study are (a) to describe how you perceive and experience informal peer observation and (b) examine how informal peer observation supports professional growth. It is anticipated that the findings generated from this inquiry will inform educational leaders and teachers about school-wide mandated informal peer observation.

Research Questions:

This investigation is designed to explore three essential questions: (1) How do elementary and middle school teachers perceive their own participation in the practice of informal peer observation? (2) How do teachers perceive the administrator's role as part of the informal peer observation process? (3) How do teachers perceive informal peer observation as a tool that improves their instruction?

Procedures:

The procedure will be a single (one school district) case study that occurs between January 2016 and February of 2017, with results/findings published by May of 2017. Data collection will include an online interview, online focus group discussion, and documentation artifacts (field notes, reflections, and journal entries). Individuals involved in the data collection will be the researcher, elementary, and middle school teachers. I do not foresee this study presenting any risks or hardship on you, other than the time invested in participating. However, your investment of time will contribute to the current practice on informal peer observation.

Confidentiality: Your identity will be protected throughout the study and thereafter. Only I, the researcher, will have access to your information. Follow-up verbal/signed and written reports, and discussions will identify you only as a number (i.e. Participant #2). Your name and district/school location will not be shared with anyone else. Your confidentiality will be protected in compliance with the University of New England's research with human participants' policies and procedures.

Compensation: No monetary or non-monetary compensation will be provided for your input or time.

Questions: If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and your participation, you may contact me, the researcher, via e-mail at cclark@une.edu or cclark@sedomocha.org, or via my home phone at (207) 717-9488. You may also contact Dr. Grania Holman at the University of New England at gholman@une.edu or by phone at (678) 234-2414.

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this research study and for your valuable insights as an educator. Your contribution not only supports my dissertation study, but also informs the current research on the practice of informal peer observation in the State of Maine.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Clark,
Literacy Coach
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership
University of New England

Appendix C
Permission Letter Superintendent of School/Building Principal

November 5, 2016

Dear Mrs. Shorey and Mrs. Kimball,

My name is Carolyn Clark and I am the Literacy Coach and Kindergarten Interventionist at R.S.U. # 68. I am currently working on my doctoral dissertation at the University of New England. I am conducting a study regarding how teachers' experience and perceive the informal peer observation as a professional development tool. This study requires data to be collected at school, and I am requesting permission to elicit participation from teachers via online interview and virtual focus group discussion.

In this research study, I plan to investigate how teachers perceive the process of mandated school-wide peer observations as an opportunity for professional growth.

It is my hope that this study will demonstrate the impact that informal peer observation has on the professional growth of teachers.

Should you have any questions regarding this study, please contact me directly (207) 717-9488 or the chairperson of my committee, Dr. Grania Holman, gholman@une.edu. Thank you in advance for your time.

Sincerely,

Carolyn Clark
Literacy Coach
Doctoral Candidate, Educational Leadership
University of New England

Appendix D
Permission to Conduct Study

Regional School Unit No. 68
Serving the Communities of Chardon, Dover-Foxcroft, Monson and Sebasticook

Stacy Shorey
Superintendent of Schools




November 13, 2016

To Whom It May Concern:

Please be advised that Carolyn Clark has permission to conduct research for her dissertation, "Professional Growth: Informal Peer Observation," at R.S.U. # 68. Information about her work will be shared as appropriate with community, staff, administration, and the School Board.

Sincerely,



Stacy Shorey
Superintendent of Schools



Julie Kimball
Principal

Appendix E

Invitation Email or in-person conversation

Dear Teacher,

I am conducting a qualitative study on informal peer observation during the months of December, 2016 to February, 2017. I would like to invite you and your peer to participate in this study. Due to restrictions of this study, please refrain from participating if you are pregnant.

This will require you and your peer to complete the peer observation cycle and then either participate in completing an interview using a Google form, or participate in an online focus group discussion. You will be asked to share your observation form taken during the peer observation and pre/post conferences. I have attached the informed consent letter; please look it over.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email with an okay and the following information: grade level, years of experience teaching, and content taught.

Before the interview or focus discussion is sent to you, I will read the informed consent letter with you and we will both sign it.

Thank you,

Carolyn Clark

Appendix F
Typical Representation Table

If more than 6 pairs of teachers volunteer, this table will be used to help determine a typical representation.

Table 1 Typical Representation Table for Participants who volunteered (modified Bloomberg and Volpe, 2012 and Donaldson, 2015)																	
<i>Participant Information</i>																	
Teacher	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17
Grade Level																	
Pre-K-4																	
5-8																	
Years of Experience																	
1-5 years																	
6-19 years																	
20 years plus																	
Content																	
Unified Specialist Music, Art, P.E.,																	
Math																	
Science																	
Social Studies																	
ELA																	
Special Ed.																	
Nurse																	

Appendix G

Interview questions

Thank you for your time and for sharing your reflections. This information contributes to the understanding of the practice of informal peer observation. Please remember to not discuss students' or teachers' names. It is to remain confidential under all circumstances. Thank you! Feel free to contact me at any time with questions or concerns.

1. In your opinion, what is the main purpose of informal peer observation for teachers?
2. Do you think that having the freedom of choosing the peer who observes you improves the process of peer observation? Please explain your answer.
3. Do you think having the freedom of choosing your own topic improves the process of peer observation? Please explain your answer.
4. What did you learn about yourself in this process?
5. What benefits, if any, have you received from conducting informal peer observation?
6. What challenges, if any, did you experience with the peer observation process?
7. What would improve the informal peer observation process to make it more beneficial for both you as an observer and for the peer being observed?
8. Did your peer's feedback help you to grow as a professional? Please explain your answer.
9. In what ways, if any, do you perceive that this experience of peer observation has impacted student learning?
10. How do you believe being observed by a peer is different than being observed by an administrator?
11. Do you believe that informal peer observation would be more meaningful if the observation forms were submitted to administration for review? Please explain your answer.

Appendix H

Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

Please feel free to ask questions of each other for clarification and respond to each other as if we were sitting around a table in a discussion. Please remember to not discuss students' or teachers' names or have any discussion outside of this document. It is to remain confidential under all circumstances. Thank you!

Focus Group Participants

(please use your color throughout the document) You may return and add questions, and respond to others as many times as you would like.

Participant 1 Participant 6 Participant 8 Participant 9 Participant 11 Participant 12

1. In your opinion, what is the main purpose of informal peer observation for teachers?
2. What understandings, if any, did you develop about teaching and learning based on the experience of informal peer observation?
3. How do you believe being observed by a peer is different than being observed by an administrator?
4. Do you believe that informal peer observation would be more meaningful if the observation forms were submitted to administration for review? Please explain your answer.
5. What benefits, in any, have you received from participating in informal peer observation?
6. What challenges, in any, did you experience with the peer observation process?
7. Do you believe that informal peer observation helped improve your instructional practice? How?
8. What is your perspective on how participating in informal peer observation influenced student learning? Please provide an example.
9. How does informal peer observation compare to other staff development activities in which you have participated?
10. Do you think that having the freedom of choosing the peer who observes you improves the process of peer observation? Please explain your answer.
11. Do you think having the freedom of choosing your own topic improves the process of peer observation? Please explain your answer.

Appendix I

Pre/Post Observation Form

RSU #68 Peer Observation Form 2016-2017

(confidentiality is a must that builds trust)

Teacher asking for a teacher to observe.

Teacher (completing the lesson)	Observer (observing the lesson)	Date	Time	Content

Domain(s):

Components(s):

Pre Conference: Date/Time

Observation: Date/Time

Post Conference: Date/Time

Recommendations: Conferences: 10 minutes or more, Observation 30 minutes or more.

Prompts for pre conference: Students will be able to based on the evidence of.....

I would like you to observe... (questioning, student discussion, pace of lesson- wait time, organization of materials, engagement, relevance of lesson) Refer to text or resources being used for instruction.

Prompts for observation: pace of lesson, take notes on what was asked of you and other notes that seem relevant. (after...take time to review your notes and text/ resources, summarize the observation-keep it objective and to the point)

Prompts for post observation: time to ask questions, review evidence (including student work), reflect changes that may need to be made for next lesson, provide resources, and celebrate our practice.

Reflection:

1. (pre observation) Please discuss the area(s) in which I feel I can improve by having a colleague observe me.
2. Describe if the process of peer observation helped you to improve in the area that you chose. Please explain.
3. I gained the following insights, if any, from completing this observation.