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Reframing Professional Learning to Analyze Teacher Practice and Promote
System-Wide Change

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the
College of Education & Social Work
West Chester University
West Chester, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of
Doctor of Education

By,
Jennifer Smerecky

May 2020

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West Chester University

Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents. Mom and dad, without your love and support the completion of this doctoral program may not have been possible. You both have always been an inspiration of hard work and perseverance and I am forever grateful to inherit your work ethic. You raised me to be honest, resilient, and committed. You believed in me when I needed it more than you could ever imagine. I strongly hope that my work makes you proud and that I continue to honor you each and every day. I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Paul & Paula.

Acknowledgements

I would like to start my thank-yous by acknowledging those that have impacted my professional career, and foremost I credit Dr. Heather Schugar. It is nearly unbelievable how far I've come as a writer and I tribute that improvement to her insight and continuous wisdom. Throughout this process Dr. Schugar encouraged me to persevere and challenged me to dig deeper into my work. I am grateful for your guidance and the unending commitment to our cohort. Dr. Schugar, you made a profound impact on my personal and professional career and I am thankful for your continued encouragement.

Thank you to Dr. Mimi Staulters' who inspired me from the moment I met her as a student at West Chester University. Dr. Staulters' wealth of knowledge in the field of special education further inspired me to proceed with my research topic. She is a leader and innovator in her field, and I am thankful for her guidance and support in this process.

Thank you to Dr. Donna Gaffney as my colleague, friend, and supporter. The ambitious work that you strive to conquer daily has inspired my work and research in professional learning. A large part of this study's success I credit to your guidance and encouragement. Thank you for believing in me early on in this process, your support has been invaluable.

For Amy & Maria, as members of my committee I cannot thank you enough for the continual support throughout this process. For my fellow classmates, Mike, Lisa, Jeff, Marcie, Lisa, and Jane, a huge round of applause to you all for being each other's rock when we all needed a sense of structure.

I save the biggest and best thank you for last, my husband. Jon, thank you for being my support system. There was not a step along the way that you did not take with me, and I could not have achieved this accomplishment without you by my side. Thank you for believing in me

and encouraging me to complete this incredible process. It is no exaggeration to say that I could not have completed this program without your support. I could not do the work I love without the love and support from you, and for that I thank you.

Abstract

The present study examined teachers' perceptions of targeted professional learning experiences offered within their educational agency. This study focused on teachers' perceptions of the planning, delivery, and follow-up support from teacher professional learning sessions. The teacher participants shared their perceptions of professional learning, implementation of new strategies, barriers to implementation, and support needed from their administration in order to grow as educators. This focus of this study aims to reframe professional learning by forming cooperation between administrators and teachers within education organizations to reform professional learning opportunities. This study advocates for further development in the collaboration of a system-wide change in the process of planning professional growth.

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Chapter I

Introduction

One way of initiating program change within an educational organization is to provide purposeful professional learning to teachers. Program-wide professional learning establishes common practices across an organization, and fosters growth of teachers and staff (Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009). In addition to the benefits professional learning can provide to an organization's system-wide needs, professional learning can enhance staff's individual growth within the organization (Dunne, 2002). Purposeful program change includes rigorous professional learning for teachers designed to enhance teachers' skill set and improve overall instruction to students. Yet, administrators within educational organizations face the challenge of creating effective professional learning for teachers when they do not involve teachers in the planning and implementation of professional learning for teachers within their organization. Social development theorist, Lev Vygotsky, identified the importance of first gaining a child's attention or engagement in a skill prior to learning occurring; the same occurs within adult learning and professional learning opportunities (Vygotsky et al., 1997). Thus, as administrators plan for teachers' professional learning or in-service trainings, the program administrators must engage staff and elicit teacher buy-in in order to create meaningful opportunities for teachers and staff to expand their knowledge and add valuable skills to their professional toolbox.

In order to establish and sustain a collaborative professional learning approach, the administrative team communicates a new program vision and the organization's plan for future change. It is crucial for program administrators to elicit teacher engagement and cooperation from staff during training and meetings, to further understand teachers individualized needs in order to plan and implement appropriate professional learning activities tailored to their areas of

professional growth and instructional improvement. Professional learning not only increases educator effectiveness but leads to desired program outcomes that are student driven and produce content-focused instruction in the classroom (Easton & Fisher, 2014). The focus of an educational organizations staff relies on their commitment to personal, professional growth and connection with their organization. As program administrators establish buy-in from teachers, they are able to interchange the focus of a professionally designed activities toward not only the organization's success, but also for the growth of the individual staff. The terminology of professional development and professional learning are used interchangeably in the field of education; yet, professional development often refers to job-related activities, whereas professional learning is known as a lifelong process for educators (Gravani, 2007).

Purpose of Study

In order to understand the importance of professional learning, this study reviewed research on traditional professional development practices versus new models for professional learning. Stein et al. (1999) shared the traditional form of professional development alongside the new form of professional learning administrators provided to teachers. Traditional forms of professional development occur in short duration, focus on ideas and changing teachers' beliefs. Newer forms of professional learning are occurring in longer duration, over time through coaching models, in sequence with teachers are developers, and scaffolding teachers' skills to building upon knowledge that is relevant and purposeful to teacher's content area (Stein et al., 1999).

In traditional professional development, teachers engage in limited input on the topic or learning outcome. Therefore, traditional training provided often left teachers gravitating toward familiar methods of teaching, as the activities were disconnected from their positions and what

was actually occurring within their classrooms (Guskey, 2002). Yet, newer models of professional learning aim to increase support of teachers and provide professional activities to enhance staff needs to and program-wide growth (Stein et al., 1999).

Aside from traditional and newly reformed professional development models of delivery, there are two forms of professional development organizations offer to staff: mandated or district professional development and elective participation professional development (Stein et al., 1999). For the purpose of this study, I will refer to professional development as mandated activities that are provided within a teacher workday. Additional forms of mandated or district professional development occur as in-service days, workshops or staff trainings that organizations provide in the school or educational environment.

This purpose of this research study is to gain a deeper understanding of how to create meaningful experiences for teachers that will foster professional growth and development and make impactful program change to support the progress of students within their classroom. The focus of this study is to investigate changes in an organization's system of delivery professional learning to early childhood teachers. This study examined teachers' perceptions on professional learning that administrators offered within their organization. Additionally, this study examined how strategies from professional learning were implemented within the classroom, and the follow up from professional learning sessions in individual teacher's classrooms after the training sessions.

Rationale for Study

In organizations, staff professional development is perceived by teachers with a negative connotation. As a result of lack of applicable professional learning opportunities administrators provide to teachers in their work environments, teachers interpret all professional learning

opportunities as unproductive. As Wright (2009) stated, “The first important aspect of reframing professional development is to focus on learning rather than development” (p. 713). Thus, teacher professional learning focuses on training staff to learn a specific skill. However, professional development has received a negative reputation from educators over the years as a result of a lack in consistency and follow through on sufficient implementation of professional learning opportunities. Although the terms professional development and professional learning are interchangeable in the field of education, it is crucial the overall meaning of professional growth is expressed as an opportunity to create and enhance teacher practice (Wright, 2009).

The purpose of this qualitative study is to use an inquiry approach to explore the planning process and implementation of professional development. Specifically, this study will examine how the educational service agency will plan for professional learning to occur for the 2019-2020 school year, in alignment with the Early Childhood Services (ECS) vision statement: “All students will be transition ready as demonstrated by their communication, social/emotional, and academic growth” (Educational Service Agency, 2019). The rationale of creating purposeful, vision-aligned professional learning is to ensure the staff within the organization are prepared to service the children to their utmost potential, as well as prepare the children to reach their expectation upon the time they advance out of the program. The purpose of professional learning is to offer staff the tools and skills needed to enhance their teaching and instruction within the classroom setting. By creating professional learning aligned to a program vision, administrators will ensure there is a central focus for program improvement and continued success.

Problem Statement

There is a need in education to determine appropriate professional learning that can inform teacher practice. Additionally, professional learning becomes more beneficial and

connected to individual teachers if the topics are learner-centered and intended for teachers to learn real-life context to bring back into their classroom immediately and effectively (Wright, 2009). The challenge in implementation of adequate professional learning occurs in the initial development of professional activities. The struggle administrators face in defining professional development is that districts and educational organizations have mandates, program needs, and initiatives, and often lack the effort in investing personalized training for teachers to target specific needs to enhance teacher practice. As part of a program reform, there is a need for further investigation into educational agencies' efforts in modeling new professional learning plans, including professional learning opportunities that expand on teachers' skills.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to reframe teacher professional learning opportunities provided within an educational service agency. This study analyzed teacher practice and promoted program-wide change in the collaborative teacher and administrator planning and implementing of professional learning activities. The main research question for this study was: How do early intervention classroom teachers utilize professional learning strategies within their classrooms to enhance system-wide needs?

Sub-questions:

1. What are early childhood special education teachers' perceptions of professional learning?
2. How do teachers implement professional learning strategies in their instructional practice?
3. What are the barriers early intervention special education teachers encounter when implementing new instruction into the classroom?

4. In what ways do special education teachers receive support from administrators to implement professional learning in early intervention classrooms?

Rationale for Methods

By using a single case study design, I was able to analyze the professional learning opportunities an educational agency provided to a specific population of teachers that will be chose for this study. The single case study approach had multiple embedded factors within that = needed additional exploration, such as external factors that impact a specific classroom environment or teachers' perceptions; however, the approach and global perspective of the study used one overarching method (Baxter & Jack, 2008). A case study approach allowed for an individual perspective into each teacher's viewpoint into their background on professional learning, the professional learning sessions that administration provided to them during the study and how they utilized strategies from the activities (Yin, 2017).

This single-study, case study design followed the delivery of professional learning training for a population of six early childhood special education classroom teachers. The focus of the professional learning was aligned with the educational service agency's vision of all students will be transition ready as demonstrated by their communication, social/emotional, and academic growth. In order to obtain that vision, administration set a goal for professional learning using teachers' input regarding their perceptions of previous professional learning through a survey and interviews. Overall, creating professional learning aligned to a program vision will ensure there is a central focus for program improvement and continued success.

Significance of Study

The objective of professional learning is currently the responsibility of administrators within educational service agencies to create purposeful, vision-aligned professional learning

sessions and activities for staff, to ensure their teachers within the educational service organization are prepared to service the children to their utmost potential, and prepare the children to reach their expectation upon the time they leave the program. However, traditional methods of professional learning employed by the educational agency have lacked teacher engagement and motivation which result in their instruction gravitating toward familiar and under-performing methods. As the purpose of professional learning is to ensure staff have the tools and skills needed to enhance those teaching and instructional opportunities within the classroom setting, administrators are responsive to teachers' perspectives on professional learning opportunities and grant training to enhance their skill set. By creating professional learning aligned to a program vision, administrators can ensure there is a central focus for program improvement and continued success.

Limitations

Given my role as the researcher and administrator in the educational agency, I have an insider perspective that provides me with a deeper understanding of the group of teachers in this case study (Unler, 2012). However, being an insider-researcher can also lead to tensions within my study as well, including possible biases or neutrality in specific topics relating to the professional learning within my study, or practices occurring with the classroom setting. I gave careful attention to reducing potential research bias in this study by considering my role as a member of this educational service agency. For the past year and a half, I have worked within the research setting as a program administrator. Thus, a limitation of the case study was possible that teachers within the study would feel pressured to participate or not participate based upon our professional relationship.

An additional limitation to the case study is the amount of time professional learning opportunities administrators can provide to teachers. As professional learning sessions occur as training or educational sessions where administrators are able to enhance the teachers' skills pertaining to specific topics, the amount of time focused on a topic is only allotted for a certain number of hours per year for educators.

A final limitation is the follow-up observations administration provides to teachers after the professional learning sessions occur in this case study. As traditional professional learning activities offer a training environment in lecture, group format, or one-stop instruction session, there was lack of follow through on strategies implemented into the classroom and additional support administrators could offer to teachers after professional learning sessions. Although this case study implemented follow up observations of each participating classroom teacher involved in this case study, further monitoring of professional learning strategies effectiveness and implementation of strategies would benefit teachers' professional growth through collaboration and continued conversations.

In order to address the potential limitations to this case study, I took steps within the research process to disclose limitations to teachers' and be transparent of limitations involved in this study. By sharing with teachers' that their identities would remain anonymous and that their responses would be confidential and non-evaluative, the teachers' were more receptive to participate within the study.

Case study design was specifically selected as the method in this study as a result of my knowledge and personal experience of working with in a special education classroom. I share the knowledge of professional learning activities that have been beneficial to my reflective practice and developmental growth as an educator. Therefore, I find it important to disclose my biases as

I am aware of the importance of my history and personal connection to the way it shapes my methodology and approach to the research design I have chosen.

Through this qualitative research study, I outlined the benefits of professional learning for special education teachers. Through this qualitative research, I had the opportunity to explain the challenging role the teachers in this educational agency take on each day, differentiating their lessons, making modifications to materials, and adapting classroom environments.

Definitions of Terms

Professional Development

Professional development refers to mandated professional development or professional development opportunities administrators employ within a teacher workday. Additional forms of mandated or district professional development occur as in-service days, workshops, or staff trainings that are provided in the school or educational organization environment (Randi & Zeichner, 2004).

Professional Learning

Professional learning encourages teachers to engage, work on common goals, and have a central focus that is more student-driven. Professional learning involves continuous and ongoing teacher reflection and administrative support and collaboration. (Thacker, 2017).

Educational Service Agency

An educational service agency refers to an organization that provides special services needed by the educational community in their service area. An education service agency offers no-cost educational, nutritional, and social services that help children prepare for success in school. The education service agency includes Early Intervention, Head Start,

and Pre-K Counts that provide services to enrolled families, and also meets the needs of special populations, including children with disabilities.

Early Childhood Special Education Services

Early childhood special education services refers to students who qualify for special education services through their local educational service agency, under the follow criteria: will all be (a) ages 3 thru 5 years old, and (b) determined eligible for early intervention services, that exhibit a developmental delay of at least 25% or exhibit a disability and require specially designed instruction.

Special Education Classroom

A specialized classroom program provided by the educational service agency for students ages 3-5 who exhibit a developmental delay of at least 25% or exhibit a disability and require specially designed instruction and have a disability category, such as Autism, Developmental Delay, Speech and Language Impairment, etc. For the purpose of this study, specialized classroom settings will be studied referring to the self-contained classroom environment of students provided with special education services provided by special education classroom teacher and related service providers (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004)).

Chapter II

Review of Literature

In this chapter, I review the literature that supports this study, including the history of professional learning, models of professional learning, and the effectiveness of teacher growth. Further, in this chapter I address early childhood and special education teachers, professional learning opportunities pertaining to the necessary teacher and administration communication and continued collaboration to provide ongoing professional learning. I identify professional learning that is tailored to meet the needs of specialized classroom teachers who service students within the preschool educational service agency setting. Finally, I conclude this chapter with my theoretical framework, specifically analyzing the structure of leadership and program change when creating professional learning.

History of Professional Learning

In order to improve professional learning for teachers within their organization, the opportunities for learning should be well-planned, purposeful, and aligned to teacher content area (Guskey & Yoon, 2009). Previous forms of professional learning took place in many formats, such as large group activities, workshops, trainers, or outside experts; however, newer professional learning opportunities are aligned to specific teacher needs as they are designed with rigor related to teacher specific content, follow up for clarity, and considerable time to ensure understanding (Guskey & Yoon, 2009).

Models of Professional Learning

As indicated in Lee's (2005) study, there is success in sustaining professional growth of teachers when professional learning is tailored towards teacher's needs, with the input from both teachers and administrators' perspectives. Lee explained the traditional form of professional

development as past practice, indicating, “Lack of teachers’ motivation for staff development may be due to in-service having been designed to cater to the masses in the school district...emphasis that administrators place on the latest hot topics rather than attempting to individualize and personalize professional growth plans” (Bradley, 1996; Lee, 2005; Olivero, 1976). Further, traditional models of professional development include large group trainings on topics that are state mandated, district-wide initiatives, or even building-wide initiatives. Such traditional models of professional development have now shifted in the education field towards a stronger commitment to create teacher change (Guskey, 1986).

Randi and Zeichner (2004) addressed the traditional form of professional development as an assessment-driven approach to provide teacher professional learning. Randi and Zeichner (2004) stated, “The motivation for both teacher and student learning derives from the pressure to perform well on specific tasks rather than the pursuit of broader learning goals. Teachers’ own learning is focused on mastering particular instructional practices rather than gaining access to the broader professional knowledge base” (p. 190). Stewart (2014) affirmed the key features in professional learning activities include content specific topics, active learning from participants, coherence for a big picture for the administration as well as teacher involved in the learning, ample amount of time spent on the activity to be beneficial, and shared participation. Effective methods of professional learning need to be ongoing and continuous in order to establish consistency in the information provided, understanding of the material, and job-embedded training to support teachers in their practice (Stewart, 2014).

In order to facilitate both teacher and administrator control, Saclarides and Lubienksi (2018) noted that a blended model would be the most appropriate professional learning design to address both teachers and administrators needs and focus on growth opportunities (Saclarides &

Lubienski, 2018). Further, Saclarides and Lubienski (2018) identified teachers' concern with administrators being the sole organizer of professional learning as teachers would determine the professional activity was more likely to be used as an evaluation or rating tool. Additionally, the administration expressed concerns, avoiding "engaging in difficult conversations with teachers" (Saclarides & Lubienski, 2018, p. 57). The challenge with administration deciding professional learning activities without teacher input is that it also prohibits teacher buy-in and decreases the likelihood of engagement in professional learning activities. Ultimately, both teachers and administrators identified the features that make professional learning truly effective are when the learning opportunities are relevant topics to the professionals involved (Wayne et al., 2008).

Randi and Zeichner (2004) acknowledged that that administrative leaders should be "paying more attention to what teachers need to know than to how", a more accurate way of designing professional learning (p. 193). In order to appropriately plan for effective professional learning sessions, teacher input is necessary in the design of professional learning activities for organizations, especially those working on program-wide change. In order to elicit teacher engagement and cooperation from staff during professional learning activities, administration must first understand teachers' individualized needs in order to plan and implement appropriate professional learning activities tailored to their teachers' areas of growth (Guskey, 1986).

Professional Development to Professional Learning

Previously teachers perceived professional development as regimented and authoritative, and administrative agency leaders failed to implement or encourage collaboration amongst teachers and administrators (Guskey & Huberman, 1995). Professional development activities are often compliance trainings pertaining to laws and regulations, that once these topics are met, administrators are able to provide further, deepening professional learning that relates to staff

needs that can enhance their overall growth as an educator. Thacker (2017) stated that the education field has shifted their language from *professional development* to a new terminology of *professional learning*; although both terms are still used today. Professional learning encourages teachers to engage, work on common goals, and have a central focus that is more student-driven. As Thacker (2017) stated, professional learning involves continuous and ongoing teacher reflection and administrative support and collaboration.

The shift in language from professional development to professional learning is a movement from stagnant lecture to collaboration, from individual to community, and job-specific to job-embedded. Professional learning encompasses peer observations, promotes non-evaluative feedback, and ultimately encourages teachers to participate with each other to share experiences (Thacker, 2017). Teachers are eager to share their input and rationale for professional learning activities to seek continual learning that supports their educational and instructional growth (Gravani, 2007). However, guidance from administrators is still needed in order to appropriately assist in the planning and ongoing implementation training activities (Birman et al., 2000). As administrators oversee professional learning for their educational agency, the design process is a collaborative effort that involves feedback from teachers to have a personalized approach to their own professional growth.

Professional Learning in Special Education

The way in which educators provide the appropriate education for all students has evolved greatly as a result of public law and court cases. One of the first cases that impacted education for students with learning needs was the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act*. This *Act* influenced the “disability rights movement”, allowing public schools to educate students with disabilities (Connor & Ferri, 2007, p. 63). *The Education for All Handicapped*

Children Act of 1975, also known as Public Law No. 94-192, was the first piece of federal legislation regarding the education of students with disabilities. Furthermore, in 2004, revisions to IDEA followed to include the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), a change that integrated children with disabilities to be educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate (Connor & Ferri, 2007). Special education law provides the guidelines for providing preschool based special education services to students within the educational service agency. Furthermore, the training and support teachers require derives from special education laws pertaining to the needs of the children within their classrooms (Connor & Ferri, 2007).

Another impactful case law was the authorization of *No Child Left Behind* in 2002 which required students with disabilities to participate in statewide and district-wide assessments with appropriate accommodations (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2004). *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) further mandated that students with disabilities to receive reasonable accommodations and modifications to be able to access the general education curriculum. In 2015, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) built upon the work of *NCLB*, implemented higher standards for local educational agencies (LEAs), and prioritizing the importance of supporting educators in our schools (ESSA, 2015).

Impact on Special Education

There is a significant relationship between teachers' attitudes toward of student performance and the support and training teachers receive in the workplace (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). The more training the teacher receives on appropriate instruction for students with significant disabilities in the classroom, the more the teachers presume that students with disabilities can learn the material. Based on identified trends, there is a need for teachers to feel

comfortable in providing instruction to students with low incidence disabilities in their classrooms. Through professional learning opportunities, teachers will build their instructional skills and improved their self-efficacy when working with students with disabilities (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). Offering teachers adequate training to support the identified needs of the students will result in more positive teacher self-efficacy as well as provide teachers with the tools needed to instruct students with low incidence disabilities (Urton et al., 2014).

Burke and Sutherland (2004) explained the impact of positive teacher perceptions on instruction of students with significant needs stem from a teacher's positive prior experience of an inclusion classroom and teacher preparation on working with diverse populations of students (Burke & Sutherland, 2004). In order to provide teachers with access to adequate training, educational agency's determine the instruction to effectively teach students with disabilities; therefore, teachers are skilled in meeting the needs of students with disabilities in the classroom. Taylor and Ringlaben (2012) further stated that professional learning should occur prior to entering the classroom; however, tenured teachers are not educated on the same instructional practices that our novice teachers presently are taught; therefore, there is a need for continued opportunities offered by educational agencies for professional growth to enhance teacher practices. Ultimately, providing educators with ample professional learning opportunities even after their tenure will create positive program outcomes for teachers and students (Taylor & Ringlaben, 2012).

Administration's Perspective on Professional Learning

Whitworth and Chiu (2015) addressed the importance of administrators creating professional learning opportunities and establishing organizational change. Further, they described the importance of administration explaining to teachers the process of professional

learning activities; yet, administration may choose an activity but “teachers should be actively engaged in their own learning” (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015, p. 123). Additionally, administrators are “primary providers of professional development and ongoing support for teacher learning” (Whitworth & Chiu, 2015, p. 129). Although administrators currently hold the majority role of creating professional learning, in order to establish teacher change and buy-in the process for planning, it is essential for teachers to become partners in the process of planning and implementation in the delivering of professional learning activities (Guskey, 1986).

Knapp (2003) identified administrators as the policy makers and creators of professional learning for teachers and staff within an education system. Further, Knapp (2003) explained the district and state initiatives professional learning activities are mandated, inducements, capacity-building, or systemic change-based. As there are multiple types of professional activities offered from continuing-education to curriculum planning, policy makers, as well, have a significant impact over the type of activities administrators’ identify for training and staff development. (Knapp, 2003).

Engaging Teachers in Professional Learning

A differing perspective on how professional learning is derived from a collaborative effort amongst administrators and teachers. More recently researchers such as Darling-Hammond et al. (2009) identified that “much professional development focuses on academic subject matter, but not much depth” (p.20). Further, Darling-Hammond and her colleagues (2009) stated that professional learning planning should be “organized to engage all teachers regularly” (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009, p. 3). Additionally, Birman et al. (2000) found that “teachers do not find generic professional development that focuses on teaching techniques without also emphasizing content to be effective” (p. 30). Ultimately, teachers were advocating for the need for more

rigorous professional learning opportunities to enhance their instructional practices within the classroom (Birman et al., 2000).

Involving teachers in the identification process will allow for teacher buy-in in terms of the professional learning topics; thus, sustaining engagement within the overall trainings. Hawley and Valli (2000) identified the importance of teacher involvement in professional learning, indicating, “This engagement increases educators’ motivation and commitment to learn, encourages them to take instructional risks and assume new roles, and increases the likelihood that what is learned will be relevant to particular contexts and problems” (p. 7). Encouraging teachers to become engaged within the planning process also facilitates future opportunities for collaboration with administration and teachers on initiatives. Lee (2005) mentioned, a professional relationship begins to develop that involves cooperation on school-based initiatives that create systemic, program-wide change.

Research Based Professional Learning Strategies

In order to support teachers within their work environment, administrators actively listen to the teachers requests for professional learning opportunities to enhance their careers but also meet the needs of the students within the classroom setting. Taylor (2011) stated, “Dealing with student behavior is often cited as one of the most frustrating aspects of teaching” (p. 197). According to Chow et al. (2017), teachers have a general knowledge of the strategies they should be implementing within their classroom environment; however, without administrators providing the proper guidance and support by means routine follow up and individualized professional learning opportunities for specialized groups of classroom teachers, the teacher strategies are lacking the skills to implement with fidelity. In order for classroom teachers to be held accountable for implementing behavior strategies in the classroom setting, there must first be

adequate, research-based professional learning provided to teachers, designed for their specific classroom environments (Taylor, 2011).

Conroy et al. (2008) identified four classroom-wide interventions for improving instruction and increasing positive behavior. The interventions included maintaining close supervision and monitoring of students, establishing classroom rules, creating opportunities to respond for students, and providing contingent praise. Conroy and her colleagues (2008) stated that when classroom strategies are implemented with fidelity within the classroom, teachers are able to focus on their instruction without pausing to manage challenging behaviors. Additionally, teachers routinely utilize a variety of behavior-based strategies within their classroom setting. Applying continued reinforcement, offering verbal praise, pairing with students prior to providing a demand, are all examples of behavior-based strategies that teachers mindlessly implement throughout the school day to create a positive classroom environment. Yet, there are still challenging behaviors that occur that lead to more restrictive behavior strategies applied in the classroom setting (Conroy et al., 2008).

Job-specific professional learning is necessary for groups of teachers that experience the same professional roles and interactions with students; therefore, need additional learning opportunities to enhance their skill set. Special education classroom teachers share in common topics of need for professional learning, such as classroom management for students with specific learning needs, assessing challenging behaviors, de-escalating students in classroom environments, and providing and collaborating on individualized instruction. Taylor (2011) addressed professional practices pertaining to research-based behavior protocol's. Taylor (2011) identified general education and special education professional opportunities to address student behavior, identify problem behavior, replacement behavior, and how to provide interventions for

staff within the classroom environment. However, teachers require targeted training for specialized classrooms that are working with students of self-contained classroom settings that have been provided with general behavioral analysis professional learning and are in need for additional support (Taylor, 2011).

In order for teachers to have the skill set to provide appropriate instruction to students within their specialized classroom programs, they must be best equipped with the tools necessary to instruct and meet the needs of their students each day. Meeting the needs of each individual child involves identifying students social-emotional, functional, and behavioral challenges that they bring with them to school. Collet-Klingenberg et al. (2010) identified evidence-based practices within special education classroom settings; however, they also recognized the implementation phase by the teacher was not generalized into the classroom setting. In order to provide effective research-based strategies within the classroom setting, the transfer of the strategy from isolation needs to occur into the natural environment of the classroom. In this case, the teacher was unable to do so; therefore, an importance aspect of future professional learning would be to implement transfer and follow through of professional learning activities from the classroom teacher are generalized into the classroom to meet the needs of the classroom students (Collet-Klingenberg et al., 2010).

With the intention of supporting teachers in professional growth, administrators provide professional learning opportunities aligned towards teacher practices that benefit their daily role in the classroom setting. As special education classroom teachers, daily challenges occur related to behavioral needs of students, specifically students of early intervention age three through five. Teachers informed administration of professional growth activities they would benefit from participating in, such as use of visuals in the classroom for structured support (Ashbumer et al.,

2018). Additional strategies teachers show interest in include increasing communication in students in special education classroom programs (Behrmann et al., 1998), as well as how to enhance total communication approach including Argumentative Alternative Communication (AAC), sign language, and voice-output devices in their classrooms specifically for students who exhibit challenging behaviors (Mirenda, 2003). Along with communication and increasing student to student engagement, classroom-based strategies on reducing challenging behaviors of students with autism are common professional learning training special education classroom teachers request from their administrators (Coogle et al., 2017).

De-Escalation Strategies

The use of classs-wide and individualized de-escalation techniques and strategies in the classroom is a professional learning topic relevant to special education teachers (Price & Baker, 2012). De-escalation is a research-based behavior intervention strategy that includes specified behavior intervention strategies as methods in the learning environment as proactive and reactive approaches designed to provide an appropriate response to the student and gain students attention back on task (Henninger & Coleman, 2008). Price and Baker (2012) noted that teacher training in de-escalation techniques typically occurs within restraint-training or crisis management training; yet most de-escalation strategies are a universal approach for teachers to address students' behaviors when referencing how to approach, engage, and prompt students within an educational environment while still monitoring student safety.

Rosenman et al. (2017) identified de-escalation strategies as imperative skills to implement when working with students with significant behaviors such as autism, down syndrome, or developmental delays, within the classroom setting, as students with aggressive behaviors can intensify at a rapid rate. The overall goal of de-escalation strategies within a

special education classroom setting is two-fold, both proactive and reactive; yet, classroom teachers implement the strategies in a variety of ways to reduce or avoid student behaviors (Henninger & Coleman, 2008). De-escalation strategies are successful in preventing or decreasing student challenging behaviors; however, teachers trial strategies to identify the appropriate de-escalation technique for an individual student as a class-wide, proactive approach.

Teachers determine the success of an intervention based upon informal assessment of the students behavior during the trialed strategy. Individual interventions are necessary based upon each student's specific needs. Conroy et al. (2008) stated:

Teachers face a variety of classroom behaviors that can detract from the learning process. At times, they may spend so much time with a few students who exhibit disruptive and off-task behaviors that they are less available for academic instruction with all students. (p. 24).

It is crucial for special education classroom teachers to implement class-wide, proactive strategies to promote student appropriate behaviors, on task behavior, and overall engagement in student learning. Taylor (2011) identified behavior intervention strategies as providing teachers with direction in handling student behaviors in their classrooms. Although teachers cannot solve student behavior, through the use of proactive strategies they can lessen the occurrence or avoid situations that lead to a behavior situation in their classroom (Taylor, 2011).

De-escalation strategies include a variety of behavior-based approaches for adults to address students behavior at a phase within the child's escalation cycle (Price & Baker, 2012). De-escalation techniques are used as interventions-based strategies when a student is in a heightened state, such as aggression, verbal tantrum, or unresponsive to adult direction. However, each individual child's cycle of behaviors varies per their individual needs; therefore,

identifying supports for students and proactive strategies both as class-wide and individualized provides teachers with the tools to decrease problematic behaviors from occurring (Price & Baker, 2012).

Proactive Behavior Strategies

To enhance teachers' understanding of de-escalation strategies in the classroom environment, teachers require further discussion on class-wide and individual strategies, follow-up training, and support. Further discussion of de-escalation strategies allows for more in-depth conversation on a topic pertaining to a specific group of teachers, as well as the needs of the teachers for the students in their classrooms. Odom and colleagues (2010) posited, "The research literature seldom describes the implementation of the practices in enough detail for a practitioner to immediately use the practice" (p. 279). Barriers to implementing behavior-based strategies include training, support from administration, and transfer of skills to other adults in the classroom (Odom et al., 2010).

Moore et al. (2017) addressed the need to implement research-based behavior management strategies into the classroom in order to provide teachers with the appropriate skill set to aid students within their classrooms. In addition, Stormont et al. (2007) identified the need for teachers to implement such strategies at an early age, while the children are young enough to shape the behavior through the use of an intervention teachers' provided in the classroom setting. However, as stated by Moore et al. (2017), the administrators need to continually train and support teachers for competence in strategies on topics related to proactive strategies that address student behavior.

De-escalation strategies to address student behavior include modifications to the students environment, feedback or items to the student, removing items, and introducing a prompt or

redirection (Rahn et al., 2017). More specifically, de-escalation strategies include understanding students needs, the use of picture visuals, modeling of behavior expectations, transition items and warnings, and use of tangible items in instruction. Hart and Banda (2010) addressed student picture visual supports for students with significant communication needs. Specifically, Hart and Banda (2010) shared the importance in the use of picture visual supports for a student's ability to communicate their wants and needs, resolve problematic behaviors by intentionally communicating using picture visuals as representation for objects or spoken words. Further, the use of picture visual supports provide students access to tangible items through form of requesting using a picture icon; whereas, without picture visual support students may use different modalities such as signing or emerging spoken language (Hart & Banda, 2010).

Teachers utilize picture visual supports in multiple ways in their classroom instruction to proactively approach student behavior. For example, teachers incorporate picture visual support for unknown items in their classroom to teach comprehension of a new task or skill. Teachers also use picture visuals as communication systems for students requesting or communication refusal in their classrooms. Additionally, picture visual supports are utilized as visual schedules for predictability or as an aid to support in transitions (Bryan & Gast, 2000). Macdonald et al. (2018) recognized the use of visual schedules offer predictability for students during classroom activities and during transitions between activities.

Modeling the exchange of picture visual support and modeling of behavior expectations is a proactive approach to address student behavior in the classroom. Conroy et al. (2008) addressed the benefits of teaching and modeling of appropriate behavior to students as encourage students to comply with behavioral expectations. Further, Moore et al. (2017) discussed the disparity in professional learning of behavior strategies stating, "Simply increasing teachers

knowledge about research-based strategies” (p. 222). Professional learning is more effective for teacher when discussion and dialogue occur on the implementation of strategies and modifications in their classrooms.

Program Change

Professional learning within an educational organization is a way of initiating program change, establishing common practices across an organization, and fostering growth of teachers and staff (Buyse & Hollingsworth, 2009). In addition to the benefits professional learning can have on an organization, professional learning also enhances the personal and professional growth of its individual staff within the organization or district (Dunne, 2002). Dunne (2002) stated “effective professional development experience enhance teachers’ knowledge and content pedagogy within framework of a teacher’s vision for his or her classroom” (Dunne, 2002, p. 68). The designers of professional learning need to look at a variety of factors including students, teachers, classroom environment, curriculum, and assessment. Additionally, Dunne (2002) noted that “state and local policies; available resources; the organizational cultural and structures; and the history of professional development in the school or setting” are all added factors that are relevant to the planning of professional learning activities that designers need to consider. (2002, p. 72).

In order to support teachers in implementing their skills acquired in professional learning, there needs to be administrative guidance as overseen from their supervisors that allows for teachers to enhance their professional craft as teachers. The support and guidance from administration that teachers require throughout this process is from a collaborative or shared process in a transformative leadership style through an organizations system or change that supports a cohesive vision for shared growth. As administrators lead their teachers toward

professional goals throughout the school year, there are fostering their academic career as well as aiding in the benefit for the students the teacher service in their classroom process.

Administrators are then advocating for instructional change in their educational service agency as they create professional learning opportunities that are aligned with teacher preference and designed with a collaboration amongst peers.

Hallinger (2003) referenced the importance of involving teachers in the instructional change process, as stated, “The collaborative processes inherent to the enquiry approach to school improvement offer the opportunity for teachers to study, to learn about, to share and to enact leadership” (p. 340). Rather than in a top-down structure, teachers are part of the approach to improvement as they plan for program change. Further, teachers and administrators work collectively together towards program goals in developing professional learning activities that align to the educational service agency’s vision for program growth. By administrators establishing teacher shared responsibility in their own professional learning, the teachers’ perceptions on their organization have shifted toward an innovation design that instills teacher buy-in, shared ownership, and commitment in the overall program’s success.

Theoretical Framework: A Theory of Professional Learning

One way to foster educational change within an organization is to provide quality professional learning opportunities for staff to enhance their instructional practice. Yet, an obstacle within creating effective professional learning stems from lack of teacher involvement in the planning and implementation of professional activities for teachers within their organization. Lev Vygotsky, social development theorist, identified the importance of first gaining a child’s attention or engagement in a skill, prior to learning, the same occurs within adult learning and professional learning opportunities. Thus, as administrators plan for teachers’

professional learning or in-service trainings, they must elicit buy-in from teachers in order to create program change within the organization (Vygotsky et al., 1997).

Educational learning theories that discuss professional learning and identify how teachers' knowledge is constructed and shared amongst fellow staff within an organization include Systems Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Transformative Learning Theory. The following graphic helps visualize the relationship between these educational theories as they pertain to this study (See Figure 1). The educational theories applied to professional learning and program change highlight the significance of a systematic approach to an organization and how teacher learning can improve professional practice.

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

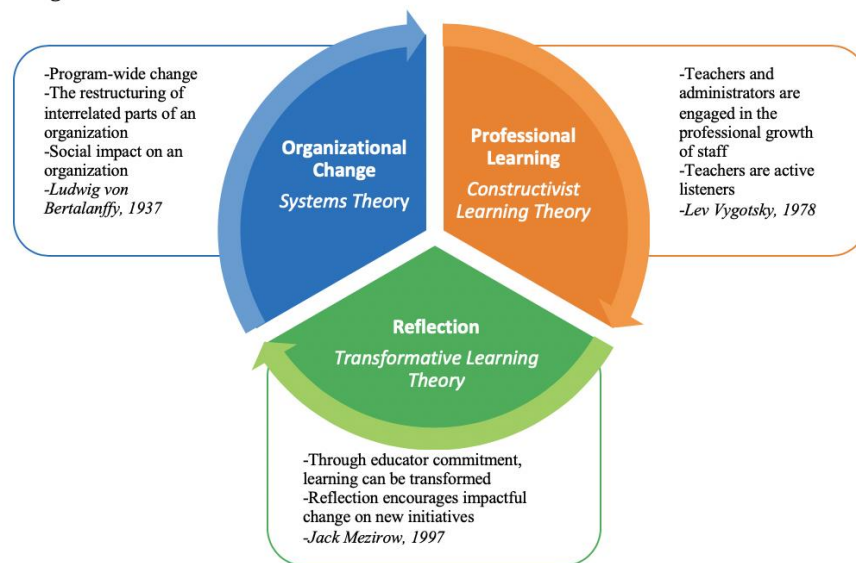


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework. Ludwig von Bertalanffy's System's Theory (1937), Lev Vygotsky's Constructivist Learning Theory (1978), and Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1997) provided the lens to examine teacher reflection in professional learning as a systematic approach to organizational change.

Systems Theory

The first step within fostering educational change within an organization occurs through systematic, program-wide change. Determining a relationship of an organization and how it functions, and identifying a need for program-wide support calls for organizational change or a system-change such as mentioned in systems theory. Ramosaj and Berisha (2014) explained that a systems theory approach provides an organization with necessary steps in moving forward, thus “receiving input from the environment is essential if an organization is to be able to respond effectively to its ever-changing environment” (Ramosaj & Berisha, 2014, p. 60). Vygotsky et al. (1997) stated that education is guided from the social environment. Further Vygotsky and his colleagues (1997) discussed how elements of the social environment can impact the child’s learning. In considering both Vygotsky’s educational psychology theory and systems theory, administrators plan for how social forces impact students and staff environments and learning abilities when planning professional learning. Additionally, Ramosaj and Berisha (2014) addressed systems theory as an “approach to leadership” (p. 59). In order to effectively plan for program-wide change, administrators guide their teachers to identify what impacts them within their own environments (Vygotsky et al., 1997). “In order to understand an organized whole we must know both the part and the relations between them” (Van Betalanffy, 1972, p. 411).

Boylan (2016) identified that one approach to creating organizational change is establishing “educational collaborations” within the program or district. This collaboration, as Boylan (2016) noted, is a “change within the educational system as a whole”; which created a system of supports and collaboration between staff and administration that fosters professional learning and enhances the development of the organizations success towards the achievement of their new vision and goals (p. 2). By viewing an organization from a systems theory approach,

the leadership team has the ability to make impactful change by interacting with the teachers and staff involved in the planning process. Moreover, systems theory aids in the understanding of analyzing your organization and designing an approach using reflection, establishing areas for program change (Boylan, 2016).

Banathy (1991) stated:

We have yet to envision a new image of education based on a new design that can guide education into the twenty-first century. Rather than creating a new design in the course of the last decade, we invested much effort and many resources to “fix” a system that was wholly outdated...we should dream about systems of education that never were and make our dreams come true by design (p. 84).

Administration created previous forms of professional learning using reactive approaches to solve problems, answer questions, or uphold demands. Yet, a proactive approach to teacher professional learning suggests a change with the design and implementation of professional learning sessions.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Within professional learning, the concept of staff development and constructivist learning is similar to Vygotsky’s approach to cognitive development of how children cooperate and learn through social interaction, including collaboration with peers who are often more skilled than they are in an area of play. Vygotsky et al. (1997) stated that “the student’s personal experience becomes the fundamental basis of pedagogical work” (p. 47). As suggested by Vygotsky and his colleagues (1997), the students’ experiences allow for them to grow within that area or skills set; thus, students require less guidance or support from a teacher. In professional learning, as staff

learn additional information there is also less administrative oversight and guidance as they develop mastery in a skill or trade (Vygotsky et al., 1997).

In order for education administrators to create professional learning that fosters professional growth they identify activities that will engage their staff within the learning to make impactful change. Kinnucan-Welsch (2007) explained the constructivist theory of learning, stating how “individuals make meaning of the world through an ongoing interaction between what they already know and believe and what they experience” (p. 271). As Kinnucan-Welsch (2007) further explained, through a combination of knowledge and experience that teachers create a deeper understanding of an identified topic; however, a true comprehension of the experience emerges once an additional opportunity to analyze the experience occurs. Overall, constructivist learning is making meaning of the learning that has occurred (Richardson, 1997).

Kinnucan-Welsch (2007) described how professional learning activities can be constructed from teachers and staff through “interactions with the environment as individuals and as members of groups” (Kinnucan-Welsch, 2007, p. 271). Further, Kinnucan-Welsch (2007) advocated that within the constructivist learning theory, “teachers as learners must be central to the design of professional development...acknowledge[s] teachers are learners, and provide ample and meaningful experiences through which they can construct their own understanding of the content of the professional development” (Kinnucan-Welsch, 2007, p. 281). As teachers develop and understand new meaning of their professional learning experiences, they can relate their practices into their classroom instruction and create positive, program-wide change.

Based on the constructivist learning theory and Vygotsky’s educational psychology theory, teachers utilize their prior knowledge to base the topic on experiences, and construct meaning to develop input for professional learning trainings (Davidov et al., 1997). Additionally,

Vygotsky and Kozulin (1986) stated the importance of dialogue for adults when learning. Through continual communication in the planning and implementation of professional learning and follow up reflection activities, teachers and administrators are utilizing their experiences to build upon their learning and continually construct new program initiatives (Vygotsky and Kozulin, 1986).

Transformative Learning Theory

When planning for professional learning, a systems approach allows for input from teachers on past practice and feedback on how to enhance future training. With staff being participants involved in the developmental process of planning professional learning activities, they utilize transformative learning theory to reflect and offer new initiatives. Wenger (1999) identified components of community that can occur in a reflection such as the transformative learning conversation, including mutual engagement between members participating in the discussion, joint expertise, and shared repertoire. Additionally, Wenger (1999) expressed the components of a community uphold accountability, as well as shared practice for all members participating in the reflection (Wenger, 1999).

Merriam (2004) explained through the process of transformative theory we look beyond what we already know about the topic and into the inner significance or process of learning. Further, Merriam (2004) described transformative learning as reflection on the experience of professional learning. As transformative learning theory encourages teachers to not only be reflective but connect their experiences and discuss how they could impact new perspectives, it is critical that teachers and administrators hold collaborative discussion to focus on future professional learning for targeted areas of improvement. To foster purposeful professional learning for teachers and staff, administration involves teachers in the planning process and

sustains their engagement by creating opportunities for real-world experiences in their practice. As administrators create a purpose to sustain the engagement of staff through experiences that are relative to their classroom practices this generates motive behind their efforts and additional collaboration in the process (Merriam, 2004).

The focus of transformative learning lends toward boarder program shifts. Taylor and Merriam stated, "Toward greater interest in factors that shape the transformative experience" (2008, p. 10). It is the responsibility of administrators to create new opportunities for professional growth to further educators process of transformative learning. By creating new opportunities for professional learning, teachers will transform their experience and explore new perspectives of development in their own education.

Mezirow (1997) noted transformative learning occurs through the adult learning process as "we learn together by analyzing the related experience of others to arrive at a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present themselves" (p. 7). Adult learners transform their knowledge of known skills from previous experiences, practice self-reflection and develop new experiences to make personal connections. Further, Mezirow (1997) acknowledged transformative learning theory involves a "social process, and discourse becomes central to making meaning" (p. 10). In professional learning, educator dialogue of shared experiences and discussion on reflective experience is critical to enhance their practice in the classroom. Further, the teachers understanding of their experience heightens in transformative learning through the social engagement with colleagues, promoting an environment for sharing and learning from each other's experiences (Mezirow, 1997).

Summary

In order to create purposeful program change educational agencies provide rigorous professional learning designed to enhance teachers' skill set and improve overall instruction to students. Voogt et al. (2015) stated, "Teachers are agents of change, engaged in the creation of curricular activities and materials to improve student learning. As the teachers interact in their design communities, they share knowledge, exchange perspectives and tap into each other's expertise" (p. 262). In order to foster system-wide change, there is a need to providing teachers with the opportunity to construct their own learning goals, collaborate on program initiatives, and develop sustained investment through partnership in developing professional learning opportunities. By developing communities of practice to create participation amongst staff members for professional learning, administration creates a culture for learning, a community of fellow professionals to share experiences, instills the notion of connection and teacher buy-in to begin intentional personal growth (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

There are many benefits of a collaborative professional learning approach were between administration and teachers utilized to bring about school or program-wide change (Darling et al., 2009). Saclarides and Lubienski (2018) stated, "a blended approach where teachers have the opportunity to select the topics they would like to focus on...to initiate professional development with teachers and more actively shape their learning opportunities" (p. 58). Specifically, in professional learning for early childhood special education teachers, my research aligns with Buysse and Hollingsworth's (2009) study regarding program quality for professional learning for practitioners. Additionally, Buysse and Hollingsworth (2009) further analyzed the quality of professional learning teachers were provided, as a result of the increasing number of students with special education needs in their educational organization. There is a need for teachers to

participate in professional learning and training opportunities in order to provide quality instruction within the classroom environment (Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009).

Reflecting back to teachers needs, providing professional learning based upon teacher need not only increase teacher engagement in the learning, but also sustains teacher professional growth to foster student achievement. Once the teachers' skills are transferred back into the classroom, the goal of program-wide change is for teachers to actively reflect on their teaching and initiate future discussion on the learning of overall system change (Buysse & Hollingsworth, 2009). As an ongoing process of collaborative discussion, creating professional learning amongst administrative and teachers is imperative to establish communication and professional, trusting relationship between administration and teachers (Saclarides & Lubienski, 2018).

Chapter III

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers' perceptions of professional learning impact their instruction in specialized classroom settings. Further, this study analyzed how teachers implemented the strategies from targeted, administrator-delivered, professional learning opportunities within their organization.

In this chapter, I introduce the case study methodology that I employed in my research design. I share the research questions and explain the details of my research design, including the participants, the setting, and the qualitative instruments that I used during the study. Additionally, I discuss the data analysis and how the data is interpreted to identify my case study results. Finally, I address the threats and limitations to the research study.

Case Study Research Design

Teacher experiences of professional learning derives from teacher provided narratives and personal experiences of early intervention classroom teachers' professional learning perspectives on implementation and reflection of professional learning opportunities. Case study methodology allows for an "in-depth examination of a particular case or several cases" (Lichtman, 2013, p. 90). While Lichtman (2013) stated that case studies "do not have sufficient breadth to make generalizations" in regard to a case that is representative to other cases (p. 92). The purpose of this case study was not to make broad generalizations, but rather to investigate the professional learning experiences of a small, select group of teachers.

Through this research I seek to fill a gap in the literature pertaining to teacher perceptions of professional learning and implementation of learning strategies in order to gain a deeper understanding of how to create meaningful experiences for teachers that will foster professional

growth and development and make impactful program change to support the progress of students within their classroom.

The purpose of this study was to investigate changes in an organization's system of delivery professional learning to early childhood teachers. This study examined teachers' perceptions on professional learning and professional learning opportunities administrators delivered from to teachers in their organization. Additionally, this study examined how teachers implemented strategies from professional learning trainings within the classroom and the follow up from professional learning that is provided to teachers after training sessions.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate possible changes in an organization's system of delivery of professional learning to early childhood teachers. The research question that guided this study was: How do early intervention classroom teachers utilize professional learning strategies within their classrooms to enhance system-wide needs?

Three sub-questions guided this study:

1. What are early childhood special education teachers' perceptions of professional learning?
2. How do teachers implement professional learning strategies in their instructional practice?
3. What are the barriers early intervention special education teachers encounter when implementing new instruction into the classroom?
4. In what ways do special education teachers receive support from administrators to implement professional learning in early intervention classrooms?

Participants

The target population for this study was early childhood, special education classroom teachers who have an interest in professional growth. For the purpose of this study, the participants were teachers of early intervention students ages 3 through 5 years old who exhibit a developmental delay of at least 25% or exhibit a disability and require specially designed instruction. All of the teachers are educators within the local education agency and provide specialized education services tailored to meet children's individualized educational needs, within their classroom programs.

The targeted population of early childhood, special education classroom teachers have teaching experience background in early childhood education and special education instruction for children in pre-Kindergarten to sixth grade. All participants within this study are female. Although names of participants within this study were kept confidential, pseudonyms were assigned to each teacher participant to allow the researcher to analyze teacher responses.

The classroom teacher participants in this study oversee multiple adult staff within their classroom programs. Each early childhood, special education classroom encompasses a contracted teacher assistant staff and related service providers such as, Speech and Language Pathologists, Occupational Therapists, Physical Therapists, and Behavior Analysts. All classroom staff are under the supervision of the regional program administrator; however, educational agency program administrators are not on site in the classrooms on a daily basis. Therefore, the classroom teacher is the only educational agency staff member in the classroom.

Description of Setting

The setting for this study was a local educational service agency in mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The educational community meets a largely populated city and serves a rural

population. The educational service agency provides academic, school-based services for surrounding public and private schools, as well as individual students that reside within the county.

The local educational service agency setting provides itinerant preschool, special education services and services in classroom locations within the remote locations throughout the county. The setting for this study included 4 separate classroom locations. From the participating classroom teachers, 3 of the 6 classroom locations were at one building location; the additional 3 classroom locations were at separate locations throughout the county. The special education classroom environments included classrooms within elementary schools; yet, the classroom operates under the direction of the educational agency, not the school district authority.

Procedures

In order for data collection to begin, necessary permissions were obtained from West Chester University Institutional Review Board (IRB). I was granted permission to begin to conduct research in October 2019, per the approval from West Chester University IRB (See Appendix A). The procedure for my research began in November 2019, starting with a brief information session with 10 early childhood, special education classroom teachers within the local education service agency and lasted approximately 15 minutes.. I provided the teachers with information regarding the investigation, frequency of professional learning provided, frequency of observations to occur, time requirement needed for participation, and consent forms to participate within the investigation. I informed the teachers of the two professional learning sessions they would attend in the upcoming weeks, as well as the follow up observations of the classroom that would occur as part of the study. Approximately a week after this discussion, I

visited each of the classroom teachers and provided each teacher with a copy of the teacher consent form (See Appendix B). Six specialized classroom teachers agreed to participate in this study by signing and returning their teacher consent form.

In early-November, I contacted the parents of the participating teachers' students by phone and provided follow up information via mail. I had access to parents' contact information through the local education service agency referral-record system. I spoke with each family individually to explain the participation in the study using a script to provide consistent information to all families (See Appendix C). Over the phone, I discussed information regarding the investigation and the parental consent form they would need to return for student participation in the study (See Appendix D). During the phone conversation, I explained the consent form to the family in addition to the rationale for the research study.

In mid-November 2019, a group of participating teachers participated in the first professional learning session. The professional learning session occurred on a Friday afternoon between the hours of 12:30 PM and 3:30 PM at the local education agency (See Appendix E). At the end of the professional learning session, each participant teacher completed an exit survey (See Appendix F).

After the completion of the first professional learning session, follow-up observations of classroom instruction occurred for each of the teacher participants in their classroom environments. I visited each classroom environment 2 times for approximately 30-minute observations of each classroom teacher during each visit. The observations occurred during mid November 2019 until the first week in December 2019. By the first week in December 2019, I observed all teachers' participants two times in their classrooms.

The second professional learning session occurred in early December 2019. All teacher participants attended the follow up professional learning session on a Friday afternoon between the hours of 12:30 PM and 3:30 PM at the local education agency (See Appendix G). At the end of the professional learning session, each participant teacher completed the second sessions exit survey. The survey was again in a web-based format, consisting of fifteen questions. I utilized the exit survey data to gather comparative data from the first professional learning session to the second session. The second exit survey consisted of similar questions regarding professional learning strategies, implementing strategies into the classroom setting, accommodating strategies to meet students' needs, and teacher perceptions of professional learning. However, the second exit survey is a summative survey of the overall professional learning teachers received in both sessions (See Appendix H).

After the completion of the professional learning session, a second round of follow-up observations of classroom instruction occurred during early to mid- December 2019, for each of the teacher participants in their classroom environments. I visited each classroom environment 2 additional times for approximately 25 minute observations of each classroom teacher. During the classroom observations I continued to use the Observation Protocol (See Appendix I). All classroom observations were recorded using a voice recording app to allow for the observation to be transcribed at a later time and analyzed for themes.

After completing the final round of observations of the classroom programs, I conducted individual interviews with each of the participating classroom teachers in order to solicit additional information related to professional learning and system-wide change. For the individual interviews, I asked each teacher the same five questions pertaining to their perception of professional learning (See Appendix K). These interviews were held in each individual

teacher's classroom, with each interview approximately 15 to 45 minutes in length. All teacher exit interviews were recorded using a voice recording app to allow for the interview to be transcribed at a later time and analyzed for themes.

Qualitative Instrumentation

There were several qualitative instruments I utilized throughout this study to gather ample amount of information pertaining to teachers' perceptions of professional learning from training sessions. The use of multiple qualitative instruments allowed for different insights into classroom teachers interpretation of professional learning. As Stake (1995) stated, "Much of what we cannot observe for ourselves has been or is being observed by others" (p. 64). As qualitative research involves merging together a series of representations to make meaning of the findings, I collected multiple aspects of qualitative information to analyze into themes (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Exit Survey

The web-based, 15 question survey (Appendix F& H) that teachers completed as part of the exit ticket for their professional learning session included the following:

- Three questions regarding teacher input on the implementation of professional learning topics provided;
- Three questions regarding teacher collaboration with fellow teachers or administration;
- Three questions regarding teacher comfortability accommodating curriculum for students with special needs within their classrooms;
- Three questions regarding teacher satisfaction with support provided by fellow teachers, administration, and therapists;

- Three open-ended response questions tailored specifically to the vision-aligned components of student success within the classroom.

Classroom Observations

After each session of professional learning, I conducted classroom observations for each of the participating classroom teachers to observe the strategies presented in the training sessions. During the classroom observations, I utilized a Classroom Observation Protocol to informally assess the teachers' presentation of the strategies in the classroom setting (Appendix I).

Individual Teacher Interviews

The individual teacher interviews occurred as semi-structured interviews with each of the classroom teachers. The semi-structured interviews allowed for a list of predetermined questions to be prepared to guide the conversation, but also the ability to “unfold in a conversational manner offering participants the chance to explore issues they feel are important” (Longhurst, 2003, p. 103). Individual Teacher Interview Questions (Appendix K) provided each classroom teacher with the opportunities to answer guided questions on their perceptions of professional learning, perspectives on implementation of professional learning strategies, and barriers to implementation and follow up of professional opportunities provided from administration or their individual classroom structure.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a constant comparative method, first coding the data then analyzing the information to identify an overall theory. I completed the data analysis in a series of stages, comparing applicable categories and data properties with the qualitative data obtained from the observations of the classroom teachers, as well as the individual interviews. The

constant comparative analysis allows to make meaning of the anecdotal information (Glaser, 1965).

The first step in the data analysis process involved transcribing all teacher observations and interviews. Then, using the constant comparative method I analyzed teacher transcriptions of classroom observations, teacher exit surveys, and professional learning exit survey responses in *Dedoose*. As I reviewed the transcriptions, I began to note themes throughout teachers' responses and observations based on the data. Through continual data analysis, the themes emerged into categories and ultimately led to the themes of this study's results (Glaser, 1965).

Threats and Limitations

As an insider-researcher, I had a "greater understanding of the culture being studied" (Unluer, 2012, p. 1). However, being an insider-researcher can also lead to tensions within my research, including possible biases or neutrality in specific topics relating to the professional learning within my study and practices occurring with the classroom setting.

As Denzin and Lincoln (2003) considered the importance of how a "qualitative researcher is aware of and sensitive to the way his or her own history shapes a study," the method that I chose to conduct my research was as a result of my knowledge and personal experience of working with this specific type of special education classroom (p. 165). I have personal experience working with Autistic Support students and prior knowledge of professional learning activities that have been beneficial to my reflective practice and professional growth as an educator; therefore, I find it very important to disclose my connection within my research. I am aware of the importance of my history and personal connection to the way it shapes my methodology and approach to the research design. Within this qualitative research study, I outlined the importance of providing professional learning to special education teachers and the

impacts of professional learning on student achievement in regard to areas of needed additional training or support to instruct students with low-incidence disabilities within their classrooms (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

Qualitative research allows for stories from individual participants to gain personal and social experience; yet tensions occur within individual participants that create strains in the research that could impact the outcomes. Tanase and Wang (2010) stated, “These differences in their initial epistemological beliefs were directly related to their initial ideas of teaching and shapes to what extend they could change their epistemological beliefs about teaching in this classroom” (p. 1246). Further, they shared that “preservice teachers brought different kinds of epistemological beliefs with different levels of strength into teacher education classrooms, which can be consistent with or contradictory to what teacher educators try to teach in their classrooms, and which shape their specific ideas and practice of teaching” (2010, p. 1247). Ultimately, participants shared experiences vary depending on their background, personal, and professional development; thus, teachers’ instruction and perception of professional growth is truly diverse. Although personal teacher experience and difference in teacher beliefs leaves availability for threat to research, trends from teacher responses from interview questions and exit surveys will be analyzed for information on common themes amongst the classroom teachers.

Summary

In this chapter, I acknowledged the purpose of my research design as a case study approach to identified early childhood, special education teachers’ perceptions of professional learning in educational service agency. In this chapter, I described my participants as well as the various settings in which data was collected in my research study. By using a case study design, I included multiple qualitative instruments within my research to gatherer data from various

perspectives, triangulate the data, and compile themes within the research. In the next chapter, I will review the identified data collected from my study and summarize the results and findings from the professional learning sessions, observations, and individual interviews.

Chapter IV

Results

The purpose of this study was to investigate teachers' perceptions of a professional learning experience. This study examined how to create meaningful experience for teachers that will foster professional growth and make impactful program-wide change to support the teacher and student progress. In this chapter, I present the findings of an investigation of six teachers' perceptions and applications of engaged professional learning. The results are compiled from 2 professional learning sessions; 12 teacher exit surveys; 4 teacher observations per teacher, a total of 24 teacher observations; and 6 individual teacher interviews. Once all data collection was complete, I utilized the constant comparative method to analyze the data and code all qualitative instruments (Glaser, 1965). Four major themes emerged from the data analysis, revealing that early childhood, special education teachers (a) perceive of professional learning to be enlightening in a collaborative environment with job-alike staff, (b) implement professional learning strategies successfully when provided applicable training, (c) perceive that barriers to professional learning arise when additional training on a topic is needed, and (d) perceive administrative support to be essential to the development and follow-through of professional learning sessions.

Perceptions of Professional Learning

During teacher exit surveys and individual teacher interviews, teachers were specifically asked questions pertaining to their perception of professional learning that their educational service agency provided in the past. Additionally, teachers were asked their current perception of professional learning, based on the professional learning sessions that I provided and as a result of this study. Based on the data collection, three sub-themes emerged from teachers' perceptions

of professional learning: (a) teacher collaboration with other teachers, (b) teachers gathering new ideas during professional learning sessions, and (c) teacher validation of their instruction.

Collaborate with Other Teachers

Collaborating with other teachers in the same classroom teacher role or similar teacher role allowed for teachers to share resources, discuss current situations, and create dialogue on important topics in their classrooms. This discussion provided a shared space for teacher engagement in each other's instruction and conversation on the professional learning topic of student behavior. Amanda indicated, "I think it was really helpful for us to really collaborate and answer to those questions. Sometimes you don't, you know, have all the answers but someone might. I think that collaboration was really, really helpful" (Exit Interview).

Teachers identified that collaborating in a small group on topics relating to teacher and student needs was beneficial to their learning. Kara noted, "The small group format of our professional development, I think was my favorite thing about it" (Exit Interview). McKenzie further affirmed the small group, job-alike setting was conducive environment for professional learning, indicating, "The collaboration with everyone was great!" (Exit Survey 2). Colleen echoed this sentiment noting that the most beneficial part of the professional learning was the "opportunities to collaborate with colleagues" (Exit Survey 1). Kara further affirmed the most beneficial part of the professional learning sessions was "collaborating with fellow teachers and troubleshooting behaviors" (Exit Survey 2). Kara noted the importance of the collaborative discussion that occurred in the professional learning sessions, stating, "I feel like that [collaborative discussion] doesn't normally happen in professional development. We're missing that discussion component. Or like we have it, but it's not applicable" (Exit Interview).

All teachers indicated the benefits of the collaborating with colleagues in a small group setting as part of the professional learning session. Additionally, all teachers noted what they perceived to be positive outcomes of collaborating with colleagues about intervention strategies and serving as resource for one other. During her exit interview, Kara shared her perception of the professional learning sessions:

I think that it was, and a common consensus amongst all of the teachers here was that it [collaborating with other teachers] was really, really helpful. Probably one of the most helpful professional developments that we've done. Just the collaborative, like the collaborative piece of it; I think was probably the most beneficial part. But like we also, it's not like we were just like coming in and talking, like you were leading the discussion and we were talking about a very specific topic.

The teachers within this study identified collaboration as a beneficial component of professional learning. Within the context of the teachers' perceptions of professional learning themes, teachers' gathering of new ideas emerged as an additional subtheme in their perception of professional learning.

Gathering New Ideas

Teachers gained new ideas geared towards classroom strategies to support their instruction. Colleen shared that she gathered new ideas such as "individual strategies to improve/support students behavior within the classroom" (Exit Survey 2). By having the opportunity to collaborate with fellow teachers in a small group discussion, the teachers were able to discuss specific behavior strategies that were relevant to each of their classrooms. Additionally, they shared behavior intervention strategies and discussed possible strategies to try

within their classroom instruction. Colleen conferred, “We could gain resources and things from each other, our peers. I love how we could...just the general discussion” (Exit Interview).

Teachers shared new ideas and tangible items as resources and intervention strategies during the professional learning sessions included in this study. The strategies included practical, immediate practices to implement into their instruction. As a result, teachers reported that they benefited from a concise list of strategies to trial in their instruction. For example, Amanda stated, “I think giving us like tangible things like here, try this. Not just like explaining it...I think you gave us some good tangible things to use. Because sometimes it’s hard for us, then come back, create whatever we need to make and then implement it” (Exit Interview). As teachers gained new ideas from the professional learning sessions through discussion and collaboration with fellow classroom teachers, they had the opportunity to implement new strategies within their practice.

Teacher perceptions of professional learning included the subthemes of collaborating with other teachers and gathering new ideas. In addition, a third subtheme was identified including teacher validation. Teacher validation emerged as a subtheme of teachers’ perceptions of professional learning as teachers affirmed their instruction through collaborative dialogue with their colleagues. Teachers in this study perceive the positive outcome of professional learning sessions with other classroom teachers to engage in discussion and support their instructional practice.

Teacher Validation

A third theme identified in teachers’ perception of professional learning is teacher validation of instructional practices. Teacher experience of the professional learning sessions, implementation of strategies, and confirmation of teacher success of instruction in the classroom

was observed or documented teacher validation. Amanda elaborated validation of her instruction once she shared resources with colleagues noting, “I gave some of them my Circle Time [strategy]” (Exit Interview). Colleen shared validation relating to professional learning sessions, stating, “It [validation of instructional practice] allows me to come back here and implement those things that I’ve heard. And it makes for a more positive experience. It makes it that I actually learned from the professional development, I’m actually getting something good” (Exit Interview).

In mid-December, the second professional learning session occurred to follow up on teacher implementation of class-wide and individualized, proactive behavior strategies. Teachers shared their perceived benefits of the second professional learning session as time to discuss their interventions such as McKenzie, stating, “When we talked about specific behaviors, we were able to come back and kind of look at that [professional learning strategy implemented]” (Exit Interview). Lyndsey indicated the discussion with colleagues on relevant topics made the professional learning sessions appear “feeling validated for how we are feeling” (Exit Survey 2). Further, Colleen shared the importance of professional learning as “topics related to teacher/student need” (Exit Survey 2). Colleen later shared, “I’ve definitely seen a difference,” validating the interventions she utilized from the professional learning sessions were beneficial to her instruction in the classroom (Exit Interview).

Implementation of Professional Learning Strategies

A second theme emerged from the data analysis of this study involving teacher implementation of tangible, practical professional learning strategies. These strategies clustered into two subthemes: (a) class-wide professional learning strategies and (b) individual professional learning strategies. The implementation of class-wide instructional strategies

included proactive strategies to support class-wide student positive behavior. While the implementation of individualized instructional strategies included behavior support strategies to prevent or de-escalate student behavior.

During first professional learning session of this study, an administrator facilitated session on de-escalation strategies, teachers learned proactive strategies to implement within their classrooms to provide supports to students' sensory, behavior, processing, and communication needs. Proactive strategies are beneficial to incorporate within special education classrooms specifically to attempt to reduce or avoid the occurrence of a student's problematic or challenging behavior. Additionally, teachers engaged in discussion on de-escalation strategies such as individual strategies to address students' needs when behavior is exhibited in the classroom, including positive and consistent direction and offering students choices to accessible items.

During the second professional learning session, teachers discussed successes and challenges within their individual classroom environments regarding the use of proactive and de-escalation strategies. The second professional learning session was a collaborative discussion on identifying the function of student behavior, individual challenging behaviors in teachers' classrooms, and how to support students with the tools necessary to communicate needs instead of exhibiting behaviors. The professional learning strategies observed during teacher observations included the use of picture visuals, use of timer, modeling of behavior expectations, visuals for classroom transitions, and use of tangible items in instruction.

Picture Visuals

Picture visuals are photographs, drawings, written words, or letters symbolizing a way of enhancing student communication. Picture visuals are a visual support to promote student

independence with transitions, completion of activities, or offering student access to items.

Picture visual supports assist students in visual representation of expected behaviors, provide meaning to abstract concepts, and break down tasks into small components using picture sequencing. Using picture visuals in the classroom setting can provide students with prior warning of upcoming tasks or activities and less reliance on adult support.

Picture Visuals as a Class-Wide Strategy. The most often observed class-wide strategy to support students was the use of picture visual support within the classroom. For instance, Amanda utilized picture visuals in a whole-group environment by using a visual schedule during her Circle Time routine. Amanda frequently utilized this visual picture schedule as part of her instruction in Circle Time with directives such as, “It’s time for days of the week,” or “Students name’s [activity] is all done” (Observation 3). McKenzie similarly displayed a picture schedule within her classroom near the classroom door for students and staff to be aware of the entire day’s activities. McKenzie incorporated the class-wide strategy during transitions, drawing attention to the visual schedule and stating the time of the next activity in the sequence (Observation 4).

Teachers in this study utilized class-wide picture visuals as arrival routines, posted near student cubby’s as an unpack task analysis when they entered the classroom. During Amanda’s first observation, she gesturally prompted the student as they arrived in the classroom to look at the picture visual on the wall of their picture and name, displayed about the student’s backpack hook. Amanda monitored the student as they began to unpack, providing additional gestural cues to the pictures to ensure the student placed their items in their assigned space (Observation 1).

Teachers also utilized picture visual supports to support students in classroom activities, following through on routines, making choices, and accessing instructional or play materials.

During the lesson, Lyndsey provided three picture visuals to a student: toys & games, walk, and blocks while stating, “Do you want to go to “toys & games,” for a walk, or go to blocks?” The student touched the toys & games picture visual. In response to which Lyndsey replied, “Toys and games. Alright, let’s go. Let’s go find it” (Observation 2). Teacher implementation of class-wide picture visual supports offer students the ability engage with their teachers and peers and an increased opportunity for teachers to facilitate functional communication for students.

Picture Visuals as an Individualized Student Strategy. Lauren utilized the individualized strategy of implementing picture visuals to allow opportunity to accessible items during Circle Time routine. Lauren stated, “[Student], you’re sitting so nicely. What song do you want to sing?” Lauren provided the student with an array of three picture visuals. The student picked the picture visual of ABCs Song. Lauren provided gestural support to place the ABC song picture on the Velcro strip. The implementation of this individualized strategy provided the student with choice to available options, but also allowed the teacher to maintain instructional control by providing appropriate options, pertaining to the Circle Time lesson.

Lyndsey utilized a picture visual of “all done” during her circle time routine. As the final activity concluded at circle time, Lyndsey presented herself in front of each child and presented the “all done” picture icon. Lyndsey additionally used another visual picture of “pour” in picture representation, to a small group of students during a special activity. The picture visual support was beneficial to utilize for individual students during this activity to prompt to the task the students were expected to complete. Additionally, teacher use of individualized picture visuals during a group activity decreased adult verbal cues instead replacing a verbal cue with a gestural cue to the picture visual support at the table when students were asked to pour items into the bowl (Observation 4).

The use of individualized picture visual supports in the classroom allow for specific direction, cues, or communication to students during instruction. Individualized picture supports provide students with more opportunities to communicate independently and engaging in reciprocal communication with teachers. Further, teacher implementation of picture visuals as an individualized strategy encourages students to respond, participate in activities, and remain engaged in instruction.

Use of Timer

A timer is a beneficial tool to utilize in a special education classroom setting to indicate transitions between activities, increase student on-task behavior, and to promote independence in student completion of preferred or non-preferred tasks. A timer is a moveable, visual or analogy clock utilized to help students with learning time segments within the school day. Visual timers include a light up, tiered colored timer that provides students with the ability to view how much time is left without a countdown of time accessible to the student. Use of timers keeps the pacing of instruction on track in the classroom, as well as ensures students have an allotted transition or transition warning prior to the next task. Timers can be motivating for students, as they are able to visualize or tell the amount of time before a known transition, as well as encouraging to continue tasks or work until end of completion of timer.

Use of Timer as a Class-Wide Strategy. During classroom observations, teachers used timers as a successful class-wide professional learning strategy. Teacher's implemented the timer within their small group settings, primarily as a tool for warning of when students would transition from one center, interest area, or rotation to the next. Both Colleen and Lauren consistently used the timer within their classroom instruction as a tool for time management, setting the timer once students arrived in their stations for a 15-minute period (Observation 4).

Using a timer as a class-wide strategy allowed for teachers to set a timer, begin instruction, then once the timer sounded the students and staff knew the rotation ended. Yet, Lyndsey and McKenzie also provided warning prior to a timer sounding for the 15-minute rotation ending. For instance, Lyndsey utilized her iPhone as a visual timer, presenting the timer to the student and stated, “Two more minutes” (Observation 1). Colleen echoed the transition timer warning during her instruction by providing multiple warnings to the end of a session rotation such as, “Four minutes”, “Two minutes”, and “Minute and a half” (Observation 2).

Teachers also implemented a timer within their instruction as a cue their own instruction for verbal prompts needed in the classroom. Colleen utilized a timer within her classroom instruction as a cue to call-out with a verbal prompt to the entire class. In Colleen’s third observation, the timer sounded then Colleen indicated, “Time to switch” (Observation 3). Colleen consistently implemented the class-wide strategy during her fourth observation, declaring, “Time to switch” once the timer sounded then assisted the student in transitioning to their next station (Observation 4). Kara echoed the use of the timer in her classroom instruction. During all of Kara’s observations, she continually used the timer during classroom instruction, setting the timer for a 15-minute rotation, calling out to students and staff when the timer sounded, then re-setting the timer as a transition tool and also to assist her with time management (Observations 1-4).

Teachers used timers as a class-wide strategy for classroom management during instruction to identify time between transitions. Teachers also utilized timers as transition warnings for staff and students to indicate time remaining in a session. The use of a timer as a class-wide strategy provided teachers with a tool for learning time segments and assist in student completion of activities and sessions.

Use of Timer as an Individualized Student Strategy. During the first professional learning session as part of this study, Kara expressed concern regarding an individual student's behavior in transitioning from a preferred toy. Kara shared the student exhibits inappropriate behavior when an analog timer sounds in the classroom to transition from the preferred item to a non-preferred task. During the second professional learning session, teachers had access to physical items pertaining to the proactive behavior strategies from the session, to take back to their classrooms to trial as interventions for students. Kara trialed a visual, light-up timer for students who was not responding to a count-down timer as currently utilized in the classroom. She immediately implemented the visual, light-up timer into her instruction after the Professional Learning Sessions for students in her rotation, Kara shared, "I've been using [timer] in my Play and Mand sessions" (Exit Interview). Kara's identified the visual timer was successful in her teacher-led rotations called Play and Mand, where she incorporated the timer within her instruction. The use of the visual timer allowed for Kara to continue her instruction within the rotation with less verbal cues to the students as the visual timer provided a warning in green, yellow, and red light of when their time was complete with a preferred item or completion of activity. The use of a timer as a transition warning for students and staff in the classroom was a class-wide strategy discussed during the Professional Learning Sessions provided as part of this study.

Kara additionally provided verbal cues to the student with prompts to the visual timer, stating, "Ok, [Student], we are going to be all done playing with the doggie when the light goes to red. We will be all done doggie when the light goes to red, then we will find something else to play with" (Observation 4). Kara later stated to the student in her session when the timer lit up red, "Ok, [Student], all done doggie. All done doggie. What do you want to play with next?"

(Observation 4). Teacher implementation of timers as an individualized strategy provided students with a support for expected behavior in the classroom. The use of timers for individualized students offered specific expectations for students to follow in the classroom, proactively addressing students' behavior.

Modeling of Behavior Expectations

Teacher modeling of expected behavior is a proactive strategy utilized in special education environments to creating student understanding of unknown, abstract, or challenging tasks or directions. Modeling of tasks is a teacher practice that involves teaching students the task analysis or structure of a longer task, as well as identifying steps in a sequence of a task that a student needs specific directions in order to complete. Specific to student behavior, modeling of expectations includes an adult exhibiting the desired or expected action in order to enlist a similar response from the student. Often, modeling of behavior expectations is delivered in combination with adult verbal or visual cues as additional individualized support for students.

Modeling of Behavior Expectations as a Class-Wide Strategy. The class-wide strategy of modeling of appropriate behavior expectations was observed in small group and large group settings in the classroom observations. Lyndsey utilized a class-wide strategy of modeling of appropriate language in the classroom. In a play station session, Lyndsey used modeling of behavior expectations during a tabletop activity when a student abruptly stood from the table. Lyndsey affirmed, "You want to be all done. Say, I am all done", and then modeled the language 'all done' on the students Augmentative Alternative Communication (AAC) device as well as verbalized 'all done' aloud. By Lyndsey providing a model of requesting to be all done with an activity, the student was then able to repeat the model and state "all done" using their AAC device to appropriately request to conclude the activity (Observation 2).

Teacher modeling of behavior expectations also occurred during whole-group classroom instruction. Amanda modeled appropriate behavior expectations during Circle Time activity. For instance, Amanda instructed students to place their hands on their lap and students did not comply with the directive. Therefore, Amanda modeled the behavior expectation of putting her hands on her lap to show students the appropriate behavior. As Amanda paired the verbal cue with the model of the expected behavior, the students were able to perform the action of hands on their lap during circle time (Observation 4).

Modeling of expected behaviors is a proactive, class-wide strategy to engage students' attention in activities and following expectations. Teacher use of modeling of behavior expectations provides routine and efficiency in procedures in the classroom. The use of modeling of expected behavior as a class-wide strategy also allows students to learn from others in the classroom that are following along with the teacher's directive and exhibiting appropriate behaviors.

Modeling of Behavior Expectations as an Individualized Student Strategy. Modeling appropriate behavior expectations include teacher interventions to prevent problematic student behaviors and direct students to the task occurring in the classroom at that time. Individual student strategies to model behavior expectations include use of teacher directions in a positive, consistent manner to state the desired behavior the student is expected to follow, as well as offering students choices to accessible items.

An example of an individualized strategy of modeling appropriate behavior occurred during a play-center rotation in Lyndsey's classroom. Lyndsey directed a student to sit in their chair; however, the student responded by throwing a toy. Lyndsey then cued the student to "Clean up" rather than attending to the behavior of a student throwing a toy. The individualized

strategies observed included use of teacher direction to task in a positive manner rather than provided negative attention to the undesired behavior (Observation 3).

Kara echoed the individualized strategy of modeling appropriate behavior in classroom instruction by utilizing positive, consistent direction when addressing student behavior. Kara gave the student the directive to transition to a center, yet the student began to lay on the floor. Kara used the consistent direction of “sit up” while a student exhibited the behavior of laying on the floor. Kara continued to provide a consistent, positive direction to “sit up” until the behavior was extinguished, and the student sat up on the floor. Kara used shorter, concise directions to “sit in chair” and gain instructional control until the student was able to transition to the center (Observation 1).

Lyndsey utilized modeled appropriate behavior expectations during a small group activity when a student was exhibiting a disruptive behavior of ripping paper at the table. Lyndsey provided directions for the group of three students to model mixing in a bowl, yet while she was assisting another student with hand-under-hand support to mix, the student began to rip the wax paper at his assigned area. Lyndsey removed the small pieces of paper that were ripped and redirected the student to the task of mixing, whereas the student looked at the teacher and was back on task. Lyndsey did not bring attention to the negative behavior, but instead gained the students’ attention to the task at hand and provided the student with support by repeating the behavior expectation of mixing (Observation 4).

Teacher use of modeling of behavior expectations as an individualized strategy offers personalized supports to the students. Modeling of behavior expectations for individual students requires consistent, positive prompts or directives to student appropriate behavior. Teachers use

modeling of individualized behavior to ensure students comprehend behavior expectations as students may require additional individualized support.

Use of Visuals for Transitions in Classroom

Transitions to another task, activity, or even play scheme are difficult for some students to complete without the implementation of supports in the classroom. Transition supports include prior warning, a visual schedule, a transition object, and an allotment of extra time dependent on the individual student. Teachers provide visuals to aid in the transition between activities within the classroom as added support to pair with a verbal or gestural cue from an adult. The use of visuals for transitions in the classroom creates expectations for the next task; therefore, students are more aware of the expectation for completing the transition.

Use of Visuals for Transitions as a Class-Wide Strategy. Classroom teachers used visual supports as a class-wide strategy to support students' success and independence. For instance, McKenzie discussed during the professional learning sessions how one of her students was struggling with transitioning from the van into the classroom. During her third observation, McKenzie shared that she implemented visual supports for transitions to and from the student's van. As a result of the implementation of picture visual supports, McKenzie affirmed that the student has been transitioning successfully to the classroom (Observation 3).

Amanda used visual supports for all transitions in her classroom. In her first observation, Amanda approached each child and handed them a picture visual as their transition warning for their next center rotation. Once the bell rung, the students transitioned to their new center rotation corresponding to the picture they were provided (Observation 1). Similarly, Kara implemented picture support for transitions within her classroom. During Kara's third observation, she gave each student a colored shape visual to denote their first center for their 15-

minute rotations. At the end of Circle Time, Kara handed each student a clip board and a picture visual of a colored shape (e.g., a blue circle and yellow star). The students were expected to transition independently to their corresponding colored shape for their first center rotation and match the colored shape. Kara and Amanda utilized visual supports during transitions to centers within the classroom rotation as support for students in sequences of activities. The visual support allocated a location within the room the students transitioned to; thus, fostering student independence in rotating from one center to the next with minimal additional adult prompts (Observation 3). Teachers use visual supports as a tool for transitions within their classrooms. The use of visuals for transitions as class-wide strategies creates expectations for the next task, making students are more aware of the expectation for completing the transition.

Use of Visuals for Transitions as an Individualized Student Strategy. Individualized transition strategies include visual supports for specific tasks students struggle to complete independently. During Lyndsey's first observation, a picture visual was presented to a student in the classroom as a visual prompt to wash their hands. The student attended to the picture then transitioned from the table to the sink to wash their hands successfully. Once the student washed their hands, the teacher removed the picture visual from the Velcro strip identifying the activity was complete and Lyndsey added another visual to the strip as a transition to the next activity. The strategy observed in Lyndsey's classroom indicated the individual student has difficulty with the transition from a tabletop activity to a non-preferred activity of washing hands. By providing visual support for the transition, Lyndsey gave the student prior warning of the task, a visual model of the expected action, and an understanding of sequence of tasks (Observation 1).

Individualized visual supports for transitions also include teacher implemented supports for groups of students at varying levels of support. During Amanda's first observation, she

approached each child individually to hand a picture visual as a transition warning for their next center rotation (Observation 1). Additionally, during Amanda's second observation, she utilized individual visual supports for students to transition to Small Groups in the classroom (Observation 2). Amanda incorporated the use of visual pictures as a proactive strategy by implementing picture visuals for the transitions. Amanda's use of picture visuals supported students in completing their transition to the next activity, with limited additional adult support during the transitions.

Individualized picture support for transitions in the classroom provides students with the tools necessary to complete difficult transition tasks. Teachers utilize picture visual support for transitions as students are familiar with known pictures of the assigned areas or tasks but may require support in the sequence of tasks or to identify the next step in the activity. Teacher implementation of picture visual for individualized supports increases students' awareness of the expectation and creates familiarity with the expected transition.

Tangible Items

Tangible items refer to a physical item a student can see or touch and have access to within the classroom environment. Teachers use tangible items within the classroom to provide a concrete meaning to a picture visual or unknown item. Additionally, tangible items offer a functional use to the physical item that students can correlate a meaning and use of the item relating to its purpose. Tangible items are beneficial proactive strategies for classroom behavior expectations, establishing meaning in activities, and student communication of wants and needs.

Tangible Items as a Class-Wide Strategy. Tangible items were observed to be class-wide supports for classroom teachers utilized in their instruction. Lyndsey provided the use of a transition item for a student in her classroom to transition from Circle Time to the art table.

Lyndsey explained to the student, “This is where we are going. Good job. We are all done. It is time for our special activity. We are going to go to art. Can you take that over to art?” Lyndsey provided the student with a paint brush, representative of the art table, and the student transitioned to the corresponding activity (Observation 4).

After an analysis of the first teacher exit surveys, 4 out of 6 (67%) teachers indicated they would begin to implement the class-wide strategies provided at the professional learning sessions immediately into their classroom practice (Exit Survey). On that same survey, 2 of the 6 (33%) teachers indicated they would slowly implement the class-wide strategies provided at the professional learning sessions into their classroom practice (Exit Survey). On the second teacher exit survey, 4 out of 6 (67%) teachers indicated they would begin to implement the class-wide strategies provided at the professional learning sessions immediately into their classroom practice, 1 (17%) indicated implementation within 1-2 weeks, and 1 (17%) indicated slowly implement the class-wide strategies provided at the professional learning sessions into their classroom practice.

Tangible Items as an Individualized Student Strategy. Teachers implemented the use of tangible items for individual student supports to offer a choice to accessible items during instruction. During Lyndsey’s second observation, as the student reached for a toy, Lyndsey interjected and modeled, “You want to be all done. Say I am all done. Alright, let’s get one more thing then we can go somewhere different. Puzzle, stacker, or sorter” (Observation 2). When the Lyndsey verbally stated the three items, she also presented the physical objects in front of the student to choose from the object the preferred. By offering a choice to an accessible, tangible item, Lyndsey utilized a proactive behavior strategy and allowed the student to communicate their need for a desired item of their choosing.

Lauren also utilized the strategy of offering choice to accessible items in her classroom instruction. After the completion of an activity, a student earned access to a preferred item; therefore, Lauren provided a choice to the students two most favorable items asking, “Do you want Pop up or Helicopter?” (Observation 2). Similarly, Kara asked openly to a student, “What do you want to play with?” within a session, allowing choice to accessible toys within the center (Observation 4). Overall, individualized instructional strategies differed between teacher to provide appropriate level of support for students within their specialized classrooms; however, teacher implementation of individualized supports was observed within all classroom environments.

Summary

During this study, teachers implemented practical professional learning strategies into their classroom instruction as proactive supports to address student behavior. Teachers’ implemented class-wide professional learning strategies and individual professional learning strategies as interventions covered from the professional learning sessions and colleague discussion on previous trials of strategies in their classrooms. Teachers identified the structure of the professional learning sessions and discussion of practical strategies was beneficial to implement into their classroom, as Lyndsey confirmed, “I like it when I can take away from it and like come back to the classroom, excited to use what I learned” (Exit Interview). Overall, teachers utilized the strategies suggested from the professional learning sessions by implementing them into their instruction as proactive supports to address student behavior on a class-wide and individualized level.

Barriers to Implementation

A third theme identified through analysis of the data collection included barriers to implementation of professional learning strategies. Barriers to implementation was further analyzed into three sub-themes: additional time to adjust instruction in the classroom, additional training needed for classroom teachers, and transfer of professional learning strategy to adult staff in the classroom.

Additional Time to Adjust Instruction

In order for teachers to appropriately implement professional learning strategies within their classroom instruction, teachers reported that they needed time after the professional learning sessions to adjust their instruction accordingly (Exit Survey 1, Exit Survey 2). Additionally, as modifications to their instruction need to be made to implement new professional learning strategies, teachers also advocated for “appropriate planning time” (Exit Survey 1).

Additional Training Needed

Teachers recognized an additional barrier to implementation of professional learning instructional practices or strategies as additional training needed for classroom teachers (Exit Survey 1). Teachers reported that there is a need for “continued professional learning” (Exit Survey 2). Lyndsey added that it would be beneficial for classroom teachers to have additional training on “specific strategies for students” (Exit Survey 1) and noted the need for professional learning to develop strategies “more specific to the population” (Exit Interview). Ultimately, teachers advocated for additional training on professional learning topics to enhance upon the skills gained in previously provided professional learning sessions.

Transfer of Professional Learning Strategy to Adult Staff

Barriers to implementation of professional learning strategies also include transfer of the strategies from the classroom teacher to the adult staff within the classroom. McKenzie shared during her exit interview:

I see progress, but it's tough again, because I can't like, I, being trained and experience, I can recognize something starting to happen and already step in. Where, I have now three other staff who aren't as knowledgeable and trained, who they let things escalate and then they're trying to de-escalate.

Kara and McKenzie both identified modeling strategies for staff in the classroom to be a barrier to their implementation of professional learning strategies (Exit Survey 2).

As a barrier to teacher implementation of professional learning strategies into classroom instruction is the transfer of strategies to their adult staff within the classrooms. During teacher observations, Amanda, Lyndsey, Colleen, and McKenzie all consulted with adult staff within their classrooms. In turn, teachers identified a concern that impedes their instruction, stating they need support on “how to best support staff and train them” (Exit Survey 1). As teachers are responsible for modeling strategies learned in professional learning sessions to their adult staff within the classroom, they need support in strategy implementation, to ensure fidelity within the strategy.

Support from Administration

The final theme that appeared in teacher responses during this study was support from administration. In order for teachers to successfully implement strategies from professional learning sessions, teachers in this study indicated they required support from administration. The

two subthemes in the area of support from administration pertain to professional learning: (a) structure of sessions and (b) follow-up support by administration.

The data analysis determined teachers requested administrators support in restructuring the design of future professional learning sessions relating to the grouping and amount of time of professional learning sessions. The professional learning sessions in this study encompassed classroom teachers in a small group format. Based on teacher feedback, the small group, job-alike professional learning session was a beneficial time to collaborate with their colleagues (Lauren, Exit Interview). However, teachers reported previous professional learning sessions were structured in large group format and not conducive to their learning. Furthermore, teachers reported previous professional learning sessions offer limited or no follow up training or support from administration on how to follow through on expectations from professional learning strategies (Exit Survey 2). Based on teacher responses, the structure of professional learning and administrative follow up support from professional learning sessions continue to be areas for development.

Structure of Professional Learning

Pertaining to this study, the structure of a professional learning session includes the length of time of a professional learning session and the size or grouping of the session. Lyndsey shared her perspective of current professional learning practice at the educational service agency during her exit interview stating:

I think a lot of it [professional learning training] is broad, because sometimes I feel like at least I'm just coming from my position, kind of isolated in a sense. Where, I like, I can't build ideas off of some other people just because they don't know that aspect of like

the type of need that some of my kids have. Not that every kid doesn't have them. But just like more specific to the population.

Further, Lyndsey indicated that current professional learning feels isolated when part of a large group session (Interview). As a barrier to implementation she noted, the structure of professional learning, "The big group professional development is needed, you know. But I think having that time for all of us to get together in a small group is really helpful" (Exit Interview).

Lauren indicated that changing the structure of the professional learning session would be beneficial as, "Smaller, job-alikes is beneficial" (Exit Interview). Teachers confirmed that administration can support staff in the small setting as well if they "facilitate more collaboration!" (Exit Survey 2). Additionally, Kara shared the value of smaller structure of professional learning sessions, "When we're with our job-likes, I think it all eliminates some of the information being presented that's not applicable to us...time is very valuable" (Interview).

Follow-Up from Professional Learning

The second theme of providing administrative support includes follow-up from professional learning sessions. Teachers in this study identified that there is a need for administrators to "observe our classrooms and come out for visits" (Exit Survey 1). Teachers request for administrative support regarding implementing strategies stating, "coming to the class and make sure it [strategy] is implemented correctly" (Exit Survey 2). Overall, teacher responses indicated follow-up support is needed to ensure professional learning strategies are being implemented properly.

The findings in this study indicate teacher support from administration for future professional learning sessions in designing the structure and providing support to teachers. As teachers reported the need for "supervisors being aware of our exact needs" (Exit Survey 1).

Further, teachers reported job-alike training as beneficial stating, “How relevant PD [Professional Development] is to everyone at the training and making sure that pulling teachers from their classrooms is for something important and helpful” (Exit Survey 2). Teachers’ reported job-alike training with their peers as valuable when brought together to learn and discuss relevant topics to their position. Further, job-alike trainings coordinate groups of similar teacher roles to discuss applicable topics to make impactful contributions to their professional growth. According to all of the participants in this study, the small group environment and time to collaborate with colleagues in similar job roles was beneficial. Teachers also support the professional learning sessions led with administrative support, as an administrator facilitating the job-alike discussion kept the conversation aligned on the professional learning topic. Additionally, teachers perceived follow-up training as part of this study to elaborate and build upon the previous professional learning as effective.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings of the professional learning study including an analysis of the teacher exit surveys, classroom observations, and individual teacher interview responses. The results illustrate teachers’ perceptions of professional learning, strategies for implementation, barriers to implementation, and ideas for administrators can support them with follow up from professional learning sessions.

Chapter V

Discussion

The purpose of this case study was to investigate changes in an educational organization's system of delivering professional learning opportunities to early childhood special education teachers. This case study analyzed teachers' perceptions of professional learning and examined how teachers implemented strategies from professional learning sessions focused on de-escalation strategies and proactive strategies to address student behavior. With the findings from this study, I seek to help inform educational leaders in creating meaningful professional learning experiences for teachers. Additionally, the findings in this study can inform program-wide change by initiating conversation and collaboration between administrators and teachers to support the professional growth of the organization's employees. In this chapter, I explore the results of the study and discuss the connections to professional learning and program-wide growth. Additionally, I provide limitations to this study and make suggestions for future educational practice and research in teacher professional learning.

Summary of Study

This study took place in at an educational service agency located in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. An educational service agency offers support for eligible children ages three through five. In order for a child to be determined eligible for early intervention special education, a child must exhibit a development delay of 25% or a qualifying disability; and require specially designed instruction. The educational service agency provides preschool special education services in the least restrictive environment, including the specialized classroom environments included in this study.

In this study, the special education environments included Autistic Support, Developmental Delay, Multiple Disabilities, and Next Step classroom programs. All six participants in this study were female teachers. Each of the classroom programs consisted of a three-hour, morning or afternoon program for students to attend the specialized classroom setting and receive intensive instruction with related services within the classroom setting. The teachers of each classroom program remained consistent for the morning and afternoon sessions; however, for the purpose of this study each teacher was observed during only one of the half-day sessions.

I gathered qualitative data to answer the main research question for this study: How do early intervention classroom teachers utilize professional learning strategies within their classrooms to enhance system-wide needs? I gathered qualitative data through teacher responses on exit surveys after professional learning sessions, teacher observations of classroom instruction, and individual teacher interviews. Once all data was collected, I coded the data and analyzed for common themes across the multiple data sources. This process of triangulating the data collected from survey, observation, and interview allowed for the development of themes that related to the research question and sub-questions.

Four major themes emerged from the data pertaining to teachers professional learning. Early childhood, special education teachers: (a) perceive professional learning as valuable when in a collaborative environment with job-alike staff; (b) implement professional learning strategies successfully when provided applicable training; (c) encounter barriers to professional learning on topics staff requires additional support; and (d) perceive that administrative support is essential to their development and follow-through from professional learning sessions.

Application of Theoretical Framework to Findings

The theoretical framework for this case study included a visual representation of a cycle of professional growth of an organization (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. Theoretical Framework

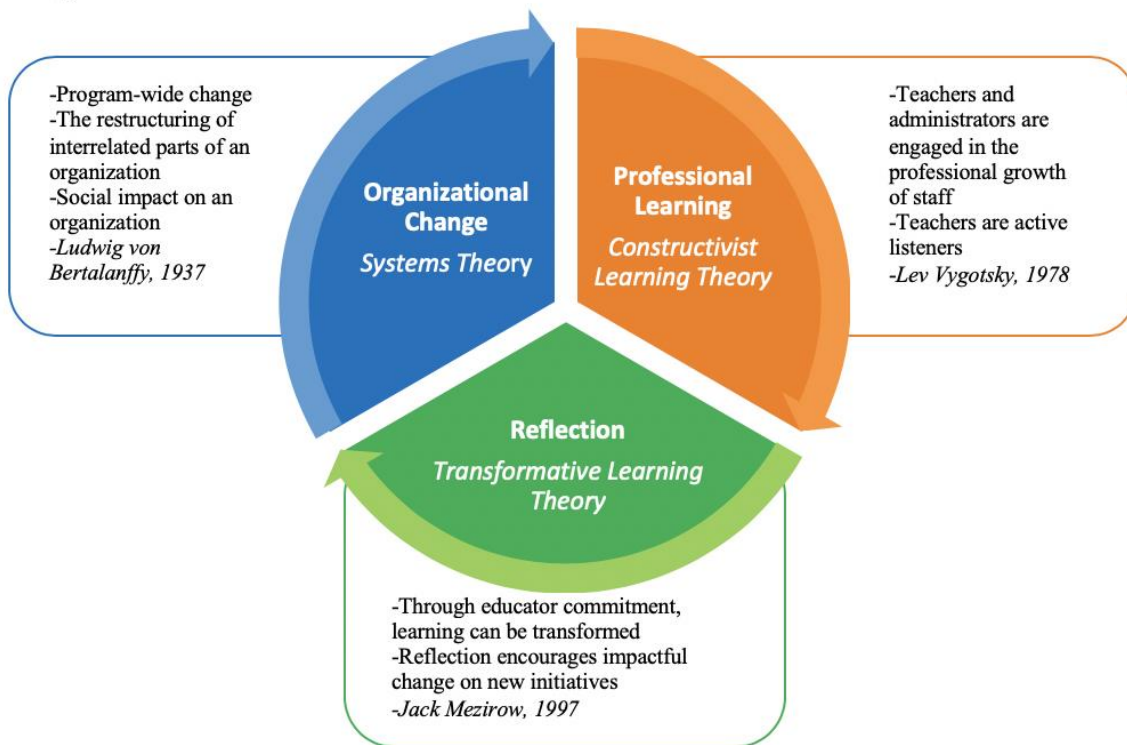


Figure 1. Theoretical Framework. Ludwig von Bertalanffy's System's Theory (1937), Lev Vygotsky's Constructivist Learning Theory (1978), and Jack Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (1997) provided the lens to examine teacher reflection in professional learning as a systematic approach to organizational change.

This theoretical framework illustrates how Systems Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Transformative Learning Theory work together to represent an organization's responsibility to

lead programmatic change, establish a culture for professional learning, and continually monitor the transformation of educator reflection and professional growth.

Systems Theory

Systems theory is the method in which components of an organization operate together and the way they impact each other. Further, those components can contribute to the growth or rate of success of the system operating as a whole (Bertalanffy, 1972). Given that a system is comprised of interrelated parts, this study identified the significant components to be administrators and teachers within the educational service agency. Further, the relationship between the components of the system in this study require analyzing their current operation pertaining to teacher professional learning.

As part of program-wide support, the findings in this study confirmed the need for restructuring the educational service agency's roles in creating and leading meaningful opportunities for professional learning. The teachers in this study indicated their lack of involvement in planning for professional learning sessions. Further, the teachers' feedback to administration on the current professional learning sessions is disregarded, as activities and trainings made available to teachers for professional learning are not applicable to the population of teachers in this study. The teachers within this study reported similar areas for the organization to restructure and create program-wide, organizational change.

During this study, teachers frequently reported the most impactful component of the study's professional learning sessions was the small-group environment. Teachers shared that previous professional learning sessions offered limited interaction between colleagues or collaboration between other teachers. Both in the teacher exit surveys and the individual teacher interviews, teachers supported the program-wide change of smaller, job-alike meetings to

collaborate on relevant topics to their classrooms. The structure of the professional learning sessions allowed for teachers to have colleague support, discussion about topics relevant to their instruction or classroom need, and time to collaborate on program-level initiatives. Further, a follow-up, small group professional learning session allowed for teachers to compare interventions, share resources implemented in the classroom, and continue conversations for ongoing support. Teachers in this study recommended restructuring the educational service agency's current delivery of professional learning sessions to small group, job-alike meetings would create an environment that instills a climate of social learning and professional growth for teachers.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist Learning Theory emphasizes bringing connection and personal experience into practice to create a significant meaning to learning (Vygotsky et al., 1997). As teachers interpreted their meaning of professional learning experiences, they reflected upon that meaning to making impactful change to their instruction or professional growth. Therefore, creating meaning and hence learning is a transformative process. During this study, teachers related to the topic of the professional learning sessions they attended and identified they were able to implement the practices discussed during the professional learning sessions into their classroom practice. Specifically, teachers had tried strategies prior to the second professional learning session; thus, there was active dialogue on how the implementation of the intervention strategy was transferred into their instruction. Overall, the teachers all related personal experiences from the professional learning sessions and reflected on their practice to make instructional changes.

The findings in this study supported the need for connected professional learning training to be available to teachers on content relevant to teacher instruction in their current classroom

environment. As teachers are active participants in their individual professional growth, teacher involvement in creating professional learning opportunities allows for educator buy-in, as the activities would connect to teacher need and be transferable to their practice. In addition, teachers indicated the most beneficial trainings are those that are with their job-alikes, in small group environments in order to gain information that is specific to their job role.

Constructivist learning theory supports the connection to prior experience and prior knowledge as the base to enhance meaning; therefore, there is a profound importance to structure professional learning sessions in an ongoing sequence for continued support. The teachers in this study recognized the benefits of the second professional learning session as part of this study, stating it was advantage to have the follow-up conversation with colleagues on the success of the interventions within their classrooms and discuss challenges. Further, this study identified teachers' perceptions of professional learning were positive when they were able to collaborate with fellow teachers within their job-alike roles. The facilitated dialogue allowed for teachers to feel validation for their own instructional practices, as well as gather new ideas from colleagues.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative learning theory is an adult learning theory of social movement that produces change (Taylor, 2008). Adults transform meaning through reflection and making sense of our experiences. Transformative learning encourages discourse and dialogue between others to support findings and deliberate on new interpretations of results (Mezirow, 1997). Further, Mezirow stated, "We transform our frames of reference through critical reflection on our assumptions upon which our interpretations, beliefs, and habits of mind of point of view are based" (1997, p.7). This study identified teacher reflection of current practices and beliefs on their instructional strategies. Based on the findings from this study, teacher collaboration with

other teachers allowed for teachers to reflect on their own practice during dialogue with colleagues and discuss programmatic changes for their classrooms. Through teacher feedback in individual interviews, teachers shared the importance of collaborating with other teachers to gather new ideas and share experiences with one another in order to gain validation as well as develop additional strategies for their own practice. Further, teachers interviews reported the need for administrator-facilitated conversations with job-alike groups of teachers on topics relevant to teacher need. The teachers in this study all identified the importance of having an administrator facilitate the conversation during small-group professional learning sessions to lead teachers in dialogue, share their input and personal experience, and provide follow up from their observations within the classroom.

Transformative Learning Theory provokes educators to identify the barriers inhibiting their willingness to inform change (Taylor, 2008). Teachers' barriers to implementing strategies from professional learning based on their reflection of their instructional practice; yet, the barriers they identified were procedural changes such as administrative support and follow-up training. Teachers voiced a willingness to change their instructional practices through collaborative conversation with other job-alike teachers during small group professional learning sessions.

Summary and Discussion of Results

In this study, the administrator-facilitated professional learning was designed to implement collaborative, discussion-based opportunities where special education classroom teachers supported fellow teachers in dialogue of proactive behavior-based strategies specific to their classroom populations. Teachers in this study attended two professional learning sessions, the first which introduced de-escalation strategies and class-wide strategies, including picture

visual support, use of tangible items, transition items, topics relevant to teacher instruction and current challenges in their classroom. The second professional learning session guided teachers in cooperatively analyzing their own implementation and practice. The results of the current study indicated that teachers' perceptions of professional learning are heightened when the content of professional learning activities includes topics that are relevant to their classroom settings and areas of expertise.

Based on the teacher feedback, administrator-led professional learning sessions in large group lectures hinders educators' willingness to engage and follow through with initiatives and program-wide procedures. The teachers' perceptions of professional learning were consistent in this study, indicating teachers perceived they benefited from small group, job-alike professional learning sessions to collaborate with other teachers, gather new ideas, and discuss their instructional practice and interventions to validate their teaching methods. The research question that guided this study included four sub-questions. The following themes discuss the results as they relate to each research area: (a) perceptions of professional learning, (b) implementation of professional learning strategies, (c) barriers to implementation, and (d) administrative support.

Special Education Teachers' Perceptions of Professional Learning

Early childhood special education teachers' perceptions of professional learning comprised of exit survey responses and individual teacher exit interviews. Teachers completed exit surveys at the end of each of the two professional learning sessions, detailing teacher perception of the professional learning sessions they participated in as a part of this study. Further, the exit interview analyzed teachers' perceptions of professional learning pertaining to their educational service agency and involvement in this study. After analyzing and triangulating information across the various data sources, the findings indicated the professional learning

sessions integrated in this study focused strongly on teachers as integral parts of their own professional learning, whereas these teachers reported in the past the professional opportunities were provided in an authoritative structure and not in a collaborative format. Additionally, these teachers reported the small group format professional learning of this study was conducive to meeting their need to discuss job-alike roles and relevant topics to their classrooms; however, in past professional learning sessions the structure of professional learning was typically a large group environment.

An analysis of the qualitative data provides a clear understanding of teachers' perceptions of their professional learning as members of their educational agency. Based on responses in this study, teacher participants shared negative associations with the professional learning opportunities their educational service agency offered in the past, as they perceived the large group environment and mixed grouping offered minimal opportunities for teacher collaboration or resource sharing. Similarly, Starkey et al. (2009) noted the importance of the content of the professional being relevant to the needs of the organization as well as the needs of the participants of the professional learning. Teachers reported the study's professional learning sessions were among the most beneficial sessions they have attended during their time at the educational agency, as the small group format allowed for collaboration with colleagues, gathering of new ideas, and validation of instructional practices through conversation of trialed interventions and classroom instruction.

Implementation of Professional Learning Strategies in Instructional Practice

As part of this study, teachers reported positive experiences on the implementation of professional learning strategies in their classroom instruction. Two subcategories emerged from teacher implementation of professional learning strategies: class-wide professional learning

strategies and individualized professional learning strategies utilized in the classroom. I observed teachers utilizing strategies from the professional learning sessions across all classroom settings as class-wide and individualized supports for students. Further, through discussion with teachers in their exit interviews, teachers consistently reported their success of newly implemented strategies attributed to the collaborative discussion they engaged in with their job-alikes and administrator, as this furthered their comprehension of strategies to apply in their classrooms.

Findings from this research study indicated that teacher participants implemented class-wide and individualized behavior-based strategies as proactive tools in their classrooms. Teachers implemented practical strategies including: picture visuals, use of timer, modeling of behavior expectations, use of visuals for transition, and tangible items into their instruction. Teachers in this study attributed their implementation of strategies to the structure of the professional learning session the delivery of simplistic, practical strategies. The proactive strategies teachers discussed during the first professional learning session offered specific approaches to address student behavior. For example, teachers learned about the implementation of picture visuals in the classroom in the first professional learning session and were provided with actual picture visual supports they would use in the classroom (i.e., classroom schedule, task analysis, individual student schedules, bathroom schedule). In addition, the teachers engaged in conversation regarding these strategies and shared how they would incorporate the strategies specifically with students who were currently exhibiting behavioral challenges in their classrooms. Teachers shared how the use of the timer would be appropriate for students who were struggling with transitions. Additionally, teachers stated the use of visuals for transitions were appropriate for students that demonstrated difficulty with knowledge of the next activity or transition from a preferred to non-preferred activity. Overall, the teachers engaged in discussion

within the professional learning sessions and determined the most applicable strategies to implement during the discussion.

Through the findings in this study, teachers expressed their positive experiences in utilizing practical strategies shared during professional learning sessions in their classroom instruction; yet, there is minimal research conducted on teacher implementation of proactive behavior strategies. Bryan and Gast (2000) recognized the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of incorporating proactive strategies into the classroom instruction to support students; yet the focus is on the individual student progress and not on a teacher's delivery of the strategy. Further, Hart and Banda (2010) identified using individualized strategies as proactive supports to encourage student communication (i.e., picture visual support); yet, the focus is on the growth of the individual child and not on the implementation of the teacher using the strategy in the classroom.

Barriers Teachers Encounter When Implementing New Instruction

Teachers in this study remained consistent in their feedback on barriers to implementation including additional time to adjust instruction and additional time to transfer strategies to adult staff. Based on teacher responses, implementing new instructional strategies was challenging given the short amount of time between the two professional learning sessions that were part of this study. Teachers reported that if more time was provided in-between the professional learning sessions then there would be more time to trail interventions. Additionally, teachers reported a longer period of time in-between professional learning sessions allows for multiple interventions if needed.

The teachers in this study identified barriers to implementing professional learning strategies and procedures from their education agency. Borko (2004) noted that teachers

demonstrate a positive relationship with professional learning when the professional learning makes an impact on their knowledge of their teaching. According to teachers in this study, previous professional learning opportunities from their educational agency are often a one-time training with limited follow up. Teachers indicated the previous professional learning sessions are a snapshot of a topic. Teachers additionally reported that trainings are typically administrator-led or an outside organization facilitator, speaker, or presenter. Teachers in this study indicated the speaker has a lack of personal connection to the community or group of teachers. Teachers reported that often an administrators and outside presenters have limited knowledge of what occurs in their classrooms; therefore, the content of the professional learning session is not fully applicable to their teaching and can be difficult to implement. Stewart (2014) argued that teachers advocate for “active learning that allowed for teachers to focus on specific needs within their classroom” (p. 31). Overall, teachers in this study identified a barrier to implementation of the professional learning strategies being the sessions content as not fully applicable to the specific population of teachers; therefore, the transfer into classroom instruction or delivery of newly learned strategies are irrelevant to all teachers.

Teachers in this study also conveyed the transfer of skills acquired in professional learning sessions as a barrier to the implementation of new instructional strategies. These teachers taught early childhood special education with additional adult support, including related therapists in their classrooms (i.e., speech therapist, occupational therapist, physical therapists, hearing therapists, vision therapists, behavior therapists, and personal care assistants). They identified the adult support in their classrooms as a barrier to the implementation of new instructional practices as the transfer of the new strategies was challenging for teachers to assume the role of implementing, given additional time necessary to train staff on new strategies.

Additionally, teacher transfer of new strategies to adult staff as challenging as a result of individual teacher personalities and interpretation of strategies to relay to other adults. The teachers in this study indicated the need for their adult staff support to be informed of the new strategies, specifically pertaining to proactive behavior strategies; yet, there is minimal time allotted for classroom staff meetings and training opportunities for related service providers within the classroom.

Specific to the current study, teachers expressed time as a barrier to implementing the strategies from professional learning sessions. Teachers explained the current study would be beneficial in an extended format, allowing for more time to trial additional strategies they discussed with their peers in the professional learning sessions. Teachers voiced for more substantial professional learning opportunities as they are participating in the learning activities and also responsible for implementing the practices into their classrooms (Bayar, 2014).

Special Education Teachers' Need for Support from Administration

Teachers in this study consistently reported a need for support from administration in regard to two subthemes: (a) structure of professional learning and (b) follow up from professional learning sessions. Teachers referred to the structure of professional learning sessions as the grouping (i.e., small or large group) and length of time of a professional learning session. Teachers noted the follow up from professional learning sessions as ongoing support, classroom visits, and continued collaborative training opportunities from administrators. Guskey and Yoon (2009) identified that follow up from professional learning activities in order to maintain the skills acquired during the session as critically importance for professional learning. Teachers in this study indicated they would like additional follow up from their administrators to ensure they are implementing new strategies appropriately within their classrooms.

In this study, teachers reported the half-day small group, job-alike meetings to be conducive to their professional growth. Additionally, they shared that the second teacher professional learning session provided beneficial follow up from the first professional learning session that allowed for teachers to reconvene with their colleagues to discuss the classroom strategies they implemented with students. Teachers reported that prior to the current study, they shared feedback on professional learning sessions occurring in small group meetings to address specific needs. Teachers also shared that at times small groups are beneficial for colleague collaboration; yet, the majority of professional learning occurs in a large group format. Additionally, teachers share the topics of the professional learning sessions provided from their educational service agency are not applicable to their current job roles. For example, teachers reported they attended large group sessions about multiple topics that did not cover classrooms roles or responsibilities; therefore, the teachers reported their attendance on that day was irrelevant and could have been better spent utilized in their classrooms. Ultimately, the teacher participants collectively described the need to restructure the professional learning opportunities offered from their educational agency by utilizing teacher feedback to create program-wide change.

The teacher participants emphasized the importance of follow-up support from administrators as part of professional learning. Teachers conveyed that administrators rarely visit their classrooms unless as part of an evaluation, a classroom tour, or a teacher's request for support. Therefore, classroom teachers shared the observations as part of this study were unique to follow up from a professional learning session.

Overall, identified trends amongst the teachers' perceptions to professional learning pertaining to a need for administrative support, indicating a structural program change for

administration to involve teachers in the design and facilitation of professional learning sessions and a need for follow up to ensure teachers implement instructional practices or if additional support is needed. Stewart (2014) specified that when administrators invite teachers to provide feedback on professional learning, it will “motivate teachers to innovate together” (p. 29).

Administrators within educational organizations are constantly reviewing professional learning practices to implement the most update to date topics, trends, and practices in the classrooms. Yet, the structure in which educational agencies offer professional learning (i.e., large group or small group format) administration does not consider; as trainings often are provided to masses of people in order to train the majority educators in one sitting. Professional learning is a costly, timely expense for educational agencies; if administrators are not looking at long-term benefits regarding teacher follow up of learning strategies, then administrators need to take a closer look at if the large group training is beneficial to offer to teachers.

Limitations of the Study

This study was subject to limitations within the areas of methodology, data analysis, and generalizability. The limitations of the study pertain to the professional learning sessions the teachers participated in as part of this study, direct classroom observations, and individual teacher interviews.

Limitations in Methodology

A limitation to this study was the sample size of the population of teachers. This study was limited to 6 female, early childhood special education classroom teachers from an educational service agency with a population of 12 early childhood special education classroom teachers.

Another limitation to the methodology of this study was the scheduling of the teacher observations. Had the study been conducted over a longer period of time, the time between scheduled professional learning sessions and teacher observations would allow time for teachers to implement strategies from the professional learning sessions, ask follow-up questions to administrators or colleagues, or ensure teachers implemented strategies appropriately. Additionally, the educational service agency early childhood services calendar allotted for breaks during the data collection time period; therefore, scheduling of observations occurred after a return from student break in service.

Limitations in Analysis

A limitation to this study pertaining to data analysis was the limited information gained from recording teacher observations. Transcripts of teacher observations were strongly reliant on my detailed notes taken during the classroom teacher observations, as much of the observation was of teacher non-verbal or gestural actions occurring in the classroom environment. Additionally, a majority of the students within the classroom programs were observed to be non-verbal; therefore, the teachers utilized multiple modalities of communication, such as sign, picture visuals, and gestural cues, all documents in transcription notes during the teacher's observation.

Limitations in Generalizability

This study examined the perceptions of professional learning of six, early childhood special education classroom teachers; therefore, this study is not generalizable beyond the context of the experience of these teachers at this educational service agency.

Implications for Educational Practice

The findings indicate multiple questions regarding teacher perceptions on the current practice of professional learning in educational agencies; yet, there are further questions and implications for future research as a result of this study relating to organizational change.

Topics of Professional Learning Sessions

Although the teachers in this study identified the professional learning to be beneficial and conducive to their learning needs, the design of the professional learning sessions was specifically tailored to meet the population of teachers, in a small group format with follow up and support from an acting administrator. For example, teachers acknowledged the professional learning opportunities as part of this study were applicable to their role as classroom teachers. A takeaway from this research study was the analysis of structure of a professional learning session to be conducive to the needs of the population of staff receiving the professional learning session. Furthermore, it is crucial the individuals planning the professional learning sessions ensure the topic of the professional learning sessions are applicable to the staff attending the sessions, the grouping or size of the sessions is appropriate for the delivery of the new material, and the presenter has sufficient background of the population who they are speaking to for the session.

Job-Alike Meetings

Through analysis of the teacher input from the current study provides teacher insight into the benefits of ongoing job-alike meetings. *Teacher job-alike* refers to groups of same level position of teachers who meet on a consistent basis. From the teacher feedback in this study, teachers reported the benefits of meeting with their fellow job-alikes to collaborate on initiatives, gather new ideas, and discuss challenges occurring in their classrooms. A key component in this

study was discussion opportunities during the professional learning sessions that allowed teachers to collaborate on the professional learning topics and strategies and engage in dialogue of how to incorporate them into their classrooms; therefore, sharing of resources amongst their job-alikes. A proposal for future practice is to incorporate routine job-alike meetings outside of the professional learning timeframe to allow for groups of teachers to collaborate on identified topics of personal interest to the job-specific team.

Professional Learning Committee

Through an analysis of this study's findings, teachers reported their lack of connection to previous professional learning sessions as the topics were not applicable to their job roles. Yet, administrators offering the professional learning sessions could have elicited teacher buy-in in order to effectively plan for the professional learning sessions. Therefore, educational service agencies may consider establishing committees of administrative level staff and solicited volunteers to effectively plan for professional learning opportunities for the organization. The purpose of a professional learning committee is to assist in the development and delivery of professional learning, training, and resources that align with the educational agency's vision. Ultimately, a professional learning committee would establish and maintain structure to foster the professional growth of all staff.

Administrative Allocation

Teacher responses from this study indicated the importance of educator involvement in the planning of professional learning sessions due to topics aligning to teacher need and relevant to current challenges in their classrooms. The teachers in this study reported that their educational agency administrators did not elicit feedback for planning professional learning; therefore, future sessions continue to be irrelevant or not applicable to teachers' needs. An

implication for administrators is the allocation of administrator responsibility in designing professional learning. One suggestion for administrators would be to review feedback from professional learning sessions from the staff evaluation thoroughly to determine trends in teacher responses. Staff evaluations provide pertinent information on teachers questions pertaining to the current professional learning session, relevant areas of needs, and individualized responses for administrators to focus on planning for job-alike sessions. Further, administrators can elicit staff input on topics of interest or areas of improvement within their classrooms. Administrators can also perform classroom observations or walk-throughs to visually identify the areas for growth amongst their staff in order to plan for future professional learning sessions that are applicable to their population of teachers.

Additionally, administrators can foster program-wide change in the reframing of professional learning opportunities by conversing with fellow administrators on system-wide processes to enhance the educational agency. As professional learning is designed to nurture growth amongst the professional staff, administrators inform program-wide decisions based upon targeted areas of growth and plan for specific topic areas for support staff learning.

Through an analysis of this study's findings, an additional implication for future change within the educational agency involves administrators' implementing an organizational structure of support for all staff within the classroom programs. Teachers' within this study identified the need for administrators to offer follow-up support from the professional learning sessions; yet, structure of the educational agency limits administrators' ability to be present within all classroom programs. A future educational practice suggests the administrative team within the educational agency develop a schedule to visit their regional classroom programs consistently to provide teachers with ongoing support. Administrator presence within the classroom programs

offers teachers validation of skills observed by their administrator and the opportunity for administrators to observe the classroom teachers, adult staff, and students they are instructing. In order to enhance the quality of the classrooms, a future implementation for the educational agency is for the administrators' to prioritize their presence in the classrooms to support the teachers within their programs.

Engaging Contracted Providers

Teacher responses from this study affirmed the lack in professional relationship between contracted agency therapists within the classroom and the classroom teacher. As a result of teachers attending professional learning sessions, they incorporated newly acquired strategies into their instruction; yet, teachers must transfer the strategies to contracted staff through continual modeling in the classroom. Overall, the teachers reported the transfer of professional learning strategies as a barrier to successfully implementation new strategies. In order to foster collaborative relationships and ensure contracted providers are implementing classroom strategies, the professional learning sessions that are applicable to classroom contracted staff should be made available to the contracted employees.

Educational agencies currently offer professional learning opportunities to teachers one time per month which on this date the contracted related service providers do not have professional responsibilities, as the classroom is closed on this day. The educational agency may offer the professional learning to contracted employees to occur alongside teachers which applicable or record professional learning sessions and share with contracted agencies to participate in on their own time. Ultimately, as a member of the classroom program, the contracted agency providers are professional responsible for engaging in the professional

learning activities and reporting back to the educational agency as they are a provider of related service to students within the classroom programs.

Assignment of Classroom Staff

Through an analysis of this study's findings of teachers' perceptions of professional learning, the assignment of related service providers within the educational agency classroom programs may alter the success of the classroom program. The barriers within the educational agency that prohibit the implementation of professional learning strategies include transfer of professional learning strategies contracted adult staff such as the related service providers in the classroom programs. Although training of contracted staff would alleviate the transfer of professional learning skills acquired by the classroom teachers, the contracted agency staff have a consistently high turnover rate within the programs. While the educational agency can train contracted providers on professional learning topics specific to the classroom programs, the contracted therapists often leave for another position and then new staff join the classroom that would require the same training.

A suggestion for future practices is the educational agencies consider staffing education agency classroom programs with their own related service providers instead of utilizing contracted agency providers. Staffing the classroom with all adult staffing being employees of the educational agency allows for professional learning to occur in a collaborative manner, under the discretion of the educational agency.

Future Research Directions

The qualitative data presented in this study provides reasoning for the teacher identified gap in communication between administrators and teachers in this educational service agency

when planning professional learning opportunities. Through the process of individual interviews, teachers proposed suggestions for the organization to make fundamental system change.

Though the teachers in this study recognized the professional learning sessions as beneficial to their professional growth and instructional practices, further research is necessary in order to explore trending topics in professional learning that would pertain to teacher perceptions of professional learning as a whole.

A replication of this study could include a larger population of educators at an educational agency to gain a deeper understanding of a larger population of teachers' perceptions of professional learning. Although this study was successful with the participating population to identify subthemes within the research, additional research is needed to develop an understanding of teachers' perceptions of professional learning pertaining to larger populations of classroom teachers, across a longer time period. Such a study could assist educational agencies in determining large-group needs for professional learning trainings and job-alike trainings needed for specific populations within an educational agency.

I advocate for future research that monitors follow up support from professional learning sessions. Teachers in this study indicated follow up from professional learning as a barrier to implementation of the instructional strategies learned from the professional learning sessions. Therefore, there are further questions pertaining to the structure of follow up from professional learning sessions can be structured from an administrative level, as a coaching model, or as a peer-to-peer support for teachers. There is an identified need to provide follow up support for teachers on new strategies, as teachers in this study stated the follow up professional learning session allowed for collaboration and discussion on the interventions and strategies they trialed

in their classrooms, if a one-time professional learning session is provided on a new topic, there is an identified need for support for teachers on the implementation in their classrooms.

Finally, I suggest further research to identify teacher perceptions on administrative-led professional learning sessions. Teachers reported previous professional learning in large group format, led by an administrator was not conducive to their professional growth. However, as part of this study, administrative-led professional learning sessions were conducive to the teachers' needs as the sessions occurred in a small group, collaborative format. Further research is needed to determine the most suitable environment that instills professional growth and creates an environment for administrative and teacher collaboration and constructive dialogue for professional learning to occur.

Summary

This study symbolizes the importance of professional collaboration pertaining to teachers and administrators in creating program-wide change and fostering professional growth within an educational agency. The teacher participants in this study described their perceptions of professional learning, implementation of new strategies, barriers to implementation, and support needed from their administration in order to grow as educators. The teacher participants within this study enhanced their own professional growth by engaging in collaborative discussion in professional learning sessions with fellow colleagues. Ultimately, the teachers in this study altered their perceptions of professional learning given the structure and administrative support incorporated within their professional growth experience.

This research contributes to the literature and growth of professional learning across educational agencies and special education organizations. The findings in this study will encourage further discussion from administrative leaders on the development and delivery of

professional learning opportunities crafted with teacher support to foster a new era of leadership amongst educators. Finally, this research will inform program change within an educational agency, eliciting buy-in from teachers and administrators to engage in collaborative discussion on program-wide growth.

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Appendix A: Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs | West Chester University | Ehinger Annex
West Chester, PA 19383 | 610-436-3557 | www.wcupa.edu

TO: Jennifer Smerecky

FROM: Nicole M. Cattano, Ph.D.
Co-Chair, WCU Institutional Review Board (IRB)

DATE: 10/16/2019

Protocol ID # 20191024A

This Protocol ID number must be used in all communications about this project with the IRB.

Project Title: Reframing Professional Development to Analyze Teacher Practice and Promote System Wide Change

Date of Approval: 10/23/2019

☒ Expedited Approval

This protocol has been approved under the new updated 45 CFR 46 common rule that went in to effect January 21, 2019. As a result, this project will not require continuing review. Any revisions to this protocol that are needed will require approval by the WCU IRB. Upon completion of the project, you are expected to submit appropriate closure documentation. Please see www.wcupa.edu/research/irb.aspx for more information.

Any adverse reaction by a research subject is to be reported immediately through the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs via email at irb@wcupa.edu

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nicole M. Cattano".

Co-Chair of WCU IRB

WCU Institutional Review Board (IRB)
IORG#: IORG0004242
IRB#: IRB00005030
FWA#: FWA00014155

Appendix B: Teacher Informed Consent

Teacher Consent Form

Project Title: Reframing Professional Development to Analyze Teacher Practice and Promote System Wide Change

Investigator(s): Jennifer Smerecky & Heather Schugar

Jennifer Smerecky
Program Administrator

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
JS840823@wcupa.edu

Heather Schugar, Ph. D
Literacy Department
West Chester University
[REDACTED]
hschugar@wcupa.edu

Research Study

The research project is being done by Jennifer Smerecky as part of her doctoral dissertation. You may ask Jennifer Smerecky any questions to help you understand this study. If you agree to participate within the research study, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form. If you choose to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop your participation in the study at any time. If you don't want to be a part of this study, it will affect your participation in the [REDACTED], [REDACTED], or future professional development opportunities provided.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to investigate changes in an organizations system of delivery professional development to early childhood teachers. This study will examine teachers' perceptions on professional development that is provided from their organization. Additionally, it will examine how strategies from professional development are implemented within the classroom, and the follow up from professional development that is provided to teachers after professional development training.

If you decide to take part of this study, you will be asked to do the following:

Teacher participants will participate in two professional development provided sessions at the [REDACTED]. Professional development sessions will be provided on Friday afternoon between the hours of 12:30pm-3:30pm.

After the participating in the professional development session, an exit survey will be provided to teacher participants. Results of the survey will be utilized to tailor the second professional development topic. The web-based survey will consist of 15 questions. The survey will be provided take 20-25 minutes at the end of the professional development session.

Following each professional development session, the research will observe the teacher participants classroom for follow-up observations of classroom instruction. Observations will

occur for each of the teacher participants in their classroom environments. The researcher will visit each classroom environment 2-4 times, for one-hour observations of each classroom teacher.

After completing the final round of observations of the classroom programs, the research will conduct individual interviews with each of the participating classroom teachers. Individual interviews will be conducted to solicit additional information related to professional learning and system-wide change. The group interview will be held at each teacher's classroom location. Each interview will take approximately 30 minutes

Are there any experimental medical treatments?

No

Is there any risk to me?

Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: Teachers may feel anxiety about adult/program administrator presence in the room while observing the instruction of the classroom teacher. If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Heather Schugar at West Chester University.

If you experience discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

Is there any benefit to me?

Benefits may include:

This research is not designed to provide teachers with any personal benefits. However, by participating in this study, data will be collected which may inform program administrators and classroom teachers on proactive professional development to enhance teacher attrition, participation in professional learning, and overall enhance student engagement within the early intervention classroom environment.

How will you protect my privacy?

The session will be recorded.

Interviews will be recorded for data analysis.

Your records will be private. Only Jennifer Smerecky, Heather Schugar, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.

Your name will **not** be used in any reports.

Records will be stored:

Password Protected File/Computer

Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion

Do I get paid to take part in this study?

No

Who do I contact in case of research related injury?

For any questions with this study, contact: Jennifer Smerecky.

Primary Investigator: Jennifer Smerecky at 570-878-3982 or JS840823@wcupa.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Heather Schugar at 610-738-0507 or hschugar@wcupa.edu

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I, _____ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix C: Script for Parent Contact

Script to Use When Speaking With Parents of Potential Participants

I am a Program Administrator in the [REDACTED] at the [REDACTED]. I am also a graduate student at West Chester University. I am conducting a research study examining early intervention classroom teachers classroom instruction with regards to the professional development provided from the [REDACTED]. Through this research I will investigate changes in professional learning, teacher reflection on professional learning practices and implementation of instruction within the classroom setting.

I am requesting that you consider allowing your son or daughter participate in this study. I have an Informed Consent Form for you to review. It includes a space for you to sign if you agree to allow your son or daughter participate. There is also space for your son or daughter to sign. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have. If you are willing to participate in this study. If you agree to participate, I will have another form for your son or daughter to sign.

If you have any questions, please contact me by phone or email at the number or address listed above. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Thank you.

Jennifer Smerecky

Appendix D: Parent Informed Consent

Parent Consent Form

Project Title: Reframing Professional Development to Analyze Teacher Practice and Promote System Wide Change

Investigator(s): Jennifer Smerecky & Heather Schugar


Jennifer Smerecky
Program Administrator


JS840823@wcupa.edu

Heather Schugar, Ph. D
Literacy Department
West Chester University


hschugar@wcupa.edu

Research Study

Would you like to grant permission for your child to take part in a research project? The research project is being done by Jennifer Smerecky as part of her doctoral dissertation. You may ask Jennifer Smerecky any questions to help you understand this study. If you would like to provide consent, West Chester University requires that you agree and sign this consent form. If you choose to grant consent for your child to be a part of this study, you have the right to change your mind and stop their participation in the study at any time. If you don't want your child to be a part of this study, it won't affect your child's participation in the 

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to investigate changes in an organizations system of delivery professional development to early childhood teachers. This study will examine teachers' perceptions on professional development that is provided from their organization. Additionally, it will examine how strategies from professional development are implemented within the classroom, and the follow up from professional development that is provided to teachers after professional development training.

If you decide to allow your child to be a part of this study, they will be asked to do the following:

Your child will not be asked to do additional tasks as participation in this study.

Are there any experimental medical treatments?

No

Is there any risk to me?

Possible risks or sources of discomfort include: Students may feel anxiety about adult/program administrator presence in the room while observing the instruction of the classroom teacher.

If you become upset and wish to speak with someone, you may speak with Heather Schugar at West Chester University.

If you or your child experiences discomfort, you have the right to withdraw at any time.

Is there any benefit to me?

Benefits to your child may include:

This research is not designed to provide students with any personal benefits. However, by participating in this study, data will be collected which may inform program administrators and classroom teachers on proactive professional development to enhance teacher attrition, participation in professional learning, and overall enhance student engagement within the early intervention classroom environment.

How will you protect my privacy?

The session will be recorded.

Interviews will be recorded for data analysis.

Your records will be private. Only Jennifer Smerecky, Heather Schugar, and the IRB will have access to your name and responses.

Your name will **not** be used in any reports.

Records will be stored:

Password Protected File/Computer

Records will be destroyed Three Years After Study Completion

Do I get paid to take part in this study?

No

Who do I contact in case of research related injury?

For any questions with this study, contact: Jennifer Smerecky.

Primary Investigator: Jennifer Smerecky at 570-878-3982 or JS840823@wcupa.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Heather Schugar at 610-738-0507 or hschugar@wcupa.edu

For any questions about your rights in this research study, contact the ORSP at 610-436-3557.

I, _____ (your name), have read this form and I understand the statements in this form. I know that if I am uncomfortable with this study, I can stop at any time. I know that it is not possible to know all possible risks in a study, and I think that reasonable safety measures have been taken to decrease any risk.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____ Date: _____

Witness Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix E: Professional Learning Session 1

Professional Learning
Session 1:
De-Escalation Strategies in the Classroom Environment

CPO

Content: Reframe Collaborative Professional Learning

Purpose: Discuss effective strategies for managing challenging behaviors in the classroom

Outcome: Build toolbox of resources for use in your classroom

Agenda

- De-escalation Cycle
- Behaviors Occurring in Your Classroom
- Collaborative on Challenging Behaviors
- Toolbox of Skills
- Exit Survey & Next Steps

De-Escalation

Video's:

[Teacher & Student Positive Relationship](#)

[Pers of Sam](#)

Behavior

- Behavior is functional
 - Behavior is learned
 - Behavior is a form of communication
- The challenge is to interpret the meaning of the behavior the child is trying to communicate.

What's the function of the behavior?

Attention, Escape, Tangible, Sensory, Power

How do you approach the behavior?

Consistent
Specific
Immediate

Write a behavior that occurs in your classroom...

The De-Escalation Cycle

1. Trigger (What happened?)

2. Agitation (How did the student feel?)

3. Escalation (What did the student do?)

4. De-Escalation (What did the student do?)

5. Recovery (How did the student feel?)

The De-Escalation Cycle

Calm
Trigger
Agitation
Escalation
Peak
De-Escalation
Recovery

- Phases of the cycle vary per individual student
- The goal is to understand a student's cycle of behavior and when/how to intervene during early phases & to develop proactive strategies.

Calm

- Student:
 - Cooperative
 - Responsive
 - Triggers are noticeable
- Staff:
 - Provide Praise
 - Set expectations
 - Routines
 - Opportunity to teach social skills

Slide 13: De-Evaluation

- Students:**
 - Student is faced with errors
 - Possible anxiety occurs
 - Peers are providing situations
 - Changing in routines/outside of normal
- Staff:**
 - Staff should reflect to schedule or known routine
 - Increase opportunities for success
 - Reminders of expectations that are successful for the student

Slide 14: Agitation

- Student is showing signs of unobserved behavior:
 - Tense muscles
 - Increase movement
 - Out of seat
- Teacher Actions:
 - Proximity
 - Provide assurance-wait or additional time
 - Opportunity for student to advance for needs
 - Provide support to task complete and preferred task once finished

Slide 15: Acceleration

- Student is exhibiting escalated behaviors
 - Behaviors may be to avoid task
 - Possible behaviors:
 - Whining, crying, task avoidance
 - threats, destruction of property
- Teacher Action during acceleration:
 - Remain calm
 - Aware, safe proximity
 - Set expectations
 - Remain consistent with direction

Slide 16: Peak

- Student is exhibiting a behavior that may be a harm to themselves or harm to others.
 - Physical aggression
 - Property destruction
 - Self-injury
 - Engagement
- Teacher and team should implement individualized safety/Crisis Plan.
 - Remain calm and respond to student behavior

Slide 17: De-Evaluation

- De-escalation is the phase of the cycle where the student is believed to begin to de-escalate.
- During the de-escalation phase, the teacher needs to ensure the environment remains safe and calm and the student is not being overwhelmed by the demands of the situation.

Slide 18: Visual Supports

Slide 19: Student Scenario

Slide 20: Proactive Strategies

Strategies that can de-escalate behavior before it even occurs...

Slide 21: Visual Schedules

Slide 22: Visual Supports

Slide 23: Personalized Visual Supports

Don't forget to wash your hands.

Slide 24: Personalized Student Supports

[illegible]

Appendix F: Professional Learning Exit Survey 1**First Professional Learning Session Exit Survey****First Professional Learning Session Exit Survey**

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 How relevant was the professional development provided today to your current position?

- ☐ Extremely relevant
 - ☐ Slightly relevant
 - ☐ Neither relevant nor irrelevant
 - ☐ Slightly irrelevant
 - ☐ Extremely irrelevant
-

Q2 On a scale from 0-10, how likely are you to implement the strategies provided today into your classroom practice?

- ☐ 0
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3
 - ☐ 4
 - ☐ 5
 - ☐ 6
 - ☐ 7
 - ☐ 8
 - ☐ 9
 - ☐ 10
-

Q3 What activities/approaches did you find from today's training to be appropriate for your classroom instruction? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Classroom Management Strategies
 - ☐ Individualized Student Strategies
 - ☐ Behavioral Strategies
 - ☐ Collaborative Strategies to Support Staff
-

Q4 Based on the information provided today, how much support do you need to implement the strategies provided in todays training?

- ☐ A great deal
 - ☐ A lot
 - ☐ A moderate amount
 - ☐ A little
 - ☐ None at all
-

Q5 How will you utilize the strategies provide from today's training? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Share as resources to fellow colleagues and staff
 - ☐ Share as resources with families
 - ☐ Teach to students
 - ☐ Teach to staff
-

Q6 What did you find as valuable from today's professional development session?

Q7 Which statement below best describes how will you implement the strategies from today's training within your classroom routine?

- ☐ Immediately implement practices within my classroom
 - ☐ Implement practices within 1-2 weeks within my classroom
 - ☐ Slowly begin incorporating best practices within classroom
 - ☐ Wait until follow up information or mandate to implement into my classroom
-

Q8 What additional area of professional development would you like to receive training?

- ☐ De-escalation strategies
 - ☐ Individualized Student Goals
 - ☐ Progress Monitoring
 - ☐ Student Compliance
 - ☐ Facilitating Student Communication
-

Q9 What additional support do you need in this topic area?

Q10 Please rate the following statements regarding the professional development provided to you today:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
The professional development was relevant to my current position.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The professional development helped me better understand my students needs in my classroom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The professional development helped me prepare for classroom instruction.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q11 Based on the training today, how can administration support the follow though of professional development in your classroom?

Q12 What challenges do you predict when implementing the strategies provided from today's training?

☐ Limited knowledge of content

☐ Restrictions on resources

☐ Additional training on topic

☐ Other: _____

Q13 On a scale from 0-10, how likely does this activity enhance your content knowledge as an educator to provide best practice to students in specialized classroom settings?

- ☐ 0
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3
 - ☐ 4
 - ☐ 5
 - ☐ 6
 - ☐ 7
 - ☐ 8
 - ☐ 9
 - ☐ 10
-

Q14 Which strategies used by the presenter were most helpful during this training session?

- ☐ Small group environment
 - ☐ Whole group discussion
 - ☐ Modeling of techniques
 - ☐ Opportunities to collaborate with colleagues
-

Q15 To continue learning about this topic, I need the following to be successful:
(Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Adequate and useful materials
- ☐ Administrative support and feedback
- ☐ Appropriate planning time
- ☐ Continued professional development on content areas

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix G: Professional Learning Session 2

1 **Professional Learning Session 2:**
Applying De-Escalation Strategies in the Classroom Environment

2 **Welcome Back!**
First, thank you!
• Established Support
• Positive Interactions
• Attention to student needs

3 **Let's Review ...**
Parents Life
Teacher Life

4 **Building upon CPO from PL Session 1 for today:**
Content: Master Individualized Learning Plans, Master Individualized Learning Plans, Master Individualized Learning Plans
Purpose: Review and discuss strategies for managing student behavior
Outcome: Review and discuss strategies for managing student behavior

5 **Agenda**
• Input from teachers on classroom environment
• Review of proactive strategies
• Review of de-escalation strategies
• **Function of Behavior**
• Discussion on individual strategies to support students
• Exit Survey & Next Steps

6 **Update from Classroom Teachers**
• How are we doing?
• Red card Behavior
• Yellow Card Proactive Strategy

7 **Strategies**
Proactive & De-Escalation

8 **Proactive Strategies:**
• Use of individualized student support
• Prompt in visual schedule
• Student transition time warning (verbal or visual)
• Allow for student choice to accessible items

9 **De-Escalation Strategies:**
• Consistency with direction
• Use of positive support, direct to appropriate behavior & avoid recalling of bringing attention to the negative behavior that occurred

10 **How do you approach the behavior?**
Consistent
Specific
Immediate

11 **Function of Behavior**

12 **Examples of behavior**
• Physical aggression
• Verbal aggression
• Self-injury
• Elopement
• Property destruction
• Tantrums
• Task avoidance

13 ★

But, why do challenging behavior persist?

- Behaviors will persist if they are meeting a need for an individual child.
- At times, behaviors are reinforced.
- All behavior serves as a function for child's communication.

14 ★

Functions of Behavior

15 ★

4 main functions of behavior

- Attention
- Escape
- Access
- Sensory

If we can anticipate the function of behavior, we can plan for a successful task, transition, activity, etc.

16 ★

Function of Behavior: Attention

- When the student receives attention after a behavior, it may increase the likelihood that the problem behavior occur in the future under similar circumstances.

17 ★

Function of Behavior: Attention

- Example:
 - Students are in centers playing games of their choice. The teacher is unable to provide much 1:1 attention. Tyler knocks over Billy's block tower he built in the Block Center. Tyler gets verbally reprimanded by the teacher. Next time when the teacher is occupied, Tyler knocks over another student's block tower.

18 ★

Function of Behavior: Escape

- When an individual engages in challenging behavior, it postpones or terminates an aversive event.

19 ★

Function of Behavior: Escape

- Example:
 - The teacher places matching cards in front of the student and the student immediately hits the teacher. The teacher removes the cards. This results in the student being given a 'break' as the teacher has removed the demand of work. Now, when the student is presented with a work task such as matching cards, the student will be more likely to hit the teacher due to past experience of the work being removed.

20 ★

Function of Behavior: Tangibles

- When a student engages in challenging behavior, he or she may receive access to reinforcing objects.

21 ★

Function of Behavior: Tangibles

- Example:
 - Upon arriving to school, Ally requests the iPad from her teacher. Her teacher replies "First Morning Meeting, then iPad." Ally falls to floor during hallway transition and refuses to enter the classroom. Ally's teacher provides a visual of Unpack - Morning Meeting - iPad. Ally walks into the classroom. Unpack train sits on the floor. When Morning Meeting starts, Ally says "hi" to the teacher and then is given the iPad.

22 ★

Function of Behavior: Automatic/Sensory

- Some behaviors are reinforcing on their own.
- These behaviors do not depend on the actions of presence of others.

23 ★

Function of Behavior: Automatic/Sensory

- Example:
 - Joe is sitting at the table next to his teacher. The teacher is filling out a clipboard chart next to Joe. Joe starts rocking, scripping, and clapping his hands at the table. This movement feels good to Joe. Next time he doesn't have anything to do, he may be more likely to engage in these behaviors.

24 ★

Function of Behavior: Automatic/Sensory

We must teach students the skills to know how to appropriately handle the function of their own behavior.

The image displays a grid of 12 slides, each with a unique abstract background of colorful bubbles in shades of blue, orange, yellow, and red. The slides are arranged in a 4x3 grid and contain the following content:

- Slide 1 (Top Left):** Title: "Teach Proactively".
- Slide 2 (Top Second):** Title: "Do your students know how to...". List:
 - Attention:
 - To obtain help
 - To obtain an item
 - To interact with others socially
 - Escape:
 - To avoid unwanted demands
 - To protest non-preferred items appropriately
- Slide 3 (Top Third):** Title: "Do your students know how to...". List:
 - Tangibles:
 - To request items they want- food, activities, toys
 - Things they need- help, bathroom
 - Automatic/Sensory:
 - How to ask or seek sensory input
- Slide 4 (Top Fourth):** Title: "How can we teach these skills to our students?".
- Slide 5 (Second Row, First):** Title: "Visual Support". Content: "What I Do You Do" and "Want To Give You" cards. Text: "A visual support can be used as a plan for accessible items / a prompt strategy to target the function of a behavior."
- Slide 6 (Second Row, Second):** Title: "Individualized Visuals". Content: "Using" and "Using Choice Cards" sections with photos of students. Text: "Individualized cards with student pictures allow for your writing, signing or illustration and prompt student choice. For example: Song Choice Cards. We read about the four students that got to know the song for study 'Circles' Time. High-Step: We read about the artist we will bring the students up study books."
- Slide 7 (Second Row, Third):** Title: "Activity". Text: "In your other settings, there is no table card. On the card, write a student behavior or practice you are currently or have engaged with in the classroom." Includes a photo of a student.
- Slide 8 (Third Row, First):** Title: "Collaborate on teacher scenarios".
- Slide 9 (Third Row, Second):** Title: "Proactive/Prevention Strategies". Text: "What can I do to make it an alternative to being a behavior issue?" Includes a pie chart showing:
 - Prevention 85%
 - Response 10%
 - Consequence 5%
- Slide 10 (Third Row, Third):** Title: "Strategies for De-Escalation". List:
 - Consistency with direction
 - Use of positive support, direct to appropriate behavior & avoid resulting or bringing attention to the negative behavior that occurred
- Slide 11 (Bottom):** Title: "Proactive/Prevention Strategies". Text: "What can I do to make it an alternative to being a behavior issue?" Includes a pie chart showing:
 - Prevention 85%
 - Response 10%
 - Consequence 5%

Reminder:

References

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Thank you!
...and having fun with your little friend.

Appendix H: Professional Learning Exit Survey 2

Second Professional Learning Session Exit Survey

Second Professional Learning Session Exit Survey

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 How relevant was the professional development provided today to your current position?

- ☐ Extremely relevant
 - ☐ Slightly relevant
 - ☐ Neither relevant nor irrelevant
 - ☐ Slightly irrelevant
 - ☐ Extremely irrelevant
-

Q2 On a scale from 0-10, how likely are you to implement the strategies provided today into your classroom practice?

- ☐ 0
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3
 - ☐ 4
 - ☐ 5
 - ☐ 6
 - ☐ 7
 - ☐ 8
 - ☐ 9
 - ☐ 10
-

Q3 What activities/approaches did you find from today's training to be appropriate for your classroom instruction? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Classroom Management Strategies
 - ☐ Individualized Student Strategies
 - ☐ Behavioral Strategies
 - ☐ Collaborative Strategies to Support Staff
-

Q4 Based on the information provided today, how much additional support do you need to implement the strategies provided in today's training?

- ☐ A great deal
 - ☐ A lot
 - ☐ A moderate amount
 - ☐ A little
 - ☐ None at all
-

Q5 How will you utilize the strategies provided from today's training? Select all that apply.

- ☐ Share as resources to fellow colleagues and staff
 - ☐ Share as resources with families
 - ☐ Teach to students
 - ☐ Teach to staff
-

Q6 What did you find as valuable from today's professional development session?

Q7 Which statement below best describes how will you implement the strategies from today's training within your classroom routine?

- ☐ Immediately implement practices within my classroom
 - ☐ Implement practices within 1-2 weeks within my classroom
 - ☐ Slowly begin incorporating best practices within classroom
 - ☐ Wait until follow up information or mandate to implement into my classroom
-

Q8 What additional area of professional development would you like to receive training?

- ☐ De-escalation strategies
 - ☐ Individualized Student Goals
 - ☐ Progress Monitoring
 - ☐ Student Compliance
 - ☐ Facilitating Student Communication
-

Q9 What additional support do you need in this topic area?

Q10 Please rate the following statements regarding the professional development provided to you today:

	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
The professional development was relevant to my current position.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The professional development helped me better understand my students needs in my classroom	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The professional development helped me prepare for classroom instruction.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q11 Based on the training today, how can administration support the follow though of professional development in your classroom?

Q12 What challenges do you predict when implementing the strategies provided from today's training?

☐

Limited knowledge of content

☐

Restrictions on resources

☐

Additional training on topic

☐

Other: _____

Q13 On a scale from 0-10, how likely does this activity enhance your content knowledge as an educator to provide best practice to students in specialized classroom settings?

- ☐ 0
 - ☐ 1
 - ☐ 2
 - ☐ 3
 - ☐ 4
 - ☐ 5
 - ☐ 6
 - ☐ 7
 - ☐ 8
 - ☐ 9
 - ☐ 10
-

Q14 Which strategies used by the presenter were most helpful during this training session?

- ☐ Small group environment
 - ☐ Whole group discussion
 - ☐ Modeling of techniques
 - ☐ Opportunities to collaborate with colleagues
-

Q15 To continue learning about this topic, I need the following to be successful:
(Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Adequate and useful materials
- ☐ Administrative support and feedback
- ☐ Appropriate planning time
- ☐ Continued professional development on content areas

End of Block: Default Question Block

Appendix I: Classroom Observation Protocol

Classroom Observation Protocol

PREPARATION				
Classroom Teacher				
Classroom Environment				
Student Population				
Targeted Professional Learning Strategy				
Time	EVIDENCE			
Professional Learning Strategy:	Teacher Implemented PL Skill			
Time	EVIDENCE			
Professional Learning Strategy:	Teacher Implemented PL Skill			
Time	EVIDENCE			
Professional Learning Strategy:	Teacher Implemented PL Skill			

Appendix K: Teacher Exit Interview Questions

Individual Teacher Interview Questions

1. What differences have you noticed in your instruction since the provided professional development sessions?
2. What effort did you make to implement the provided strategies from the professional development session?
3. How, if at all, has the follow up from the professional development informed your instruction?
4. How would you suggest we alter the professional development to provide you with additional support?
5. What is your perception of the specific professional development you receive as part of this study? What is your perception of professional development as a whole?