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## Middle School Teacher Perceptions of Effective Professional Development Practices: A Phenomenological Study

Christi Glasco

*Concordia University - Portland*

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Concordia University–Portland

College of Education

Doctorate of Education Program

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Middle School Teacher Perceptions of Effective Professional Development Practices:  
A Phenomenological Study

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Concordia University–Portland  
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the College of Education  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in  
Instructional Leadership

Floralba Marrero, Ed.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

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Concordia University–Portland

2020

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to investigate the perceptions middle school educators shared regarding the effectiveness and relevancy of their professional development trainings. Professional development opportunities serve as a method for learning and growth to educators and assist them in adapting to educational changes throughout their careers. Effective and relevant development practices have been shown to increase the value educators assign to the experience as well as increase the likelihood educators will bring their newfound knowledge into their classrooms. This study utilized personal one-on-one interviews and reflective journaling with 12 participants from the Pacific Northwest. Nine of the participants joined in a focus group setting for additional questioning. The overall themes produced by this research study were that educators view professional development opportunities as necessary, educators want effective learning methods during trainings, and middle school educators need targeted training pertaining to their specific population of students. While participants discussed both positive and negative aspects of their current trainings, agreement was made that professional development practices still have much room for improvement to be considered both effective and relevant to their current teaching positions and practices.

*Keywords:* professional development, middle school educators, young adolescent development, effective practices, teacher perceptions

## **Dedication**

This dissertation manuscript is dedicated to all of my past and present middle school students who have inspired, empowered, challenged, and transformed me as a person and as an educator, and to my future students who deserve the most equipped and engaging teachers imaginable. You are the reason I get up each morning and drink inordinate amounts of coffee. You are also the reason I am passionate about creating the best learning environments possible. Your futures and successes have been worth all of the work that was put into this study.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **Introduction to the Problem**

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Adolescent Health (2016), there are 42 million adolescents in the United States between the ages of 10–19. Fifty percent of those are young adolescents between the ages of 10–14. These young adolescents are facing a multitude of changes as their bodies, brains, and higher level processing begin to mature and develop. They are also the students that populate every middle school classroom across the nation. The Office of Adolescent Health reported, “If adults who work with youth understand the demographic characteristics and diversity of adolescents, they can do a better job of planning and delivering services to this population” (2016, para. 4). Educators that work with this age group should be equipped to teach, empower, and support these developing youths as they struggle with and adapt to the changes they are undergoing.

Professional development is an educational tool to prepare middle school teachers with the task of meeting the demanding needs of their students. Caskey and Anfara (2014) stated, “Understanding and responding to the unique developmental characteristics of young adolescents is central among the tenets of middle level education” (para. 1). With the necessity to understand the developmental context of their students, middle school educators should be receiving equitable and contextually appropriate professional development opportunities that provide them with content knowledge and best practices that is specific to working with their population and meeting their educational needs. This study seeks to understand from the perspectives of current middle school educators if this is, in fact, occurring.

## **Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem**

In the early 1900s, the concept of educating a young adolescent differently from their older or younger peers was a new venture adopted by the American education system. Policy makers and educators alike saw a need to be addressed in this age group due to the vast amount of growth and change that occurs between the ages of 10–14. The middle school movement in the United States really took root during the 1950s and 1960s, and since then there have been a number of researchers who have advocated for quality practices that best serve the population. Manning (2000), in his brief history of middle schools, boldly stated that educators have a professional obligation to consider and “push for effective middle schools that meet the developmental needs of the students who attend them” (p. 192).

Mizell (2010) stated that “research confirms that the most important factor contributing to a student’s success in school is the quality of teaching” (p. 1). With the trends in education and content knowledge that students are required to know changing nearly every year, educators must stay abreast with how to convey information to students in relevant ways. Meaningful and effective professional development opportunities are a way for educators to remain competent in a demanding field. Professional development plays a critical role in improving the quality of education for teachers and students alike. Middle school educators, however, are not receiving specific and targeted training opportunities based on their demographic of student. There is insufficient research that explains why this negligence occurs.

The conceptual framework for this study is to investigate what effective professional development looks like and compares that information with the perceptions that current and former middle school educators have toward the professional development that is being offered to them. It has been shown that effective professional development practices can lead to a greater

sense of self-efficacy amongst educators (Chen, Brown, Hattie & Millward, 2012; Ryan, Kuusinen & Bedoya-Skoog, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Strieker, Gillis & Zong, 2013).

When educators perceive greater self-efficacy in their profession, their classrooms become more positive learning environments and ultimately the students become the primary beneficiaries.

### **Statement of the Problem**

All educators need to receive relevant and contextually appropriate professional development opportunities that allow them to grow and become increasingly more competent in their jobs. Middle school teachers are rarely given these opportunities to learn about, and meet, the varied needs of their young adolescent students. Middle school educators are not receiving adequate and effective trainings that address the needs of their middle school classrooms.

Instead, they are often urged to attend secondary education training days that primarily address the specific needs of high school students. The content of these trainings is specifically designed for educators of a more mature population, and therefore must be adapted by middle level educators to meet their needs.

Middle school students are a unique population because they experience drastic changes physiologically, physically, and neurologically. The educational needs that these students have differ from those of elementary and high school students. Educators who work with this demographic of student are not receiving the specific training opportunities required to best meet academic as well as social and emotional needs.

While serving a developmentally unique population, middle school educators should not only be properly equipped to work in their contextual setting, they should also receive adequate and effective continuing education opportunities in an effort to better their craft. These teachers

should be given the professional tools to equip them in guiding and educating students during this critical stage of development.

There has been a great deal of research pertaining to the quality and effectiveness of professional development practices as a whole. The measurable qualities that contribute to effective professional development have a direct correlation with teacher perception on the effectiveness of the training (Bohn, 2014). There are few secondary teachers receiving middle level certification (Deering et al., 2015). It is imperative that middle level educators receive equitable and effective opportunities to improve their practice.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to gain first-hand accounts from current or former middle school educators on the perceptions they share regarding their past, present, and future professional development opportunities and to assess whether they are effective, relevant, and meeting the needs of teachers. The goal is to uncover the professional development practices that are the most relevant across the lived experiences of the participants, and determine how professional development opportunities could be of more direct assistance to classroom pedagogy for middle school educators.

This study delves into the perceptions of 12 current and former middle school educators in the Pacific Northwest. The study takes a phenomenological approach in order to analyze the shared experiences of all participants. Phenomenology is the most appropriate approach to the study because it allows participants to share their subjective opinions and permits the researcher to cluster themes of meaning. Creswell (2013) stated that in a phenomenological approach the “human experience makes sense to those who live it, prior to all interpretations and theorizing”



(p. 86), which means that value to the study is assigned when educators are able to express their thoughts regarding their professional development experiences openly.

Participants agreed to participate in one-on-one interviews, reflective journaling, and a focus group to assist the researcher in data collection. Each participant was asked the same series of questions in their one-on-one interview and then asked to reflect upon their responses through reflective journaling that would be submitted to the researcher. When all interviews were complete, the researcher conducted a focus group that consisted of nine out of the 12 participants. The focus group elicited candid cooperative reflection amongst the participants and provided the researcher rich discourse to bring into the study.

### **Research Questions**

The primary research questions throughout the individual interviews are:

1. How do middle school educators describe their professional development experiences?
2. What characteristics of professional development do middle school educators view as effective ways of learning?
3. Are middle school educators experiencing professional development that is relevant to their classroom population?

Each question naturally elicits further follow-up questions to the participants and due to the subjective nature of their responses, follow-up questions may be subtly different each time. By continuing to question based on specific material that has been provided, the researcher can piece together the overall picture the participant is attempting to illustrate.

## **Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

There have been numerous studies that reflect the importance of effective professional development practices among educators. What the literature is lacking, however, is whether educators consider the training opportunities they actually receive to be effective and in the best interest of their classrooms, especially at the middle school level. There is also a lack of research that suggests educators are receiving specific professional development training in the key areas of pedagogical approaches and curriculum design that tailor to the developmental phases of middle school students (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014).

This researcher looked at the perceptions educators share in delineating the effectiveness of current practices and provides insight into how professional development could be more meaningful as it targets the specific needs of the middle school classroom. The potential benefits that this study provides could be of great use to school and district administrators as they seek to improve their current professional development practices. The literature reviewed in this study outlines the key components to effective practices in professional development and when combined with the perceptions provided by participants could be a powerful tool in the hand of educational policymakers to provide training opportunities specific to the middle school demographic of educators.

## **Definition of Terms**

Throughout the study, the following terms will utilize these definitions:

**Effective professional development.** According to Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017), effective professional development can be defined as “structured professional learning that results in changes in teacher practices and improvements in student learning outcomes” (para. 3).

**Adolescence.** “Adolescence is the transitional stage from childhood to adulthood . . . [where] physical and psychological changes begin to occur between ages 9–12” (Psychology Today, 2019, para. 1) and continue typically through age 18–19. The study focuses solely on young adolescents (ages 11–14), their developmental changes, and the ways in which educators can accommodate in the classroom.

**Professional development.** “The process of improving staff skills and competencies needed to produce outstanding educational results for students” (Hassel, 1999, p. 1). Professional development in this study refers specifically to the additional trainings that educators receive after employment in a middle school.

**Relevance.** “The term relevance typically refers to learning experiences that are either directly applicable to the personal aspirations, interests, or cultural experiences of students or that are connected in some way to real world issues, problems, and contexts” (Glossary of Education Reform, 2013, para. 1). Throughout this study the term relevance is used to relate the professional development opportunities received by educators and also to describe how educators are utilizing new skills in their personal classrooms.

**Contextually appropriate.** This applies to the content of a professional development experience. Contextually appropriate trainings are those that are created to address a specific population or need to the teachers who will use the information in their current classrooms.

### **Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations**

Assumptions in qualitative research are typically viewed as a negative aspect that can bring about bias into the study (Saldaña, 2016). While this can be true, most research designs actually begin with an assumption stemming from the researcher and can be the vehicle to proposing a specific study design. In this case, the study was conceived through the personal

experience of the researcher in an attempt to explore whether other middle school educators saw the same need and lack of opportunity. Creswell (2013) stated that “objective understanding is mediated by subjective experience” (p. 86) and it is the hope of the researcher to use the many subjective experiences of the participants to create an objective understanding on middle school professional development.

Delimitations are the study’s constraints and parameters put in place by the researcher to limit the scope of the study. For the purpose of this study the researcher actively recruited participants were licensed educators in the Pacific Northwest, currently teaching (or have taught) in a middle school classroom (Grades 6–8), and have experience in a public or private institution. Diversity in terms of years of experience, gender, and ethnicity were highly sought after.

One of the greatest limitations to phenomenological research is the researcher’s ability to bracket their own feelings on the matter and focus on what is being presented to them through the responses of the participants. Bracketing, according to Creswell (2013), is the omittance of the researcher’s “experiences [only to] rely on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the phenomenon from others’ lived experiences” (p. 52). True bracketing can be difficult to obtain, especially when the researcher has their own shared experiences on the topic.

An additional limitation to the research study is that it has a small sample size, which is common throughout phenomenological studies. The researcher acquired 12 participants that had a breadth of educational experience for this study. All participants, however, were also from the same geographic area. Due to these limitations it is difficult to state with certainty that the results would be indicative of all middle school educators across the Pacific Northwest or even nation. It

would require a much larger sample size to make a definitive case for stronger, more effective, and more targeted professional development in other areas.

## **Summary**

Middle school can be a difficult time for students and educators alike. Students are navigating the body and brain transformations that come with the onset of puberty and teachers are called to ensure learning continues despite the challenges students are facing. Middle school teachers have a daunting task of understanding these developmental changes and creating appropriate lesson and behavior plans that are consistent with this developmental stage. Many middle school teachers did not receive specific middle school licensure, which means that effective and ongoing professional development toward this end is imperative. This study openly discusses with educators that are currently, or have been, in the middle school environment and their perceptions on the state of professional development trainings they are receiving.

Chapter 2 introduces the topic of professional development through a thorough literature review including studies that have focused on the key aspects required for professional development to be deemed effective. The studies include qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research methodologies. It also elaborates on the conceptual framework of this study by focusing on the positive and negative benefits of effective professional development.

Chapter 3 focuses on the qualitative methodology used for this study, primarily the phenomenological approach. It develops the purpose and design of the study in greater detail as well as outlines the population sampling and how participants were chosen. Instrumentation, data collection methods, and data analysis procedures are also explained in detail. Chapter 3 also reflects upon the potential ethical issues of the study as well as the researcher's position to the study.

Chapter 4 is the culmination of the research. Participants are introduced via pseudonyms with their educational backgrounds. Research methodology and analysis is discussed with explanations regarding the different styles of coding that were used. A summary of the findings is broken down by research question and reflects the major themes and subthemes that emerged from the research. The organization of the data and results also reflect the research questions and the themes that emerged from them. Chapter 4 culminates by stating the three major themes of the overall study as presented by participants and analyzed by the researcher.

Chapter 5 takes a closer look at the results of the study and compares them to the existing literature on effective professional development practices. Implications for future practice, policy, and theory are then discussed in depth. Lastly, the researcher makes recommendations for further research pertaining to middle school educators receiving effective professional development that is context specific to their population of students and the overall struggles those students are facing.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

A stereotypical middle school classroom is not an environment that most would categorize as their dream occupation. Middle school educators are often met with, “Wow, tough age,” when asked what they do for a living. Students at this age are at a developmental stage that includes drastic changes disrupting this period of their life. There are struggles that exist within the classroom because of changes such as attention span, hormonal shifts in mood, and increased need for movement (Kennedy, 2011). According to Perry and Pauletti (2011), the middle school environment can be a challenging dynamic and is typically buzzing with students laughing, screaming, back-talking, whining, crying, often all at the same time. Moran (2015) discussed how the middle school years are when students become more frustrated due to the inability to regulate their emotions and as a result anxiety becomes part of their daily experience. Yet, for some unique educators, this difficult age and setting is where they find their true calling; these teachers are the people that believe that this age group can and should be equipped for a bright future. These teachers, however, are not always provided with adequate tools to carry out their high and noble calling.

With middle school age being a time of great change, a few things become inevitable. Middle school students have the ability to shift moods within seconds; they can fluctuate between maturity and immaturity at a moment’s notice. They are moving from a completely egocentric mentality to Piaget’s formal operational stage (Schaefer, Malu, & Yoon, 2016), but the progression is a bumpy road and has numerous setbacks. According to Piaget’s formal operational stage, children by age 11 or 12 “begin to think more rationally and systemically about abstract concepts and hypothetical events” (Shaffer, 2009, p. 61). In so doing, their desire

for autonomy becomes great, and as they seek their independence, they begin to pull away from their parents and need adult role models that guide them through important decision-making and choices; they also need to find answers for themselves. While they cannot be trusted in full due to their constant state of exaggeration; they seek ways in which to prove themselves and their worth to adult figures (Shaffer, 2009).

Young adolescents are extremely aware of the changes their bodies are making, and easily become self-conscious. They are also uncomfortable with any attention they receive, whether it is praise or criticism. Middle school students also care more about the opinions of their peers than their own feelings and developing intuition (Shaffer, 2009). These factors, and so many more, are reasons why teachers who serve this population need specialized training. These fundamental changes can be detrimental to the learning environment if not addressed in ways that support student achievement. Middle school teachers should be properly equipped with the tools required to meet the needs of each learner, adapt to their developmental changes appropriately, and provide high quality education that engages and stimulates this age group (Kennedy, 2011).

## **Topic**

This literature review will focus on the research related to professional development opportunities for educators at the middle school level. Based upon the unique developmental stage of middle school students, middle school teachers should receive equitable professional development that addresses the specific developmental needs and challenges of the population they serve. Elementary and upper secondary professionals receive training that pertains to their student body, while middle level educators are often grouped into those categories and are asked to learn new material and pedagogical approaches that are not relevant for the population they



serve (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014). Oftentimes, this training must be adapted by the teachers to fit their students' needs. It is more efficient to give teachers the training that best serves their population without having to make modifications to the content presented. Since "research confirms that the most important factor contributing to a student's success in school is the quality of teaching" (Mizell, 2010, p. 1), it is beneficial for districts to provide all their educators with continued professional development to strengthen their practice through trainings relevant to their population. Teachers who do not experience, or participate in, effective professional development practices do not improve upon their skills and ultimately student learning suffers.

The literature review explains how and why middle schools were created along with the present day challenges the schools confront. The research argues that professional development is a tool to combat the various pressures that teachers face along with improving the overall quality of education, including teacher performance (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014). Professional development refers to the advancement of ongoing learning opportunities accessible to teachers and other education personnel through their schools and districts to increase their abilities (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011). The research outlines the effective practices that constitute successful professional development programs and how to institute them within the school culture, and how they can be especially operational within the middle school atmosphere.

### **Context**

Since the inception of the middle school program in the United States, it is acknowledged that the particular age group at this level has varied needs, and therefore should be educated differently than elementary and high school students (Schaefer et al., 2016). Middle school students are very different from their elementary and high school counterparts, yet they receive

less educational attention that directly addresses their demanding developmental needs (2016). Between the ages of 11–15, students encounter social, emotional, cognitive, and physical changes at a rapid pace, which creates for instability along with little flexibility (Bowers, Geldhof, Johnson, Lerner, & Lerner, 2014; Shaffer & Kipp, 2014). Due to these developmental factors, the physical and mental environment of a middle school is significantly different from that of the elementary schools the students have transitioned from, and it is trying to prepare them for the high school environment they will soon join.

Many have questioned the best course in which to educate adolescents and whether separating them from mixed aged peers is the best course of action (Mears, 2012). Some researchers argue that a K–8 setting is more beneficial for the healthy development of young adolescents while others propose modifications to the standard 7–8 grade separation; for example, whether or not to include grades six or nine (Giwa, 2012). Until a unified change is made on the broad scale, middle schools exist and it is professionally prudent to train teachers that work within them to meet the needs of their specific student population.

For these reasons and more, it is ineffective for middle school teachers to receive the same professional development as their elementary and high school colleagues (Compton, 2010). Professional development opportunities that are programmed toward elementary teachers do not give middle level educators the appropriate tools for their maturing population and often require significant modifications. Professional development established for high school instructors can be too advanced and are created for more cognitively mature students to reap the benefits. The number of professional development opportunities for middle level educators, however, are limited and do not encapsulate the essential tools required for working with the constant change that middle school students present (Giwa, 2012).

## **Significance of the Study**

The significance behind this research study is that there has been insufficient research done investigating the benefits of professional development designed specifically toward middle school educators, equipping them to work with a developmentally diverse population of students (Shaffer & Kipp, 2014). When it comes to middle school teachers receiving specific professional development with regard to the stage of development their students are in, no research currently exists, which is why there needs to be more advocates for this programmatic change. In addition, the research lacks pedagogical approaches, curriculum design, and other important factors that are developmentally appropriate for middle school education (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014). A research study geared toward designing professional development that equips teachers to work with the specific needs of students encountering great developmental changes can change the way in which middle level educators are trained and developed (Mears, 2012), thus helping to create a more dynamic educational experiences for the students and greater self-efficacy among teachers.

## **Importance of the Study**

Professional development is a vital component in most careers, but it is the life breath for educators who seek to stay professionally relevant. Professional development refers to “ongoing learning opportunities available” (Editorial Projects in Education Research, 2011) for educators to work toward content and pedagogical craft mastery. These extended learning opportunities provide educators the opportunity to equip themselves for dynamic instruction within their classrooms. Mizell (2010) argued that there are three levels of results when it comes to teachers receiving adequate professional development. The first is that “educators learn new knowledge and skills because of their participation.” Second, “educators use what they learn to improve

teaching and leadership,” and lastly, “student learning and achievement increase because educators use what they learned in professional development” in the classroom (p. 6).

### **Argument of Discovery**

The issue facing middle level educators is that they work with a diverse, challenging population and do not receive adequate training or continuing development. Secondary licensed professionals are “primarily trained to teach at the high school level and specific to their content area” (Rodesiler, 2017, p. 138). The developmental needs of young adolescents does not appear in the curriculums, inadequately preparing teachers for educating middle level learners, in the researcher’s opinion. Once professionals enter the middle school environment, professional development opportunities become sparse, and do not address the numerous developmental challenges the students face.

Research by Giwa (2012) and Lutrick and Szabo (2012) investigated the perceptions that middle level educators have on professional development opportunities afforded them. In most cases, middle level educators were dissatisfied with their professional development opportunities due to lack of meaningful content or feasibility of development material to be put into practice in the classroom. When opportunities contained what many researchers (Desimone, 2009; Gulamhussein, 2013; Hough, 2011; Hunzicker, 2011; Klein & Riordan, 2009; Supovitz & Turner, 2000) labeled as effective practices, perception on quality increased as well as general attitudes regarding attending professional development. Teachers also described a more positive outlook on the trainings offered when given choices or the ability to voice needs.

The professional development trainings offered to middle level educators, while minimal, tend to focus on long-term programming and content-specific best practices (Green et al., 2013; Ryan et al., 2015). Throughout the course of this work, research has yet to be found where

professional development concentrated on the developmental needs of young adolescents and the educators that work with them each day. Middle schools and the districts they occupy would significantly benefit from educators who are trained to serve the whole child, giving a truly well-rounded education that addresses the many faces of the middle school student.

### **Problem Statement**

Middle level educators rarely have opportunities for professional development that is specific and relevant to their population of students (Chen, Brown, Hattie, & Millward, 2012). With adequate training and proper tools, middle school teachers can more easily engage their students, enrich their learning, and empower them to be successful learners for the duration of their educational career. Teachers and administrators who habitually advance their own knowledge and skills model for students that learning is imperative and useful for their futures (Mizell, 2010).

There are many negative effects that can occur to the nature of education when teachers do not participate in relevant and effective professional development opportunities. The definition of professional development is “the process of improving staff skills and competencies needed to produce outstanding educational results for students (Hassel, 1999). Without these opportunities, educators do not learn and refine the pedagogies required to teach the skills students need for education and work in the 21st century (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). When teaching practices do not continue to grow, student learning and outcomes become stagnant as well.

### **Organization**

This review of research discusses both professional development and the developmental changes that middle school teachers encounter in their students. It begins with the creation of the

middle school and why it exists, followed by the unique challenges that middle schools endure. Due to this, professional development is a tool to equip teachers to combat challenges, and is therefore outlined in the review. Lastly, effective professional development practices are discussed and how they can be used to educate and empower middle school teachers.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Within the realm of education, professional development plays a critical role in equipping teachers to run effective classrooms. As education evolves and reforms, teachers need to remain ahead of the curve to give their students high quality education that prepares them to be academically successful as well as globally competent and competitive. Professional development is considered a vehicle of change in institutions, and therefore it must be determined how to bring it about in meaningful and empowering ways. Much research has gone into professional development and what makes it effective. For example, Hochberg and Desimone (2010) reported “that for professional development to be effective, it must address challenges while also building teachers’ capacity to change” (p. 89). Desimone (2009) argued that effective professional development should have a core conceptual framework. Abilock, Harada, and Fontichiaro (2013) believed that the core of effective professional development lies within self-questioning and reflection. Many researchers (Birman, Desimone, Porter, & Garet, 2000; Goldring, Preston, & Huff, 2012; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Wayne, Yoon, Zhu, Cronen, & Garet, 2008) believe that effective professional development across the grade levels is an equation filled with outside experts, on-going time commitments, engaging activities, relevant content, and meaningful follow-up. Little research, however, has been done on providing equitably effective opportunities across the grade levels. This study seeks to examine the specific professional development practices and how they are utilized (or not utilized) to train and

support middle level educators. With so few teachers obtaining middle level certifications, it is imperative for professional development to empower educators to work effectively with middle school students (Deering et al., 2015).

Middle level educators need additional opportunities to participate in effective professional development to improve their pedagogical craft for the middle school level population. While opportunities abound for both elementary and higher secondary teachers, middle level teachers serve a unique population and should receive ample preparation and on-going training to work with these young adolescents. While studies can be found on specific professional development initiatives within the middle school context (Bryant, Linan-Thompson, Ugel, Hamff & Hougen, 2001; Green, Gonzalez, López-Velásquez & Howard, 2013; Gregory, Allen, Mikami, Hafen & Pianta, 2013; Supovitz & Turner, 2000), they are specifically designed with content specific courses in mind while the general pedagogy behind educating these professionals is sparse. More tailored opportunities need to be made available in order for middle level educators to best serve the growing needs of their students.

Young adolescents undergo significant changes in their middle school years. It is a time for self-discovery and transformation. Middle school students face challenges unique to their age (Akos, 2005; Charmaraman, Jones, Stein & Espelage, 2013; Kennedy, 2011; Moran, 2015; Oelsner, Lippold & Greenberg, 2010; Ryan, Kuusinen & Bedoya-Skoog, 2015; Wigfield, Lutz & Wagner, 2005), and educators must be prepared to handle these factors as they play a role inside and outside of the classroom. The needs of these students vary greatly in comparison to elementary or high school students. Educators would do well to be given professional development opportunities that equip them with the necessary tools to help guide young

adolescents through this stage of life in addition to the teaching strategies that best serve them. During this time of fluctuation, educators play a critical role in the young adolescent life.

While professional development has faced many obstacles in terms of effectiveness, teacher perception on what they are learning and how it is delivered seems to be a continual challenge. Current researchers agree on the factors indicating effective professional development practices such as form, participation, duration, active learning, content focus, and coherence (Abilock et al., 2013; Desimone, 2009; Giwa, 2012; Goldring et al., 2012; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Hough, 2011). When professional development opportunities adhere to these guidelines, teacher perception tends to be more positive and participation is greater. When opportunities fail to use effective professional development practices, however, the perception of teachers is not favorable toward participating in future opportunities (Compton, 2010; Giwa, 2012; Hardin & Koppenhaver, 2016; Lutrick & Szabo, 2012; De Vries, Jansen &, Grift 2013). In preparing to deliver professional development opportunities to middle school educators, administrators need to be aware of these challenges and address them effectively.

Effective professional development has also been linked to greater teacher self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2012; Ryan, Kuusinen & Bedoya-Skoog, 2015; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Strieker et al., 2013). Educators who have stronger and more positive images of themselves in their role become more empowered and effective in their classrooms. Middle school educators have a difficult task and their reported self-efficacy may decrease if they are not given the tools and opportunities to thrive within their context. Proper middle level professional development opportunities can help raise teacher perceptions of themselves, thus creating more positive learning environments for the students within their care.



Kennedy (2016) illuminated on the function of professional development for educators by stating that there is a dual purpose. The first is that professional development focuses on “a main idea that teachers should learn,” and secondly, “provide a strategy for helping teachers enact that idea within their own ongoing systems of practice” (p. 946). Many researchers claim to have the best theories concerning how professional development should be employed, but Kennedy asserted that the reason behind each researcher having their own theory is that there is not one overarching theory that encapsulates everything a teacher must do. Teachers must be role models, coaches, mediators, salesmen, counselors, among other roles, and with these “different conceptions of teaching come different conceptions of how [professional development] can improve teaching” (p. 946). The core concept that researchers agree on is the fact that professional development allows teachers to improve their pedagogical craft, which, in turn, creates greater student achievement.

Due to the lack of professional development opportunities available, the population that they serve, and their reported self-efficacy, middle school educators need to be equipped with more effective professional development opportunities. As these teachers seek to prepare young adolescents for their future educational endeavors, educators themselves need to be equipped with the proper tools necessary to fulfill these goals and continually meet standards. School officials and administrators should recognize the variance between elementary, middle, and high school students and afford their teachers at every level chances to learn how to best serve their population. Figure 1 demonstrates how effective professional development practices enhance both teacher and student outcomes.

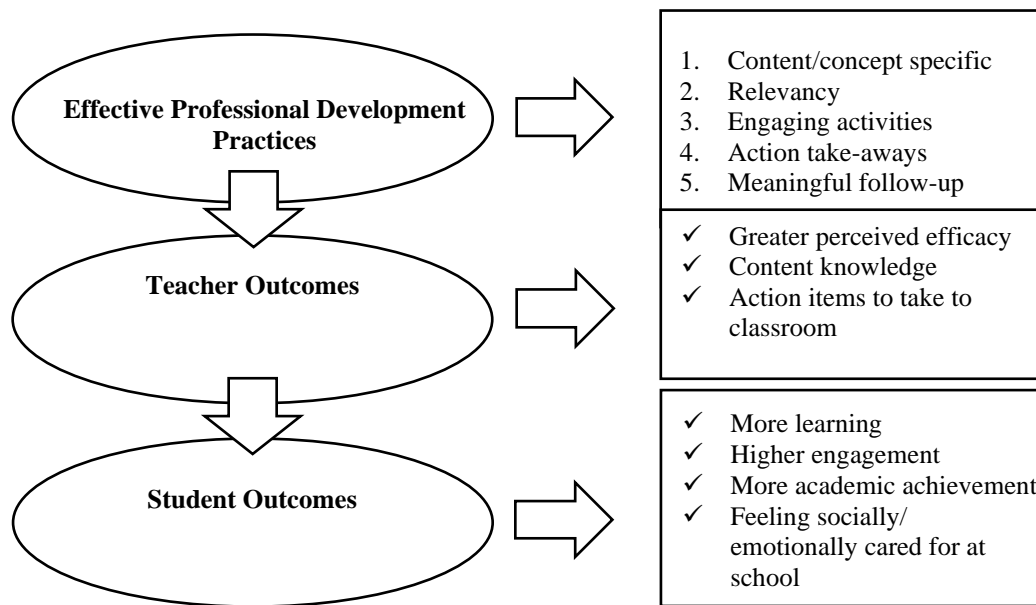


Figure 1. How effective professional development benefits teachers and students.

### Review of Research Literature and Methodological Literature

A look at current literature revealed the depth of the many facets in this study. First, the purpose behind the structure of modern middle schools is addressed. Second, the purpose of professional development is discussed followed by what effective practices in professional development look like. Benefits and challenges of effective professional development are reviewed as well as the requirements teachers must meet in order to be licensed.

**History of middle schools in the United States.** The creation of the middle school in the United States was the result of a need to “address the educational and developmental needs” of students aged 11–14 (Manning, 2000). These learners are neither children nor are they adults, and “they require an education that institutes programs and practices that meet their specific needs” (p. 192). Before the institution of the middle school, the traditional school structure consisted of elementary years lasting a duration of eight grades, and high school the remaining four. High schools were formed to academically prepare students for university studies and professional careers. In the early 1900s, however, a need was observed to serve the student

population in a different way. By the 1950s and 1960s, researchers began to see a greater need and the “Bay City, Michigan, school system established the first middle school [grades 7–8] in 1950” (Manning, 2000, p. 192). Since that time, there has been much research and training in the development of middle schools.

The first middle schools were structured on a “core curriculum, guidance programs, exploratory education, and vocational and home arts” (Manning, 2000, p. 192). This provided students with an education in the traditional subjects if they wished to pursue their education beyond middle school, but also prepare those students who were planning to enter the workforce. Since its inception, the middle school movement has focused on the ever-changing needs of young adolescents. According to Akos (2005) “The middle school model not only recognized early adolescence as a unique developmental phase, but also that the educational structure, teaching, and learning needed to be congruent with students’ developmental needs” (p. 96). With students being in a state of developmental flux, the middle school became an integral way to address their growth. In his brief history of middle schools, Manning (2000), asserted that educators have a professional obligation to consider and “push for effective middle schools that meet the developmental needs of the students who attend them,” (p. 192) in order to increase student achievement and academic success.

The characteristics that comprise a middle school education must be different from the elementary school and high school in order to meet the specific social, emotional, and cognitive demands of the young adolescent population (Wigfield et al., 2005). Many middle schools strive to be more “student-centered, focused on creative exploration, and seek to maintain flexibility to emphasize the affective and cognitive development of the students” (Akos, 2005, p. 98). This allows the school to educate the whole student in developmentally specific ways that connect the

student to their education. Yet while middle school educators understand the nuances of this population, they need ongoing professional development that is directed specifically to meet their needs as educators teaching a unique population of students.

**Purpose of professional development.** There are many purposes behind educational professional development which should be examined and discussed. With the array of complex challenges that schools face in modern society—from the growing diversity in each population of students, to incorporating new technology in the classroom, to meeting arduous academic standards and goals—research demonstrates the need that teachers have to be able to enrich and build on their instructional expertise (Abilock et al., 2013; Compton, 2010; Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011). Due to this demand for instructional knowledge and refined pedagogical skills, many researchers and change agents have tasked themselves with developing a vision for professional development that focuses on subject-matter knowledge, coupled with explicit standards for student performance, and implemented in a conducive setting (Abilock et al., 2013; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Kose & Lim, 2010; Supovitz, & Turner, 2000). With these objectives, and clear push for the enhancement of middle school pedagogy, educators are more equipped to enhance the educational needs of their students.

**Effective professional development.** Numerous researchers (Desimone, 2009; Gulamhussein, 2013; Hough, 2011; Hunzicker, 2011; Klein & Riordan, 2009; Supovitz & Turner, 2000) have investigated professional development practices among teachers across the grade levels to identify what works and that which is ineffective. These researchers agree on the practical procedures (steps that can be instituted without major disruption) that make professional development relevant, authentic, and expected to produce results. The duration of professional development, to begin with, must be “significant and ongoing to allow time for

teachers to learn a new strategy and grapple with any implementation problems that occur” (Hough, 2011, p. 133). When teachers are not afforded the time to make necessary adjustments, they can become discouraged in the process and abandon the cause.

There must also be continuous means of support for an instructor as they begin to implement new strategies that change their classroom practices (Desimone, 2009; Hough, 2011; Hunzicker, 2011; Klein & Riordan, 2009). Routine is difficult to change, for both teachers and students. If there is going to be a change in the structure of a classroom, support must be present. Also, a teacher’s first encounter to a new concept “should not be passive, but rather should engage them through varied approaches so they can participate actively in making sense of the new practice” (Hough, 2011, p. 135). Because of this, modeling (the act of having a trainer step into the classroom and show an educator a specific concept) has proven to be an exceedingly powerful way to present a new concept and aid teachers in understanding what they need to execute (Desimone, 2009; Klein & Riordan, 2009).

Lastly, the “content offered to teachers should not be vague, but instead grounded in the teacher’s discipline (for middle school and high school teachers) or grade-level (for elementary school teachers)” (Desimone, 2009, p. 190). It is illogical for a math teacher to attend a professional development training tailored to language arts teachers. The professional development opportunities offered to teachers should follow these guidelines if they are to be meaningful and effective to the teacher’s practice.

**Benefits of effective professional development.** The benefits of educators participating in effective professional development opportunities, according to researchers, are numerous. Gulamhussein (2013) argued that “teacher learning is the best investment for the future of education.” Student achievement is the core priority of most every educational effort when

considering the training and equipping of teachers (Abilock et al., 2013; Supovitz & Turner, 2000). Education is evolving at a rapid rate, and effective professional development opportunities afford educators the opportunity to remain professionally relevant. As these changes in education take place and teachers seek to remain relevant to their craft, effective professional development encourages teachers to reflect, refine, and improve their pedagogical approaches, and offers ineffective teachers a chance to observe what they are doing against the backdrop of soundly grounded philosophies of teaching (Compton, 2010; Guskey, 2009; Kennedy, 2011; Kose & Lim, 2010). When educators take advantage of adequate professional development opportunities that are offered to them, the positive results bring forth dynamic and fruitful change within classrooms.

**Challenges of ineffective professional development.** Education, as it has evolved with an ever-changing society, combats numerous challenges in the 21st century. With an increase in cultural and ethnic diversity, classes filled with limited English proficiency students, and the pressures of achieving district, state, and federal benchmarks (Aud et al., 2010; Bryant et al., 2001), middle schools, specifically, need new and inspiring ways to serve a challenging population. The task set forth for today's teachers is to acquire the skills necessary to learn, recognize, and honor the academic diversity and development of their learners while still meeting benchmark goals.

The educational and developmental needs of adolescents are difficult to navigate, and without proper training, teachers can quickly become ineffective. In addition to the many challenges that this age group brings, reformers continue to push for overall school improvement and acquiring benchmark goals. Successful public education includes the improvement of the

quality teaching and teachers' professional development (Goldring et al., 2012; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012) to meet these demanding needs.

While professional development is a critical and fundamental component to the life and longevity of an educational career, many teachers resist the opportunity for growth and change. Bohn (2014) suggested that this is typically caused by four factors:

teachers who do not believe their administrators understand or support them, teachers who lack confidence and do not know how to improve, teachers who prefer more traditional methods and believe that change is too much work, and teachers who lack the desire and motivation to improve. (para. 2)

All of these factors, in combination with prior negative experiences, hinder the willingness of educators to participate in new opportunities.

**Teacher requirements for professional development.** Educational professional development can be an important tool to equip teachers for the challenges they will encounter and the pressures associated with their student population (Dack & Tomlinson, 2015; Goldring et al., 2012). For example, in one of the states in the Pacific Northwest, the number of professional development units required varies depending on the type of license a teacher holds. A unit is the equivalent of one hour of training. For a 3-year license, teachers must obtain 75 units during the life of their license. For a 5-year license, 125 units must be completed. Teachers satisfy these units through workshops, in-service days provided by their districts, and occasionally conferences that offer certificates of units completed. An educator in a different state of the Pacific Northwest must follow a different set of procedures. Professional development units in that state are referred to as clock hours and may only be obtained from a Professional Educator Standards Board-approved provider. For each 5-year license a total of 100 clock hours must be

documented in order for license renewal. While each state in the nation has their own requirements that teachers must satisfy, the implication is that professional development is critical to developing stronger schools.

### **Review of Methodological Issues**

The use of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method research is a significant factor in understanding any field of study. The combination of the three methods has aided in understanding not only the area of professional development but also in adolescent development. Studies from each of these three methods are outlined below.

**Qualitative research.** Jones and Deutsch (2013) examined shifting adolescent needs in pre-, early, and mid-adolescence and how those needs were met in the context of an after-school program. Their study sought to understand perceptions of 17 youth in a Boys and Girls Club in Michigan about the role of 12 knowledgeable adults in mentoring positions using participant-observations and interviews. They argue, reasonably, that adolescents present diverse needs and as a youth matures, their needs shift at a rapid rate. Due to this, it becomes critical to establish program settings and activities with adults that understand adolescents that promote healthy development, in and out of the school context.

The results of this qualitative study were based around two age groups. The study revealed the differences in development between early adolescents and mid-adolescents, as one might expect. For each group, the perceptions formulated by the youth and staff regarding developmental changes was recorded. The researchers utilized an interpretive approach and “allowed initial analyses and constant comparison to guide their data collection” (Jones & Deutsch, 2013, p. 20). This allowed researchers to understand the needs and gave insight into the lives of the youth who felt they were maturing and growing up at the club.



The limitations of this research were in the omitting of certain data that did not reflect positively upon the research. This can be seen as a manipulation of the data and therefore not trustworthy. The purpose of the research was to identify positive outcomes regarding social and identity development within the program structure. Due to this, the researchers chose to not include every observation or interview. It was stated that some participants showed boredom, chaos, and even aggression, which did not reflect on the nature of supportive relationships or the program. This is particularly poignant considering professional development. Boredom, chaos, and aggression can be symptoms of a staff that is not properly trained to deal with the population they serve.

In another qualitative study, Lutrick and Szabo (2012) interviewed administrators (specifically principals and assistant principals) about their beliefs regarding effective professional development practices. The researchers argued that “instructional leaders are more and more responsible not only for determining the topics of professional development sessions, but for also delivering the content” (p. 6). Researchers used a phenomenological method to compare the beliefs of varied instructional leaders with the national benchmarks of quality professional development.

The interviews and data from the administrators produced themes to professional development such as ongoing in nature, collaborative amongst colleagues, “data-driven design, interest-driven design, and interactive for all participants” (Lutrick & Szabo, 2012, p. 8). When compared with the national standards for effective professional development, researchers found that the administrators’ beliefs were in line with standards, but implementation of the standards remained a challenge to implement. The authors suggest that this study be continued on a broader spectrum, as this was a small sampling, and they further suggest that instructional

leaders should continue to utilize standards for professional development to provide effective training in their schools.

Samek et al. (2010) produced a qualitative study that “investigated university faculty, classroom teachers, and principals’ perceptions of well-prepared middle school teachers in the state of Oregon” (p. 273). The study focused on finding the congruence and divergence that exists between these groups and how it affects preservice teacher preparation. Through the use of interviews with the three stake holding groups, perceptions on assessment, collaboration, content knowledge, development, disposition, family and community, philosophy, and instruction, differentiation, and management were recorded.

There are clear limitations to this research. While the sampling was intended to represent the state of Oregon, the data was gathered from institutions of convenience rather than random selection (Samek et al., 2013, p. 280). One of the weaknesses of a convenience sampling is that it often can either underrepresent or overrepresent a population, which creates bias (Convenience Sampling, 2012). Despite the limitations of the study, the results produced thought-provoking discussions for the future of middle level education.

**Quantitative research.** A longitudinal study (Pfeifer et al., 2013) was conducted through the department of psychology at the University of Oregon that evaluated the neural bases of adolescent social self-evaluations. The goal was to measure “the effects of age and pubertal development” (p. 7415). This study focused on confirming adolescence to be an important developmental stage in which youth develop a self-awareness of their unique selves and links to others, which is influenced by many factors.

This research study included 27 neurotypical individuals, 18 of which were “female, with no history of psychiatric, neurological, or learning disorders” (Pfeifer et al., 2013, p. 7416). Their

brains were scanned using a functional magnetic resonance image (fMRI) “while making evaluations of self and other in the social and academic domains, once at age 10” and again at age 13 (p. 7416). Between the first testing period and the second testing period, significant increases on the Pubertal Development Scale (PDS) took place for both genders.

The results of the two scans revealed several factors to the researchers (Pfeifer et al., 2013). The researchers’ hypotheses were proven correctly when increases in the PDS occurred between the two testing periods and was significantly positively correlated with increased responses to self. Additionally, researchers were able to see that the time between the two testing periods revealed that adolescents form executive functions, increase memory, and gain perspective during this age and that there are strong linkages to self-evaluative processing. Anatomically, the brain of an adolescent goes through a series of vast changes in a relatively short period in how they evaluate themselves and the peers and adults around them. The research illustrates the tight relationship between biological and social changes during puberty. This illustrates, also, the reason behind educators needing specialized training to work with this age group.

Up to the time of publication, this research was the only longitudinal approach to self-development using MRI scans, outside of research done in animals. The authors suggest that future studies should continue to study the regions of the prefrontal cortex in young adolescents during their phase of self-evaluation to determine when these critical changes peak in the scan. This suggests that one of the limitations of the study is that the participants were only tested twice, and with 3 years between testing sessions. If participants were tested more frequently, such as every year during this time of development, researchers could more accurately describe how puberty played a role in the transition that participants went through.

Paulson, Rothlisberg, and Marchant (2016) conducted research that measured “teachers’ perceptions of the importance of an adolescent development knowledge base” (p. 25) and how it affected instructional practice. They conducted a Likert-scale survey to which 258 middle school and high school instructors from districts in the Midwest responded. Seventy-three percent of the sample were middle school teachers and 27% were high school. The average years of teaching experience was 16.18 and ranged from 1 year to 56 years. Teachers were represented across the core subjects. The survey addressed “teachers’ perceptions of the importance of general developmental principles, their knowledge base of such principles, and the influence increasing knowledge would have on practice” (p. 26).

With the belief “that the application of developmental principles to teaching practices is imperative in the education of middle and secondary grade students” (p. 28), Paulson et al. (2016) stated that the reasons of the study were broken into three parts. First, teachers were presented with developmental principles that would typically be taught in an adolescent development course and they rated them on importance for pedagogical purposes. Next, they were asked to rate what teachers (in general) already know on the same principles. Lastly, “teachers were asked to rate the influence an increased knowledge of adolescent development would have on their personal teaching practices” (p. 27).

The questionnaire used for this study “was developed by a team of researchers that included representatives from developmental psychology, educational psychology, school psychology, middle and secondary teaching, and preservice teaching” (Paulson et al., 2016, p. 29). These researchers identified 33 adolescent development concepts that spanned seven categories.

The seven categories addressed were: biological development and included items about pubertal development and its effects of behavior; cognitive development included items related to characteristics of adolescents' thinking and social cognition; social development included items about identity development, parent relationships, and autonomy; friendship included items about the development of peer groups, popularity, and the nature of friendships; dating included items about dating behaviors and sexual development; school included items about achievement motivation and effects of tracking and school size; and diversity included items about gender, ethnic, and social class differences. (p. 29)

The results of this study revealed that teachers perceived significant differences among “the different aspects of adolescent development in their importance to teachers” (p. 32). The most striking result was that teachers perceived “cognitive and biological concepts to be most important for them to know” (p. 33), while at the same time having the least knowledge in these areas. The categories of friendships and social development were ranked the least important and yet teachers ranked their knowledge on these two as higher than others. Across the categories, the level of knowledge that teachers claimed to have was significantly lower than the importance they ranked each category.

The researchers claimed that this study helped establish the “importance knowledge of adolescent development has for the instructional practice of middle school and high school educators” (Paulson et al., 2016, p. 36). The majority of teachers in the study stated that increased awareness of adolescent development would, in fact, impact their teaching practices, effectively illustrating that “teachers recognize the links between their knowledge about their students and effective practices in the classroom” (p. 37).

In another quantitative study, Battle and Looney (2014) investigated teachers' intentions to remain in the field of education. A staggering percentage of American "teachers leave the profession within the first five years" and this research study used an "expectancy-value theory to explore 46 in-service teachers' valuing of teaching and knowledge of adolescent development as it relates to their intentions to remain teaching" (Battle & Looney, 2014, p. 369). The theory driving the question was based on a conventional health and wellness approach, stating "that prevention of illness is preferable to crisis management" (p. 370), which can be applied to the profession of teaching. It is better to equip teachers with what they need for career longevity rather than continue losing qualified educators. With this in mind, the research question became whether or not "associations exist between valuing teaching, knowledge of adolescent development and intentions to remain in teaching" (p. 371).

The sampling for this study involved 46 secondary teachers with an average teaching experience of 5.17 years. Participants were asked to respond to three Likert-scale surveys that measured "valuing of teaching, knowledge of adolescent development, and perceptions of intentions to remain in teaching" (Battle & Looney, 2014, p. 372). The valuing of teaching instrument measured task-valuing constructs such as intrinsic, attainment, utility value, and cost. Sample items included statements such as "I like going to work in my classroom," "I think teaching is useful for what I want to do in the future," and "Teaching doesn't leave me enough time for other activities I enjoy" (p. 372). The knowledge of adolescent development scale asked participants to rate their knowledge of four domains (cognitive, motivation, social, and moral). Items were divided into two subscales where researchers were more interested in teachers' perceptions of knowledge rather than actual knowledge outcomes. The "intentions measure

asked participants to indicate how likely it was that they would remain in teaching for the foreseeable future” (p. 372).

The results of this study were consistent with the expectancy-value theory to predict intentions; in this case, to continue in the educational field. “Intrinsic-attainment and utility task valuing of teaching were significantly, positively correlated with intentions to remain in teaching” (Battle & Looney, 2014, p. 373). Cost valuing, however, had negative associations with teachers’ intentions to remain in the profession. A significant and positive correlation ( $r = .36$ ) “was found between teachers’ knowledge of social and moral development and the intrinsic attainment value they assigned to teaching” (p. 374). This is a firm argument that teachers who have an understanding of the developmental stage their students are in have greater self-efficacy in their positions and will likely remain in the profession.

**Mixed-method research.** Hough (2011) developed a longitudinal research study examining the “characteristics of effective professional development” (p. 129) within the middle-level grades. The primary focus of Hough’s study is the degree to which characteristics identified as components of effective professional development are associated with levels of program implementation and sustainability (p. 129). A specific program was utilized, and while deemed important to the case study site, was the avenue through which Hough examined the professional development practices and the relationship to teacher practices with student outcomes.

Utilizing both qualitative and quantitative methods, Hough (2011) broke the study into four parts. Part one was a descriptive study founded on data provided by the participating districts. Part two created a survey that was given to the 900 educators that went through the training in the summer of 2008. The survey was utilized as a pre-assessment before educators participated in the training, a formative assessment as it was also given on the last day of the

workshop, and a summative assessment as it was used as a follow-up in the spring of 2009. In addition to the surveys, part two also included the researcher leading three focus groups where he interviewed participants, tape-recorded the sessions, and then had them transcribed by a paralegal transcription expert.

Part three focused on two online questionnaires that were administered to teachers. The first questionnaire focused on perception of implementation, while the second questionnaire measured perceived school climate using a school climate index. ANOVA techniques were used to examine the differences between school and MANCOVA techniques were used to examine the difference between individual schools and the entire sample. The three areas that were measured were implementation, school climate, and student outcomes. In regard to the total number of participants over the span of the years studied (2,319), it was found that the relationship between the level of training and implementation is highly correlated (Pearson  $r = .79$ ).

The significance of this study is that five components of effective professional development have been identified by educators having been through the training. The first is that content for any training should be delivered by an expert in the field. Second, administrators and teachers alike need to show support for implementation of a new program or model after the training. Third, each training offered should be aligned to one or more of the school's improvement goals. Next, the training should contain practical application to classroom needs, such as mentoring. Lastly, the "strategies presented must be appropriate to the background and experiences of the teachers involved" (Hough, 2011, p. 135). In addition, effective professional development must be sustained for at least two years when implementing a new program and



that 75% or more of faculty and staff must participate. When these components are in place, teachers perceived greater results when implementing new strategies in the classroom.

Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, and Yoon (2001) identified “three core features of professional development that have significant and positive effects on teachers’ knowledge and skills pertaining to classroom practices” (p. 916). These core features incorporate a “focus on content knowledge, opportunities for active learning, and coherence with other learning activities” (p. 917). In order to come to these conclusions, researchers integrated the ideas found in literature as “best practices in professional development to create a set of scales describing various activities, and then tested the characteristics to examine their effects on teacher outcomes” (p. 918). A national sampling of math and science teachers were interviewed and surveyed regarding a specific professional development training offered them. This mixed-method approach resulted in identifying several ways for improving professional development and supporting best practices.

### **Synthesis of Research Findings and Critique Previous Research**

Many researchers (Battle & Looney, 2014; Caskey & Anfara, 2014; Giwa, 2012; Hough, 2011) have contributed to the field of education through their work in exploring both professional development and young adolescent development. The findings of these researchers are congruent with each other in terms of what produces quality and contextually appropriate professional development, as well as the distinct changes that occur to young adolescents.

There is an undeniable relationship between quality teaching and student outcomes in the classroom. It can, therefore, be assumed that professional development practices should work to produce quality teaching practices and pedagogy. Hough (2011), Hunzicker (2011), Abilock et al. (2013), Garet et al. (2001), and Penuel et al. (2007) have all discussed the characteristics that

make for effective professional development practices and find common ground in their approaches and in their findings. Successful professional development strategies have been defined as “experiential, grounded in participants’ questions, collaborative among educators, connected to and derived from work with students, sustainable and intensive, and linked to a school’s goals” (Hough, 2011, p. 130).

Adolescent development is a topic of research that has no end. Some researchers, though, have touched upon issues in adolescent development that directly relate to middle level teachers and the classroom environment. Teachers, counselors, and administrators should be aware of the developmental transformations taking place during the young adolescent years and how they affect the learning environment of the middle school classroom.

Numerous elements impact the development of a young adolescent. Wigfield et al. (2005) and Akos (2005) both researched from a middle school counselor’s perspective, reporting on the various issues that arose during this age span. These researchers have reported significant trends in the 21st century middle school classroom dealing with issues from anxiety, bullying, poverty, identity formation, and many others that teachers and other school personnel should be educated about. There is a critical need for middle schools, and their teachers, to be developmentally responsive to their students.

Building off of the research of Wigfield et al. (2005) and Akos (2005), more current research can illuminate the changing needs of the developing young adolescent. Moran (2015) purported a significant rise in anxiety within middle level classrooms and Charmaraman et al. (2013) argued the need for teachers to be well-trained in bullying issues. Liang, Commins, and Duffy (2010) highlighted that along with technology advances came social media and networking, which has contributed to the development in young adolescents both positively and

negatively. Sullivan, Childs, and O'Connell (2009) reported on the risk behaviors that these students exhibit that educators should be cautiously aware of, such as eating disorders, suicidal tendencies, and alcohol/drug use among others. All of these researchers indicate that these issues have already become evident in middle schools around the world and continue to grow more concerning.

### **Summary**

The literature covers the purpose behind professional development and how it can be used as a tool to better the educational field and equip teachers for the challenges they see in their classrooms and schools. Change agents within the educational field have created a concept for what professional development should look like and encompass, in an effort to train teachers in intensive and maintained preparation around solid assignments that is centered around subject-matter expertise, associated with precise standards for student achievement and implemented in an authentic setting. Many researchers advocate for strong professional development practices in an effort to remain relevant in a rapidly changing field, improve pedagogical approaches, and focus on student achievement.

The argument proposed from the research is that middle level educators do not see balanced and effective training as do their peers who teach elementary or high school, especially in regards to the developmental needs of their students. Much of the research is based on teacher perception. The teachers who have received effective professional development continue to be actively engaged learners who, in return, see greater engagement and learning amongst their students. The research, however, is thin concerning the amount of professional development offered to middle level educators in regard to their specific population.

During the middle school years, more so than at any other school level, educators are challenged with an intense range of “students’ developmental, social, psychological, and cognitive needs, beliefs about school, and expectations for their learning experiences” (Akos, 2005, p. 101). Middle school students are encountering significant transitions and learning how to adapt to them. During this time, positive encounters with knowledgeable adults can yield monumental outcomes. The patterns of thought established during this time can result in consequences on lifelong learning, personal satisfaction, and vocation achievement, which makes a teacher’s ability to effectively and sustainably work with this age group all the more critical.

## **Chapter 3: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

Professional development within the educational context is the primary instrument for teachers to improve their pedagogical craft and create a culture of student achievement within their classrooms. Not all teachers, however, receive equitable and effective opportunities. Middle level teachers (Grades 6–8) do not receive the extensive training experiences that their elementary and high school counterparts receive both in content specific areas as well as pedagogical skills (Ellerbock & Kiefer, 2014). It is imperative for middle level educators to receive quality development opportunities due to the nature of the population they serve. Middle school students are undergoing significant physical and developmental changes and need teachers that know how to meet their academic needs. Additional research should be done in order to understand how various districts are equipping their middle level professionals with strong professional development opportunities. Effective professional development opportunities have proven to give teachers more specific content and pedagogical knowledge, thus increasing their self-efficacy within their classrooms (Finnegan, 2013). Self-efficacy is the belief that someone has in themselves to do a task well. With increased self-efficacy, teachers are confident to engage students in age-appropriate learning activities and students' academic achievement increases as their teachers use relevant skills to communicate information.

The purpose of this study was to investigate and uncover the thoughts, feelings, and perceptions that middle level educators have with regard to the professional development opportunities they receive and whether or not they are effective, relevant, and meeting their needs. It also investigated whether they are obtaining adequate training that prepares them to address the teaching and learning needs of a middle school classroom. Educators shared their

professional development experiences and if they found these experiences supported their classroom practices of working with a historically difficult age group. Educators also were given the opportunity to state what they would hope to see and experience in future professional development trainings.

The definition of a phenomenological study is “to research the lived experiences of a phenomena from the first-person point of view” (Creswell, 2013, p. 53). This study was conducted using a phenomenological approach; professional development was investigated using the lived experiences of educators. This method produced an in-depth understanding of how middle level educators experience professional development and uncovered what they would hope to receive in the future. Moustakas (1994) reasoned that the experience one lives and their behavior share an inseparable relationship with the phenomenon. This chapter will outline how the study took place including the phenomenological design, instrumentation, participant selection, and data collection.

### **Research Questions**

Creswell (2013) stated that research questions for a phenomenological approach “explore the meaning of [the] experience for individuals and asks individuals to describe their everyday lived experiences” (p. 54). The research questions for this study have been designed to purposefully obtain insight into the lived experiences of middle level educators concerning the professional development they have attended as well as the types they would like to receive. Each key research question was followed up by additional questions to elicit the most detailed response possible and to ensure understanding. The following questions provided the researcher with the pertinent information for the study:

1. How do middle school educators describe their professional development experiences?
2. What characteristics of professional development do middle school educators view as effective ways of learning?
3. Are middle school educators experiencing professional development that is relevant to their classroom population?

### **Purpose and Design of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to understand the professional development experiences of 12 licensed middle school teachers from various schools in the Pacific Northwest. Phenomenology is a qualitative approach that examines the “lived experiences for individuals concerning a concept or phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 51). The theory behind a phenomenological approach is based on the foundation that “human experience makes sense to those who live it, prior to all interpretations and theorizing” (p. 86). By utilizing a phenomenological approach and interviewing participants, the researcher was able to more adequately understand how middle school teachers describe their professional development opportunities, how these opportunities impact their teaching abilities as educators of middle school students, and ability to utilize content in the classroom. The goal was to uncover the professional development practices that were most effective and relevant across the lived experiences of participants, as well as determine how professional development opportunities could be of more direct aid to classroom pedagogy for middle school teachers.

“Phenomenology’s approach is to suspend all judgments about what is real until that reality is founded on a more certain basis” (Creswell, 2013, p. 52), which is done by bracketing out any preconceived notions from the researcher. Bracketing is “a method used in qualitative

research to diminish the potentially harmful effects of preconceptions of the researcher that may taint the research process” (Tufford and Newman, 2012, p. 80). The researcher bracketed out any preconceived notions regarding the phenomenon of professional development in order for the participants to express their experiences in an unbiased format. All input was gathered, coded, and then put into “meaning clusters” (pp. 54–55) that allowed the researcher to make sense behind the general experience of the participants as well as how it was experienced and whether there was a meaning to be discovered. Due to the subjective nature of participants’ opinions on their lived experiences, phenomenology was the most appropriate method for the study.

### **Research Population and Sampling Method**

Creswell (2013) stated that a phenomenological approach is best utilized with 5–24 participants so that a multitude of perspectives can be evaluated. This study was designed to interview 12 middle level educators in the Pacific Northwest, from various districts and both public and private schools. Twelve participants provided the researcher an appropriate sampling across years of experience and ethnic diversity. Participants were licensed educators working within the middle school context (Grades 6–8).

The researcher utilized purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling throughout networks of teachers to provide diversity of years serving as educators, gender, and ethnicity. All three sampling techniques are nonprobability based and allowed the researcher to recruit participants that match the characteristics of a specific population for the objective of the study. Using purposive sampling afforded the researcher the chance to collect data from individuals that could provide first-hand information on the phenomenon being studied. The researcher was able to select specific individuals who met the criteria of the study. A snowball sampling method was used by the researcher to reach a broader sampling population through networks that were



already established. Participants aided the researcher in the recruitment of additional participants. The benefits of utilizing a convenience sampling was that “the relative cost and time required” were minimal, which enabled the “researcher to achieve the sample size they want[ed]” in a quick and cost effective manner (Convenience Sampling, 2012, para. 1). All participants were from the same geographic region, which supported the researcher in terms of scheduling one-on-one interviews.

The limitations to this sampling technique is that there is a risk for bias and the population of the study is unlikely to represent an entire population, yet in qualitative research participants should be selected based upon their experience with the phenomenon being investigated (Creswell, 2013). The researcher sought to recruit diversity amongst participants in three categories: years of experience (0–4 years, 5–10 years, and 10+ years), gender, and ethnicity. Prospective participants were made cognizant of the purpose behind the study, and should they choose to participate were asked to sign a consent form stating that their lived experiences may be shared for the purpose of the research project. Their identities, however, were safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms through the duration of the study. Participants had the option of opting out of the study at any point.

### **Instrumentation**

The primary instrument that was utilized was in-depth one-on-one interviews accompanied by reflective journaling. The reflective journal served as a way for the researcher to reflect on their own assumptions and values, acknowledging them as part of the process, but not allowing them to become the central focus of the study (Ortlipp, 2008). Reflective journaling by the participants allowed the researcher to have a more comprehensive view of the participant and their thoughts and feelings toward professional development. A focus group took place with

interview participants once all of the individual interviews had taken place. The focus group was conducted after the individual interviews so that whole-group follow up questions could be addressed. The specific questions participants were asked to respond to were created by the researcher, based on previous research, and specifically formulated so that participants could share candid responses without the influence of bias on behalf of the researcher (see Appendix A).

Since this study is based on a convenience sampling, one particular site was not used. Rather, participants were asked to meet at a convenient location that provided a private environment for the interview conversations, such as a local library private room that was reserved ahead of time and provided an ideal environment for digital recording. Creswell (2013) suggested that the interview should be semi structured and recorded so that the researcher can return to the interview to transcribe it later for data analysis (p. 121). In addition to recording the interview, the researcher kept a narrative journal to record observations and reflect upon data collection practices.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher was the primary instrument for the collection of all data. Three methods of data collection was utilized in the study: one-on-one interviews, reflective journaling, and a focus group. At each individual interview, the researcher explained the study to the participants and answered any questions or concerns before beginning. The participants were aware that the interview would be digitally recorded and the researcher would also be taking notes. The written responses were used to find what Creswell (2013) would call meaning clusters of key phrases as well as document nonverbal communication such as facial expressions and body language. When the interviews were completed, the researcher transcribed the audio recordings and presented the

interviews to the participants so they would have an opportunity to read through what was said and verify their responses, also known as member checking (Saldaña, 2016). To ensure the privacy of each participant, they were each given a pseudonym and are only referred to by that alias for the duration of the study and on all data generated during interviews, journals, and the focus group.

At the conclusion of each interview, the researcher asked participants to take time and reflect upon the discussion and to keep a journal of salient points as well as any additional information they may have forgotten to share, including personal stories. This allowed the researcher to engage with the participants' information in a less formal atmosphere, where participants may not feel restricted in their responses. Participants, when finished, were asked to electronically submit their journals to the researcher. The researcher used the journal entries to code, cluster themes, and interpret meanings of the narrative data collected (Creswell, 2013) in addition to the transcriptions from each interview. After interviews were completed, transcripts were reviewed, and journal reflections received, the researcher hosted a focus group with the participants of the study for follow up questions and to validate the themes that had emerged from the in-depth interviews and journaling. This format stimulated interactive communication between participants and helped them to delve deeper into discussion on the subject of professional development and offer new insights into the phenomenon.

### **Identification of Attributes**

Attributes are constructs of the study that cannot be measured yet dictate the overarching theme of the research. This study is centered around the concept of middle school teachers (Grades 6–8) and their perception of professional development, adolescent development, and how effective and relevant professional development influences the classroom in both respects.

Teacher development is a central theme of the study as high-quality teaching is fundamental to student success. This can be achieved through continuing education that centers on content mastery and pedagogical craft specific to middle level educators. Pedagogy, what teachers do and how they do it, is paramount and has a profound impact on student achievement (Kennedy, 2016).

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Creswell (2013) asserted that “phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and search for all possible meanings” (p. 52). In order to extract all possible meanings, the researcher began to code the information presented in the interviews immediately upon completion. “A code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 3). It is a highly interpretive act by the researcher and requires the researcher to do several rounds of layering to complete the process.

Saldaña (2016) suggested that the process of coding begins in the interview because researchers tend to pre-code the information as it is said. This is done by “circling, highlighting, bolding, underlining, or coloring rich or significant participant quotes or passages that strike” (p. 16) during the interview and note-taking. Once the interviews were finished, the researcher started the procedure known as first cycle coding. The researcher utilized initial coding, values coding, and evaluation coding in the first cycle. Initial coding is the “breaking down of qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 81). Values coding is the “application of codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her

perspective or worldview” (p. 89). Lastly, evaluation coding is the “application of non-quantitative codes onto qualitative data that assign judgments about the merit and worth of programs or policies” (p. 97) and is meant to describe, compare, and predict. All three of these coding methods assisted the researcher in extracting meaning and themes from the interviews.

Second cycle coding procedures are higher-order means of “reorganizing and reanalyzing data gathered through the first cycle coding procedures” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 151). The researcher utilized pattern coding during this phase as it was a way of “grouping the first cycle codes and data into a smaller number of sets, themes, and constructs” (p. 152). The second cycle of coding allowed the researcher to compare narrative codes from each interview using the constant comparison method. From there, themes emerged between interview participants to create thematic units that the researcher could use to interpret meaning.

### **Limitations and Delimitations of the Research Design**

The nature of a phenomenological study is that it is completely subjective. The researcher must make every effort to set aside their own thoughts or feelings on the matter, and focus on what is being presented to them through the research participants. In a phenomenological study, a researcher must set aside (or bracket) their own “experiences and rely on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the phenomenon from others’ lived experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 52). It can be difficult to ensure true bracketing, which is why it is one of the greatest potential limitations of phenomenological research. Another limitation to the research is that phenomenology typically has very small populations being studied (12 in the case of this study), so it would be difficult to say that the results are typical across broader populations.

Delimitations of a qualitative research study are the parameters that a researcher sets that limit the scope of the study. While limitations are typically not within the control of the

researcher, delimitations are. For the purpose of interpreting educators' lived experiences with professional development in the middle school environment, several delimitations are necessary. Prospective participants will consist of licensed educators who currently teach (or have taught) within a middle school (Grades 6–8) with varying years of experience, gender, and ethnicity. Participants will be based in the Pacific Northwest. Participants from both public and private schools were encouraged to participate.

### **Validity, Credibility, and Dependability**

Credibility and dependability validate the qualitative research study. It is imperative for a researcher to establish credibility and dependability in their study. Credibility in a qualitative research study refers to how believable and trustworthy the findings are. Trustworthiness in qualitative research establishes the “credibility, transferability, confirm-ability, and dependability of the study” (Statistics Solutions, 2017). Due to the subjective nature of a phenomenological study, the participants are the ones that deem whether or not the study is credible. For this reason, participants possessed an active role in creating meaning for the study by verifying transcripts of their interviews and clarifying any misunderstandings. This procedure is called member checking and it optimized the validity and credibility of the findings of this study.

Dependability is the consistency with which the study could be duplicated. The primary instruments for this study were the researcher and the interview protocol. The research study could be duplicated with the use of the protocol; however, a phenomenological study is likely to produce varied results dependent upon the lived experiences of the participants involved.

### **Expected Findings**

Creswell (2013) stated that “objective understanding is mediated by subjective experience” (p. 86). The expected outcome of this study was to gain a more insightful and big

picture perspective of professional development opportunities for middle school teachers and how those teachers felt they equipped them for work in their classrooms. The study also provided understanding on whether professional development among middle school educators was effective and relevant to meet the needs of their population of students. The interview questions allowed the researcher to achieve comprehensive insights into the lived experiences of the participants, and may be able to contribute to how future opportunities are developed and offered to the middle level education community.

### **Ethical Issues in the Study**

Precautions were taken to make sure that this research study would be handled professionally and in the best interest of the participants and researcher. There are many steps involved to ensure that proper protocol was followed. First, the researcher obtained written consent from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to perform the research study before embarking on any and all research. Concordia University required the researcher to submit a research proposal to be reviewed and approved prior to research. Once approval had been established, the researcher began to recruit participants that fit the scope of the study. All potential participants were informed of the nature of the study and a description of the process before agreeing to participate. The researcher addressed any questions or concerns from potential participants before enrolling them in the study. When potential participants agreed to take part in the study, a consent form notifying them of the context of the study, as well as their rights, was signed before interviewing will begin. All participants and affiliated school districts were given pseudonyms in place of real names that are used for the duration of the study and any following work related to the study. During the interviews, all participant responses were digitally recorded and saved on a personal technology device that is password protected and is only accessible to

the researcher. The only person to review the transcripts of the interviews was the researcher. Lastly, consent forms, transcripts, and all data affiliated with the study were filed for the required 3-year period and then will be destroyed.

### **Conflict of Interest Assessment**

The researcher did not anticipate any conflicts of interest within the research study. The researcher did not have an established relationship with any prospective participants and there were not any financial gains on the part of the researcher or the participants.

### **Researcher's Position**

The role of the researcher is to remain as objective as possible while interpreting the lived experiences of the participants. As a current middle school teacher, however, the researcher has a vested interest in the topic of study. The researcher has been a middle level educator for 10 years and the professional development opportunities that have been offered during that time have not been designed to equip teachers to work within their middle school classroom or to engage their middle school students in their academic pursuits. Through conversation with other middle level professionals, it can be concluded that the lack of middle level development leaves teachers feeling inadequate to serve their populations and burnout can often occur due to the additional time and effort put toward finding solutions on their own.

The intentions behind this study are to gain insight as to how teachers within the Pacific Northwest have been equipped to work with their middle school students and meet their academic needs. An underlying question within the researcher is how, and if, various districts in the area are observing the need for more professional development at the middle level and how they plan to address it. After studying teacher leadership for 3 years, the researcher hopes to



obtain enough perspective and information through various other middle level educators to develop new opportunities for growth in the professional development realm.

### **Summary**

This chapter began by delving into the researcher's conceptual framework for the demand for more contextually appropriate professional development opportunities for middle level educators and the importance behind why there is a need. The purpose behind the study is to gain the insights of middle level professionals in the Pacific Northwest, as to the professional development opportunities they receive and how they meet their specific content and pedagogical needs in the classroom. The study utilized a phenomenological approach as it is appropriate for collecting data on the lived experiences of the participants. The researcher actively recruited licensed educators who are currently working, or have worked, in Grades 6–8 in their career. The recruiting process included purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling methods to obtain participants.

The researcher used interviews, reflective journaling, and a focus group as means of data collection and the researcher served as the primary instrument in executing the study. The researcher had developed overarching research questions that guided the study as well as specific questions that were asked of the participants. For data analysis the researcher went through two cycles of coding; the first took place after the individual interviews were complete, and the second after the completion of the focus group. The first cycle of coding included initial coding, values coding, and evaluation coding techniques while the second utilized pattern coding to uncover the meanings behind the lived experiences.

The study contained limitations including the researcher's own bias, which was bracketed out for the duration of the study, as well as delimitations which are the parameters of the study

within the researcher's control. To ensure validity, credibility, and dependability, a process of member checking took place after the interviews by having participants confirm the transcribed interviews by the researcher. Other ethical issues within the study have been outlined and the researcher has stated their position on the topic.

## Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

### Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain a more in depth understanding of the perceptions that middle grade educators have on their professional development opportunities. Professional development is the means by which educators remain competent, competitive, and powerful in their practice. It is integral to the life and longevity that an educator has within their career since education is an ever-evolving system and new skills and techniques must be acquired. Subsequently, the middle school years are unique to students and teachers alike. Middle school students have different needs than their elementary and high school counterparts and it requires varied skills to educate them. This study focused specifically on finding out whether middle school educators believed they were being given opportunities to further develop their skills, learn new tools to use in their instructional practice, and learning relevant information. Each of these components is critical to working in the culture and climate of a demanding middle school classroom meeting their students' needs.

This chapter will discuss in detail a description of the sample, the methodology used in this research and the analysis used to develop findings, a summary of the findings, and a presentation of the data and results. The three primary research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do middle school educators describe their professional development experiences?
2. What characteristics of professional development do middle school educators view as effective ways of learning?

3. Are middle school educators experiencing professional development that is relevant to their classroom population?

Each of these questions required the participants to reflect on their experiences throughout the course of their career in regard to professional development as well as answer follow-up questions that made their responses more thorough and clear to the researcher.

As an educator, the researcher has spent 11 years as a middle school instructor and has sought to strengthen her performance in the classroom through professional development opportunities geared specifically toward meeting the cognitive, social, and emotional needs of the students. Finding quality professional development opportunities that catered to these skills was difficult. It was through this lack of middle school specific professional development opportunities that the researcher sought the perspectives of colleagues and acquaintances in the profession. Through many conversations and shared frustrations, this research was conceptualized.

The conceptual framework for this study is based on the concept that all educators should receive adequate and effective professional development opportunities to improve their pedagogical craft and to enhance their classroom climate. Secondary and elementary teachers have a vast plethora of opportunities for professional development that can be found with general ease with any search (Deering et al., 2015). Middle school teachers, however, do not have as many opportunities available to them and generally attend workshops and lectures geared toward high school and elementary educators and are asked to adapt what is taught to fit their classroom needs. These teachers, however, have unique challenges that are separate from other age groups (Bowers et al., 2014).

Twelve educators volunteered to participate in the study and be interviewed. Nine of the 12 also participated in a focus group after all individual interviews had been conducted. The focus group was intended to follow up with participants and offer an opportunity to clarify any potential misunderstandings or add pertinent data to their interviews. The end result, however, included the participants collaboratively discussing the future of middle school professional development and where they would like to see it in the future and where the focuses should be in order to best serve those teaching in middle school classrooms.

### **Description of the Sample**

Once IRB approval was granted, the researcher used snowball (Lewis-Beck, Bryman, & Futing, 2004) and purposeful (Lavrakas, 2008) sampling methods to recruit participants. Through networking with known teachers and outreach via social media, the researcher recruited 12 eligible participants for the study. All of the participants that partook in the study are currently, or had once been, middle school teachers in the Pacific Northwest. The districts represented were diverse in terms of racial backgrounds as well as socioeconomic statuses. Two of the educators currently work for different private schools within the same area. All schools represented are accredited, either by the state or by AdvancEd (in the case of the private schools), and participants are each licensed to teach through their state's teacher licensing commission at the secondary level in the Pacific Northwest.

The participants of the study had ethnically, socioeconomically, and educationally diverse backgrounds that contributed to their reflections on professional development. The researcher attempted to gain a broader spectrum of participants concerning gender and ethnicity, but the resulting participants consisted of five males and seven females. Of these were one

African American, one Latino/Hispanic, one Asian, and the rest Caucasian. Table 1 exhibits each participant, their gender, years of experience, and ethnicity as it is pertinent to the study.

Table 1

*Pseudonyms for Participants*

Pseudonym	Gender	Years of Experience	Ethnicity
Participant 1	Male	50	Caucasian
Participant 2	Male	9	African
Participant 3	Female	3	Caucasian
Participant 4	Female	23	Caucasian
Participant 5	Male	4	Caucasian
Participant 6	Female	28	Caucasian
Participant 7	Female	17	Caucasian
Participant 8	Female	7	Asian
Participant 9	Male	34	Caucasian
Participant 10	Female	13	Latina/Hispanic
Participant 11	Female	19	Caucasian
Participant 12	Male	1	Caucasian

Participant 1 is a retired middle school teacher that has contributed to the educational field for 50 years. They hold a doctorate in religious studies and a master’s in education. They have served as a teacher, administrator, academic advisor, and student teacher supervisor in their long career and continues to substitute teach in middle schools during their retirement. They have worked in both public and private school environments as well as at the university level mentoring future teachers.

Participant 2 is currently in their ninth year of teaching and has spent the last six of those years in an inner-city middle school with a very diverse population of students. They currently

hold a bachelor's degree in education and is working to complete their master's. When they became a teacher they had anticipated teaching at the high school level, but was offered a position working in the middle school physical education department of their district instead. They claims that they will most likely continue teaching middle school for a few more years, but it is not where they want to be. Ultimately, they would like to be reassigned to a high school within the same district so that they can continue teaching physical education and coach varsity sports.

Participant 3 is currently in their third year of teaching middle school science in a large and affluent district. They have a bachelor's degree in education and plans to pursue their master's within the next two years. Their district serves a low percentage of minority students and does not qualify for Title I funds due to the wealthy population of families in the area. They have spent all three years in the same school and does not foresee changing districts within their career.

Participant 4 is currently in their 23rd year as a middle school math teacher and is also the advisor to several student clubs/organizations. They hold a master's degree in teaching and is considering adding more endorsements to their license so that they can potentially teach science in addition to math. They teach in a rural district where the diversity of students is low and the population is primarily middle class farmers. They began their career in a large urban district but made the decision to relocate after 10 years, spending the last 13 years of their career in the same school.

Participant 5 is currently in their fourth-year teaching middle school language arts in a rural district. They recently completed their master's in education and added a TESOL (Teaching English to Students of Other Languages) endorsement to their teaching license. They are an

active participant in the school outside of their classroom responsibilities. They sponsor several student-led organizations and has also been tasked to lead professional development trainings in technology to the rest of their colleagues. The population of their students are primarily Caucasian and Latino, which is why they added TESOL to their license. They plan to return to the district in coming years, but is unsure how long they will stay in the small community.

Participant 6 is currently in their 28th year of teaching middle school physical education. They hold a bachelor's degree and a physical education credential on their teaching license. They began their career teaching elementary physical education, but when the majority of their state's public schools changed the structure of elementary to being Grades K–5 and middle school to Grades 6–8, they made the switch to a middle school in the same district. Their district lies on the eastern border of a large urban city and serves a varied population, primarily students from eastern Europe and Latinos. They are currently past the age of retirement, but plans to continue teaching middle school for at least two more years in the same district.

Participant 7 is currently in their 17th year teaching middle school language arts and social studies. They have a bachelor's degree and has obtained continuing education credits to keep their license up to date. Not only do they teach, but they have also been assigned to mentor new teachers in the district and they coach two sports throughout the school year. They have spent the last 15 years in the same district and plans to retire there as well.

Participant 8 is currently in their seventh-year teaching middle school math and science. They have a master's degree with a secondary licensure endorsement. They work in a large private school district and has been since they initially began teaching. They trained to be a private school teacher and plans to spend their career within that system. They are also the head of the technology committee for a cluster of schools and is seeking new ways to integrate new



skills and devices into the curriculum. They are passionate about continuing education for all teachers, especially when it comes to technology integration.

Participant 9 is currently in their 34th year of teaching at the same private school where they began their teaching career. They have a bachelor's degree with a science credential and seeks continuing education credits to keep their license current. Due to the small size of their school, they teach multiple subjects with sixth grade being their homeroom. They also teach mathematics and physical education to students in Grades 5–8. They have worked with a diverse population of students over the years and plans to retire at the same school within the next six years.

Participant 10 is currently in their 13th year of teaching middle school language arts and social studies. They have a master's degree and a secondary license with both language arts and social studies credentials. Their district resides about an hour east of a large urban city and is small in comparison to the urban schools but also has high diversity. They plan to continue teaching middle school for a few more years, but is unsure if they will continue working in education for much longer as they feel they have exhausted their talents with little support.

Participant 11 is currently in their 19th year serving middle schools. They have a master's degree with a secondary license endorsed with math and science and has recently completed the requirements for their administrator's license. They spent the first 15 years of their career as a classroom teacher before moving on to become a middle school administrator. They are currently the principal of a large middle school. They plan to continue working with middle school students for the duration of their career.

Participant 12 is currently in their first year of teaching and found themselves teaching middle school as a last resort. They have a bachelor's degree with a secondary license endorsed

to teach language arts. They had aspired to teach high school language arts, but with a minimal number of openings in the area found themselves accepting a position within a large district serving a diverse population of students. They do not plan to stay at the middle school level and will continue to seek employment at a local high school. They claim that the middle school population is too difficult for the talents they possess.

The researcher focused on ensuring the sample was diverse in terms of years of experience and gender. Ethnic diversity was a consideration when looking at whether or not current professional development practices were relevant to educators working with an ethnically diverse population. When the interviews were completed it became known that ethnically diverse teachers have race-specific concerns regarding the teaching and mentoring of students within their specific demographic. This concept is revealed more in the summary of findings in the research.

### **Research Methodology and Analysis**

This study used a phenomenological approach to obtain and analyze the perspectives that middle level educators have on the professional development opportunities they receive. By understanding how teachers perceive their ongoing professional training, districts and states can tailor their practices to produce empowered and thriving educators. A phenomenological approach was the best fit for this study because it allowed participants to express their viewpoints openly and without judgment (Creswell, 2013). Participants were able to provide in-depth reflection into their current and former experiences with professional development as well as brainstorm what they would like to see in the future for middle school teachers specifically.

In an effort to understand a broad spectrum of perspectives, the researcher attempted to recruit participants both with a wealth of educational experience and those with minimal, in

addition to diversity in gender and ethnicity. In order for participants to be eligible for the study, they needed to be licensed educators in the Pacific Northwest and have either current or former experience working in Grades 6–8. The recruiting process took several forms. The first step was to make contact with current middle level educators the researcher knew in the field and have them recommend other educators who fit the description of the study, which is known as purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013). Correspondence was initiated with those educators and, in turn, they recommended more participants for the study which is considered snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013). Lastly, a social media post was made via Facebook to reach out to remaining educators that may have contacts that fit the study’s needs. Thirty-seven contacts were established in total for the study. Through the process of communicating with potential participants regarding research requirements, time commitment, and fulfillment of the designed study, 15 participants signed consent forms and scheduled interviews. During the course of the study, three participants had to withdraw for various reasons, which left the study with the originally anticipated 12 participants.

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant and recorded them to later be transcribed. Each interview varied in length, ranging from 35 minutes (shortest) to 110 minutes (longest), with an average interview time of about 50 minutes. The IRB-approved set of interview questions were utilized by the researcher, as well as additional questions that stemmed from responses given by the participants. All questions led participants back to the study’s three main focus questions.

After each interview, participants were asked to write about their professional development experiences and to continue expounding on their responses from the interview questions in the form of a reflective journal. Journal entries were a means for participants to

continue to reflect upon their perspective on their experiences and write about them. They were encouraged to tell specific stories, bullet-point ideas, brainstorm, and/or create graphic organizers for their thoughts. Reflective journals could be done either by hand or electronically, but participants were asked to submit their journals via email before the focus group convened. Ortlipp (1994) asserted that reflective journaling is a way to establish transparency in research, as participants must explore the impact of critical self-reflection.

In addition to taking notes, the researcher used the recordings to transcribe each participant's interview after its completion. The completed transcripts were sent to participants in order to member-check the accuracy of the researcher. When participants confirmed that the transcriptions were accurate, the researcher began first cycle coding the information and as themes began to develop the researcher was able to create focus group questions that specifically targeted those themes.

The goal of using a phenomenological approach for this study was to uncover the thoughts and feelings behind the phenomenon of professional development, which is an experience that all educators share. Creswell (2013) stated that "phenomenological data analysis proceeds through the methodology of reduction, the analysis of specific statements and themes, and search for all possible meanings" (p. 52). With this in mind, the researcher began the first round of coding to uncover themes throughout the interviews. The methods of first round coding used in this study were initial coding, values coding, and evaluation coding in an attempt to find the meanings of the themes that developed.

**Initial coding.** Initial coding is the process of taking the data and breaking it into smaller, more discrete, parts and comparing them to find similarities and differences (Saldaña, 2016, p. 81). The researcher utilized initial coding after each individual interview had been transcribed

and confirmed for accuracy. Multiple readings of the transcripts took place as the researcher made notes and became familiar with key words and phrases used by each participant.

**Values coding.** Values coding applies the codes from the gathered data and uses it to reflect the values, attitudes, and beliefs of the participant and how they shape their worldview (Saldaña, 2016, p. 89). Values coding was utilized in this research to help understand whether participants saw a need for effective and relevant ongoing training in their field. The researcher was able to assign codes by listening to the interviews multiple times in addition to rereading the transcripts. In most cases, the participants remained calm and neutral in their discussion about their professional development experiences, but often began to change their tone or pace of speech when particularly excited or frustrated about the topic on which they were speaking. Visible body language changes were also noted during the interviews when these moments occurred.

**Evaluation coding.** Evaluation coding applies codes in an attempt to assign judgments to programs and policies and establishes their worth or merit (Saldaña, 2016, p. 97). This process was utilized in an attempt to judge the effectiveness of how schools and districts are currently employing their professional development experiences.

The focus group took place three weeks after the final interview had been completed and was recorded in the same way that personal interviews had been. Nine of the 12 participants came together with the researcher and collaboratively answered open-ended follow-up questions based on the themes that had emerged during one-on-one interviews. The participants quickly connected with one another over the topics of discussion and the researcher was able to play a minimal role to keep the discussion moving. As participants answered questions, the conversation naturally and authentically shifted into a participant-led brainstorming session of

visions for future professional development opportunities specifically designed for middle school teachers. The researcher took copious notes during this time and allowed participants to organically let the conversation flow. The focus group session lasted over 90 minutes. The focus group was recorded in the same way the individual interviews were and all notes were recorded via the researcher's password-protected personal laptop.

After the conclusion of the focus group the researcher again transcribed the event and sent the transcription to the participants for member-checking (Creswell, 2013). Participants were asked to respond to the accuracy of the transcript within one week if there were corrections that needed to be made. None of the participants found error in the transcription and the researcher was then able to move toward a second cycle of coding procedures.

A second cycle of coding procedures took place after the focus group was completed. Saldaña (2016) summarized the second cycle of coding as "reorganizing and reanalyzing data gathered through the first cycle coding procedures" (p. 151). By utilizing this second cycle with pattern coding, the researcher was able to reduce and solidify themes and patterns found in the first cycle of coding and compare the narrative codes from each interview more fully. The first cycle of coding began immediately after the one-on-one interviews were finished, and the second cycle right after the focus group. Approximately eight weeks total was spent in the coding phase of this research study.

### **Summary of the Findings**

Analyzing and coding the data made several themes emerge from what the middle school educators reported about their professional development experiences. First, the researcher will explain the major themes and subthemes that permeated throughout the study, followed by the

themes that developed from each research question. Table 2 displays the overarching themes of the study accompanied by their subthemes.

Table 2

*Overall Themes of the Study*

Major Themes	Subthemes
Professional development is necessary	Opportunity for growth Times change – teachers should too Teacher relevancy
Teachers want effective professional development	Time sensitive Interactive Qualified/experienced instructors Young adolescent psychology
Middle school teachers need/want targeted training to their population	Brain development Social/emotional health Specific techniques/tools Classroom management

**Research question 1:** How do middle school educators describe their professional development experiences? All educators encounter professional development experiences throughout their career. There is a broad spectrum of topics that can be targeted throughout a school year by education associations or district by district. These experiences are intended to enhance an educator’s pedagogy and practice and allow growth opportunities for all educators. This question was designed so that participants in the study could give a raw and untainted reaction regarding how they feel about the professional development opportunities being offered to them and if they are being provided with adequate learning experiences. Table 3 illustrates the themes and subthemes that emerged:

Table 3

*Descriptions of Professional Development Experiences*

Major Themes	Subthemes
Administration developed	One size does not fit all
	Lack of engagement
	Administration
	Faculty
	Long-term expectations
	Short-term follow through
	Unrealistic expectations
Policy driven	Lack of student focus
	Standardized testing
	Limited choice
Poorly planned	Lack of teacher voice
	Time inefficient

**Research question 2:** What characteristics of professional development do middle school educators view as effective ways of learning? Teachers inherently know that there are different ways to learn. They also understand that some content is more desirable than others based on the needs they encounter in their classroom settings. This question aimed to find out what middle school educators view as the most efficient and effective way to provide them with the tools they need to run their classrooms and meet the needs of their students. Table 4 highlights what teachers found to be most important in their professional development experiences:



Table 4

*Characteristics of Effective Professional Development*

Major Themes	Subthemes
Format	Timing/duration
	Active learning techniques
	Teacher choice/autonomy
	Mentor presenters
Practical application	Tools for immediate use
	Grade/age specific
	Content specific
	Meets teacher needs
Positive culture	Collaborative
	Supportive
	Effective follow-up

**Research question 3:** Are middle school educators experiencing professional development that is relevant to their classroom population? Middle school teachers have a unique population of students they must serve. These students’ development is in full swing, meaning their brains and their bodies are changing at rapid rates. Teachers should be educated in how to best meet the needs of these students who are experiencing such great changes. Table 5 represents the topics that middle level educators report they are receiving in the majority of their professional development opportunities:

Table 5

*Themes of Professional Development Experiences*

Major Themes	Subthemes
Professional learning communities	
Social issues	Bullying Mental health awareness LGBTQ-A awareness
Cultural sensitivity	

These themes combined reveal many truths that middle school teachers perceive about professional development in their respective schools and districts. In the next section, the researcher will give a broader explanation on these themes as they pertain to individual educators as well as the group.

**Presentation of the Data and Results**

All educators experience professional development in some capacity throughout their career. The perceptions of this shared experience among educators can vary, but when these 12 middle school teachers were interviewed, common themes and subthemes emerged and began to paint a picture of the climate professional development has taken within these schools and districts.

**Research question 1.** The first research question required the participants to reflect upon and describe the professional development opportunities they had been given in the last few years of their career. The varied negative reactions (scoffs, chuckles, eye rolls, etc.) of most of the participants was indicative of the state of middle level professional development that is taking place within the districts where the participants work.

**Administration developed trainings.** The participants indicated that the responsibility of planning and facilitating professional development opportunities is placed on the administrative

teams that work within the schools. The teachers interviewed in this study reported mixed feelings regarding the effectiveness of this model due to the assumption that administrators do not view the responsibility as seriously as they should or do not consider the input of the teachers on what they should be learning. Participant 4 commented, “It seems like an unspoken natural rule that administrators develop the trainings for their teachers. Everyone knows it, but few enjoy it.”

Participant 2, who teaches in one of the larger Pacific Northwest districts, reported that professional development trainings are developed and scheduled at least one year in advance with the input of the superintendent, school board, and the administrative team from each school as a whole. “The district creates a multitude of offerings within the district for educators to choose.” Professional development days are scheduled into each school year and teachers may choose the training that “best fits their need at the time or seek outside trainings that cater to their needs or interests on those given days.” There are also district-wide trainings that are mandatory for every teacher to attend. The teachers in this district, according to Participant 2, “appreciate that they have a choice, and ultimately some power, in what they pursue to learn and bring back to their classrooms.”

For the majority of schools and districts represented in this study, however, the careful planning and teacher choice component was lacking, according to the participants from those districts. Participants explained that the administrator (or administrators) of each individual school was the primary source for creating professional development opportunities for their staff and that teacher choice was not a luxury afforded. Administrators often picked one topic to address on a scheduled in-service day and required all teachers to attend. Participant 5 stated that “It is difficult to have one training on one day where attendance is mandatory for all teachers.

How can administrators think that this possibly benefits every person in the room?” This one-size-fits-all mentality made it difficult for educators to feel like they were receiving any depth on any given topic, but simply an overview. In addition, teachers reported that these types of trainings often focused on one content area, such as science or language arts, which immediately nullifies the effectiveness of the training to teachers of other subjects, in the opinion of participants.

Participants reported that another negative downfall to professional development designed by administrative staff is the lack of engagement, reportedly from teachers and administrators alike. Participant 7 recalled the following:

I’ll never forget the day that my principal stuffed us all in a conference room together to listen to someone ramble about test scores and when I looked over at him, he was leaning on a filing cabinet with his eyes closed, mouth open, and spittle was running down his chin.

Several participants shared similar stories about how administrators were either disengaged or ultimately absent from the trainings that they themselves mandated. Participant 2 acknowledged that “it must be difficult to plan something that will be in every educator’s best interest,” they said, “but come on man, if you’re going to make me sit through it, you should as well.” Most participants confessed that they bring other work, doodle journals, or even coloring pages to mandated professional development trainings “in an effort to stay awake and appear to be taking notes,” according to Participant 12.

Lastly, participants reported frustration with administrators who provided trainings that did not serve long-term benefits to the educational environment. One example of that frustration, among many, was training that implemented new procedures that required teachers to gradually

change a classroom protocol. Participant 6 told the story of a new behavior plan their administration wanted to adopt in the following passage:

We were told that this new plan was for the best interest of our students, so my colleagues and I put our hearts into it. After six months of diligently working on it, though, the administration team seemed to forget, or maybe stop caring, that this was the direction we were headed. It's irritating to spend time on something that never comes to fruition. As my colleagues and I realized that administrators were not following up, our frustration took over and we ended up not proceeding with the plan.

Participant 6, and others, expressed that too often in their professional development experiences their administrators would call for long-term expectations and only follow through for a short time. Participant 11, who has designed professional development days for their staff as an administrator, expressed that "Even as an administrator, things are passed down into my hands that I may or may not agree with. I admit I've dropped the ball on follow-up when I don't feel the justification behind what I've been given."

***Policy driven.*** "Every school I've ever been a part of during my 50 years in education," according to Participant 1 (who has administrative experience), has a set of policies in place that create a "safe and conducive workplace as well as environment for learning." Participants reported that their student and faculty handbooks outline these policies in detail so that educators and students alike know the expectations set upon them and how to keep an effective learning community in place. Several teacher participants reported that entire professional development hours have been devoted to learning these policies as well working to create new extensive policies. "One of the longest days of my life," stated Participant 9, "was a day that our principal read every page of our handbook to us. He requested we each note changes that needed to be

made, but I'm fairly certain I zoned out at page 3." Similarly, Participant 4 shared "in the beginning of my career I believed I could help make meaningful change to school procedures and policies." They recalled that each time the administration would ask for teacher input, they would share it. After years of not receiving feedback on their ideas, no changes made, and administrators continuing to use professional development days to ask staff for input, they stated, "I don't know why they even spend time asking if they're not going to even consider it. I can think of about a hundred different ways I'd rather spend professional development time."

An additional concern participants shared was that policy driven trainings were not student (or teacher) focused and primarily relied on more legal or technical matters. "I hope all educators understand their legal responsibilities," said Participant 2, "but it is discouraging that administrators choose to focus on that, rather than giving us the benefit of the doubt that we know what we are doing." Participants expressed that they desire their professional development time to focus on more tangible ways to serve their schools and students. "I want my learning hours to focus on how I can be a better educator for my students and our school community," stated Participant 7, "and that's hard to do when it feels like we are crossing T's and dotting I's."

Participants described the focus that administration placed on standardized testing during professional development training. Standardized testing, according to participants, is a process that requires educators to follow specific instructions and expectations. "Tedious is the word I would use to describe the process of going through testing procedures," Participant 10 expressed. Participants recognized that learning how to be effective proctors of tests was a skill that they needed, but again stated that such training "could be done in a more efficient way," according to Participant 3. Participants 4, 8 and 10 shared concerns that they were required to attend the same trainings on how to test students that novice teachers were. "I've given this test hundreds of

times,” sighed Participant 4, “so until you change tests or there is a change in how it is administered, please respect my time.” Participant 8 stated that “even with new updates to the test, the way in which we administer it never seems to change. It is important for new personnel to know the ins and outs of testing, but let the rest of us sit that one out.” Participant 10 added that they’d be more open to trainings revolving around standardized testing if “the tests became more inclusive and was administered in ways that every student could benefit from.”

Teachers reported that the professional development days devoted to policy matters were the days they most felt like their time was being underutilized. “Everything about policy related matters is both important and depressing. I wish administrators would figure out a way to condense it so that teachers’ time is better utilized,” Participant 7 asserted. Several teachers spoke to how their time would be better used, and they would “feel more productive, if administrators were more proactive about reflecting on policies that were no longer working and collaborate on how to make applicable changes,” said Participant 5. Participants also reported that when they attempted to make suggestions to better the policies and procedures in their schools, administrators were, according to Participant 3, “dismissive and focused more on a predetermined script for how the training should flow. I learned to keep my mouth shut because my ideas for improving things for my students and coworkers were consistently shot down.”

When the participants of this study collaborated, through the use of the focus group, on the topic of policy, they agreed on the importance of having such standards in place that aid the schools in running more smoothly. They also agreed, however, that spending professional development hours during the school year was not a proper use of development time. “I don’t dislike policy, but the powers that be are not paying my coworkers and I extra to sit around discussing it. I believe that’s in the job description of the administrators,” Participant 8 stated.

Participants concluded that administrators should devote one morning or afternoon before the school year starts to address necessary policy business with their staff and utilize the remaining dedicated development days to trainings that enhance the classroom and ultimately benefits students. “I think one day devoted to policy at the beginning of each school year may be appropriate as a refresher,” asserted Participant 7, “but the rest of my development time should be spent focused on my classroom.” Participant 6 reported that at one of their former schools they had a 20 minute meeting once a week “to discuss matters that fall into the category of policy” and a follow-up email was subsequently sent to reiterate what was discussed. Participant 6 articulated that they viewed this as “highly effective and saved time from longer training days to stay focused on other tasks.”

**Poorly planned.** Participants expressed how teachers are often required to be highly organized individuals and manage their professional time appropriately. They must develop lesson plans every day that fit into specific time frames. They execute these plans within their given time frames so that objectives are met and students walk out of the classroom knowing exactly what they need in order to complete their assignments. Time, and the use of it, is important to teachers. “My time is important and if I’m not organized, I waste it, which is not something I can afford to do,” stated Participant 5. The most prevalent concern that participants had about their last year’s worth of professional development was how poorly planned it appeared and how their professional time was not respected. Participant 3 stated during the focus group, “It seems like we are all in agreement that our time is precious and feel that it is not being respected by those planning our professional development.”

Nine of the 12 participants in the study indicated that their professional development opportunities within their schools did not respect their time as professionals. The educators who



reported that their time was being misused stated that simple concepts should not have an entire day devoted to them. “I can learn about one specific technology app, depending on its complexity, in a single morning. I don’t want to sit through an entire day’s training and only learn one thing. Now if you plan to teach me multiple ways to differentiate with my given population, then by all means let’s spend the time and do it right,” said Participant 4. Others agreed with this sentiment that certain topics can be covered in shorter time frames, thus creating an opportunity to cover more topics in a single in-service day. “Sometimes it seems like organizers of professional development want to do the least amount of work possible by stretching concepts longer than is needed,” commented Participant 12. Participant 10 stated that they “wonder whether or not [organizers] are fluent in lesson planning. If they were, they’d realize their time estimates to cover concepts needed additional work.”

In addition to poor time management, participants noted that the organizers of some professional development opportunities may not have taken the time to structure the trainings in an effective manner and that they were put together in a rushed fashion. Participant 10 stated “If I don’t take the time to thoughtfully think about my lesson plans, it’s difficult for me to meet my objectives and I could be reprimanded by my administration. This is the same administration that is facilitating my own learning days willy-nilly.” Participant 7 said, “Good lessons take some time to plan. I don’t think it is too much to ask for organizers to take the time to plan meaningful experiences for teachers.” Several additional educators shared these concerns and may have been agitated when discussing their training days and how they were not well thought out.

Participants also conveyed concern that many of the trainings being offered to them “lacked a voice representing the teachers and their needs,” according to Participant 2. Eight participants mentioned that teachers in their buildings were rarely asked to provide input on what

they felt was important to learn or focus on. “We are on the ones on the front lines. We know the students the best. It seems illogical that our opinions would not be sought after when deciding what kinds of trainings needed to take place,” Participant 9 purported. Participant 1 shared that “teachers have a more thorough understanding than a lot of their administrators as to what is actually happening with the students” throughout their school buildings and that asking teachers to share what they need “could be a simple step administrators could do to show they not only trusted their employees but valued their input.”

**Research question 2.** The second research question asked the participants how they would characterize effective ways of learning in a professional development atmosphere. Their responses indicated that several things should take place in order for effective learning and retention to take place, but often are lacking in current professional development offerings.

**Format.** Participants reported that more often than not, the format of a professional development training is tedious. Five participants used the term when describing their experiences. “Conducive learning environments” and “proper learning techniques” may not be a priority during trainings and this leaves educators “feeling unsatisfied” (Participant 10). Participants also stated that trainings are often held in the school auditorium, cafeteria, or gymnasium in an effort to “fit all personnel in one space for an extended period of time” (Participant 2). This format may often times include a speaker who will “lecture for long periods of time while staff are expected to absorb all that is being said” (Participant 4). What these trainings may be lacking is an understanding that “adults learn in many of the same ways that students do” (Participant 9), and learning could be structured more effectively so that maximum benefit may be obtained.

One factor that participants commented negatively about was the timing and duration of their respective trainings. “It doesn’t seem like organizers have a firm grasp on how long, or short, it takes to cover their own content,” Participant 7 said. Participant 8 stated that trainings were “too long for the content they addressed, while others said some content needed more time than was allotted.” This phenomenon was also addressed when participants spoke about how poorly planned they believed their trainings had been. “Accurate timing is an indication of a training well planned. Unfortunately, I haven’t seen that much in my career,” expressed Participant 6. Timing was important to those interviewed; they felt that too much time was wasted and could be put toward being productive in other areas, such as their classrooms. Participant 11, an administrator who plans trainings, stated, “Before I became an administrator I hated anything that took my time out of my classroom. Now that I organize trainings, I try hard to respect my teachers’ time, but there are always additional factors.”

Participants also spoke about how difficult it was to remain focused and engaged in many of their trainings because presenters “lacked an understanding of, or chose not to use, active learning techniques” (Participant 1). Participants 2 and 5 shared that they would not attempt to stand in front of their students for six hours delivering a lesson. They said they knew what the outcome would be – “bored students.” Participants found it was unreasonable for presenters to “think that grown adults could handle the daunting task of sitting for hours on end and remain attentive any more than a room full of middle school students” (Participant 12).

During the focus group, some participants shared how their districts had begun to utilize a higher caliber of presenter for the trainings. Their schools would request or hire professors from area universities who could speak with mastery about a given topic or they would look outside of the area when a suitable presenter could not be found. Participant 3 said, “My

principal has sought university professors, local psychologists, and other pertinent professionals in our community that can speak with authority on subjects relating to our students. It's been very powerful." Some participants expressed a desire for their districts to follow that example due to the seemingly low standard that had been set for speakers. Participant 9 stated, "It seems like any Pete off the street is recruited to facilitate some of our trainings. We need competent professionals." The concept of mentor presenters seemed very important to participants, but some of the districts represented in this study were not supplying their trainings with such candidates. "I want to learn from someone who has been there and done that, or at least someone who has done the necessary research to speak with authority on a topic," Participant 9 explained.

Participant 6 told a story about one training day that they described as "intolerable" and "suffocating," exhibiting many of the negative qualities that have just been discussed. The objective of the day was to discuss and learn about classroom management tips and techniques that could be utilized throughout the entire school. At first the participant, along with their colleagues, expressed interest in gaining new perspectives on their practice, but as soon as they were gathered in the school's cafeteria and the training started, they "knew it would be a very difficult day to get through" (Participant 6).

According to Participant 6's story, the principal opened the day by telling his staff that the student population of their school was "out of control" and how it was "the fault of all the teachers for not cracking down" and using more strict discipline procedures. "Those may not have been his exact words," Participant 6 said, "but that was the meaning we were all left with." This introduction lasted about 15 minutes before the principal introduced the guest speaker for the day: a woman from a larger district in the area who had seen a radical decrease in behavioral issues in her student population over the last several years.

After the introduction, however, the principal had “nearly lost his entire staff’s attention” (Participant 6) due to the “degrading nature of his words.” Participant 6 and their colleagues “sat there speechless” as the speaker took her place at the podium. Colleagues who had been recruited ahead of time to help throughout the day began to pass out thick packets of paper to everyone in the room. When Participant 6 examined their packet, they learned that it was 40 pages worth of slideshow notes. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” was their only response as they “mentally tried to prepare for what the rest of the day would look like.” As they examined the notes, they realized that the speaker’s slides were completely filled with tiny writing.

When the speaker began, Participant 6 realized that the speaker had placed all of the content she would cover into her slides. There was no extra material for them to take notes on; everything was right there on the paper in front of them. Participant 6 recalled that after 10 minutes of listening, they had “officially checked out and began thinking about what I wanted to have for lunch” and “finding any excuse to make lists and doodles on my note packet.” They continued reliving the experience by stating:

I have had decent professional development seminars as well, but this was by far the worst experience I was ever a part of. My coworkers and I were immediately uncomfortable sitting at a bunch of long, hard tables when our staff is small enough that we could have easily fit into the small auditorium that has cushioned seats. It may seem petty, but you would think that the comfort of everyone during a day-long training would be some kind of priority. Next, our principal humiliated all of us by blaming the student behavior on our lack of skills. Lastly, I would have assumed that the speaker coming for the day would have had more public speaking skills than my middle school students. It

was brutal to listen to, and in addition, I felt that everything she covered could have been Classroom Management 101 at the local community college.

Several other participants shared similar stories as Participant 6 in regard to the general format that their professional development opportunities take. “For every positive experience I have with professional development trainings, I could tell you five horror stories,” Participant 1 said. Participant 11 revealed that they are unaware of any specific set of “best practices” for professional development, but also stated that there should be (either spoken or unspoken). “Teachers should follow best practices. It doesn’t seem that far-fetched that organizers of professional development should as well” (Participant 11). Participants equated their expectations for professional development to the expectations that are placed on them as educators; presenters and facilitators “should consider their audience” and the “various learning styles when considering how they will present content to a group of people” (Participant 1).

***Practical application.*** Another aspect that participants attributed to effective professional development is practical application for the classroom. The ability to learn a new skill or procedure and be able to take it back to their students for immediate use seemed to be of importance to these educators. “When I have something tangible, whether in my hand or in my mind, at the end of the day that I can utilize right away I feel as though my day was well spent,” said Participant 8. Participants described trainings that were specific to the age and grade level they taught as well as specific to their content area as being most helpful. “I become infinitely more invested in a training if the topic can be applied directly to my classroom,” said Participant 3. Participant 12 stated, “I don’t mind learning about things poignant to classrooms outside of my own, but at the end of the day, I’d like to be able to have something to share with my students.”

Participant 2 elaborated on this topic by saying that they are still relatively new to the profession (9 years) and still needs to build their “educational toolbox.” Participants agreed with Participant 2 that due to the “changing nature of education” they are consistently trying to add new ideas, games, technology, and creativity to their classroom environments. “I believe it is imperative,” Participant 2 continued, “that teachers continually learn practical ways of staying relevant and engaging to their students before those students become checked out and deem education as not important.” They stated that they have had “great success” and “feels validated as a teacher when they bring new practices to their classroom” that excites their students. “It’s the best case scenario,” said Participant 1, “to do what [Participant 2] just described. It’s what administrators hope for and not necessarily always receive.”

Participant 6, a veteran teacher of 28 years, expressed that for older teachers who are nearing retirement it is “critical to take away new skills or ideas to be put into the classroom before they become another statistic of stagnancy.” They discussed this concept further by stating:

We all know that old teacher who taught the same way since the first day of their career and has never changed. They are the ones counting the days to retirement and are more concerned with maintaining order than allowing their students to flourish. This generation of teachers will not be the ones going back to school to pursue advanced degrees and learn new pedagogies. Where else are they supposed to learn how to engage each new generation of student outside of their professional development time?

Several participants may not have been pleased with the professional development offerings their districts provided them in terms of practical application to the classroom. They expressed frustration that it did not seem to be a priority. “I get so frustrated with the trainings that are

offered because they seldom benefit the students in my classroom,” said Participant 10. Participant 4 stated, “My frustration comes into play when I learn more tangible applications to my classroom in 20 minutes of Google searching than I do in a day of training.” Ten of the 12 participants stated that if their professional development time were used to learn ways to immediately improve their classroom through new skills and applications that they would attempt to utilize those skills “as quickly as possible” (Participant 5), depending on the relevancy to their own classroom. The other two participants expressed that while they want new skills and applications they would consider initiating them into their classrooms after they saw other classrooms have success using them. “I don’t want to just jump into anything without seeing the first-hand proof that it works,” stated Participant 9.

According to the participants of this study, it may be difficult to find trainings that address middle school classrooms specifically. Participants expressed that it is easy to find trainings outside of their district-mandated offerings that covered basic pedagogy that was applicable to all ages and grades, but the number of offerings for middle school specific trainings were few in number. Participant 10 explained that in their yearly contract they are able to take two professional days outside of the trainings their district provides. “Due to the proximity of the city I am eager to find trainings more applicable than what my small district offers, but actually finding one that caters specifically to middle school content can prove to be quite difficult,” they said.

***Positive culture.*** Participants unanimously agreed that they want to feel encouraged and valued in their learning communities. “I want to learn new things. I want to learn new ways to teach. I also want to feel encouraged and supported as I do so,” stated Participant 9 “because I am an integral part of my team, like all teachers, and should be valued.” Participants expressed



that most, but by no means all, of the professional development days they participate in leave them feeling “discouraged” or “numb” at the end. They stated that a more positive culture surrounding the idea of coming together in the name of learning would increase overall positivity in their school buildings and in their personal classrooms as well. “Just once I’d like to walk into a training where everyone, including administrators, were excited to be there and to learn,” said Participant 7. Participant 4 shared, “I need to show excitement in my classroom when I teach, because if I don’t, my students won’t be excited to learn. The same applies to trainings and those who facilitate.”

“There is nothing worse than feeling the dread of walking into the school auditorium with all of my colleagues knowing that we are going to feel more drained at the end of the day than we already are,” Participant 10 stated. A “fun and uplifting” environment is not something Participant 10 would attribute to their school or district. They described it as a “sterile environment where enthusiasm and support for teachers is scarce.” For these reasons and more, Participant 10 stated, “I may not even stay teaching much longer. It seems like there’s never enough support and I’m aging faster than I should be because teaching without support is exhausting.” They went on to say that because of the distance between their rural school and the city, where more trainings may be offered, it is very rare for teachers to attend professional development outside of opportunities provided by the district due to time constraints and additional costs.

Participant 5 told a similar story to Participant 10, but with opposing outcomes. They, too, teach in a district outside of the city that often provides its teachers specific trainings pertinent to the district and its population. Their story, however, was how they registered for a professional development day that focused on bringing technology into the classroom. They

arrived not knowing anyone but it was made apparent that other attendees had been coming to this training for years and many of them knew each other. They recalled they were “greeted warmly and immediately adopted into a group of other teachers.” Participant 5 said that the opening keynote speaker was a local principal who had tried his hand at stand-up comedy and was “quite successful.” The message “was humorous and so positive and inspiring that I felt eager to learn for the rest of the day,” Participant 5 stated. They told of other aspects of their day, but, “It was the keynote that energized me. It made me remember why I started teaching and it motivated me to learn as much as I could that day to take back to my students.” When the day was complete Participant 5 felt supported and inspired to take what they had learned back to the staff in their school building. Participant 5 now mentors teachers in their building to implement new technologies into their teaching while they also continue to learn for themselves. They smiled as they recalled that this new passion started with “one super positive morning that I was otherwise not thrilled about.”

Participants agreed that professional development may not need to possess negative connotations, but it often does. Participant 1 has had to plan and implement numerous professional development days in their long career in education and they said that each time they stood in front of their teachers they would try to “shock and awe” them somehow. “It was my job [as an administrator] for 20 years to make sure my teachers loved their job and had a smile on their face when they came to work, because that’s what inspires kids.” They recalled a time that they were introducing a speaker to a crowd of educators and attempted a magic trick:

I had been working on this trick for weeks because I knew it was something silly that would make my team laugh, but I guess I got stage fright because in the end I wound up with a couple of stitches in my pointer finger. I guess I sure shocked them, but it quickly

became an inside joke between my teachers and I; something that we laughed about for years.

Participant 1 believes professional development should be “fun, positive, engaging, and productive.” These are the same adjectives they “hoped could be said of the classrooms and teachers” in their buildings.

When asked how they wanted to describe their professional development experiences, participants provided a long list of positive adjectives. Two of those adjectives became a focal point during the focus group. Participants stated they want to learn collaboratively, gleaning from one another’s experiences and they want to feel supported as they learn new skills and practices. “Positive collaboration and support are what make a great learning environment,” commented Participant 11, “and without those things it can be difficult to feel inspired to learn.” Participant 12 stated, “I am far from having all the answers and so I rely heavily on brainstorming with my colleagues that have more experience than I do. Without that collaboration, I’d be lost.” Several participants noted that in modern society people are being asked to work in collaborative groups more than they were even a decade ago. Working collaboratively is a skill that they infuse into their classrooms so that students “learn to work with a variety of people” (Participant 8), and it is a skill that they, too, seek to use regularly. Participant 12 shared that some of the most “remarkable things” that happen in their classroom are the product of collaborative conversation and brainstorming. “When I’m learning something new in a training,” Participant 12 stated, “I like to see what my colleagues with more experience think about it before I jump in. Their years of experience and support help me navigate my new career.”

Lastly, participants asserted that effective professional development needed to have effective follow up in the days, weeks, and months after the training. “Don’t leave me hanging, boss man. Show me your support by following up with me on that new concept and see if I need additional help or let me know I’m doing it well,” Participant 2 pointed out. Participant 5 said, “If administrators found a topic critical enough to have a day devoted to learning it, then it should be important enough to follow up and make sure that their teachers are doing it.” Participant 4 mused that if they “had a dollar” for every time their administrators “forgot to follow up” on something they were trying to institute then they would be “a lot closer to retirement.”

**Research question 3.** The third research question posed to participants asked them to state whether or not they thought the professional development they were receiving was relevant to their classroom population. Relevancy to the classroom seemed to be an important factor for educators. “If what I’m learning isn’t relevant to my classroom or my students in some way, then I want to be able to find a training that will provide that,” stated Participant 5. The participants of this study recognized the need for some of the training opportunities they were given, and dismissed others as unnecessary. After interviewing participants about their most recent trainings, four main topics were coded from the data. Participants discussed the importance of these topics and the relevancy to their classrooms.

***Professional learning communities.*** In education, these are collaborative groups of teachers who come together to “enhance their department or subject matter through ongoing learning and support with and for each other” said Participant 11. Participants of this study said that professional learning communities have become one of the most popular topics discussed during their most recent trainings. “It seems like everything we do now involves our professional

learning communities,” Participant 7 asserted. “First came all the trainings on ‘how’ to do it right, now the Earth’s axis revolves around them.” The participants revealed mixed feelings as to whether or not they viewed this as a beneficial use of their professional development time. “I think professional learning communities are great in theory, and I’ve personally benefited from mine, but now that the world knows what they are and how to do them, why do we spend even more time discussing the logistics of them during our training days?” questioned Participant 10.

Four of the 12 participants expressed that they enjoyed learning about professional learning communities and the time that had been dedicated to them to meet with their groups. “I can’t say enough great things about my PLC and what we have been able to accomplish,” said Participant 3. Participant 12 stated, “This has been an incredibly rewarding experience for me as a first-year teacher and I enjoy all of the time we have to meet.” Meeting with other professionals who shared subject matter content seemed important to these participants so that they could collaborate and share ideas on ways to improve their pedagogies. Participant 3 works for a district that assigned them to a professional learning community upon hiring them. They have received mentoring from older teachers and has been able to in turn share their strengths with others. Their team meets twice a month together and they are responsible for reporting the minutes of their meetings to their assistant principal. When the school provides in-service days, their team gives a summary to the rest of the teachers in the school about what is new in the science department and what they are working on together. “This experience helped make my transition into full-time teaching so much easier and I am grateful for the wealth of knowledge that my peers and I bring to each other,” they said.

Participant 2 shared the sentiments of Participant 3 about the value of time spent with professional learning communities, but also recognized that an abundance of professional

development time was being dedicated to the ideal without balancing out training time with other areas of instruction. Participant 2 was one of three that seemed positive overall about professional learning communities, but also stated that development days should be spent in other ways:

My team and I meet at least once a month, if not more, and it is a great experience. When I have an opportunity to have a professional development day, however, I want to be learning new skills and pedagogies that will benefit my instruction.

The participants that shared the same sentiment as Participant 2 agreed that some in-house professional development time could be used as a way to bring the learning communities together, but that it should not be the sole focus of an entire training day. “I think it’s completely reasonable to use PLCs as a tool throughout a training day, but it should not comprise the entire day,” Participant 4 commented. “My PLC meets regularly,” shared Participant 6, “and we cover a lot of the daily teaching business. Training days should be spent learning new skills...and then we can discuss those new skills with our group.”

An additional three participants seemed to have negative feelings toward using professional development time on professional learning communities. They viewed the two as separate entities that serve different purposes. Participant 9 specified that “My professional learning community is for in-house support and strategies. I go to professional development trainings to receive outside resources and new ideas that my team and I do not already know.” Participant 1 expressed that “PLCs are the product of thoughtful training. They were never intended to fully replace training days altogether.” These participants acknowledged the validity of PLCs as a whole, but identified they did not think training days were the way to bring them about.

*Social issues.* Throughout the interviews it was made known that modern social issues have risen to the top of the districts' priorities for professional development trainings offered to their educators (the participants). The three issues that were most commonly brought up were bullying, mental health awareness, and gender awareness. Almost all of the participants spoke to each of these topics and viewed them as not only necessary pieces of their own education to become better teachers, but highly desired topics of study that were relevant to their classrooms.

Trainings on bullying have become one of the most important pieces of teacher education, according to the participants. "Bullying is so prevalent amongst middle school students that teachers would be remiss to not be trained in how to handle it," Participant 8 commented. "It's so important to me to be well equipped." Several schools in the research area have initiated anti-bullying campaigns with specific curriculum used to educate staff and students on the "harmful effects as well as prevention" (Participant 10). All of the participants reported that they could not remember a time where bullying was not an issue in middle school. "It is a rampant disease that has consumed our society and will unfortunately probably always be around. Tolerance of the issue, however, died a while ago," said Participant 11. They went on to say that before the start of each school year in their district an afternoon is spent on the topic of bullying. All of the teachers sign a pledge of zero tolerance on a large banner that is hung in their respective buildings. Each classroom has a smaller version of the banner as well. "I thought it was a little corny at first, but it has become a powerful tool of justice. When I catch a student participating in bullying behaviors, all I have to do is point to the pledge and they know I mean business," Participant 11 said.

The veteran teachers among the participants recognized that mental health among their students has always been a sensitive topic of discussion. Two of these educators confessed that

when they first began teaching they did not view the mental health of their students as “their business” and therefore remained silent on the matter. Throughout their years in education, however, they have personally known students who needed professional help that did not receive any and have come to terms with being advocates on the matter. “After my son’s friend in school took his own life at the age of 15,” Participant 1 recalled, “I began making the emotional well-being of my students a top priority. I don’t want it on my conscious that I saw the signs and didn’t say anything.” After this experience, Participant 1 sought out trainings on mental health awareness in the area and in return brought the information back to the district they were an administrator for. They went on to say, “It is my personal belief that every educator everywhere that works with young adolescents should have in-depth knowledge on the signs and symptoms that their students are struggling.”

The younger participants, like Participant 5, recalled their experiences in middle school as “one of the most difficult times in their life.” Each shared stories about battling depression, eating disorders, or anxieties that came from facing the peer pressure that seems to inherently comes with the age group. They expressed gratitude that their middle school teachers were allies in their struggles and that a plethora of information was now readily available for them to become allies as well. “Without the help of one or two very special middle school teachers in my life, I don’t know what I would have done. I’m grateful that they stepped in when they didn’t have to,” said Participant 5. Participant 8 discussed their view on teachers receiving mental health training:

As teachers we are often the first line of defense in protecting our students. We see them every day and in every mood imaginable. I am so appreciative that my school system has



made recognizing mental health signs a priority so that I can best serve the kids in my care.

The last social issue that participants spoke of was a topic that has made it into more professional development trainings in recent years. Schools, according to participants, are seeing a need to educate their teachers on sexuality and gender awareness as well as the LGBTQ-A community. “It’s part of our society as a whole, and therefore it is important to learn about. Respecting each of our students as individuals is critically important,” stated Participant 2. Some participants displayed varying feelings toward the overall topic, but agreed that it has become necessary in today’s society to learn how to educate students regardless of whether or not their own personal beliefs aligned. “I don’t know about nature versus nurture or how people are the way they are. I have my opinions, but at the end of the day I couldn’t live with myself if I was the reason one of my students did not feel supported, so I need to learn,” stated Participant 9.

Participant 5, an active member of the LGBTQ-A community, teaches in a small rural town that is considerably conservative. They “feel as though the district took a significant risk” when hiring them to teach middle school language arts to this population. What they were not aware of at the time is that the district had seen more students needing a mentor in this capacity and someone that could help the other staff understand who they were teaching. “I don’t know what they saw in me at my interview, but I’m glad they did, and I hope they don’t regret it,” they said. Since their hiring, Participant 5 has led numerous trainings to the employees in their district on how to be “inclusive, compassionate, and respectful educators.” They went on to say, “The opportunity my district has given me to not only do what I’m passionate about, but also become a greater advocate to my community has allowed me to grow both as a human being and as an educator.” Participant 5 says they hope more districts will see this need and respond to it.

Participant 2 expressed how the LGBTQ-A trainings that their district has created have helped them become a “greater and more compassionate teacher” as well. They confessed that when they began their teaching career the thought had not crossed their mind that they would be working with a population of students that required this kind of understanding. “Basketball and badminton; that’s what I thought my curriculum would be about,” they joked, “but I didn’t realize, or I didn’t remember, that middle school locker rooms are a breeding ground for bullying and harassment.” Through effective training on the subject, Participant 2 says that they have become less naïve and oblivious to the struggle several of their students face. They say they have become an ally and has helped some of their students become more sensitive to their peers as well:

If you had asked me nine years ago the difference between gay and queer I would have laughed and made an insensitive joke. But since then I have been educated, thankfully, and like Maya Angelou said, now that I know better I have to be better.

***Cultural sensitivity.*** The participants of this study that came from larger cities and districts expressed that cultural sensitivity has been a prevalent training for the last decade. Participants attributed this to the fact that the more urban areas of their state seemed to attract more diverse populations of people. “In the last ten years I have become well-versed on what it means to be inclusive of all cultures,” said Participant 1, “but I’m still nowhere near where I should be. It’s an ongoing process, which is why trainings are important and should continue.” Participant 11 shared about their experience of growing up in the research area and how it has changed:

I grew up in [redacted] . . . and I remember in high school being able to stereotype each school in the area as to what their population of student was. That one over there—that’s

the rich White school. And over there—that’s the Black school. I’m not proud of that and I am happy to say that the schools in [redacted] have diversified so much over the years that no one can do what I did any longer.

The districts represented in this study seem to be making strides to educate their faculty and staff on being aware of the students’ cultural and ethnic needs and identities.

The participants who were from outside the major city, and typically in smaller districts, however, said that they viewed this training as an immediate need that they were not necessarily receiving. “More than 50% of our student population has a cultural identity that is not that of your typical White American,” stated Participant 5. “You’d think that our district would take this kind of training into more serious consideration.” Participant 10, a Latino from Guatemala, expressed dissatisfaction with their district that serves a large Hispanic population outside of the major city:

We are an agricultural community—we rely on our many vineyards and orchards to sustain the economy of our town. The majority population of our students are Hispanic. I feel like my administration chooses not to see that. There is nothing about our school that honors the heritage and our teachers have not been trained to see these students as the beautiful pieces of their culture that they are.

Participant 10 is the only person of color on staff at their school. They state that their colleagues are fine people, but there appears to be little to no effort to bring the cultural backgrounds of the students into the education environment. “Ultimately, it’s depriving both the students and the school of the cultural richness that could be here,” they said.

Participants seemed to view cultural sensitivity training as an integral piece to their professional health. Many participants indicated that they felt strongly about learning how to

become aware of their own biases that prevent them from being effective educators to every student. Participant 2, an African American educator in the city, stated that while the larger schools seemed to be actively educating their faculty on how to be more culturally aware and sensitive, “there is still a long road to travel.” They went on to say, “The work of cultural inclusiveness is far from being over; I’m sure I won’t see it in my lifetime. I am proud, however, that I get to be a part of the process.”

**Overall themes.** The combined questions from the personal interviews, the insights shared through reflective journals, and the discussion procured from the focus group created some overall themes and subthemes. These subpoints became the heart of this study and reflected the perceptions that participants shared in their current professional development experiences as well as what they hope to see in the future.

***Professional development is necessary.*** The participants of this study explained that professional development is a necessary component in their profession. Not only do they want opportunities for growth, they need experiences to keep them sharp and practices that allow them to remain relevant in their classrooms. “I may not always like it, but I understand the value and the critical nature that professional development plays in my career,” said Participant 4. Participant 6 explained, “Without ongoing training, I wouldn’t have had the opportunities for growth as a teacher. It’s important teachers continue to grow” Participants acknowledged that while they were the ones receiving immediate benefits of these trainings, their “students are the ultimate beneficiaries” (Participant 1) and “the ones who stood to gain the most from their teachers bettering their practices” (Participant 11).

The most valuable aspect of effective professional development, according to participants, is the opportunity for growth. Each participant expressed a desire to continue

learning and growing in the profession, regardless of their intent to stay teaching or even at the middle school level. Participant 1 stated that they believed it was human nature to continually be growing and bettering oneself. “In this profession,” they continued, “no one can truly say they ever arrive at the pinnacle; the pinnacle is continually moving.” Participant 5 said, “Growing and learning is what makes education fun. When we stop having fun we become boring.” Participant 11 asserted that “the moment teachers stop wanting to learn, their students stop learning as well.” As a current administrator, they stated that they never want to hire a teacher “that thinks they already know everything” because continuing to learn is what makes a true educator.

The participants of the study who had more than 10 years of experience acknowledged that “education is a fluid construct” (Participant 4) that does not stay the same for very long. They each expressed that with every new generation of students they had to alter the way they ran their classrooms in some way. “Some things will always stay the same,” expressed Participant 6, “like middle school students being difficult. They will always be difficult because of the stage they are at in life. What doesn’t stay the same is the type of difficult and how teachers need to respond.” One of the most perceived shifts in educational culture was presented by Participant 1, who had the most educational experience of the participants. They remembered a time when corporal punishment in the classroom was not only expected, but encouraged. Then they recalled the era of stern discipline with no attachment, followed by a generation of tough love when it came to disciplining students. “And now,” they went on, “the best advice I can give to the teachers I mentor is to build those relationships, love those kids, and when you do need to discipline them, make sure they know your heart.” This is one example, among many, that participants shared as to how education has changed and how “it needs teachers that will change along with it, for the better” (Participant 1).

Lastly, the participants expressed that professional development is necessary in order to remain relevant in their classrooms. With the fluidity of culture and society and the impact that it has in the classroom, “teachers need ways to remain in touch with their population of students so that maximum learning can occur” (Participant 7). “A teacher’s ability to remain relevant and build relationships ultimately piques student interest and then they assign value to what is being shared or taught,” said Participant 2. Participant 12 shared a story about how they had been struggling at the beginning of their first year. They felt overwhelmed and the students were not receptive to them. They attended a training right before Christmas of that year where their only take-away was to work on building a relationship with one student at a time. After the new year a student came into Participant 12’s classroom with music blaring through their headphones and it was a hip-hop song they recognized from their own school days. “I had a choice to make,” they laughed, “I could be the hard nose and tell him to put his music away immediately, or I could get on his level, swallow a bit of my pride, and start singing along to the song.” They chose the latter. The result of a seemingly inconsequential action “became the admiration of that student and their peers.” Soon, Participant 12 recalled, “The admiration turned to respect and before I knew it, students were more engaged.” He went on to say, “I didn’t realize that teaching language arts to middle school students could be as fun as it was. Now I throw in a popular media or cultural reference in my lessons and they go nuts!”

***Teachers want effective professional development.*** It seems every participant had a horror story to share when talking about their professional development experiences. What seems to be rare, and yet the most desired among educators, are experiences that elevate their drive, passion, and creativity for bringing about learning in their classrooms. “I want to learn new skills, but I also want to be inspired. The trainings I have received have been less than

inspiring,” said Participant 9. The participants of this study stated that they desire effective trainings and to continue learning and growing in their profession. “Effective practices in training really do make the difference between wanting to learn and feeling obligated to learn,” said Participant 2. The factors that made professional development the most meaningful, according to participants, were being time sensitive, interactive, and learning from qualified mentor instructors.

Time sensitivity, as described by participants, is important due to the many responsibilities that they have. Participants made comments reflecting that while they “value good training” (Participant 9), if it does not meet their learning and growing needs, they “would rather use that time to productively work in their classrooms grading papers, lesson planning, and curriculum designing amongst other things.” Participants agreed that time sensitive trainings are opportunities that “appropriately break down material into manageable segments and do not prolong content for the sake of filling time” (Participant 11). They also agreed that most content can be covered “within a two-hour time period” (Participant 5), but “opportunities for educators who are struggling or want to know more should be given the opportunity to do so after the training has ended” (Participant 1).

Participants explained that they spend a lot of time planning to ensure that their lessons are engaging to their students. Participant 3 reported, “A large part of engagement relies on how interactive a lesson is, either with the content itself or with their peers.” The participants conveyed that adults may best learn by this model as well. Participant 8 explained how they are an advocate for a model of pedagogy that lets them teach the lesson, show the students how to do the task, and then release them to complete it. They stated that adult learners would probably do best with this model as well:

I don't want someone to simply tell me what to do or how to do it. That's important, yes, but I'm not going to know how to replicate your results unless you first show me and then watch me do it to ensure I'm doing it correctly.

Participants stated they want to learn from more experienced educators or people who have mastery in a given skill or content area. "It's becoming difficult to find people who have been in education longer than I have," Participant 1 joked, "but there's a lot of people who have specialized training that I don't have and I love to learn from them." Trainings offered by mentor professionals may be a powerful tool to any professional development training. Participants stated that high quality trainers "increase their likelihood to both remain focused during the training as well as retain the information given" (Participant 8). In addition to having mastery of what they are teaching, participants desired trainers to be proficient in common public speaking skills so as not to distract from the content being delivered. Participant 5 asserted that, "My 7th grade students would feel my wrath if they presented to me the way some of these guest speakers do. It's distracting and that makes me lose focus."

***Middle school teachers need and want training targeted to their population.*** Middle school teacher participants understand that they are working with a population of students that are commonly perceived as difficult. "Nobody wants my job. People tell me I'm nuts for working with this age group," said Participant 6. This difficulty "is brought about by changes happening in their bodies and brains that they have not yet learned how to navigate" (Participant 11). Participants explained that many times their students may be misunderstood because they are "being held to the same standards as young adults when their brains are not yet capable of those higher level functions" (Participant 10). Participants of the focus group brainstormed suggestions of topics that they considered critical to every middle school teacher.



First, participants appeared adamant that middle school teachers should continually be learning young adolescent psychology and brain development appropriate to 11–14 year old students. “Much like the world of education, psychology evolves and it seems there’s always something new to learn,” said Participant 11. The physiological changes that students in this age group are experiencing is abundant. Being aware of these changes could help teachers not only understand their students better, but also “help with instructional design and behavior management” (Participant 7). “It is important for educators to understand what is developmentally appropriate for these students and what is considered beyond their developmental capacity,” Participant 1 asserted.

Another area that participants seemed to think middle school teachers should be receiving specific training on is techniques and tools to utilize in the classroom that are consistent with students’ physiological and emotional development. “The same teaching techniques that may be appropriate for a high school senior is vastly different than those used in the middle school environment” Participant 6 claimed. Participant 12 said, “Teaching cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach.” The practical application of these techniques seemed to be where most of the participants agreed they were themselves lacking. Participants claimed they learned through trial and error about how to best work with middle school students. “I do a lot of guess and check in my classroom,” Participant 2 confessed. They continued by stating, “Not nearly as much anymore, but I was trained to be a high school teacher and learning how to bring it on down to this level took time.” Participants expressed that they would like specialized training where specific wording and actions were introduced that are developmentally appropriate and that they could use in their classrooms.

Lastly, participants seemed to believe middle school teachers should become fluent in social and emotional health of young adolescents. Participant 3 relayed that teachers should be aware of specific problems and social activities that are tempting for this age group to participate in. “They should be taught the warning signs,” they said, “and when to step in, and in what capacity. Participant 7 explained to the focus group that they had struggled to connect and engage one of their female students in most lessons. At conferences the parent of that student explained how she had generalized anxiety disorder coupled with specific social phobias and that was “why the student found it difficult to remain focused in class or even participate.” Participant 7 said they felt embarrassed that they had “never considered that the student could be enduring that type of hardship because they did not know what to look for.” Having this knowledge, however, allowed the participant to alter certain aspects of the classroom to make it easier for the student to be successful.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to acquire the perceptions that middle school educators had toward their past, present, and future professional development trainings. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. How do middle school educators describe their professional development experiences?
2. What characteristics of professional development do middle school educators view as effective ways of learning?
3. Are middle school educators experiencing professional development that is relevant to their classroom population?

These questions were employed through individual interviews, reflective journals, and a focus group that allowed the researcher an in-depth look at whether or not teachers viewed their experiences as adequate and effective.

The study included 12 licensed educators from the Pacific Northwest who were currently teaching in middle schools or had previously taught in middle schools. The participants represented varying levels of educational experience and cultural backgrounds as well as diverse school districts. Participants were chosen using purposive, snowball, and convenience sampling methods to ensure appropriate and diverse perceptions.

The researcher utilized one-on-one interviews, reflective journals, and a focus group to collect and analyze all data. Each interview and the focus group were digitally recorded and transcribed by the researcher and then verified through the participants. The researcher then used the data to code, cluster themes, and interpret meanings of the narratives provided.

The study found that educators who experience professional development trainings have positive and negative stories to share. The research questions prompted detailed illustrations as examples to participant responses. After several rounds of coding, the researcher was able to cluster specific themes that emerged. The descriptors used by participants to describe their professional development trainings were administration developed, policy driven, and poorly planned (Table 3). The characteristics participants used to define effective professional development practices were broken down by three categories: theme, practical application, and positive culture. Each of these categories had multiple subthemes that emerged from participant perception on effectiveness (Table 4). Third, participants reflected on the topics they had most recently learned about through professional development trainings such as professional learning communities, social issues, and cultural sensitivity (Table 5).

The overall perception on past and present professional development opportunities for middle school teachers was mostly negative with scattered positive experiences that led participants to discuss a more positive future for middle level training. In the end, the researcher deduced three key results from the participants' perceptions. First, educators view professional development as necessary and important. Second, they not only want but need effective professional development practices. Lastly, middle school teachers want and need targeted training for their specific population of students. Further discussion of the results and their implications toward future research are discussed in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and reveal the perceptions that middle school educators have on their past and present professional development experiences and how effective they are to serving their population of students. The researcher utilized individual interviews, reflective journaling, and a focus group for participants to share their thoughts and lived experiences regarding the effectiveness of the trainings they had been given and are receiving. Participants considered the current state of their trainings and the relevance of them to their classrooms and also shared what they hoped future trainings would offer them.

Middle school students are a challenging demographic to teach due to the physiological and neurological changes occurring during this phase of adolescence. Their bodies and brains are transforming them from children to young adults trying to navigate their way through a newfound independence, peer pressure, and hormones (Bowers et al., 2014). Educators that work with this age group need to have an understanding of the issues that are being faced so that they may teach to the specific needs concerning these adolescents.

Professional development is the means by which educators stay up-to-date on current best practices in education as well as learn new skills and applications for their classroom environments. These trainings can range in topic and frequency from state to state and district to district. The goal of each, though, is to assist educators in performing their best and bringing about successful student outcomes in the classroom. Effective training techniques are often the deciding factor on whether or not educators find the trainings useful and relevant to their classrooms (Giwa, 2012). Studies have shown that effective professional development practices

not only bring about higher engagement amongst participants, but that they are also more likely to feel empowered to put their new knowledge into practice more readily than those that were disengaged (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Hough, 2011; Kennedy, 2016).

The issue, and one purpose of this study, was to uncover whether or not middle school educators are receiving effective and relevant professional development that specifically prepares them to meet the needs of their young adolescent students. For example, a secondary teaching license in the Pacific Northwest allows an educator to teach Grades 6–12, but the preparatory programs to obtain this license focus on training educators to teach high school. Little training is devoted to the education of middle school students, so educators who find themselves teaching at that level need additional supports in place to assist in making them engaging, relevant, and compassionate adult figures in the lives of their students.

Chapter 2 of this study reviewed the current literature that is available on effective professional development practices and on the diverse needs that young adolescents have in the classroom. Chapter 3 reflects the methodology used for this study and presents how the researcher carefully planned the course of action. Chapter 4 presents the results of the study by revealing the perceptions that participants shared. In this chapter, those perceptions will be analyzed and interpreted to bring about meaning.

### **Summary of Results**

The significance of this study resides in the belief that effective professional development brings about positive benefits to both educators and students. The more educators are aware of who their students are and the developmental stage they are in, the more able they are to design developmentally appropriate and engaging lessons. This ultimately manifests a more dynamic educational experience for students and a greater sense of self-efficacy among educators.

Throughout this study, three main research questions were used during individual interviews, as a basis for reflective journaling by participants, and as a jumping off point in the focus group. Those questions were:

1. How do middle school educators describe their professional development experiences?
2. What characteristics of professional development do middle school educators view as effective ways of learning?
3. Are middle school educators experiencing professional development that is relevant to their classroom population?

These questions were the core of the study and allowed participants to give candid feedback to the researcher.

There is evidence in the literature to support effective professional development practices, but a lack of research specifically targeting middle school educators and their perceptions of the trainings they are receiving. According to Mears (2012), all professional development should empower and equip educators to work with their specific population of students. Several researchers have deduced that if American public education is going to be successful then it is going to prioritize the improvement of quality teaching through effective professional development practices (Goldring et al., 2012; Roeser et al., 2012).

Professional development is a critical piece to the life and longevity of an educational career, but for many educators it is seen as more of a burden than an opportunity for growth. This outlook can be attributed to several key factors according to Bohn (2014), but the primary cause of educators' dissatisfaction toward the trainings they receive stem from ineffective approaches to learning and a lack of relevant topics to classroom practices, erring on the side of vague

generalities. As educators receive more negative experiences with professional development, the more resistant they become to seeing the educational value that it is intended to offer.

The literature also illustrates that through the use of effective practices and clear objectives, educators can feel empowered to enrich and build on their instructional expertise (Abilock et al., 2013; Compton, 2010), appreciating the value of professional development as it is provided to them. According to Gulamhussein (2013), the best investment for the future of education is through the enhancement of teacher learning. The benefits for engaged educators pursuing learning opportunities are numerous. Effective professional development affords educators the opportunity to reflect, refine, and improve their pedagogical crafts while bringing about positive, relevant, and engaging classroom environments that work toward student achievement.

This study took a phenomenological approach in order to collect the shared experiences of 12 middle school educators and their perceptions toward the professional development opportunities they are given. The participants were selected through purposive (the researcher was able to select participants that fit the target criteria), snowball (several participants aided in recruiting additional participants), and convenience (participants were from the same geographic region) sampling methods in order to achieve the parameters set by the researcher. They were all licensed educators within the Pacific Northwest and are currently teaching, or have taught, in middle school Grades 6–8. The participants represented a wealth of educational experience, ranging from a first-year educator to one that had served in education for 50 years.

The researcher conducted individual interviews with each participant that were recorded, transcribed, and member-checked for accuracy. After each round of interviews, participants were asked to engage in a round of reflective journaling to further expand on their responses as they



pertained to the research questions. When all interviews were complete and reflective journals collected, nine of the 12 participants joined in a focus group that allowed them to collaborate together on their shared experiences with professional development.

The researcher engaged in two rounds of coding as the data was collected. According to Saldaña (2016) a code “is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). The first round of coding occurred after the interviews. Initial coding and values coding were used during this cycle as well. The second cycle of coding occurred after the focus group was complete and was utilized through the lens of evaluation coding. By participating in the coding process the researcher was able to extract themes of meaning from the data collected.

The results of this research study revealed both positive and negative practices currently being utilized for middle school professional development. Participants offered candid and vulnerable responses to the research questions that allowed the researcher a very authentic view of what these educators had experienced. Major themes emerged from each research question as well as three overall themes for the entire study.

Research question one asked participants to describe their experiences with professional development and their responses, while varied and covered a broad spectrum of emotions, primarily illustrated a negative picture of what professional development currently looks like. The three major themes that emerged from this question were that professional development was developed in most cases by district or school administration, it tended to be policy driven, and more often than not was poorly planned. Each of these themes also revealed multiple subthemes that reflected a lack of attention to educators or their needs for support.

Research question two aimed to find out what middle school educators view as the most efficient and effective ways to provide professional development. With learning at the core of the professional development experience, it was not a surprise when educators reflected practices that one would expect to find in a classroom. The major themes that emerged included format (time/duration, active learning techniques, teacher choice/autonomy, and mentor presenters), practical application (tools for immediate use, grade/age specific, and content specific), and a positive culture of learning (meets teacher needs, collaborative, supportive, and has effective follow-up).

The third research question asked teachers to reflect on whether or not they were receiving professional development that was relevant to their classroom population. With middle school students in the midst of great developmental change, educators should know how to meet their diverse needs. The overall impression that participants created was positive, but still had areas of improvement that need to be addressed. The three main themes from this question consisted of professional learning communities, social issues (bullying, mental health awareness, and LGBTQ-A awareness), and cultural sensitivity. Participants were pleased that these trainings were becoming more available to them within their schools, but stated that not enough has been done to truly bring light to these sensitive issues.

Throughout the interviews, reflective journals, and focus group participants spoke to three concepts repeatedly. Those three concepts have become the main themes of the entire study. The first is that educators view professional development as necessary. They view it as an opportunity for growth in their profession and a way to remain performing at their best. The second is that educators want effective professional development practices. They want to be engaged and submerged in learning because that is what they love. Lastly, educators not only

want but need targeted training to their specific population of students. Middle school educators want trainings that are unique to their middle school students so that they may best serve them.

### **Discussion of the Results**

The findings of this study suggest that middle school educators often have a negative view of their professional development opportunities, but they also assign value to such experiences and hope that practices will improve over time. The personal narratives of each participant illustrated how imperative professional development trainings are to educators as well as a need for improvement in order that educators may gain increased satisfaction and benefit. Participants expressed a correlation between the satisfaction they feel at the end of a professional development training with how likely they are to consider its value and likelihood they will use the concepts provided in their classrooms.

Participants of the study expressed a great need for professional development in education. They reasoned that it is a logical means to provide continued education and training to teachers throughout their careers, keeping them abreast of the latest research-based pedagogy as well as provide strategic methods of instruction. Participant 1, who has been in education for 50 years, expressed that education has changed so vastly and rapidly throughout their duration in the classroom and in administrative roles that if it hadn't been for ongoing trainings they would have fallen behind and would have become irrelevant and ineffective. Professional development is a means to achieve positive learning outcomes and growth for educators. It is vital to the life and longevity of an educator's career and effectiveness.

As critical as professional development is in the minds of the participants, it has been made clear that in order for substantial outcomes to take place, educators need to be engaged through effective training practices. Much of the dissatisfaction participants feel toward

professional development stems from antiquated instruction techniques and poor planning. Participant 6's personal testimony described in Chapter 4 is a prime example of a training that could have had positive outcomes for all involved, but due to a lack of planning, ineffective delivery, and a negative environment, participants of that training left feeling defeated rather than empowered. Effective practices can transform even a mundane topic into an opportunity for learning and growth.

Lastly, participants expressed their desire for professional development trainings to meet their specific context. A middle school educator does not obtain maximum benefit from attending a training designed to assist high school teachers without manipulation of the content to meet their needs. "My administrator asked me to attend a training at the high school in our district concerning rubrics for reading and writing assignments," said Participant 5. They reflected on the outcome of that training:

The whole time the trainer was talking about 'in-depth analysis of themes presented across literature,' all I could think was how I was still trying to instruct my students on how a five paragraph essay works and getting them to cite their sources.

Participant 5 reported back to their administrator that while the concept of the rubrics was valid, they had no tangible evidence of what could be used at the middle school level since models would need to be made from scratch. Middle school educators want and need trainings that specifically help them meet the needs of their population of students, meeting them where they are at mentally and physically.

### **Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

**Conceptual framework and results.** Education is a fluid system that evolves over time. The shifts that take place are in direct correlation with the changing skills and abilities required

of students once they become adults and leave the hallways of structured learning. Educators must also adapt to these shifts in learning because it challenges the way they teach. Educators, now more than ever, are tasked with providing high quality education that prepares their students to be globally competent and competitive. Professional development, therefore, should be implemented in meaningful and empowering ways. According to Hochberg and Desimone (2010), “[In order for] professional development to be effective, it must address challenges while also building teachers’ capacities to change” (p. 89). Despite the varying results in research as to what entails effective professional development, participants expressed this need for growth and learning as an absolute.

There are many theories when it comes to what makes effective professional development practices. Some researchers believe that the core of effective professional development resides within reflection and self-questioning on the part of the educators (Abilock, Harada & Fontichiaro, 2013). Others believe that the key components are a combination of outside experts, on-going time commitments, engaging activities, relevant content, and meaningful follow-up (Birman et al., 2000; Goldring et al., 2012; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; and Wayne et al., 2008). The participants of this study expressed their own beliefs about what effective professional development should look like and do not substantially differ from those of the experts. Figure 2 illustrates the similarities and differences between what researchers had already observed as effective professional development experiences and the factors that participants attributed to effective practices leading to the shared beliefs about the benefits of such practices.

### Factors that Contribute to Effective Practices

**Research says:** self-questioning, reflection, outside experts, engaging activities, relevant content, and meaningful follow-up

**Participants say:** mentor presenters, timing/duration, teacher choice, active learning techniques, tools for immediate use, grade/age specific, content specific, meets teacher needs, collaborative, supportive, and effective follow-up

### Benefits of Effective Professional Development

- More enhanced teacher self-efficacy
- Greater content knowledge
- Applied skills to work with age demographic
- Tangible methods to implement in classroom
- Greater job satisfaction
- More effective teaching methods implemented

Figure 2. Factors and benefits of effective professional development.

**Literature review and results.** The research field is saturated with data that supports effective practices in professional development. The cost of ineffective practices as well as the benefits of compelling and practical practices is well documented. There is also ample research dedicated to the psychology of the young adolescent. There are also a sufficient number of studies that focus solely on educators working with students in this stage of development. What the literature lacks, however, is educators' perceptions on the actual training they are receiving in regards to working with this population. This study sought to begin a journey filling that void in the literature. This study also complements the research that has come before it in many aspects.

The neurological and physiological needs of young adolescent students are diverse and challenging. Between the ages of 11–15, these students encounter social, emotional, cognitive, and physical changes at a rapid pace (Bowers et al., 2014; Shaffer & Kipp, 2014). Middle schools were established to address the educational and developmental needs of students in this phase of life (Manning, 2000). The middle school model “not only recognized early adolescence

as a unique developmental phase, but also that the educational structure, teaching, and learning needed to be congruent with students' developmental needs" (Akos, 2005, p. 96). Middle school students are no longer children that are stimulated by elementary logic, but they are turning into young adults who question things for themselves in an attempt to come to their own understanding and conclusions; to feel a sense of autonomy. Middle school educators who understand the developmental phase that their students are in are more likely to institute appropriate curriculum and establish a conducive learning environment. Two of the participants in this study self-reported that middle school was not their first option for their career, struggling to connect with the students and the early adolescent phase of life. Those educators admitted that they need more training supports in order to remain working with this population or they will seek other secondary education employment.

The purpose of professional development in education is to enrich and build on educators' instructional expertise (Abilock et al., 2013; Compton, 2010; Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2011). There will always be something new in education: a new behavior support system, new technology applications for the classroom, new academic standards or curriculum benchmarks, and the list could continue. Research supports a vision for professional development training that focuses on subject-matter knowledge and explicit standards for student performance, all while supporting educators (Guskey, 2009; Kose & Lim, 2010; Supovitz & Turner, 2000).

States, districts, and individual schools face great challenges when they do not prioritize and implement effective professional development strategies. As education evolves, educators must be prepared for each new generation of students to bring different challenges as well as values. Educators who resist this inevitable fate and do not participate in ongoing education

themselves will become stagnant and ineffective in their classrooms. Middle schools educators, specifically, need new and inspiring ways to serve their population of students. With individual student success at the heart of education, educators cannot afford to not participate in relevant learning themselves (Kennedy, 2016). If districts, and the educators inside of them, do not see value and participate in ongoing effective professional development practices, the future outlook of their classrooms will be grim and the overall achievement and success of students will suffer.

**The community of scholars and the results.** There are many researchers who have ventured into the subject of effective professional development and substantially less who have looked into the perceptions that middle school educators have regarding the topic. Middle school educators represent a significantly smaller population than that of elementary or high schools (spanning three grade levels as opposed to six and four). In general, there are more studies that speak to the nature of elementary and high schools rather than middle schools.

Giwa (2012) produced an extensive work illustrating the perceptions that middle school educators shared about the quality of professional development opportunities afforded them. His work is the closest in nature to this research study's efforts to obtain perceptions on effectiveness and relevancy of professional development by middle school educators. Giwa's participants, however, were all drawn from the Association of Illinois Middle-level Schools (AIMS) and actively sought out and were given strategic opportunities for growth due to their membership in the group. This study, on the other hand, looks at the opportunities afforded to educators by their districts and/or supplemental trainings they attend.

### **Limitations**

Due to the phenomenological design of this study, certain limitations were present that may have affected the results of this research. The core of qualitative research, and especially



phenomenology, is to delve into the human aspect of the story at hand (Jacobs & Furgerson, 2012). This type of research is highly subjective in nature and because the results are not intended to be statistically significant or due to chance it can be difficult to establish credibility and reliability.

One of the greatest potential limitations of phenomenological research is what Creswell (2013) referred to as bracketing. Bracketing is when the researcher must set aside their own “experiences and rely on intuition, imagination, and universal structures to obtain a picture of the phenomenon from others’ lived experiences” (p. 52). True bracketing can be difficult to manifest, which is why it might be considered a limitation. The researcher has stated (Chapter 3) that they have a connection to the research in as much as they are a middle school educator and that the concept of this study was conceived through personal experience. As research was conducted, however, the researcher made an intentional practice of asking more questions than delivering statements. Asking questions helped the researcher focus on what the participants had to say rather than on the preconceived narrative in their own mind.

Another limitation to this study is the sample size of the participants. Phenomenology typically include 5–24 participants (Creswell, 2013). This study had 12 participants that were all from the Pacific Northwest. This small sample size cannot be truly representative of middle school educators throughout the Pacific Northwest, let alone the nation. Another issue with a small sample size is the ability to replicate the research. The data collected was specific to this group of participants in their given circumstances at the time of study. As a subjective approach, it is difficult to say whether these same participants will share their same perceptions at a future date; it is even more difficult to state that other educators in the same circumstances would share these perceptions.

## **Implication of the Results for Practice**

This phenomenological study was envisioned by the researcher because they perceived two different, but correlated, phenomena occurring in the professional development practices of middle school educators. The first of these is that there is a lack of professional development opportunities being offered specifically to this particular group of educators, and of those opportunities that are, effective practices of learning are not typically taking place. Each state has their own requirements for becoming a licensed educator and also to remain licensed through the duration of a teaching career. In the Pacific Northwest, licensed educators must accumulate a certain number of professional development units (learning hours) in order to renew their license and remain in the field. For example, in one state of the Pacific Northwest, each learning hour is equivalent to one unit. Educators who hold a 3-year license must complete 75 units in the three years that their license is valid to qualify for renewal. For a 5-year license, 125 units must be completed. It is a time commitment that can become quite costly. Participants of this study noted how difficult it can be to achieve the required number of hours when they feel as though their options are minimal and, at best, less than inspiring. It is logical, therefore, that these trainings institute effective practices in order for educators to gain the maximum benefit possible.

The second phenomenon observed by the researcher is that middle school educators are not learning the specific skills and tools available to work with a developmentally challenging group of students. Most, if not all, of the professional development units that educators from this study have acquired are through trainings hosted by their own school or district. The authorities who deem what training is given and when is often the administration team of a given school or district. The content of these trainings is varied and covers a large range. Participants of this study revealed that some districts are beginning to implement more content-specific and relevant

topics to the list of issues to cover, but other districts are still lagging behind in providing relevant classroom topics and applications for the middle school educators. This study demonstrates that middle school educators want to know how best to serve their population of students and that means ongoing and meaningful trainings that help them accomplish this. The progress that has been made, according to participants in terms of relevancy to their trainings, is just the beginning of where professional development needs to go in order to achieve its desired results.

Two participants of this study came from the same district, one of the largest in the region. The two participants shared that while there were still frustrations in the district with professional development, they were also optimistic about how their district implemented training days. Professional development opportunities are scheduled for an entire school year and many choices are made available to teachers on each training day. On these days, teachers may choose the training that best fits their needs and context. They must sign into the training for documentation that they attended, and at the end of each training surveys are handed out to rate the overall satisfaction and effectiveness. Suggestions for future trainings are also part of the survey process. The teachers involved in this district claim that this helps them feel like they have some autonomy as well as voice when it comes to the trainings their district host. More districts could benefit from this model of professional development.

### **Implications for Theory**

This study's conceptual framework stems from research literature that states educators have a more positive view of professional development and subsequently learn more when effective practices are being utilized (Abilock et al., 2013; Bryant et al., 2001; Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Desimone, 2009; Giwa, 2012; Gulamhussein, 2013; Hough, 2011; and

Kose & Lim, 2010). Effective professional development practices include an array of aspects such as outside experts, on-going time commitments, engaging activities, relevant content, and meaningful follow-up. These attributes have been shown in the research literature to bring about transformational learning, which allows teachers to continue to grow and learn in significant ways that also add value to their classroom environments. The participants of this study illustrated this to be true throughout their many stories regarding their experiences.

### **Implications for Policy**

The perceptions that middle school educators had toward their professional development was uncovered and analyzed in this study. The findings from this research reveal that not only do effective professional development practices bring about more learning and positive outcomes for educators, but that educators consider many of the trainings they receive to utilize ineffective practices. Research question three specifically addressed what educators viewed as characteristics of professional development and the results imply how school and district administrators could be structuring their trainings for maximum benefit. Many of the themes that participants pointed out are in line with and reflect effective practices discussed in the literature.

**Format.** Generally speaking, the format is the outline of the how the professional development opportunity is structured. While there are many ways to format a learning experience, not all are considered effective practices. Participants of the study addressed four themes that they define as effective practices that all professional development trainings should possess.

**Timing and duration.** Time sensitivity is a priority for many educators. Participants expressed that they saw more value in manageable increments of time spent on development over an all-day training session. Participants view smaller, more manageable, increments of time

less daunting and easier to approach. It also sends a message to educators that their time is valued and it will not be wasted. The middle school educators participating in the study also equated it to modeling techniques. Many stated that with the attention span middle school students possess, teachers must be skilled facilitators of learning time. By actively approaching training with this mindset, middle school educators not only feel respected but they are absorbing technical practices as well.

***Active learning techniques.*** Middle school educators diligently strive to have engaging classrooms where students feel compelled to learn. Participants revealed that as educators, they are the students who wish to feel compelled to learn as they participate in professional development. The days of stand and deliver techniques have been long forgotten. Students in any capacity need to be part of the learning process and not just bystanders.

***Teacher choice.*** Participants reported that some of their most meaningful professional development trainings were the ones they were able to choose. This is not a luxury afforded to all. Some participants did not even recognize what this might look like in terms of trainings offered to them. The ones who had been given this opportunity, though, stated that they were ultimately more engaged because it was their choice to be there. Whether the options are two or 20, teacher choice helps give ownership of the training to the educator. At the district level, this could be a critical component to effectively training all teachers in a given day, and each grade level would be catered to.

***Mentor presenters and outside experts.*** It is important for middle school educators to learn from those that have come before them in education. Participants agreed that having speakers from outside of their school or district who had appropriate credentials on the content assigned more credibility to the training. Many schools have gotten in the habit of recruiting their

own personnel to teach certain trainings, according to participants. While there is merit in giving educators an opportunity to shine and share their talents with colleagues, it should not become the primary method of content delivery. Participants found it difficult to trust the validity of the training when peers were the only presenters.

**Practical application.** Middle school educators desire to know that what they are learning is relevant to their classroom contexts and will ultimately help bolster student achievement. Practical application is important to educators because, as participants stated, they want to know how to improve in tangible ways. By applying newly learned skills in their classroom contexts, educators are likely to feel a sense of accomplishment and greater self-efficacy.

**Tools for immediate use.** The participants of this study purported that one of the things that assists them most in taking new ideas back to their classroom is something tangible that they can manipulate to fit their specific context. They reported that it could be as simple as a grading rubric or a packet full of resources where they can learn more on their own. Participant 6 said that one of the best trainings they had been to was how to incorporate more games into their classroom and they left that day with a deck of playing cards. They had learned many things that day, including at least 10 different ways to review content using a simple deck of cards. That tangible reminder empowered them to immediately start using their newfound knowledge in their classroom.

**Grade/age specific.** Middle school educators represented in this study want to learn skills that apply to middle school students. Participants found it necessary to meet with and discuss with teachers that taught different grade levels than themselves. This is in the context, though, of working toward a cohesive scope and sequence for a middle school student's education. A sixth-

grade language arts teacher should know what the seventh grade teacher is doing so that they can adequately prepare their students for the next grade level. Grouping elementary and high school teachers along with middle school teachers is what participants found frustrating and relayed as ineffective.

**Content specific.** Participants expressed dissatisfaction when they were forced to sit through trainings that did not directly apply to the content area in which they taught. Several narrated experiences where this occurred and not only felt that their time had been wasted, but that it was unethical for them to claim the professional development units toward the renewal of their license. This can correlate with more teacher choice in professional development opportunities. All departments of a school do not necessarily need to be trained together, unless the content is general enough for everyone to benefit. This could take many forms including professional learning communities or departmental-specific training days.

One area of focus in this discussion amongst participants relied solely on learning content that assisted them in learning developmentally appropriate ways to teach middle school students. Participants expressed the desire for more trainings devoted to the developmental stages their students were in, even if it was review. Educators want to know not only how to educate these transforming minds, but also how to be more empathetic toward the struggles they are encountering on a daily basis. Participants felt that a large part of being an effective teacher was learning how to identify when things are not going the way they should academically, emotionally, or physically.

**Positive culture.** It does not matter if it is a young adolescent student or a fully formed adult, a negative environment will not help produce optimum learning. Educators want and need

to feel built up and empowered to perform their very best. Negative environments push educators toward faster rates of burnout and apathy in their career.

***Collaborative.*** Participants reported that educators want to feel like they are part of a team and not isolated. Administrators and educators should be working together to create new ideas and work on new skills. When there is a clear separation between the two it becomes an “us versus them” mentality that is not healthy for accomplishing group goals. Professional development practices that are collaborative allow educators to glean knowledge and expertise from each other as well as the speaker/trainer.

***Supportive.*** Middle school educators conveyed that if they feel supported in learning something new, they are more likely to stick with it. Support can come in many different ways. Sometimes it is monetarily, like when an outside-the-district training opportunity becomes available and the teacher cannot afford to pay out of pocket. Sometimes support comes in the way of words, such as encouraging an educator that feels a concept is too difficult to grasp. Support can also look like actions taken to show a teacher that what they are doing is important, like using a prep time to cover a teacher’s class so that they can attend an important meeting. These were all examples given by participants when they talked about the support needed when learning new skills to better their classrooms.

***Effective follow-up.*** Participants specified that learning new skills through professional development practices can be difficult. Often times educators do not learn how to do the skill in one sitting. Even when they deem their learning as valuable, they need extra supports to implement the task on their own. This can be accomplished through follow-up routines by either the outside professional that gave the training returning for classroom observation or by administrator review. Participants expressed that if the content of a training is important enough



to devote time learning, then it is important enough for the proper personnel to ensure that it is now being implemented.

*Meets teacher needs.* Educators want to know that their voice is valuable when it comes to the professional development trainings that are taking place. Mandated trainings rarely inspire excitement. One idea presented in the data was for administrators to put out a questionnaire to teachers at least once a year so that they could understand the areas in which teachers felt they needed the most assistance. Participant 11, once a middle school teacher for 15 years and now administrator for the last four, said, “Teachers are the life breath and heartbeat of any school. They have a stronger pulse on what is and is not happening in the building than anyone else, including myself. I would be foolish not to hear them and what they need.”

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The results of this study are one small piece in the educational discussion about the perceptions middle school educators share on the effectiveness and relevancy of their professional development opportunities. The overall themes uncovered in this study are that participant educators view professional development as necessary, teachers want effective professional development practices, and that middle school educators want and need targeted training that is specific to their population of students. While these findings add value to the educational community as a whole, it is really only a starting point for future discussions on the subject.

Further research is required in order to explore whether or not similar results would occur in other geographic areas or with a different sampling size. Replication of this exact study may be difficult due to the conversational nature of the interviews. While the three main research questions remained the heart of the study, each response elicited further follow-up questions that

were unscripted. The general methodology, however, could be used again to create a more substantial picture of the perceptions that middle school educators share regarding the effectiveness and relevancy of their professional development trainings.

It would be beneficial for the educational community to conduct further research on this topic using a variety of methods. Some suggestions based on the research findings could be:

1. Two case studies:
  - a. One specifically exploring the professional development practices of a school or district where educators claim highly effective practices and a positive perception of their trainings.
  - b. Another specifically exploring the professional development practices of a school or district where educators claim ineffective practices are present and a negative perception of their trainings.
2. A mixed-method design that integrates the qualitative human component of “how” educators feel about their professional development practices with the strategic quantitative data collected through surveys and other means that shows “why” they are discontent.

## **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study intended to uncover the perceptions that middle school educators had regarding the effectiveness and relevancy of the professional development trainings in which they had participated in. The researcher interviewed 12 middle school educators, asked them to participate in reflective journaling, and facilitated a focus group with nine of the participants. The personal narratives described by the participants created a unique understanding of the professional development practices being utilized in their schools and

districts. The data collected from this research afforded the researcher an in-depth picture of the experiences these participants had lived. Negative perceptions as well as positive surfaced as participants sought to provide detailed explanations to each of the three main research questions.

The three main research questions that this study focused on were:

1. How do middle school educators describe their professional development experiences?
2. What characteristics of professional development do middle school educators view as effective ways of learning?
3. Are middle school educators experiencing professional development that is relevant to their classroom population?

The significance of the results was a raw look into the depths of current practices at the middle school level. The middle school educator participants currently view their professional development experiences through a negative lens. Participants shared stories that made them laugh when recalling the circumstances as well as stories that rekindled the frustration they once felt in the heat of a moment. While positive narratives were also present, the negative was the prevalent approach taken. Participants expressed frustration over administration organizing professional development trainings without input from the teachers about what they need. Too often, participants said, development days were spent focusing on policy related matters rather than how to improve student success. Finally, participants reported feeling burnt out on professional development training because of the poor planning that went into it.

Participants were well-attuned to the characteristics that create effective professional development practices. Without having done the research through the literature themselves, they were able to point out almost every characteristic of professional development that the

researchers had. In the end, though, the participants' list was longer and more detailed than anything the researcher had found in the literature. This poignant result of the research illustrates that effective and engaging educators know how to bring forth dynamic learning opportunities to their teaching environments.

The third research question brought about very interesting dialogue by the participants and the results show that some districts in some areas are starting to prioritize subject matter content into trainings that previously would not have appeared. The participants from these districts were pleased, and appeared proud, that their districts had taken such bold steps to ensure their educators were aware and prepared for sensitive topics to arise in the classroom. Other districts, however, have not made such moves to integrate culturally and societally sensitive material into their training content and the participants who were part of these districts expressed great remorse for that fact. Regardless of whether a district was beginning to broach more relevant topics or not, participants all agreed that there was more their schools and districts could be doing to create socially, emotionally, and developmentally aware educators.

The results of this study allowed the researcher to reflect upon their own preconceived narrative from before the study took place. This study began as a reaction to issues the researcher saw throughout their years of experience, but listening to the shared experiences of others revealed that all participants shared a strong desire to improve the educational communities surrounding them. Each educator that participated, whether it was their first year of experience or 50th, gave powerful testimonies that reflect their dedication and love toward their chosen career. Despite working through the hard times, they all seek to improve the future of education, by making a difference to one student at a time. Educators are the real-life superheroes.

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## **Appendix A: Individual Interview Questions**

Research question 1: What are the types of professional development opportunities made available to middle level educators?

1. Are they content specific? Grade specific? Pedagogical in nature?
2. What was the subject matter of the last three professional development opportunities you experienced?
3. How are these experiences structured? Are they lectures? Participant-based learning activities?
4. How would you describe the effectiveness of these experiences? Do you take new information back to your classroom to improve student achievement?

Research question 2: What have middle level educators' professional development opportunities provided them in terms of equipping them to work with their population?

1. How have you learned to work with the developmental needs of middle school students?
2. What types of trainings have you attended that are specific to the middle school population?

Research question 3: What do middle school teachers want to see in their future professional development opportunities with regard to their population and pedagogical craft?

1. If you could design an ideal professional development experience for middle level educators, what would it involve?
2. What are some key content areas that all middle level educators should receive training on?

Do you have anything else to add?

## **Appendix B: Statement of Original Work**

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

### **Statement of academic integrity.**

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

### **Explanations:**

#### **What does “fraudulent” mean?**

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

#### **What is “unauthorized assistance”?**

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of work.



**Statement of Original Work (Continued)**

I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University–Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.
2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychology Association*.

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\_\_\_\_04-09-2020\_\_\_\_  
Date