



# VCU

Virginia Commonwealth University  
VCU Scholars Compass

---

Theses and Dissertations

Graduate School

---

2020

## A Critical Examination of Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Liberatory PD

Christine C. Moore  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Secondary Education Commons](#), and the [Teacher Education and Professional Development Commons](#)

© Christine C. Moore

---

Downloaded from

<https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/etd/6448>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at VCU Scholars Compass. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of VCU Scholars Compass. For more information, please contact [libcompass@vcu.edu](mailto:libcompass@vcu.edu).

A Critical Examination of Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Liberatory PD

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Christine Carrie Moore

Bachelor of Arts in English, James Madison University, 2004

Master of Arts in Teaching, James Madison University, 2005

Director: Ross Collin, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Department of Teaching and Learning  
School of Education

Virginia Commonwealth University  
Richmond, Virginia  
November 16, 2020

## Acknowledgements

To begin, I must thank the stranger I met while waiting out a layover at Dulles International Airport. Had she not been so convincing that my professional goals aligned with the pursuit of a PhD, I never would have started this journey.

To the coworkers who cheered me on, I thank you: Blazar, for being the most patient math tutor and for the hours you sacrificed to help me prepare for the GRE; Clement- for participating in class projects and being a force of positivity; Conway- for inspiring me to be a better teacher by your example and enthusiasm; Davenport- for your willingness to keep me on staff; Dean- for the laughs and the check-ins along the way; Lundberg- for being my constant cheerleader; McLamb- for printing papers, being my confidant, for all room 417 talk, etc.

I would be remiss not to acknowledge the lasting impression professors at VCU had on me. Dr. Christenbury, I will strive to emulate what I learned from your instruction over the rest of my career as an English teacher. Dr. McMillan, I simply would not have finished this degree had I not taken 890 under your leadership. I will forever be indebted to you for the wisdom and motivation you provided. Dr. Naff, you were my qualitative guru, and I am so grateful for your willingness to share your insight as this project evolved.

To my committee, I apologize that even in this section of the dissertation I am long-winded. Adai, Hillary, and Kurt: thank you for believing in me. You were patient, attentive, and brilliant at every turn. Ross, your feedback was consistently thought-provoking and generative. From the very beginning you have been professional, kind, steady. I appreciate all the ways you have helped me grow as both an intellectual and an instructor. You have my utmost respect.

To my CCC folks, I am grateful for every project, presentation, and discussion. I gleaned so much from your perspectives. Brionna and Virginia, you both made me feel like I could do

this. Your guidance was unmatched. Sandy and Brooke- I treasure you two. I appreciate every knowing glance and every emoji exchanged. Our friendship was the greatest gain of this degree.

To the eight amazing educators who participated in this research, I am truly grateful. Being willing to give of your time even as our nation navigated pandemic and necessary protest was truly admirable. I loved hearing your perspectives. This project only exists because of you.

Jenn Schero, your willingness to test my codes came at the perfect time. I cannot wait to return the favor! Randy, your friendship (and the wine tastings) made the homestretch possible. To the amazing Julie Bridges, thank you for making me feel capable to see this through to the end. Your coaching was a game changer. I hope to provide future scholars the same degree of compassion that you so generously offered me.

For these last three years, I have had to say no more than any other time in my life, and that is not an answer that I like to give. I am thankful for the many friends who gave me grace to say no. Katie, my soul sister, you always made me feel like I could do it. Smith and Cockerill, my amigos, your visit last fall reminded what matters most in life... late night jukebox dance parties, obviously! Julie Trueblue, GC, and Twin, my GGs, you all are my safe haven and my constant inspiration. You always put things in perspective by sharing a song or a verse that provided assurance and peace. I never want to imagine a life without the three of you in it.

In the last stretch of this research, I truly wanted to walk away, but I had some amazing women who provided much-needed accountability. Krista Kirk, your Monday check-ins made the week feel manageable, and your reminders to take care of myself helped me feel more balanced. Courtney Spain, even after birthing your first child, I could count on you to reach out; you inspired me to keep at it even on the hard days. Sarah Hughes, you did not miss a single Wednesday, and your words always gave me the push I needed to tackle my goals. Alison

Morrone, a 14-hour time difference never stopped you from faithfully asking about my progress. Your friendship motivated me more than you may ever realize. Lauren Watts, your reliable Friday texts helped me stay the course, and I am so grateful for your unwavering support.

Steven and Maria, you have both expressed a confidence in me from the start that I often felt was undeserved. Our conversations were always pivotal as far as the productivity they prompted. Thank you for believing in me.

To my parents, thank you for always showing up. You have let me cry and complain and celebrate-sometimes in the space of a single evening. I am so fortunate to have you both in my corner. Mom, I look back on the times you quizzed me and helped me study with sincere gratitude. Thanks for loving me even when I was difficult to love.

I praise God for having the opportunity to pursue this degree. I am overwhelmed as I recognize the ways His love provided for me at every stage. To my Mission Church family, thanks for rallying around me in these last few months. You spur me on to pursue truth and justice, and I am grateful to be in unity with such an amazing group of brothers and sisters.

I do not know how people get through this without a pet. Sadie, you were the most loyal (and lazy) writing partner. With you curled up at my feet, the writing felt more manageable. Thanks for the companionship and the daily walks through the neighborhood, sweet Sades.

Andy, there was never a point when you doubted my abilities. More often than not, your faith is what carried me through to the next deadline. I am humbled when I think about every meal you prepared, every errand you ran, every rant you endured. Thank you for remaining steady throughout this process. You are such a good man. Your character consistently prompts me to be more loving and more sacrificial. Getting to do life with you, well, all I can say is my cup runneth over. You are my favorite, and I love you yet today.

To D, my better half...

“...cause when I found you,  
my heart found a home.”  
-Seabird

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Tables .....	x
List of Figures .....	xi
List of Abbreviations .....	xii
Abstract and Keywords.....	xiii
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Rationale for Study of the Problem .....	2
Statement of the Purpose .....	2
Research Background .....	3
What Counts as Teacher PD? .....	3
Acknowledging the Context in Which PD Occurs .....	5
Traditional Approaches to PD .....	6
Qualities of Transformative PD .....	9
Agentic Approaches to PD.....	12
The Need for a More Critical Approach to PD.....	13
Liberatory PD.....	14
Research Questions.....	15
Overview of Methodology.....	15
Overview of Dissertation .....	17
Definitions of Key Terms .....	19
Chapter 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE .....	22
The Value of Teacher Agency in PD.....	22
Different Conceptions of Teacher Agency .....	22
Defining Teacher Agency for this Inquiry.....	24
A Theoretical Framework for Teacher Agency .....	25
How Different PD Approaches Impact Teacher Agency .....	26
How Traditional PD Constrains Teacher Agency .....	26
PD Designs that Foster Agency .....	31
Agentially-Aimed PD .....	34
Search Guidelines .....	34
A Close Analysis of Six Agentially-aimed Studies .....	34
Constraints of the Agentic PD Models .....	46
Limitations of Agentially-aimed PD.....	47
Need for Critical Approach to PD .....	49
Need for Repositioning of Teachers .....	50
Need for Disruption of Dominant Thinking .....	51
Liberatory Professional Development .....	53
Defining Liberatory PD .....	54

Redefining the Search Parameters .....	55
Possibilities of Liberatory PD .....	56
Theoretical Tools for Analyzing Liberatory PD .....	66
Synthesis of Findings Related to Liberatory PD .....	69
Current Limitations of Liberatory PD.....	70
Discussion and Implications of the Literature .....	70
The Challenge of Developing Teacher Agency .....	70
Need for Foundational Understanding of Teacher Agency .....	71
Gaps in Understanding.....	72
Summary of Literature Review.....	73
 Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY .....	 76
Researcher Positionality.....	76
Searching for Solutions.....	77
Acknowledging my Idealism .....	78
Epistemological Perspective .....	79
How these Perspectives Influence the Inquiry Process.....	83
Research Design.....	84
A Critical Study of PD.....	84
Description of Context.....	86
Description of Participants.....	88
Measures/Instrumentation.....	93
Procedures.....	96
Data Analysis .....	98
Quality and Rigor.....	102
Reflexivity.....	103
Authenticity.....	106
Institutional Review Board .....	109
Timetable for Study .....	110
Summary of Methodology .....	110
 Chapter 4: FINDINGS .....	 113
Theme One: Facing Contextual Constraints that Limit Teacher Agency .....	114
Lack of Control .....	115
Breakdown of Trust .....	125
Theme Two: Desiring to be Reframed as Knowledge Producers.....	132
How Teachers See Themselves .....	133
Perceived Value of Liberatory PD.....	148
Theme Three: Struggling to Envision how Agency could Support Liberation ...	159
Feeling Limited in Ability to Transform Context.....	160
Defaulting Towards PD Designs Rooted in Control.....	175
Summary of Findings.....	188
 Chapter 5: DISCUSSION .....	 189
An Emergent Theory of PD: The Cycle of PD Stagnation.....	189
Overview of the 4 Barriers.....	189



Reproductive Nature of the Cycle.....	196
Implications of Key Findings.....	197
A Cycle that Cultivates Unproductive Agency.....	198
A Cycle that Suppresses Critical Reflection.....	200
A Cycle that Masks Oppression.....	203
A Cycle that Perpetuates Oppression.....	205
A Cycle that Sustains Misconceptions of Teacher Agency .....	207
How Praxis Can Potentially Break the Cycle .....	210
Study Limitations.....	215
Adapting to COVID-19 Disruptions.....	215
Limitations Related to the Participant Population .....	216
Limitations to my Criticality.....	221
Transferability of Findings .....	222
Future Directions for this Study.....	222
More Critical Studies Focused on PD.....	223
Studies Specific to the Current Context.....	228
Conclusion .....	232
REFERENCES .....	238
APPENDICES .....	253
Appendix A: Phase 1 PD Planner Recruitment Email.....	253
Appendix B: Phase 1 PD Planner Consent Form.....	255
Appendix C: Phase 2 Secondary Teacher Recruitment Email.....	258
Appendix D: Phase 2 Secondary Teacher Consent Form.....	260
Appendix E: Interview Protocols for PD Planners .....	263
Appendix F: Identity Map Instructions for Teacher Participants .....	266
Appendix G: Interview Protocols for Teacher Participants .....	267

**List of Tables**

1. Characteristics of Professional Development Planners .....	90
2. Characteristics of School Sites.....	91
3. Enrollment Percentages by Race/Ethnicity at School Sites in Fall 2019.....	91
4. Characteristics of Teacher Participants by School Site .....	93

## List of Figures

1. Model of Liberatory Professional Development.....	53
2. Model for Study of Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Liberatory PD .....	73
3. Karen's Identity Map .....	134
4. Melissa's Identity Map .....	135
5. A Visual Representation of the Cycle of PD Stagnation .....	190

**List of Abbreviations**

APD	Anti-dialogical professional development
AYP	Adequate Yearly Progress
CPD	Critical professional development
CRP	Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
CRT	Critical Race Theory
CSRA	Critical Self-Reflection of Assumptions
NCLB	No Child Left Behind
NCTE	National Council of Teachers of English
PD	Professional development

## Abstract

This study sought to develop an understanding of secondary teachers' perceptions of liberatory (justice-oriented) professional development at three school sites in a single school district. As participants shared their perceptions, three significant themes emerged; they described 1) facing contextual constraints that limited their agency 2) desiring to be reframed as knowledge producers, yet 3) struggling to envision how their agency could support their liberation. These key findings led to an emergent theory of the *Cycle of Professional Development Stagnation*, a cycle involving barriers that perpetuate the framing of teachers as passive recipients of knowledge. As evidenced in this qualitative inquiry, this cycle serves as a system that can oppress secondary educators as it relates to their agency and their means for developing greater criticality. The findings from this study indicate the need for further research in the field as they highlight approaches to PD that work to discourage a more justice-oriented teacher workforce and therefore may prevent cultivation of more equitable learning environments for students.

**Keywords:** *agency, professional development, secondary teachers, secondary education, Freire*

## **CHAPTER 1: Introduction**

Although the value of teacher-centered approaches to PD are well documented in the literature, much of the training teachers continue to receive places them in a passive role (Bevins et al., 2011; Glickman et al., 2018; Little, 1993; Kennedy, 2016; Picower, 2015; NCTE, 2019). As Darling-Hammond (2010) posited, teachers typically only “get a few ‘hit-and-run’ workshops after school, with little opportunity to share knowledge or improve their practice” (p. 201). Unless a district or school administrator explicitly supports transformative or agentic approaches to PD, pursuing such learning might be challenging for many educators in the current accountability climate. Thus, more teacher-centered PD approaches necessitate teachers having a measure of control which may not be easily obtained within their school contexts.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Recent research has highlighted the benefit of teacher agency and its relationship to professional growth (Biesta et al., 2015; Imants & Van der Wal, 2019; Strahan, 2016), yet research has failed to illuminate how secondary teachers can mobilize or even develop such agency that may be either personally lacking or constrained in their particular teaching contexts. There seems to be an element of reproduction at work here: teachers lack agency that could empower them to pursue transformative PD and their mandated PD experiences typically do not involve qualities that assist them in developing greater agency. Put another way, if teachers lack agency, and PD is their main means for professional growth, then understanding the ways in which PD could help foster teacher agency seems both pertinent and productive.

In spite of some promising new studies and theories related to more agentic and justice-oriented approaches to PD, there is a scarcity of literature specifically focused on the secondary school context (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Kohli et al., 2015; Yoon et al., 2007). Most pertinent to

this inquiry, though, is the lack of literature that seeks to understand more about teacher agency and its relationship to PD from the perspective of the secondary teacher (see Riordan et al., 2019, p. 339).

### **Rationale for Study of the Problem**

As a field of study, PD has been criticized for not having rigorous empirical studies that provide clear consensus of the types of PD that can enhance teaching quality and/or student achievement (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Kennedy, 2016). Although there is extensive research in the field, some have questioned the rigor as well as the replicability of findings in many of these studies (Desimone, 2009; Ingvarson, et al., 2005; Yoon et al., 2007), as they often fail to isolate singular interventions or have appropriate measures of an intervention's effectiveness (Guskey, 2009; Kennedy, 2016).

There is a need for rigorous research within the field of PD that specifically examines teachers' perceptions regarding their own learning. Instead of implementing a particular PD model and testing its effectiveness, this study will seek to involve the secondary teacher in the very process of defining and describing a more emancipatory approach to PD. The design of the study is different than others in the field as it will seek to purposefully reframe teachers as knowledge producers as opposed to knowledge recipients. Consequently, in crafting my conceptual framework, teacher agency has been prioritized both as a topic of inquiry and as an aspect of my research design decisions.

### **Statement of Purpose**

In pursuing this current study, the aim is to make a contribution to the existing literature in understanding more about secondary teachers' perceptions of the kinds of PD that can foster agency as well as their perceptions about what constraints might limit their ability to pursue such

PD. To add to the body of scholarship focused on PD, this inquiry will seek to understand more about how secondary teachers perceive the concept of a liberatory approach to PD. This research aims to serve as a potential starting point for future creation or even investigation of teacher-generated approaches to liberatory PD that might be identified in this study. The data collected in this qualitative inquiry could be used to then carry out comparison studies that determine the kind of “scientifically defensible data” which Guskey and Yoon (2009) argued remains lacking in the field. With this goal in mind, the question, “What, if any, aspects of liberatory PD do secondary teachers perceive would contribute to more effective PD?” will serve as the guiding question for this inquiry.

### **Research Background**

Although extensive research has been conducted in the field of PD, there is still much discrepancy as to both how teachers should be taught and what they should be taught (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009). A review of the pertinent research on teacher PD will examine these different perspectives and ultimately foreground the need for further inquiry in the field.

### **What Counts as Teacher PD?**

There are conflicting perspectives presented as to what constitutes professional development (PD) for teachers. Kelly (2006) proposed that it has to do with teachers developing expertise. Strahan (2016), on the other hand, described that, “teachers’ professional growth involves their sense of who they are as people, how they view learning, and how they interpret their surroundings” (p.668).

Across multiple studies, researchers also acknowledged the pattern of PD being defined *for* teachers instead of *by* teachers (Bevins et al., 2011; Firestone et al., 2005; Flint et al., 2011;



Gemeda et al., 2014; Little, 1993). In an effort to highlight this pattern, some researchers have delineated between the terms professional development and *professional learning* to describe teacher learning (Skerrett et al., 2018). In their study, Skerrett et al. (2018) defended this distinction arguing that professional development is a term that connotes powerlessness as development decisions are historically made on behalf of teachers, whereas professional learning is a term that insinuates greater teacher agency and collaboration.

### ***Defining PD Broadly***

In thinking about the myriad sources of growth that influenced my own instruction, it became challenging to provide a specific list of what counted as PD. Had it always been delivered through a specific means? Had it always been structured? Had it consistently involved particular resources? Had it always been school-sanctioned? In considering my answers to these questions, I found that definitions of PD that were broader in nature resonated with my own experiences of professional growth (see Rinke & Valli, 2010, p. 646). With this in mind, to define the construct of PD, this study aligns with Desimone's (2009) broader description of PD:

Teachers experience a vast range of activities and interactions that may increase their knowledge and skills and improve their teaching practice, as well as contribute to their personal, social, and emotional growth as teachers. These experiences can range from formal, structured topic-specific seminars given on in-service days, to every day, informal "hallway" discussions with other teachers about instruction techniques, embedded in teachers' everyday work lives. (p. 182)

Of all the explanations and definitions presented in this literature, Desimone's (2009) most clearly articulated the variety of experiences that can translate to teacher learning. As researchers

have noted, attempting to designate what counts as PD may be less productive than considering the qualities of PD that foster growth (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2009).

### ***Taking a Stance on PD***

In framing this study, I must acknowledge that the sort of professional growth I am proposing is not value-neutral; instead, it is the kind that specifically aims to strengthen teachers as active, developing professionals. In this way, the study aligns with Mezirow's (1997) claims regarding the goal of adult learning: "to help the individual become a more autonomous thinker by learning to negotiate his or her own values, meanings, and purposes rather than to uncritically act on those of others" (p. 11). In this sense, this inquiry seeks to understand more about the sort of PD that would help teachers develop greater autonomy within their teaching contexts- an autonomy that could empower teachers to play an active role in potentially reshaping or redefining those contexts to better meet the needs of their students. Such a discussion seems incomplete without first contemplating the context within which PD experiences are occurring.

### **Acknowledging the Context in which PD Occurs**

Over the last three decades, teacher learning has occurred in a context marked by increased emphasis on teacher accountability and high stakes testing (Au, 2007; Au, 2009; Dover et al., 2019; Little, 1993; Picower, 2011; Picower, 2015; Rinke & Valli, 2010). This context has impacted school structures and the professional identities of teachers alike (Buchanan, 2015; Campbell, 2019; Dover et al., 2018; Hartman, 2016; King & Nomikou, 2018; Martinez et al., 2016; Picower, 2011; Picower, 2013; Valli & Buese, 2007). Au (2007) conducted a qualitative metasynthesis review of the literature that examined the ways in which this accountability context narrows the curricular content. He concluded that "systems of educational accountability

built on high-stakes, standardized tests are in fact intended to increase external control over what happens in schools” (Au, 2007, p. 264).

PD programs nationwide were certainly impacted by this increased control. In large part because of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, pressures to prepare students for success on standardized tests permeated schools nationwide, and this emphasis on assessment influenced the school mandates and PD programs that were adopted and implemented (Hartman, 2016; Martinez et al., 2016; Rinke & Valli, 2010; Ritchie, 2012; Yost & Vogel, 2007). In reviewing the literature, a trend towards school-wide staff development initiatives that adopted a training model approach and prioritized student achievement (in this case narrowly defined by assessment scores) emerged as a result of this shift towards increased accountability (Little, 1993; Picower, 2015). Although in some cases this marked a shift towards school-based PD, this did not mean that each school was given freedom to pursue completely individualized programs (Rinke & Valli, 2010).

### **Traditional Approaches to PD**

For the purposes of this inquiry, I will define initiatives that have been emerging and prevailing within this accountability context as *traditional approaches to PD*. In employing the word “traditional” I intend to emphasize the pervasiveness of such approaches in the recent and current socio-political context. My word choice is not meant to make any commentary about the longevity of such approaches; additionally, it aligns with Picower’s (2015) description of such approaches.

In many secondary settings, a principal or leadership team (that may or may not include teacher representatives) determines what professional learning will be delivered to the staff (Bevins et al., 2011; Firestone et al., 2005; Flint et al., 2011; Gameda et al., 2014; Little, 1993).

As Wells and Mitchell (2016) described, “this type of professional development represents a one-sided monologue, where one person or entity (such as school/district administration or even state-level mandates) controls the content and its form of expression” (p. 36). Often these top-down directives regarding the content, design, and delivery of these programs are directly influenced by the policies that are shaping assessment and accountability measures in a particular district (Desimone et al., 2006; Rinke & Valli, 2010), and this may be particularly true in urban contexts (Lee et al., 2007; Martinez et al., 2016; Skerrett et al., 2018). With such approaches, participation may become focused on fulfilling contract requirements as opposed to investing in authentic learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009).

Traditional PD efforts tend to focus on building teacher effectiveness as it relates to student success on high-stakes tests as opposed to a teacher’s self-identified target of growth (Flint et al., 2011; Picower, 2015; Rodesiler & Pace, 2015; Tang & Choi, 2009). Kennedy (2016) explained in her review of PD literature that the method of prescription currently remains the most ubiquitous approach to PD. She explained that with this widespread approach to PD, “prescriptions are typically presented as universal, reducing the amount of flexibility or personal judgment teachers will need to enact the idea” (Kennedy, 2016, p. 955). In this way, attention towards the needs of individual teachers often become overshadowed in traditional PD models (Gemedda et al., 2014; Glickman et al., 2018; Picower, 2015).

### ***Support for Traditional PD***

Proponents of school-wide initiatives may see their efforts to disperse information regarding curriculum redesign and realignment as purposeful (Rinke & Valli, 2010). Little (1993) recognized that outsourced programs that are designed to meet particular needs have a certain appeal because they are often easy to implement; her work did not advocate for their use

but rather acknowledged the reasoning some districts may have for avoiding alternative designs that may be considered “pragmatically messier” (p. 15) in spite of their potentiality. Advocates of standards and increased accountability might see immense value in prescribed approaches to PD as their one-size-fits-all approach, or their more regimented content requirements attempt to get the majority of staff members at a school in line with state and/or national policies through efficient means. Firestone et al. (2005), though, acknowledged that district-wide PD does not account for teachers’ varying levels of expertise, and it is rarely tailored to address the concerns of individual content areas. In this way, traditional approaches to PD may result from good intentions, despite their design limitations (Hartman, 2016).

### *Critique of Traditional PD*

Critics of such approaches have questioned whether PD should be homogenous in its structure or its content (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Glickman et al., 2018; Flint et al., 2011), especially when accounting for its delivery in varied contexts (Desimone et al., 2006; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Little, 1993; Rinke & Valli, 2010). Sprouse (2016) discussed how a more prescriptive approach to PD fails to provide “deep context-rich opportunities for application” (p. 63). Similarly, Bevins et al. (2011) described that this more pervasive approach to PD has learning outcomes that are “centrally imposed” that fail to provide “stimulating, high quality opportunities for teachers to update their subject knowledge and try out new pedagogies” (p. 400).

These imposed systems can range in degree of autonomy and level of constraint placed on teachers (Campbell, 2019). To return to Rinke and Valli’s (2010) study, the researchers found that in one of the three school contexts they studied, the teachers were influencing and shaping the structure of the PD in productive ways, but the content and focus of the professional learning

was still tied to the district's assessments. As this particular school did not struggle to meet AYP requirements, teachers may have had the ability to impact the PD at their school, but teacher learning was ultimately still imposed by district expectations (Rinke & Valli, 2010). As such, even a mandated PD program that offers aspects of teacher choice is still by definition mandated which will likely have a discernable impact on teacher learning (Kennedy, 2016).

Flint et al. (2011) argued that the “interests, wonderings, passions or needs” of teachers are often unaccounted for when it comes to large-scale or school-wide PD that is offered in K-12 settings (p. 1163). Studies indicated that traditional PD may feel isolated, fragmented, or altogether disconnected from a teacher's classroom experience (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Flint et al., 2011; Rodesiler & Pace, 2015; Tang & Choi, 2009; Yoon et al., 2017). As described in one of the most recently revised National Council for Teachers of English position statements, “far from being a true learning experience, much of the professional development that teachers are exposed to is a top-down, one-size-fits-all, one-shot model, directed at teachers rather than inclusive of teachers and their diverse classroom experience” (NCTE, 2019).

More pointedly, Glickman et al. (2018) asserted, “the need to individualize teacher learning, indicated by the literature on adult learning, stands in sharp contrast to the actual treatment of teachers” (p. 73). On the whole, those who critiqued traditional PD argued that the approach failed to include characteristics that could best support teacher learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Glickman et al., 2018; Little, 1993; NCTE, 2019; Picower, 2015).

### **Qualities of Transformative PD**

As so many researchers have questioned both the rigor (Desimone, 2009; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Yoon et al., 2007) and the results (Guskey, 2009; Kennedy, 2016) of PD studies focused on particular programs, this inquiry focuses instead on essential qualities of PD that kept

surfacing in oft-cited studies. This decision was based in part by researchers who have indicated the need to align qualities of PD with specific contexts in order to be most impactful (Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2009; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Little, 1993; Rinke & Valli, 2010). Additionally, Liu et al.'s (2016) claim that the ultimate goal of PD "should be a transformative one" that seeks to empower teachers aligned with my own beliefs (p. 421).

Studies indicated that as adult learners, teachers need to feel invested in their own growth (Glickman et al., 2018; Patti et al., 2012; Skerrett et al., 2018). Similar studies advocated for teacher-designed and/or teacher-led PD (Bevins et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Riordan et al., 2019; Rodesiler & Pace, 2015). Other studies have emphasized the need for PD designs that provide adults the opportunity to grow in their respective crafts as active learners (Charteris, 2016; Gameda et al., 2014; Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Skerrett et al., 2018). This active teacher learning can take many forms, some of which are described below.

### ***Critical Reflection***

According to Mezirow's (1998) *transformational learning theory*, transformative growth necessitates adults learning to think autonomously through critical reflection of assumptions (CRA) and to engage in rational discourse with others. Mezirow (1998) described these as "emancipatory dimensions of adult learning," (p. 191). Likewise, Patti et al. (2012) advocated for forms of PD that allow "educators to participate in reflective practices that cultivate self-awareness, emotion management, social awareness, and relationship management" arguing that reflection had the potential to equip educators who engaged with such activities to be more effectual in their craft (p. 264). As indicated in the literature, transformative PD involves intentional reflection aimed at considering one's own positionality in relationship to one's learners (Fernández, 2019; Hooley, 2013; Koonce, 2018; Mezirow, 1998; Patti et al., 2012;

Smith, 2011).

### ***Focus on Content and Coherence***

Researchers have emphasized the need for PD to be content-focused to support teachers in building expertise in their field (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Darling-Hammond et al., 2009; Desimone, 2009; Desimone et al., 2006; Firestone et al., 2005). Researchers have also identified a need for PD initiatives to provide coherence as it relates to depth of focus (Firestone et al., 2005) as well as alignment with relevant policies and reforms that impact the school context (Desimone et al., 2006; Desimone, 2009; Rinke & Valli, 2010).

### ***Collaborative Relationships***

Recent studies have also advocated for collaborative discourse to be included in PD efforts (Burke & Collier, 2016; Charteris, 2016; Fernández, 2019; Glickman et al., 2018; Podolsky et al., 2017; Rehm & Notten, 2016; Rodesiler & Pace, 2015; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015; Sprouse, 2016; Strahan, 2016; Tang & Choi, 2009; Wall & Palmer, 2015). In defending the means for carrying on productive discussion, Mezirow (1998) described that the “the content of the discourse must be a focused, critically self-reflective, collaborative inquiry into how one’s own habits of mind have framed his or her points of view” (p. 196). Studies found that PD that allowed teachers to exchange and build knowledge also increased their social capital (Yoon et al., 2017), and this was found to be true even when the collaboration happened virtually (Rehm & Notten, 2016; Rodesiler & Pace, 2015). The literature also highlighted that teachers also need adequate time to participate in productive discourse and knowledge sharing (Little, 1993; Podolsky et al., 2017).

### ***Teacher Framed as Researcher***

Studies also revealed that transformative PD encouraged teachers to identify context-



specific problems in need of solutions (Burns & Pachler, 2004; Garcia & Garcia, 2016; Patti et al., 2012; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008; Wall & Palmer, 2015). Little (1993) posed that “one test of teachers’ professional development is its capacity to equip teachers individually and collectively to act as shapers, promoters, and well-informed critics of reforms” (p. 5).

Researchers also highlighted the need for PD to adopt a job-embedded approach involving sustained inquiry (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Desimone et al., 2006; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015; Strahan, 2016; Tang & Choi, 2009). Furthermore, this concept of sustained inquiry emphasized the need for PD to provide teachers sufficient time to develop understanding and carry out implementation of their researched interventions (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Ingvarson et al., 2005; Podolsky et al., 2017; Skerrett et al., 2018; Sprouse, 2016; Yoon et al., 2007; Yost & Vogel, 2007).

The literature provided multiple lists delineating specific qualities that should be included in any PD effort that intends to have lasting effects on its learners (see Desimone, 2009; Flint et al., 2011; Guskey, 2009). Taken as a whole, many of these studies offered similar ideas about the qualities of PD that can potentially yield teacher growth. Additionally, most of these studies identified approaches that could be tailored in cost effective and practical ways to suit the needs of school contexts (Desimone et al., 2006; Little, 1993). This begs the question as to why these qualities are not consistently embedded within PD designs nationwide. More specifically, it points to need to thoughtfully consider the way that teacher learning is being framed in traditional approaches to PD.

### **Agentic Approaches to PD**

PD that prioritizes teacher agency is one promising new approach to PD that incorporates many of the transformative qualities reviewed above. Researchers have identified teacher agency

as being advantageous, especially in its propensity to foster professional growth in terms of increased teacher autonomy and self-efficacy (Biesta et al., 2015; Imants & Van der Wal, 2019; Skerrett et al., 2018; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015). Recent studies have examined the effectiveness of efforts to reposition teachers as active agents of learning within PD models (Burke & Collier, 2016; Hardy, 2009; King & Nomikou, 2018; McNicholl, 2013; Mette et al., 2016; Sprouse, 2016). Using Clark's (2016) definition of teacher agency as well as Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) model of teacher agency for PD to closely analyze these PD studies, though, showcased that even agentially-aimed PD might encounter structural barriers that make it challenging for teachers to critically problematize their positionality in emancipatory ways.

### **The Need for a More Critical Approach to PD**

Synthesizing these findings on recent PD efforts that sought to foster agency led to the conclusion that perhaps PD that promotes aspects of agency is not enough to instigate lasting and transformative growth for teachers. In this way, examining PD that promoted teacher agency was not as revelatory as I first hypothesized it would be. This pointed to the need for a critical framework that could support the discussion surrounding teacher agency and PD.

Applying Freire's (1970) *banking concept of education* to the literature on PD illuminated the ways in which many PD programs frame teachers as passive learners as opposed to knowledge producers. Traditional approaches to PD, and even some approaches that have agentic aims perpetuated an oppressive treatment of teachers (Bevins et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Little, 1993; Skerrett, et al., 2018). Incorporating Freire's (1970) theory into this inquiry illuminated the need to develop and research PD efforts that have more overt liberatory aims. Such a PD model would seek to liberate teachers to gain control over their

professional growth in ways that could hopefully lead to transformed teachers and as well as transformed classrooms.

### **Liberatory PD**

In response to this need, I propose an approach to PD rooted in Freire's (1970) ideas about liberating the oppressed. For the purposes of this study, I will define the construct of *liberatory PD* as being an approach to PD that positions teachers as autonomous and active participants in control of their own growth and that prioritizes critical reflection aimed at empowering teachers to develop an understanding of their own agency and how that agency can be enacted in particular contexts. From a theoretical perspective, liberatory PD repositions teachers in the sort of active, critically reflective roles for which Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1998) advocated, it aligns with the characteristics of agency that Clark (2016) and Imants and Van der Wal (2019) outlined, and it empowers teachers to autonomously pursue a wide range of PD experiences as Desimone (2006) described.

A review of the literature examined the potential of several teacher learning experiences that were more liberatory in their design or delivery (Charteris, 2016; Dover et al., 2018; Dover et al., 2019; Garcia & Garcia, 2016; Hollingsworth & Clarke, 2017; Hooley, 2013; Katsarou et al., 2010; Margolis, 2002; Martinez et al., 2016; Navarro, 2018; Patti et al., 2012; Picower, 2015; Riveros et al., 2012; Sacramento, 2019; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015; Skerrett et al., 2018; Strahan, 2016; Wall & Palmer, 2015; Wells & Mitchell, 2016) as well as recent theories that could support the design and assessment of such PD experiences (Kohli et al., 2015; Pantić, 2015). These approaches and theories offer starting points for potential liberatory PD programs as they purposefully liberate teachers to pursue professional growth through more agentic, autonomous, and critical means.

## **Research Questions**

As previous studies had not captured a rich and thorough understanding as to how secondary teachers conceptualized their own agency in relationship to liberatory PD approaches, this study attempted to fill a gap in understanding within the literature. More specifically, this study sought to understand more about secondary teachers' perceptions of liberatory PD and how it might contribute to more effective PD.

To closely examine the secondary teacher perspective as it relates to liberatory PD, the following research questions guided my work and assisted me in determining potential patterns in teacher responses:

*Research Question 1:* How do secondary teachers describe their agency in navigating the PD fulfillments required by their school?

*Research Question 2:* How do secondary teachers perceive the value of liberatory PD?

*Research Question 3:* How useful do secondary teachers find the vision of agency in liberatory PD?

*Research Question 4:* How do the differences in school contexts shape secondary teachers' responses to the concept of liberatory PD?

## **Overview of Methodology**

In hopes of generating detailed data embedded in a specific context, this study followed a qualitative research design (Maxwell, 2013). The study aligned with constructivist research designs (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) in which the researcher takes on the role of an interpretivist (Gray, 2014). In line with these approaches, the inquiry adopted a critical lens as it aimed to co-construct knowledge with participants (Gray, 2014; Lincoln, 2005; Noblit, 2005). More specifically, this critical inquiry involved eight secondary teachers in a single school district.

Part of my rationale for conducting a qualitative study was my desire to center the secondary teacher's voice within the study. Since the inquiry sought to understand more about teacher agency, it seemed appropriate to prioritize understanding what liberatory PD means "for participants in the study" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30). Enabling participants a chance to offer their own perspectives provided a deeper understanding of their individual perceptions and their individual teaching contexts; such rich descriptions would have been challenging to capture through a quantitative survey. More than that, my methods were intended to "interrupt broad social trends" where decisions are made *for* teachers as opposed to *by* teachers (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 83). Additionally, as this research design was not static, a qualitative inquiry offered opportunities for the generation of theory as it emerged within the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Maxwell, 2013).

Purposeful sampling as well as snowball sampling techniques (Maxwell, 2013; Noy, 2008) were employed to select three PD planners working in the same school district and five secondary teachers from the three school contexts where each of these PD planners work. Data collection occurred in two phases. Semi-structured interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; McMillan, 2016) were conducted during the first phase to collect insights from the three PD planners. During the second phase of data collection, each of the five participants created an identity map (Fine & Sirin, 2007; Sirin et al., 2008) which they used as a means to consider their role as both teachers and learners before participating in an hour-long semi-structured interview.

All interactions were audio recorded and then transcribed by a reputable company. Transcripts were then carefully coded and categorized to generate conclusions (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). Multiple steps were taken to bolster this study's trustworthiness. For example, member checks were carried out to verify accuracy of representations and findings (Guba, 1981;

Tracy, 2010). Research memos were frequently composed in an effort to remain reflective at every stage of this inquiry (Finlay, 2002; Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). Additionally, using two methods of data collection assisted me in triangulating the data (Guba, 1981; Maxwell, 2013; McMillan, 2016; Patton, 1999; Tracy, 2010). In summary, this qualitative inquiry followed an iterative process that sought to deeply understand the perceptions of secondary teachers located within a specific teaching context (Maxwell, 2013).

### **Overview of Dissertation**

Using a qualitative design approach, this dissertation sought to enhance understanding of secondary teachers' perceptions of liberatory PD and its perceived utility within their teaching contexts. This research was aimed at responding to a gap in understanding in the fields of both professional development and teacher agency. More specifically, it attempted to respond to the need for secondary teachers' perspectives to be represented within the literature in these fields.

This first chapter provided a broad overview of the concept of professional development and its relationship to teacher agency. This introduction indicated that although there has been vast research in the field of PD, there is still knowledge to be gained as it relates to the types of PD that can foster both professional growth and teacher agency. The research questions that framed this inquiry as well as an overview of the design decisions that were made in hopes of answering these questions were presented in this opening section as well.

The second chapter provides a review of the literature that analyzes the concept of teacher agency more closely. Using both a proposed construct of agency (Clark, 2016) and a theory of teacher agency in PD (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019), six recent PD efforts that claimed to prioritize teacher agency are analyzed. This analysis foregrounds the justification for a more critical approach to PD. Possible approaches to liberatory PD as well as theoretical frameworks

for analyzing these approaches are considered. Reviewing the literature in this way provided a case for why a study on liberatory PD was warranted.

The third chapter begins by explaining my positionality as a researcher in hopes of clarifying this study's genesis as well as its design decisions. A detailed description of the study's methodology is provided in hopes of not only adding to this study's overall trustworthiness, but it is also intended to provide insight as it relates to the potential transferability of this current study's findings.

In the fourth chapter, the three significant themes that emerged from this qualitative inquiry are presented along with evidence from the data to support these findings. As participants shared their perceptions, they described 1) facing contextual constraints that limited their agency 2) desiring to be reframed as knowledge producers, yet 3) struggling to envision how their agency could support their liberation. In hopes of remaining true to this study's constructivist (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and critical aims (Gray, 2014; Lincoln, 2005; Noblit, 2005), participants' voices are prioritized throughout the presentation of the findings.

The fifth and final chapter begins by unpacking the *Cycle of Professional Development Stagnation*, a theory that emerged from this study's findings. A discussion of this emergent theory and its implications is provided in conjunction with relevant literature in the field. This chapter also offers an account of the study's limitations as well as considerations regarding the transferability of findings. Recommendations are also made for how this study's findings could be expanded upon in future studies that are broader in scope as well as those that are specific to the school district in which this inquiry took place. This chapter ends by offering important conclusions which indicate the need for further research in the field.

### Definitions of Key Terms

*Antidialogical professional development (APD)*: PD that positions teachers as passive recipients of knowledge and fails to offer teachers the opportunity to reflect on their own positionality and how that may impact their students; in this way, this approach to PD may be perpetuating instead of disrupting domination and division in schools as it tends to “ignor[e] broader historical or institutional injustices” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 10).

*Autonomy*: Autonomy refers to acquiring “the understanding, skills, and disposition necessary to become critically reflective of one’s own assumptions and to engage effectively in discourse to validate one’s beliefs through the experience of others who share universal values” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 9). For this inquiry, autonomy will be examined as it pertains to the teacher’s perspective.

*Banking concept of education*: Education that involves learning as “an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor” and with this banking concept, “the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits” (Freire, 1970, p. 72). For the purposes of this study, the “students” in this case are the teachers who are pursuing professional learning.

*Critical identity work*: This reflective work involves “a critical analysis of race, power, and systems of oppression” (Fernández, 2019, p. 187). Critical identity work is presented as being an essential aspect of any “re-humanizing professional development structure” that seeks to promote critical consciousness among educators (p. 187).

*Critical professional development (CPD)*: PD that “develops teachers’ critical consciousness by focusing their efforts towards liberatory teaching” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 9). CPD aligns with Freire’s (1970) proposal that dialogic action offers a means to liberation as it



“engages teachers in political analysis of their role as educators in the reproduction or resistance of inequity” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 11).

*Critical self-reflection of assumptions:* Mezirow (1998) described that “critical self-reflection of an assumption (CSRA) involves critique of a premise upon which the learner has defined a problem” (p. 186).

*Cycle of PD Stagnation:* This is an emergent theory developed from the data collected in this study. The cycle involves 4 main barriers that make it difficult for teachers to disrupt the cycle including: top-down control over PD decisions, constraints on teacher agency, culture of mistrust, and the paradox of domestication. As shown through its application to this study’s findings, the Cycle of PD Stagnation the potential to be broken through the praxis and an enactment of teacher agency.

*Liberatory professional development:* For the purposes of this study, liberatory PD is defined as an approach to PD that positions teachers as autonomous and active participants in control of their own professional growth and that prioritizes critical reflection aimed at empowering teachers to develop an understanding of their own agency and how that agency can be enacted in particular contexts. From a theoretical perspective, liberatory PD repositions teachers in the sort of active, critically reflective roles for which Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1998) advocated, and it also aligns with the characteristics of agency that both Clark’s (2016) construct and Imants and Van der Wal’s (2019) model promoted.

*Praxis:* As a means towards liberation from any form of oppression, praxis is described as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1970, p. 51). For

this inquiry, praxis is considered an essential element of PD efforts that claim to have critical aims.

*Professional development:* Professional development denotes teacher learning experiences that “can range from formal, structured topic-specific seminars given on in-service days, to every day, informal ‘hallway’ discussions with other teachers about instruction techniques, embedded in teachers’ everyday work lives” (Desimone, 2009, p. 182). This study will adopt this broader description of professional development as it acknowledges that “teachers experience a vast range of activities and interactions that may increase their knowledge and skills and improve their teaching practice, as well as contribute to their personal, social, and emotional growth as teachers” (Desimone, 2009, p. 182).

*Teacher agency:* This study will draw on Clark’s (2016) socio-cultural perspective which contends that a teacher’s agency “represents awareness of their self, their intentionality, and their capacity to make choices in the context of schooling” (Clark, 2016, p. 1).

*Traditional professional development:* Traditional professional development can be described as school-wide staff development initiatives that adopt a training model approach and prioritize student achievement (in this case narrowly defined by assessment scores) that emerged as a result of a shift towards increased accountability (Desimone et al., 2006; Little, 1993).

*Transformative learning:* Transformative learning is described as “education that fosters critically reflective thought, imaginative problem posing, and discourse” that is “learner-centered, participatory, and interactive, and it involves group deliberation and group problem solving” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 10). For this study, qualities of transformative PD align with the ideals of transformative learning.

## **CHAPTER 2: Review of Literature**

This chapter includes a discussion of literature focused on understanding more about the relationship between PD and teacher agency. Two critical questions guided this literature review: What are some examples of recent PD programs that have provided and fostered teacher agency, and what are their effects? Based on an analysis of these studies, how might PD programs more effectively foster teacher agency? To answer these questions, the chapter begins with a close analysis of the concept of teacher agency followed by an explanation of the theoretical framework that will be used to examine the relevant literature.

### **The Value of Teacher Agency in PD**

Recent research indicates that teacher agency is being recognized more widely as an asset that can support professional growth (Biesta et al., 2015; Imants & Van der Wal, 2019; King & Nomikou, 2018; Skerrett et al., 2018; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015; Strahan, 2016). Biesta et al. (2015) described trends that validate “agency as an important dimension of teachers’ professionalism” (p. 625). Strahan (2016) contended that “teachers’ sense of agency is a critical factor in the process of professional growth” (p. 668). In her article, Charteris (2016) similarly emphasized the “importance of teacher agency in light of individualistic neoliberal approaches to professional learning that locate teachers as consumers of knowledge created elsewhere” (p. 278). Agency is a term that can be broadly applied to many educational contexts, and this broad application may cause inconsistency in understanding or interpretation of what it entails. This review seeks to determine how key theorists in the field are describing and defining teacher agency as well as agency’s perceived impact on teachers’ professional growth.

### **Different Conceptions of Teacher Agency**

Campbell (2019) discussed the ways in which teacher agency was “an essentially

aesthetic set of dispositions and behaviours” (p. 31). Drawing on Lévi-Strauss’ (1966) conception of how humans interact with the world, Campbell (2019) presented the concept of teacher as “*bricoleur*”- the teacher who imaginatively puts to use the available resources in his or her teaching context (p. 33). With this vision of teacher professionalism, agency becomes a matter of awareness, discernment, and creative action (Campbell, 2019). Along similar lines, van der Heijden et al. (2015) conducted an exploratory study in which they developed a framework constructed from the literature on agency that identified the qualities of “lifelong learning, mastery, entrepreneurship, and collaboration” as being common characteristics of teachers who are considered change agents. These descriptions align with conceptions of agency focused on agency as an individual characteristic a person might have or seek to develop (Bandura, 2001).

Other recent studies, though, have shifted towards expressing agency in terms of a dynamic interaction between the individual and society. Although Robinson (2012) acknowledged that teachers’ values and beliefs made a significant contribution to their agency, she also indicated that those values and beliefs are impacted by contextual factors. She described that agency “seems to be about internalising choices, about analysing and reflecting, based on past experiences and future trajectories”, but that “temporality” and “external culture” influence the degree to which agency can be enacted (Robinson, 2012, p. 233). Lasky (2005) likewise defended a social-cultural perspective of teacher agency. She asserted that teacher agency is involved in an intricate system that simultaneously affects and is affected by the context in which it exists (Lasky, 2005).

Similarly, Buchanan (2015) described teacher agency as “identities in motion” (p. 717). For the teachers in her study, agency had to do with “whether or not they could teach the way they wanted to teach within their local school context” (Buchanan, 2015, p. 709). In her study of

nine primary school teachers in California, Buchanan (2015) found that when there was a good fit between a teacher's professional identity and her local school culture, agency was exhibited by the teacher stepping up, whereas when there was a lack of fit, agency was exhibited by the teacher pushing back (p. 710). These responses emphasized how context may work to encourage or discourage teacher agency (Buchanan, 2015).

Building on the work of Biesta and Tedder (2007), Charteris (2016) advocated for considering teacher agency from an ecological perspective that considers the specific issues that arise in a particular context and the responses these issues can feasibly elicit. In their study, Biesta et al. (2017) argued that "the achievement of agency emanates from the complex interplay of individual capacity and collective cultures and structures" (p. 52). King and Nomikou (2018) described agency as "a fluid expression shaped by the individual and the wider temporal structures in which the individual exists" (p. 89).

### **Defining Teacher Agency for this Inquiry**

In spite of the many studies that offered working definitions of agency, this inquiry will align with Clark's (2016) construct as it presented a socio-cultural perspective that emphasized the challenges teachers face when thinking about and potentially enacting "their agency in a socialized context" (p. 7). Of the more recent pieces centered on teacher agency, Clark's definition more purposefully acknowledged the tension between teachers' individual sense of agency and the larger structures that may or may not stifle agency. He proposed that because of this dichotomy, agency could not be reduced to simply present or absent in a classroom. As he framed his research, Clark contended that "a teacher's agency represents awareness of their self, their intentionality, and their capacity to make choices in the context of schooling" (p. 1).

By choosing Clark's (2016) construct for thinking about agency in less binary terms, this

inquiry aims to better account for the complexity and nuance inherent in attempting to conceptualize teacher agency. Clark's (2016) study offered a picture of the constraints that may inhibit teacher agency, but it simultaneously offered a challenge to reconsider the possibilities for developing agency even amid these constraints. His definition inspired the search for a theoretical lens that could also offer a less dichotomous approach to understanding the ways that teachers enact their agency in socialized contexts.

### **A Theoretical Framework for Teacher Agency**

Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) recent publication provided a lens for specifically considering how PD designs might work to foster or constrain teacher agency. They posited that "teacher agency is realized within socio-cultural constraints," (p. 3), but they proposed that teachers can respond to these constraints with action that may alter their contexts. Their study sought to provide researchers with the ability to assess PD and school reform from a teacher agency perspective. Although the model supports inquiries examining both PD and school reform, for the purposes of this inquiry it will be used solely to examine recent PD efforts.

Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) article offers a comprehensive framework for assessing PD efforts built on the assumption that "teacher agency results from this interaction between individual practice and perceived work context" (p. 7). The researchers argued that certain factors should be present in a PD program that claims to provide and foster teacher agency. With this in mind, Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) model presented five essential characteristics that should be used for analysis of teacher agency in PD:

- (1) presents the *teacher as an actor*, (2) depicts *dynamic* relationships, (3) treats professional development and school reform as inherently *contextualized*, including multiple levels, (4) includes content of professional development and reform as

*variable(s)* and (5) considers the outcomes as parts of a *continuing cycle*. (p. 7)

For the purposes of this literature review, this model offered a framework from which to determine the ways in which recent PD efforts may have fostered or inhibited teacher agency.

Clark's (2016) definition regarding a teacher's awareness of self, purpose, and decision-making capacity aligns well with Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) first essential characteristic of PD programs which claimed teachers should be framed as active participants. For example, if a PD program empowers teachers to define their own sense of purpose, it may empower them to act more easily in accordance with that purpose. Thus, Clark's definition provided a stronger explanation of the different ways a teacher could be positioned as an actor within PD models. For this reason, both Clark's (2016) construct as well as Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) model of teacher agency in PD will provide a comprehensive framework for this review.

### **How Different PD Approaches Impact Teacher Agency**

To better understand how teacher agency relates to PD, the literature on PD was carefully revisited to determine what the literature on PD revealed about teacher agency. In the following section, the combined theoretical lens of Clark (2016) and Imants and Van der Wal (2019) will be used to offer a discussion of this relationship.

### **How Traditional PD Constrains Teacher Agency**

Biesta et al.'s (2015) study that sought to determine more about the role of beliefs in teacher agency found that teachers lacked professional discourses that could help them see past the policy and curriculum constraints they encountered within their teaching contexts. As Biesta et al. (2015) described,

much of the blame for this situation lies in externally imposed systems which alter the dynamics of schooling, leading to incremental change without the development of a clear

philosophy of education to underpin the changes in question, and a professional collegiality that enables its development. (p. 636)

Au (2007) asserted that these externally imposed systems are rooted in the desire to increase control over what happens in schools. These imposed systems have been found to constrain teacher agency (Buchanan, 2015; Campbell, 2019; Dover et al., 2018; Lasky, 2005; Robinson, 2012), and may even become “mechanisms for reforming teachers” (Ball, 2003). Traditional approaches to PD are an example of one such imposition as they often dictate what counts as learning for teachers as well as how instruction will be delivered to teachers (Hartman, 2016; Picower, 2015; Rinke & Valli, 2010; Yost & Vogel, 2007). Traditional approaches to PD can constrain teachers through limiting their choices, hindering their autonomy, or inhibiting their opportunities for critical reflection.

### *Lack of Choice*

Districts that make decisions regarding PD programs might believe that their choices help support and promote teacher agency. School leaders might assert that chosen PD programming can empower teachers to make more informed or even research-based decisions that will result in student growth. They might defend their selections by asserting a program’s cited success or effectiveness in recent studies. As Little (1993) described, though, justifying programs based on claims of relevant research “has increasingly become a means for exercising institutional authority rather than for informing teachers’ judgements or framing their own inquiries” (p. 16). She cautioned against implementing PD programs that do not provide space for teachers to engage with and critique the research that was used to craft such programs. In order to verify the proclaimed credibility of a PD approach or its applicability to a school context, Guskey and Yoon (2009) similarly advocated that “educators must be prepared to dispute such claims” (p.



498). Such dispute, if encouraged, could help to foster the sort of dynamic relationships that Imants and Van der Wal (2019) highlighted as being essential in their model for teacher agency in PD. The fact that traditional programs perpetuate more linear relationships indicates that PD can serve as a system that imposes itself on teachers without instigating long-term change, and it can work to diminish teacher agency (Gemedo et al., 2013; Skerrett et al., 2018; Smardon & Charteris, 2017; Wells & Mitchell, 2016).

Traditional approaches to PD do not typically originate from teacher knowledge and expertise; instead these programs often involve an outside expert coming in to train a staff (Little, 1993; Wells & Mitchell, 2016). In this way, such approaches do not generate the contextualized PD that can foster greater agency (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). PD that frames teachers in this manner may fail to develop a teacher's capacity for decision-making by limiting knowledge production and knowledge sharing among staff members (Bevins et al., 2011; Charteris, 2016; Flint et al., 2011; Little, 1993; Liu et al., 2016; Skerrett et al., 2018; Yoon et al., 2017). Teachers have immense collective expertise on which to draw, but traditional PD programs may not enable them to make ultimate decisions on what knowledge will be pursued or they may not afford teachers opportunities or channels through which to share that expertise with colleagues (Little, 1993; Skerrett et al., 2018). The results of Yoon et al.'s (2017) study indicated what much of the recent PD literature indicated: traditional approaches to PD do not eliminate teacher isolation or create optimal conditions for collaboration (Flint et al., 2011; Kelly, 2006; Rodesiler & Pace, 2015; Sprouse, 2016; Wells & Mitchell, 2016).

Even those buildings that do not experience external pressures to perform may still have to align PD content with policies that the teachers may not be able to directly influence (Rinke & Valli, 2010). Apart from PD programs that rely on scripted lesson plans, stakeholders may argue

that the choices that teachers make as far as how they will enact the programming within their individual classrooms requires and reflects a degree of teacher agency. It must be noted, though, that there is a big difference between having the “capacity to make choices” about the PD programs themselves as opposed to how to carry out the PD program that has been selected on behalf of teachers within a school setting (Clark, 2016, p. 1).

### ***Lack of Autonomy***

Some traditional PD programs make claims about prioritizing teacher autonomy while they continue to prioritize district goals above teacher independence. For example, despite its stated aim to engage and involve teachers in their own growth through identifying their own learning needs, Gemedu et al. (2013) identified a large gap between policy and practice for the teachers engaging in a newly adopted PD program in Ethiopia. By capturing the teachers’ perspectives in this study, the researchers found that although the program’s policy discourse claimed to offer teachers agency, the PD program was understood narrowly by teachers, a managerial approach was used to deliver the PD, teachers’ motivations and needs were not recognized, teacher workload increased, and teachers felt unsupported by leaders (Gemedu et al., 2013). When PD programs such as this one claim to position teachers as active participants but then fail to empower them to take control over their own professional growth, they work to constrain teacher agency. Simply claiming a PD will promote the sort of content flexibility and teacher influence that Imants and Van der Wal (2019) identified as being essential characteristics of agentic PD does not guarantee that this will come to pass. Such affordances must be purposefully incorporated to the program’s design from beginning to end.

Of the 28 studies included in Kennedy’s (2016) recent review of the literature on PD programs, only three of the studies that met her selective design standards fit into the category

designated as “knowledge” that provided teachers with the greatest degree of autonomy (p. 957). In her discussion, Kennedy (2016) questions why stakeholders expect more prescriptive approaches to PD to be effective among adult learners if studies have provided evidence that such approaches fail to work with younger students. This prescriptive approach through which many PD efforts are delivered grant teachers little room to make their own judgment calls as to what is best for their classroom or their students (Kennedy, 2016). As Flint et al. (2011) posited, “the isolated nature of these approaches have teachers passively receiving information from identified experts on strategies or approaches that they will then implement unquestioningly (and often half-heartedly or resentfully) in their classrooms” (p. 1163). Prescriptive approaches to PD, then, may not enable teachers to take on the sort of active role that Imants and Van der Wal (2019) delineated as a key characteristic for agentic PD.

Although traditional PD programs may seek to prompt and promote growth, their design and delivery often frame teachers as passive learners in need of outside expertise (Bevins et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Little, 1993; Skerrett et al., 2018; Wells & Mitchell, 2016), and this limits teachers in their ability to take on an active role in their own learning process (Charteris, 2016; Glickman et al., 2018; Hardy, 2009; Little, 1993). By not taking an a more active role in their learning, it is also unlikely that teachers are developing all aspects of the agency for which Clark (2016) advocated. For example, if teachers are not actively involved in the knowledge construction of their learning, it is unrealistic to think that their intentionality or their self-awareness will be thoughtfully considered much less refined.

### ***Lack of Reflection***

Perhaps most concerning, then, is that by complying to traditional PD approaches, teachers may perpetuate the very habits they long to eliminate (Campbell, 2019; Hardy, 2009;

Hartman, 2016; Kennedy, 2016). The outsourced or decontextualized designs of these programs may impede teachers from being able to deeply consider how their own positionality may disadvantage their learners (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Fernández, 2019; Flint et al., 2011; Picower, 2015). Whereas agentic PD programs as envisioned by Imants and Van der Wal (2019) would consider outcomes of a PD as being involved in a continuous cycle, the outsourced design of many traditional programs do not invite such an iterative approach to teacher learning. To be agentic, they would need to involve constant refinement; instead, their designs often stymie reflection aimed at improvement or accountability (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). When outcomes are treated as end points, the pattern is often to simply repeat it or move on to another intervention as opposed to considering how and why a PD approach did not positively impact a school context.

More than that, if PD content is consistently mediated by district, state, or national policies, teachers are positioned in a way that gives them little choice but to either align with what those policies decide is appropriate and acceptable knowledge (Au, 2009; Campbell, 2019; Little, 1993; Rinke & Valli, 2010; Wells & Mitchell, 2016) or attempt to creatively transform or resist the policies (Hartman, 2016; Skerrett et al., 2018). As Picower (2015) outlined, traditional PD “positions teachers to be unquestioning” (p. 2) and may even cause educators to be complicit with policies with which they do not agree. In this way, traditional approaches to PD that constrain teachers may work to maintain the status quo by stifling potential voices of dissent and disruption (Buchanan, 2015; Campbell, 2019; Milner & Laughter, 2014; van Woerkom, 2010).

### **PD Designs that Foster Teacher Agency**

By considering alternative approaches to PD, it becomes clear that PD can be approached in ways that would help foster teacher agency. The benefits of such approaches may be far-

reaching, as Strahan (2016) claimed “professional growth is most dramatic when characterized by a stronger sense of agency and collaboration” (p. 670). A discussion of PD characteristics that can promote teacher agency is offered in the following section.

### ***Encouraging Conversation***

One way in which PD can foster agency is through prioritizing teacher discourse. Multiple studies have identified the need for teachers to have space to explore their beliefs about teaching through discussion in order to develop a sense of their own agency (Biesta et al., 2017; Buchanan, 2015; Kelly, 2006; Lee et al., 2007; Martinez et al., 2016). In their study, Biesta et al. (2015) propose that “access to wider discourses about teaching and education would provide teachers with a perspective on the beliefs they and their colleagues hold, and would provide a horizon against which such beliefs can be evaluated” (p. 638). Such evaluation seems essential in today’s educational climate marked by inequities.

### ***Prioritizing Collaboration***

As research has indicated the ways in which collegiality can foster teacher agency (Buchanan, 2015; Hartman, 2016; Robinson, 2012), it should also be prioritized in PD models. Robinson’s (2012) study revealed how collegiality can empower teachers to withstand and even creatively adapt to policy demands. Lee et al. (2007) identified that teachers in their study would have had to overtly reject district policies in order to carry out the culturally congruent science instruction presented in their PD program, and they acknowledged that this was “not a small request” (p. 1286). Their study, then, also pointed to the potentiality of encouraging collegiality that might enable collective resistance (Lee et al., 2007).

Similarly, Hartman (2016) found that when a group of veteran English teachers were faced with a school mandate they judged to be ineffective, it was their collegiality that assisted

them in persisting as educators (p. 16). Hartman (2016) suggested, though, that these teachers could have made better use of their agency if they had collectively and creatively worked together to more openly resist the “institutional hegemony” they faced (p. 20). Considering Clark’s (2016) emphasis on the influence context has in enabling or constraining a teacher’s agency, it seems essential to contemplate how colleagues play a part in shaping a teacher’s context. With this in mind, PD programs could be designed in ways that specifically encourage collaboration. Such programs could empower teachers to align their efforts to change their teaching contexts. In this way, PD that promotes collaboration can foster teachers’ individual agency and it might also generate collective agency among colleagues.

### *Creating Space for Dissent*

Little (1993) defended the need for PD to provide “support for informed dissent” (p. 11). She argued that individual decisions as well as collective choices can become stronger when dissent is appropriately fostered and employed to test assumptions or consider alternative courses of action (Little, 1993). Sannino’s (2010) work similarly sought to underscore how agency and resistance can be positively connected, especially as it relates to teachers’ professional growth. Both articles highlighted the ways in which alternative approaches to PD can create space for resistance and dissent to be expressed in productive ways. Instead of expecting teachers to implement school mandates unquestioningly (Hartman, 2016), PD programs could alternatively invite teachers to engage with the conflicts and resistance such mandates inspire (Buchanan, 2015; Little, 1993; Sannino, 2010). PD that was designed in such a way that welcomed dissent might foster the kind of teacher agency that empowered educators to reflect on their own teaching philosophies (Clark, 2015) as well as their teaching contexts in productive and potentially emancipatory ways.

### **Agentially-Aimed PD**

After determining that PD had the propensity to foster agency among teachers, a close examination of PD models that claimed to promote agency seemed warranted. The following section first recounts how decisions were made regarding which empirical studies would be selected for analysis.

#### **Search Guidelines**

An introductory database search for examples of agentic PD revealed that although there is extensive literature available regarding PD, studies that examine both PD and teacher agency simultaneously are far less prolific. To begin, the terms “professional development” and “teacher agency” were used in the search fields. As the literature used to define and theorize agency was published in the last four years, the search was also limited to peer-reviewed articles from 2015 to the present. This initial search within *ProQuest* yielded 156 initial results. All 156 abstracts were read and studies that did not include 3 or more of the characteristics identified in the model proposed by Imants and Van der Wal (2019) were excluded. This reduced the list to just over a dozen studies. After selecting a few representative examples of agentic PD to examine more closely, the reference lists of these selected studies were examined to locate additional studies. As a few key studies were referenced multiple times across reference lists, the abstracts of these additional studies were reviewed as well. This led to the inclusion of two studies that were published before 2015. The review of agentially-aimed PD provided below is not exhaustive, but it offers examples of six studies that to some degree align with the agentic characteristics identified in Imants and Van der Wal’s (2019) model.

#### **A Close Analysis of Six Agentially-Aimed PD Studies**

Although recent approaches to PD have attempted to promote deeper and more

contextualized learning aimed at fostering greater teacher agency, a close examination of these studies elucidated aspects of their designs that constrained such aspirations. The following includes a review of six agentic PD efforts that sought to reposition teachers as knowledge producers but in some ways were still limited in their ability to instigate transformative professional growth. By carefully critiquing these agentially-aimed PD efforts through the combined perspectives of Clark (2016) as well as Imants and Van der Wal (2019), this review aims to gather more insight as to how and what aspects of teacher agency may be constrained or fostered by particular PD designs or within particular contexts.

### ***Hardy's Study of a Curriculum Adoption Effort***

Through his examination of an 18-month PD, Hardy (2009) determined that even when participants were given greater input in crafting curriculum based on newly adopted standards, they experienced a tension between approaching their learning in a traditional manner versus approaching it in a more self-directed manner. On the one hand, participants revealed tendencies towards a “compliant disposition” focused on meeting administrative demands, but on the other hand they revealed “a more educational disposition” that encouraged thoughtful reflection and a more collaborative approach to PD (p. 82). This dichotomy of dispositions- compliance vs. - innovation- reflects the ways in which the structures of schooling (in this case the teachers’ traditional experiences with PD that was chosen for them as opposed to a PD program that afforded them greater autonomy and input) have historically constrained teachers’ opportunities to foster greater agency.

The PD effort that Hardy (2009) studied afforded teachers the chance to define and clarify their intentions and it encouraged them to make choices on their own. Even though these affordances align with Clark’s (2016) interpretation of agency, the fact that some teachers



responded with compliance indicates that the program failed to foster agency in all its participants. As it was described, the participants were involved in dynamic relationships in which they were actively shaping the PD content which aligns with at least three of the characteristics highlighted in Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) model. It is worth noting, though, that although teachers had the chance to actively take part in shaping the PD initiatives, they were still working to align the curriculum with newly-adopted standards which the teachers in the study did not play a part in creating. More than that, the funding garnered to support this initiative required that the PD developed would focus on specific "curriculum areas" (p.75). In this way, their roles as actors were not without limitations. Although the content of the PD was contextualized as teachers worked to create a well-aligned PD, it is unclear as to whether the outcomes of this PD effort were part of a continuous cycle (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). Furthermore, Hardy's (2009) findings revealed that teachers may struggle to think of themselves as knowledge producers even when encouraged to do so.

### ***McNicoll's Investigation of Collaborative Inquiry***

As a university researcher, McNicoll (2013) participated in a professional learning community along with five advanced-level biology teachers to co-investigate a problem of practice they all faced in their London-based teaching contexts. These school contexts had undergone reforms resulting in a more segmented curriculum as well as an increased number of required assessments. During their initial meeting, the five teachers discussed the ways in which "their teaching had become increasingly content-driven" (p. 223) due to the testing pressures they faced. Collectively, they identified the need for a teaching strategy that purposefully shifted away from the often-truncated approach to their biology instruction. Together, with the help of the researcher, the teachers created an activity aimed at supporting a more holistic view of

biology that promoted independent learning skills of students and provided formative feedback from learners to measure growth.

Participating teachers found the PD effective in contributing to their confidence, positioning them to identify a problem in need of study, providing an opportunity to collect meaningful feedback from learners, and enabling generative collaboration alongside others who faced similar constraints (McNicholl, 2013). On the surface, this PD effort aligned with the tenets of agency that Clark (2016) presented in his work. For one, it encouraged teachers to consider their own teaching habits as they were evidenced in their teaching contexts. Based on the inquiry they chose to pursue, it also helped them to reevaluate their intentions as biology teachers. Finally, it empowered participants to imagine an alternative course of instruction thereby increasing their capacity for decision-making.

On the other hand, McNicholl's (2013) study failed to indicate just how agentic teachers were empowered to be within these constrained teaching contexts. Although teachers expressed an increase in their confidence, it is unclear whether this translated to teachers developing the ability to ultimately question and push back against the reform pressures they faced. The study did not provide any insight as to how this PD-generated teaching activity was perceived by school administrators. Questions as to whether teachers were encouraged to incorporate more lessons like this one or whether they received pressure to return to a pedagogy more aligned with test preparation imperatives remain unanswered. In this way, Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) requirement that the teacher be framed as an actor in agentic PD was bound within confines of the PD itself, but it is unclear as to whether that framing translated to their actual teaching contexts. Additionally, as the collaborative PD effort only resulted in the development of a single lesson, it also remains uncertain as to how many other lessons these individual teachers went on

to revise after gaining the confidence this PD effort claimed to encourage.

As McNicholl (2013) described the PD as being temporary in nature, it does not seem to treat the outcomes of this PD as a part of a cyclical learning model (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). The teachers created an activity that invited feedback from students, but the PD program itself did not invite feedback from its teacher learners. The study did conclude with semi-structured interviews that were conducted six months after the final meeting to gauge participants' individual perceptions about the changes resulting from the PD, but it did not indicate that these interviews were aimed at helping teachers consider what their next step would be in engaging with this type of PD. Additionally, the fact that all five participants were described as "enthusiastic teacher volunteers" seems important in light of the PD's more agentic design (McNicholl, 2013, p. 227).

#### ***Mette et al.'s Examination of a Teacher-designed PD***

In their examination of a PD program aimed at improving teachers' cultural competence, Mette et al. (2016) studied the effects of a PD effort created by a high school's multicultural committee. These committee members identified a need in their school context and worked to develop a learning opportunity aimed at responding to that need. Members started by researching culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and critical race theory (CRT) literature and translated their findings into a series of six 45-minute PD sessions that they delivered to their staff (Mette et al., 2016).

The design of this PD effort seems to reflect the tenets of agency for which Clark (2016) advocated. The teachers on the committee sought to become more self-aware. They made efforts to more clearly align their intentions with methods indicated as effective within the relevant research. They created a program designed to specifically meet the needs of their school context.

The design phase of the PD also included many of the characteristics that Imants and Van der Wal (2019) prioritized in their model of teacher agency in PD. As the PD was crafted, it required teachers to take on active roles as they carefully reflected on the selected literature and theory in an effort to create context-specific lessons for the rest of their staff. The teachers engaged in dynamic relationships with other committee members, and since they shaped the content of the PD themselves, they certainly had input as to what was covered in each session delivered to the staff.

Just by taking part in creating this PD, then, these committee members were developing and enacting their agency as they were making decisions that directly influenced the context of their school (Clark, 2016). What is less clear, though, is how the PD potentially fostered agency for the teachers who were not a part of the committee. Although the rest of the teachers engaged with a context-specific problem, they did so by following instruction that had been created for them by other staff members. Thus, the PD was agentic for teachers involved in the generative phase but may not have been for those involved in the delivery phase. Clear descriptions of how the PD was delivered to staff members were not provided in this article, so any speculations of how the content was framed for the recipients would be unwarranted. It is also unclear how the results of the PD were going to be used. Whether they would inform future iterations of this PD approach or whether they would be viewed as an end point remains uncertain (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019).

At the conclusion of this three-year effort, the study's results revealed that teachers in the school felt the PD assisted them in "acknowledging cultural differences" and responses indicated that "some teachers were able to reflect on notions of race, poverty, and white privilege" (Mette et al., 2016, p. 13). In addition to these positives, though, teachers noted the challenges of the PD

which they perceived as “lack of time and implementation apathy” (Mette et al., 2016, p. 14). The researchers indicated that the teacher-driven PD was delivered on top of other district and building initiatives and therefore may have been overshadowed by demands that were deemed more pressing.

This research provided an example of how a PD’s transformative aims can be constrained by the district-wide expectations placed on teachers. The PD itself may have had the capacity to foster the type of nuanced and site-specific agency for which Clark (2016) defended, and it may have included multiple characteristics from Imants and Van der Wal’s (2019) model, but the larger context within which this PD took place may have constrained more wide-spread professional growth. This finding further highlighted the need for agency to be developed that accounts for teachers’ immediate school contexts as well as the larger structures within which those contexts are embedded. Additionally, it indicated that teacher agency needs to be intentionally fostered at every stage of a PD effort, not just during its genesis.

### ***Burke and Collier’s Study of a Teacher Inquiry Group***

Burke and Collier (2016) facilitated a teacher inquiry group in Canada that involved 12 participants seeking to understand and implement social justice into their instruction. The participants were responsible for reading two texts to foster a deeper understanding of the tenets of social justice-oriented pedagogy and then they engaged with children’s literature that could be used to translate their understandings into practical lessons. The authors discussed the benefit of such teacher inquiry groups in that “the combined perspectives and expertise enhance the learning of all members involved” (p. 270). They described this group as an example of professional learning community that encouraged both reflection and dialogue. Burke and Collier (2016) contended that defining and even implementing social justice into classrooms can be

challenging for educators, and that it should be “conceptualized as a collaborative effort” (p. 272). Their research effort, then, served as a model of such an effort as they recounted the results of partnering with local teachers to better elucidate “how to teach in socially just ways” (p. 283).

If PD aims to provide teacher agency, Imants and Van der Wal (2019) asserted that it must be framed as “inherently contextualized” (p. 7), and that “the focus should be on characteristics of the direct work environment of teachers” (p. 5). As opposed to a more traditional approach to PD that may be decontextualized from teachers’ classroom experiences, Burke and Collier’s (2016) inquiry created space for educators to engage with issues they identified as having practical significance to their specific school contexts. On the surface, then, it seemed to align with Imants and Van der Wal’s (2019) model for teacher agency. This PD had a teacher-centered design aimed at helping teachers to make socially just decisions to empower their classrooms, but it was not a large-scale effort embedded in a *singular* school context. The teacher inquiry group included only a handful of participants from different schools who were personally invested in seeking out methods for teaching social justice. Although the participants all shared investment in adopting more socially just teaching methods, the fact that they came from different school contexts calls into question just how agentic this PD may have been for participants.

This PD involved dynamic relationships and content which the teachers were included in shaping; it also positioned the teachers in active roles as “larger discourses of power and responsibility surfaced in the teacher talk” as they “co-constructed meanings” (Burke & Collier, 2016, p. 276). In considering these characteristics, the PD had the potential to foster teacher agency among participants (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). In addition, the participants reflected on their intentions and became more self-aware through this PD effort. The PD also helped them

to make more socially just decisions regarding literature that would be read in their classrooms. These indicate that the PD fostered aspects of agency that Clark (2016) identified as being ideal, but in the midst of the PD, teachers in this study “talked about the ways in which they were constrained by political, social and community forces” (Burke & Collier, 2016, p. 283). Burke and Collier (2016) explained that these constraints ranged from censorship, required assessments, or even the threat of repercussions (p. 283). Consequently, participation in this PD did not eliminate structural barriers that made taking charge of their identified learning needs more feasible for teachers.

### ***Sprouse’s Reflection on Collaborative Critique***

Sprouse (2016) presented a collaborative PD effort that she found to empower the teachers within her school context. Based on McDonald and Allen’s (1995) description of a Tuning Protocol, her staff adopted a collaborative critique approach to PD. With administrative support and time built into the school day for this PD effort, Sprouse (2016) discussed the ways in which this critique process helped improve classroom instruction and support cross-curricular learning. In her article, she provided the structured steps involved with this critique protocol including setting norms, assigning roles, presenting work for critique, providing time for reflection, offering warm and cool feedback, etc.

The teachers were framed as actors who set the norms, served in the various roles, and reflected purposefully on their own work as well as the work of their colleagues. Sprouse (2016) acknowledged that teachers would occasionally exhaust their own expertise and seek the support of an outside expert, but this was still seen to empower teachers. As Sprouse (2016) defended, “the difference from more traditional modes of PD such as the one-shot workshop was that we chose the problem, we chose the expert, and we worked as a team using the critique protocol to

improve students' learning" (p. 66). The PD model involved dynamic relationships where participants offered and received critique focused on self-selected content. The PD was highly contextualized as it involved teacher-identified artifacts in need of improvement. Even the outcomes were treated as a part of a continuous cycle as the critique process evolved as teachers brought new artifacts to investigate alongside their colleagues. In this way, the model of PD included all aspects of Imants and Van der Wal's model (2019).

On the other hand, the various aspects of teacher agency that Clark (2016) provided in his definition were not as easy to identify in this study. The collaborative critique protocol empowered teachers to make decisions regarding what they would study, but that does not mean that it empowered them to make decisions that significantly altered their teaching context. The hopeful tone with which Sprouse (2016) crafted her argument might imply that other teachers who participated in this PD did so in a manner that helped them become more self-aware and it empowered them to better define their intentions, but there is no discernible evidence that this occurred.

The nature of this research, then, makes it difficult to assess just how much agency was fostered among the staff that Sprouse (2016) discussed. Written for a largely practitioner journal, *English Journal*, the article offered an avenue for potentially agentic PD without clearly delineating just how participation had empowered teachers (beyond the author) to become more agentic. This PD was presented as a school-wide initiative, so perhaps a quantitative study of teacher perceptions could have clarified some of these uncertainties. In its current form, the study did not provide any data, and it did not offer multiple participant perspectives. Providing reactions of other teachers from the author's critique team may have offered greater insight into



the various aspects of agency that this PD fostered for different participants.

***King and Nomikou's Study of a Pedagogically Focused PD***

In their study of a year-long PD program designed to support teachers in their adoption of a science capital pedagogical approach in their classrooms, King and Nomikou (2018) sought to determine the ways in which teachers in their study exhibited agency and the factors that facilitated or constrained their agency. The study involved nine teachers from various schools across London; these teachers had either applied to the program or been recruited to participate. Data were collected through teacher interviews before and after the PD, including lesson observations, reflective conversations with teachers following the lessons, and focus groups with students.

The fact that the pedagogical approach was “developed in partnership with teachers” (King & Nomikou, 2018, p. 90) indicated that it positioned the teachers as active participants and included them in defining and shaping the PD content (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). Additionally, the PD's focus on empowering teachers to integrate a more socially just approach to science instruction within their classrooms revealed that this PD was highly contextualized (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). The reflective conversations included in the data collection phase study may have encouraged teachers to “conceptualize their purpose for teaching” within “the socializing structures” where they taught (Clark, 2016, p. 8). By discussing their observed lessons with a researcher, it is also likely that the teachers developed greater self-awareness as it relates to their teaching (Clark, 2016).

To analyze their data, King and Nomikou (2018) combined the frameworks of Pantić (2015) and van der Heijden et al. (2015) to determine if teachers had acquired greater agency through the PD program. This analysis revealed that although the PD had agentic aims, it may

not have provided the sort of agency that can generate change. The data reflected instances of teachers developing refined purposes, increased mastery, and elements of reflexivity, but their achievement of autonomy was more challenging to identify. The researchers shared how many participants “felt constrained by the pervading accountability paradigm present in their schools” and that “wider structures and systems of their institutions curtailed their nascent agency” (p. 100).

Although there were instances where the participants began to apply their learning to question the status quo as it related to science instruction, some struggled to take the risks that would be required to consistently implement the science capital building approach in their classrooms. Fears related to student behavior and correlating pushback from leadership constrained many of these teachers from effectively enacting their agency. This aligned with Clark’s (2016) claim that resistance “requires positive or productive forms of agency to move beyond simply resisting social norms” (p. 3). It also revealed that teachers may not have increased their capacity for decision-making within their school contexts, thereby constraining an aspect of their agency as Clark (2016) defined it.

As they analyzed the data to determine factors that affected agency, they determined that collaboration supported the development of teacher agency (King & Nomikou, 2018). This finding aligns with other studies regarding the impact collegiality can have on one’s agency (Buchanan, 2015; Hartman, 2016; Robinson, 2012). King and Nomikou (2018) also identified the school culture as having an influence on teacher agency, as many teachers experienced “a tension between the desire to implement changes in their teaching to support social justice, and the obligations they felt to cover enough ground” (p. 98). Finally, their data revealed that the feedback from others had an impact on the degree of agency facilitated by this PD effort.

King and Nomikou (2018) concluded their discussion by proposing a shift away from using assessment results to measure student and teacher success and instead towards a more socially just measurement of “developments in critical teacher agency” (p. 101). They went on to argue that such measures could also be used to measure the success of PD efforts. Although this was a suggestion they offered, they did not indicate that such measurements would inform future iterations of this PD effort. As a result, this PD did not appear to align with Imants and Van der Wal’s (2019) model as it relates to how PD outcomes are treated. Despite the indication that some participating teachers enhanced aspects of their agency, the fact that most of their participants were volunteers from different schools across London makes it challenging to determine how effective this PD would be in other contexts.

### **Constraints of these Agentic PD Models**

In synthesizing these more agentic approaches to PD, it became clear that the multi-faceted agency which Clark (2016) presented in his study was not consistently and unanimously developed within or enacted by the teachers that participated in these various PD efforts. A nuanced and ever-evolving agency as Clark (2016) perceived may be counter to the experience of many teachers and may even be difficult to develop even for more justice-oriented teachers as it was for the two preservice teachers he studied. Similarly, when looking at these studies through the lens of Imants and Van der Wal’s (2019) model for teacher agency in PD, it became clear that not all PD efforts that attempted to support agency included the characteristics outlined in their model. The characteristics involving PD outcomes seemed to be most inconsistent across the studies, which aligned with the results Imants and Van der Wal (2019) found in their review of 36 articles (p. 10). Even those studies that did include many of the characteristics outlined in the model still did not prove to generate wide-spread or transformative agency among

participants.

In applying Clark's (2016) definition of teacher agency to these models, it became clear that "a teacher's agency is much more complex than a simple binary characterization" (p. 1). Analyzing these studies did not definitively illuminate how PD programs might more effectively foster teacher agency. They did, however, call into question how the aspects of agency that were fostered in each PD effort could have been drawn out and developed more fully to empower teachers towards liberation for not just themselves, but their students as well. In the end, the question remained as to whether simply prioritizing agency within PD models would be enough to empower teachers to transform their teaching contexts.

### **Limitations of Agentially-Aimed PD**

As the literature indicated, even within agentic models of PD, teachers were not consistently questioning and probing issues concerning their own teaching philosophy or their school context. This questioning relates to the self-awareness and the capacity for making choices which Clark (2016) presented as key aspects of teacher agency. It also relates to the "position of the content of professional development" (p. 5) as described by Imants and Van der Wal (2019). They argued that when content is treated inclusively, it is "redefined by teachers" as teachers enact the content within their teaching contexts (Imants & Van der Wal, 2019, p. 5). In some cases, as teachers began to enact the content they engaged with during their PD experiences, they faced barriers that limited their capacity to make changes (Burke & Collier, 2016; King & Nomikou, 2018).

To revisit Hardy's (2009) study, his research revealed that even PD approaches that offered greater power to teachers were not immediately emancipatory since teachers were still bound within larger contexts that influenced their decisions. The conflicting dispositions Hardy

(2009) discussed may be a direct result of teachers feeling limited in their ability to express concerns or make decisions regarding their own professional growth. Other studies have indicated that this default towards teacher compliance, even if it is just in word, (Campbell, 2019; Hartman, 2016; Robinson, 2012) may not be uncommon (Buchanan, 2015; Woollen & Otto, 2013) and that such compliance can work to maintain structures that fail to serve the needs of all students (see Riordan et al., 2019, p. 327). Within Woollen and Otto's (2013) ethnographic study of an arts-based reform effort, they described how "teachers reveal their complicity in social reproduction" by openly criticizing high-stakes testing "while continuing to support it" by aligning their instruction with it (p. 101).

One possible reason for this is that in a few of these PD models that proclaimed agentic aims (King & Nomikou, 2018; McNicholl, 2013; Mette et al., 2016), the initial decisions regarding the topic of study were not instigated not by teacher participants themselves, but by other stakeholders. If a PD claims to provide agency for teachers but is *given to* teachers instead of *generated by* teachers themselves, it seems potentially incongruent as it relates to its design and its intention. More than that, the degree of agency such PD could reasonably inspire should logically remain questionable.

This literature review revealed that simply trying to make PD more agentic may not actually help teachers develop agency that they can feasibly enact within their teaching contexts. Campbell (2019) argued that "without creating an environment where teachers can research, develop and create their own practice in unique, personal ways, there is limited opportunity for them to become the agents of social and education change they might otherwise be" (p. 37). Perhaps prioritizing agency within PD programs is not enough to empower teachers to transform their teaching contexts much less help uproot inequities that may persist in their classrooms.

Synthesizing the constraints of these agentic PD approaches highlighted the need for a new approach to PD that can liberate teachers to not just develop greater agency but to equip them to put their agency to work in their teaching contexts.

### **Need for Critical Approach to PD**

As the agentic approaches to PD still involved constraints that impeded teachers in their ability to develop and enact their own agency, the review of literature indicated that teachers might need greater control over their learning if they aspire to become more agentic in their particular teaching contexts.

Researchers have indicated that structures that constrain agency might encourage a lack of criticality among educators (Biesta et al., 2017; Miller & Laughter, 2014; van Woerkom, 2010). If teachers do not have a strong sense of their own agency that enables them to appropriately problematize issues they encounter in their teaching contexts, how can they hope to disrupt and potentially solve such problems? Logically, if agentially-aimed PD efforts are not enabling teachers to develop or enact agency within their teaching contexts, how can teachers become agents of social change within those contexts? More importantly, if PD frames teachers in an oppressive manner, how can teachers help uproot oppression in their own classrooms? These questions underscored the necessity of a critical framework that could enhance the discourse involving the relationship between teacher agency and PD.

Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* proposed that any system of oppression that projects its learning outcomes upon those it oppresses works to maintain oppression. He described this approach to instruction as the *banking concept of education*, through which "the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (Freire, 1970, p. 72). In applying his work to adult learners participating in PD, it

becomes clear that teachers (who in this context are the students) will remain oppressed when participating in any professional learning model which frames them as empty receptacles in need of knowledge. Referring to models of PD that follow the banking model that Freire (1970) described, Skerrett et al., (2018) asserted that “teachers are mandated to come together to engage with problems of practice, materials, resources, and solutions already identified for them by others” and that teachers are expected to accept this deposit of knowledge unquestioningly. (p. 121). Many traditional approaches to PD, and even some approaches that proclaim agentic aims perpetuate this oppressive treatment of teachers (Bevins et al., 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Gemedá et al., 2013; Little, 1993; Picower, 2015; Skerrett, et al., 2018).

### **Need for Repositioning of Teachers**

In discussing learners who are a part of the banking system, Freire (1970) argued that “the more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (p. 73). Freire (1970) articulated that “oppression is domesticating” and that resisting such domestication “can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (p. 51). He contended that only the praxis -a reflection that imbues action- has the potential to be transformative for those seeking liberation. Freire (1970) proposed that only a problem-posing approach to education that embraces the concept of praxis would liberate learners to take an active role in defining their world and ultimately regaining their humanity. As Morrell (2014) described, this is “a problem-posing pedagogy in which teachers and students learn from engaging in a mutually constitutive dialogue that emanates from real-world problems” (p. 209). Applying Freire’s (1970) theory to the field of professional learning invites teachers to question how particular approaches to PD position them and discourages them from blindly

accepting such positionality.

Little (1993) proposed that when it comes to PD, teachers need to be repositioned to cultivate their own agency on their own terms. Similarly, Wells and Mitchell (2016) advocated for an approach to PD that “would push back from deficit perspectives” and enable teachers to influence the decisions regarding their own learning (p. 36). As Freire (1970) explained, a common aspect of the banking approach is that the content of the learning is chosen for the learners, “and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it” (p. 73). This adaptation as it manifests itself in PD models (even if it is a reluctant adaptation) works as an oppressive system as it forces participating teachers to follow hierarchical mandates that may not be relevant to a teacher’s individual classroom concerns. Furthermore, resistance to such mandates embedded within this oppressive system requires agency that may not be easily obtained (Clark, 2016). This points to a need for more liberatory-aimed models of PD that help disrupt outsourced control over teacher learning decisions and instead empower teachers to take steps towards determining and fulfilling their own learning needs.

### **Need for Disruption of Dominant Thinking**

Research indicates that many school environments “are often antithetical to a vision of social justice education” (Picower, 2011, p. 1112). Picower (2013) also contended that many teachers may lack an awareness of the ways in which “education is a highly political field” (p. 170). As Milner and Laughter (2014) posited, “if teachers are not taught to critically examine power structures like race and poverty, the teachers are still learning something---possibly that it may not be essential for them to critique power structures in the world in order to change them” (p. 349). For justice-oriented researchers like Picower (2013), this lack of criticality is alarming



as she argued, “there is no realm of schooling unaffected by issues of power and control” (p. 171).

By not participating in approaches to PD that embrace a problem-posing model, Riordan et al. (2019) contended that for many teachers “the construct of race and other issues of equity can remain elusive” (p. 336). More than that, they argued that

too often professional learning does not develop from the informal question-asking teachers do in their own practice and even less often do teachers have experiences doing so in ways that situate issues of equity, power, institutional racism, and class at the center of professional learning” (Riordan et al., 2019, p. 340).

These findings further emphasize the need for PD that has overt critical aims both in its fostering of agency in teachers and its confronting of oppressive societal structures.

Flint, et al. (2011) highlighted the ways in which traditional approaches to PD “require teachers to uncritically implement” the strategies offered by experts delivering the program and that such approaches do not provide opportunities for “reflection, growth, and engagement” (p. 1167). Kohli et al. (2015) described such PD efforts as oppressive in that they fail to grant teachers the opportunity to reflect on their positionality much less act to change mindsets that may be inhibiting their learners. Accordingly, if teachers’ actions in a given context are perpetuating student inequities, but teachers are not critically considering the impact of such actions, oppression will reproduce itself (Fernández, 2019; Katsarou et al, 2010; Kohli, 2019; Riordan et al., 2019; Sacramento, 2019).

In her article, van Woerkom (2010) posited that critical reflection enables people to “become aware of the situation that is suppressing their autonomy” (p. 344). Similarly, van der Heijden et al. (2015) argued that for teachers to be considered change agents they must regularly

reflect on their practice. Morrell (2014) advocated for the importance of such reflection as he claimed that “having teachers unpack their beliefs is an important step in possibly transforming those beliefs” (p. 209). Buchanan (2015) proposed that PD should purposefully incorporate critical self-reflection with the aim of supporting teachers in their ability to push back against dominant discourses to potentially affect change in their teaching contexts. Fernández (2019) referred to this type of intentional reflection as *critical identity work*, and he contended that such work should empower educators to begin “critiquing conditions of schooling and countering hegemony” (p. 188). These studies indicate that if teachers are not afforded time and space to question their own identities, their own learning needs, or their own teaching ecologies, hopes of dismantling inequities or affecting any sustainable social change through PD would be unrealistic. Consequently, PD aimed at fostering both agency and criticality among educators could empower teachers to problematize their own positionality and perhaps help disrupt power structures that perpetuate marginalization within schools.

### **Liberatory Professional Development**

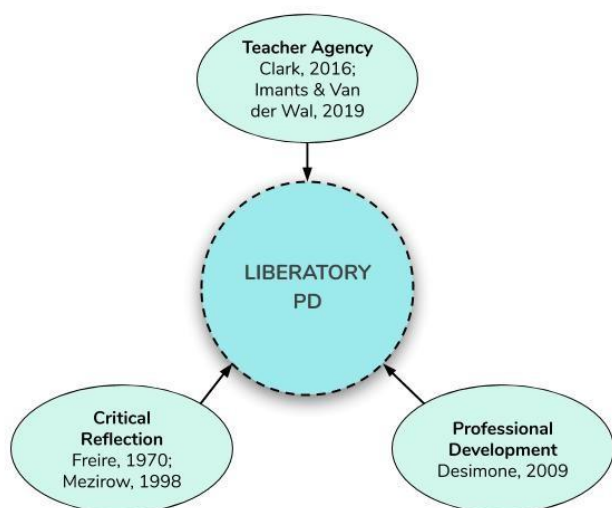
Applying Freire’s (1970) theory to this inquiry illuminated the need to develop and research PD efforts that have more overt liberatory aims. Such PD approaches would purposefully aim to liberate teachers to gain control over their professional growth by developing critically reflective habits that could hopefully lead to transformed teachers and as well as transformed classrooms. The goal in adopting a critical lens through which to conceptualize and potentially redefine PD in a more emancipatory manner would be to aid teachers in fostering greater agency that could empower them to become agents of change in their schools. To reach this goal, I propose an approach to PD rooted in Freire’s (1970) ideas about liberating the oppressed.

## Defining Liberatory PD

For the purposes of this study, the construct of *liberatory PD* will be defined as a critical approach to PD that prioritizes critical reflection aimed at transformation. The definition is purposefully descriptive as opposed to prescriptive so that it does not assume that liberation can be achieved through one specific approach. In this way, a PD endeavor need not look the same from teacher to teacher in order to be considered liberatory. This PD approach positions teachers as active participants in control of their own professional growth. From a theoretical perspective, liberatory PD repositions teachers in the sort of active, critically reflective roles for which Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1998) advocated, and it also aligns with the characteristics of agency that both Clark's (2016) construct and Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) model promoted.

Additionally, it embraces a broad understanding of what constitutes professional development as Desimone (2009) outlined. A visual representation of liberatory PD appears in Figure 1.

**Figure 1. Model of Liberatory Professional Development**



*Figure 1.* This model indicates the three major contributors (teacher agency, professional development, and critical reflection) as well as relevant research that influenced the proposal of liberatory PD as an alternative approach to teacher learning.

Models of liberatory PD would specifically seek to empower teachers in developing an understanding of their own agency and how that agency can be enacted in various teaching

contexts. Teachers participating in this type of PD would be self-directed learners who were free to investigate the problems they confronted in their own classrooms. In this way, teacher autonomy as it relates to the choice of PD content and design would also be an integral part of this approach to professional learning. In spite of its emphasis on individualized needs, this approach would not encourage teacher isolation; instead, it would create space for productive and meaningful collaborations to be pursued which may not be afforded or prioritized within other approaches to PD.

Teachers pursuing liberatory PD would no longer be beholden to an oppressive system that forces them to learn in a prescribed manner mandated by district, state, or national regulations. Instead, they would play an integral part in thoughtfully determining their own learning needs and defining the appropriate means for obtaining that knowledge. As it seeks to promote both agency and criticality among teachers, its format would be purposefully adjusted to meet the needs of particular learners situated in particular teaching contexts. Such an approach to PD has emancipatory aims for both teachers and students alike as it encourages teachers to problematize their own positionality and in doing so perhaps disrupt power structures that perpetuate marginalization within schools.

### **Redefining the Search Parameters**

At this point, another literature search was conducted to locate examples of teacher learning experiences that were more emancipatory in their design or delivery. With this concept of liberation in mind, a search for PD approaches that sought to confront and disrupt the traditional framing of teachers but also empowered teachers to help confront and disrupt power dynamics within their classrooms was conducted. This involved searching for PD models that specifically prioritized critical reflection aimed at transformative growth (Mezirow, 1998),

included design elements that aligned with Clark's (2016) definition of teacher agency and the characteristics of agentic PD delineated in Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) model, and supported a broader interpretation of what counts as PD that aligned with Desimone's (2009) description. In particular, the literature search involved looking for studies in which teachers were repositioned to critically reflect on their own learning needs and pursue PD efforts tailored to meeting those needs. Adding the phrase "critical reflection" to the list of initial search terms generated only 10 articles in *ProQuest*. A few useful studies were chosen from this initial search, but then multiple reference lists were reviewed in search of titles that seemed pertinent to this inquiry. This stage of the research was much less linear than the previous one. Whether it was classmates who shared articles or extensive searches through multiple databases, this phase in the literature search took on a much more iterative approach.

### **Possibilities of Liberatory PD**

The following section includes an overview of PD approaches that offered participants greater liberty to pursue individualized professional learning and develop greater agency simultaneously. In spite of their limitations, these studies offer starting points for the creation of more liberatory PD approaches that would allow teachers to develop greater agency through which they could confront their classrooms and school contexts more critically.

#### ***Liberating Teachers through Collaborative PD***

Research has affirmed the need to encourage interaction among educators in order for them to develop greater agency (Biesta et al., 2015; Biesta et al., 2017; Buchanan, 2015; Kelly, 2006; Lee et al., 2007; Robinson, 2012; Strahan, 2016). The following section provides a review of PD designs that liberate teachers to work collaboratively to both define and pursue their own learning needs.

**Purposeful dialogue.** Charteris (2016) presented dialogic feedback as an approach to PD that allowed teachers to consider their own teaching practices more thoughtfully. By discussing and reflectively examining student data together, teachers that Charteris (2016) studied were able to determine and “drive the direction of their professional learning” (p. 290). Prioritizing teacher discourse in this way empowered teachers to act in a more agentic manner by giving teachers the opportunity to determine both their students’ learning needs as well as their own (Charteris, 2016). Although it does reframe teachers, carrying out a PD effort like this could become more liberatory if it purposefully sought to examine data in hopes of identifying inequities and generating ideas for combatting these inequities.

Wells and Mitchell (2016) also presented a dialogic approach to PD they helped initiate through their role as literacy leaders. Contending that traditional approaches “only perpetuate the closed-door teaching mentality that finds teachers going back to their classrooms, closing the door, and teaching without being disturbed—and without the possibility of change” (p. 36), they sought to pursue an alternative approach to PD when faced with supporting the adoption of a state-mandated reading initiative. They worked alongside teachers to shape how PD was defined and pursued. This manifested itself in a range of activities such as small group conversations, scholarly readings, blog posts, coaching partnerships, individualized goal setting, reflective discussions, and even a restructuring of whole-group PD that encouraged shared power and participation. With dialogue as the common thread among all of these activities, they found that their PD approach helped the teachers involved begin to transform their teaching contexts. Their flexible and dialogue-centered PD approach aligns with a liberatory approach to PD that specifically repositions teachers to be knowledge producers involved in conversations that help empower educators to reflectively and collaboratively problematize their learning environments.

**University Partnerships.** Hooley's (2013) "praxis inquiry model (PIP)" offered a PD model that pointed to the value of both reflective practice and partnerships between the university, the school, and the community (p. 126). Hooley (2013) contended that teachers must create opportunities to disassemble "structural and intellectual roadblocks so that historical and cultural epistemologies can flourish rather than be denied in classrooms" and that this sort of critical knowledge production results from "dialogue amongst the people" (p. 130). Such a stance implied that the structures that reproduce inequality in our schools cannot be dismantled if they are never discussed by the teachers that are embedded within such structures. As Hooley (2013) explored in his article, the possibilities and alternatives that could emerge from a critical praxis approach to PD have the potential to disrupt the power structures that perpetuate inequity; this approach aligned with Freire's (1970) claim that "liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). In their narrative account, Katsarou et al. (2010) similarly advocated for strong and intentional partnerships between universities and K-12 school districts, arguing that a teacher candidate's development and potentiality may be constrained without prioritizing these collaborative relationships.

Serving in part as the group's facilitator, Picower (2011), a university professor, examined how a critical inquiry project (CIP) assisted new teachers in staying true to their desires to teach for social justice. Although the program was not a formalized PD, she found that it did provide "a safe haven" that supported the novice teachers in resisting compliance with neoliberal policies that ran counter to their social justice pedagogies (Picower, 2011, p. 1112). These examples are indicative of the ways in which collaborative partnerships with universities could support secondary educators in becoming more agentic within their teaching contexts.

**Coaching Models.** Wall and Palmer (2015) described how their rethinking of an

instructional coach's role and purpose helped coaches "learn to share their knowledge in a way that empowers teachers to critically problem-solve their own classroom circumstances" (p. 634). To liberate teachers, they adjusted their PD model to closely align with the tenets of Freire's (1970) dialogical approach during interactions between coaches and teachers. By repositioning the teachers as equals working with instead of under coaches, Wall and Palmer (2015) found that teachers were empowered towards self-actualization that helped strengthen their instruction. In a similar study, Patti et al. (2012) articulated the value of a personalized approach to PD involving six reflective sessions with the support of a trained coach. The coach served as a resource, but the teachers themselves decided the focus of their reflective sessions. The authors concluded that "reflecting on one's purpose and professional vision lays the foundation for the transformational process" and that undergoing such efforts can lead educators to "positively impact the culture and climate of the classroom and school" (Patti et al., 2012, p. 270). These studies also aligned with Kennedy's (2016) finding that PD programs involving coaches were more effective when the coach adopted a collaborative role.

**Learning Communities.** Skerrett and Williamson (2015) conducted a qualitative study that sought to determine how preservice teachers interacted with professional communities as they sought to become agents of change for social justice in urban school settings. They found that in the midst of these experiences participants became "increasingly adept at one or more of the following practices: critically analyzing, engaging, creating, and/or transforming their professional communities to achieve greater justice in urban education" (Skerrett & Williamson, 2015, p. 590). Their study exemplified the ways in which PD could be approached more flexibly and creatively; the authors posited that reframing teacher preparation programs as professional communities might help "discover ways to foster in preservice teachers' knowledge, agency, and



practices that advance social justice in urban education” (Skerrett & Williamson, 2015, p. 596).

Dover et al. (2019) offered the results of the faculty learning community they created in order to support and sustain the work of critical, social justice-focused educators at their university. They found that participation “increased members’ sense of efficacy and authenticity as social justice educators” (p. 6). Similarly, Riveros et al. (2012) advocated for professional learning communities as a means to transformative PD. They argued that such an approach empowers teachers to “exercise their agency in the school setting” among other benefits (p. 205). Skerrett et al. (2018) also identified that because professional learning communities encouraged “teachers’ ownership, empowerment, and agency in relation to their joint work,” they promoted teacher growth (p. 119).

Navarro (2018) presented critical inquiry groups as an alternative approach to PD that could specifically provide “a departure from NCLB reform that employs top-down, technocratic and assessment-driven teacher training” (p. 339). The members of this group met monthly and shared the responsibilities of both leading the group and determining its design. Rooted in Freire’s (1970) ideas about the liberatory potential of praxis, participants in this teacher-led group engaged with critical texts, presented curriculum focused on social justice, and developed personal action plans. Navarro (2018) reported that this PD “provided an intimate space for teachers to discuss the progress of their pedagogical goals, provide support and hold one another accountable” (p. 345). Of particular note to this literature review is the participant in Navarro’s (2018) study who indicated that participation in this collaborative PD effort was the only space where he felt he was treated as an “intellectual professional” (p. 347). Participants also discussed feeling safe to develop as social justice educators within this collaborative space (p.351). In his conclusion, Navarro (2018) argues that there is a “need to re-configure professional development

as a horizontal model that will centre the voices and needs of teacher practitioners” (p. 354). This liberatory approach to PD emphasized the ways in which collaboration can support growth among educators, especially those educators seeking to promote social justice in their classrooms.

### ***Liberating Teachers through Critically Reflective PD***

As previously noted, critical reflection can empower teachers to potentially transform their classrooms and their teaching contexts (Campbell, 2019; Freire, 1970; Kennedy, 2016; Mezirow, 1998; van Woerkom, 2010). Additionally, the literature on critical reflection emphasizes the value of reflecting collaboratively (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1998). For example, Sacramento’s (2019) investigation of a teacher-led PD found that creating a collaborative space for reflection “provided teachers with the opportunity to imagine the possibilities for change in students, theorize concepts, discuss issues in the classroom, and conduct deep identity work” (p.172). The literature recounted various ways that such reflection could be incorporated into PD designs. A few of these PD approaches that attempt to liberate teachers by specifically prioritizing critical reflection are included in the section that follows.

**Critical Case Studies.** Dover et al. (2018) presented their article as a tool that could be used as a means for professional development for educators who are seeking to advance social justice initiatives. Their work provided a series of critical case studies, each of which underscores a dilemma that teacher educators might encounter amidst the current teaching climate. Cases were followed by discussion questions that invited readers to consider the dilemma of practice from various lenses. The authors described their publication as “a critical act of hope” intended to promote reflection that would enable readers to “grapple with the complexities of a visionary path forward” (Dover et al., 2018, p. 231).

Additionally, Dover et al. (2018) disclosed that their exclusion of suggested responses to each dilemma was purposeful in that it could “support readers in using these cases as springboard for locally resonant professional learning” (p. 232). Although the dilemmas of practice presented by Dover et al. (2018) are somewhat specific to teacher educators working in higher education, an approach to professional learning such as this could easily be tailored to other contexts. Whether teachers were tasked with crafting their own critical case studies or invited to discuss case studies relevant to their teaching contexts alongside colleagues, this approach to professional development could promote greater agency as Clark (2015) defined it.

**Genre Reflections.** Margolis (2002) shared the impact of having student teachers craft and share “genre reflections” (p. 214). He described that these compositions “aim to develop new teachers’ capacities to observe and responsively act” within their specific teaching contexts (Margolis, 2002, p. 214). Margolis (2002) shared that the productive discourse that occurs as teachers in training share their personal work with a public audience makes them “better able to move from release, to reflection, to contemplation, to change” (p. 216). These required genre reflections empowered the student teachers to develop the self-awareness that Clark (2016) articulated is an essential ingredient of agency. Margolis (2002) concluded his article by proposing the potential of in-service teachers engaging in genre reflections as a PD project or even incorporating genre reflections into action research projects; he defended the value of this reflective tool and offered that their ability to “make teachers more conscious” could be transformative for both teachers and students alike (p. 220).

**Recorded Lesson Reflections.** Hollingsworth and Clarke (2017) conducted a qualitative study that looked at using video recordings of lessons to stimulate teacher reflection and provide meaningful feedback to practitioners. They first developed a research-based classroom

observation framework and then conducted a focus group involving 16 teachers to help refine this observation tool. Participating teachers chose two foci from the observation tool, they selected the lessons and dates for recording to take place, and they led the feedback and reflection conversations. After this process concluded, the researchers conducted interviews to determine how this process was perceived by the participating teachers.

Hollingsworth and Clarke's (2017) results indicated that participating teachers found the process meaningful because it provided specific feedback on a self-selected area of practice, it stimulated reflection and conversation about their instruction, it enabled them to consider ways to change their future practice, and it prompted a greater sense of ownership over their professional growth. Their study only involved two willing math teachers, but the design features could easily be replicated or even adapted to assess the PD's effectiveness among an entire department, staff, or even district.

Hollingsworth and Clarke (2017) proposed that video recordings offer a unique opportunity to collect data that is more subtle and contextualized, as it can support teacher reflection more effectively than other research tools. In particular, they noted its propensity to "render visible... unnoticed practices" and argued it could encourage the "development among the teaching community of a new vocabulary by which we might describe teaching practice" (p. 458). Beyond discussing the benefit of having teachers record and reflect on their own lessons, Hollingsworth and Clarke (2017) also discussed the ways in which recorded lesson could be used as case-based teaching tools for both preservice teachers as well as practicing teachers.

### ***Liberating Teachers through Autonomous PD***

Throughout this inquiry, the need for teachers to have greater autonomy over their learning was underscored. Studies indicated that it was often the element of agency that was

most challenging for teachers to develop (Gemedda et al., 2013; Kennedy, 2016; King & Nomikou, 2018). Teacher autonomy often stands in direct contradiction to district mandates (Ball, 2003; Buchanan, 2015; Campbell, 2019; Lasky, 2005; Robinson, 2012), so its exclusion from PD models can serve to oppress teachers. Although PD models that specifically prioritize teacher autonomy are less prolific, a discussion of more autonomous approaches and their implications for a more liberatory PD are detailed below.

**Self-designed Learning.** Strahan (2016) recently investigated the effects of a self-directed PD that took place in a small urban school district. To complete the year-long PD, the teachers “identified their own personal goals for improving instruction, designed plans of action, and assessed results” (p. 667). This was best illustrated by one teacher participant who sought growth in the area of classroom management. After attending seminars, completing focused readings, and participating in meetings with a counselor and parent from her school, the teacher helped to design an observation tool that allowed her colleagues to observe her efforts and supply feedback for further improvement. This teacher then spearheaded an effort to share what she had learned with eight other educators in her building. By having the participants assess their own development, this PD approach embedded aspects of reflection and autonomy directly into the program. Adjusting the aims of such assessment to be more critical in nature could allow this program to become even more liberatory.

Martinez et al. (2016) highlighted the benefits experienced by a group of educators in Los Angeles who sought to create their own PD that would provide them with the space and freedom to “develop decolonizing pedagogies” alongside other critical educators (p. 305). Developed in part because they felt their school-mandated PD failed to address issues they were facing within their urban teaching contexts, this group of educators started a teacher inquiry group known as

People's Ed. One explicit goal of the organization was described as aiming "to interrogate the tension between the process of schooling and the role teachers play in reproducing the status quo" (Martinez et al., 2016, p. 305). As such, their autonomous efforts were also founded on the importance of collaboration and critical reflection.

The results indicated that through their participation in this teacher-developed and teacher-centered PD effort, participants were able to establish a sense of solidarity with other educators that helped them survive and even begin to thrive as critical practitioners. This solidarity helped the teachers feel less alienated and for some teachers even provided "feelings of agency and relief" (Martinez et al., 2016, p. 306). The researchers contended that "having a space that allows members to make sense of their sociopolitical realities can be meaningful for some teachers who want to understand the inequities they see in their schools" (p. 309). They also acknowledged that such a space may stand in direct contrast to the way teachers are traditionally treated as it relates to their PD experiences. As Martinez et al. (2016) asserted in their discussion, there is a need to enable "autonomous spaces for teachers to engage in practices that allow them to (re)connect with one another" as their inquiry illuminated the ways "teachers draw from each other as they think, learn, and grow in spaces that are humanizing" and how this collaborative space "provided a foundation to build up their capacity to develop pedagogical practices that challenge current structures of schooling. (p. 311). Their findings provided evidence of how productive PD initiatives that encourage teacher autonomy can be, in this case, especially for critical educators.

**Action Research.** Garcia and Garcia (2016) shared the results of a participatory action research project that empowered high school students to build cultural pride as well as experience academic success through a teacher's decision to design a more culturally relevant

curriculum. As Garcia and Garcia (2016) defended in their conclusion, through “advocating for critical reflection on practice... action research promotes the notion of teacher empowerment” (p. 191). Their article highlighted how teachers can enact agency through taking autonomous steps to adjust curriculum and conduct action research that directly resonates with their student populations. By aligning her curriculum decisions with her intention to promote greater cultural pride in her students, the teacher in this study enacted the very “productive agency” that Clark (2016) argued is essential; the teacher’s interrogation of her context helped her to “redefine normalized practices” related to curriculum choices, and the transformation empowered both the teacher as well as her learners (p. 8).

Likewise, Picower (2015) delineated the benefits of Inquiry to Action Groups (ItAGs) that were spearheaded by members of social justice educators who belonged to the New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE). These ItAGs involved participants who co-constructed their own learning experiences by not only helping determine the topic of inquiry, but also the direction of the inquiry. In her findings, Picower (2015) found that participation in these groups enabled teachers to “become more aware of their own power as educators, which developed their ability to enact their role as social justice educators both inside and outside of the classroom” (p. 12). The researcher’s analysis also revealed that this more autonomous approach to teacher PD had emotional, intellectual, and professional benefits (Picower, 2015).

### **Theoretical Tools for Analyzing Liberatory PD**

A review of the literature also revealed theoretical tools that could support analysis of liberatory PD efforts. As these theoretical tools emphasize the importance of agency within models of PD, they align with some of the key elements of liberatory PD. The following section

provides an overview of these tools and considers their applicability for future research.

### ***A Critical Theory of PD***

A promising theoretical development in recent literature is a PD model theorized by Kohli et al. (2015). Building on Freire's (1970) work, Kohli, et al. (2015) defined traditional approaches to PD as *antidialogical professional development* (APD) and proposed a model of *critical professional development* (CPD) that “develops teachers’ critical consciousness by focusing their efforts towards liberatory teaching” (p. 9). They proposed that APD positions teachers as passive recipients of knowledge and focuses on “compliance rather than change”, and that it fails to offer teachers the opportunity to reflect on their own positionality and how that may impact their students; in this way, they argued that APD may be perpetuating instead of disrupting domination and division in schools as it tends to “ignor[e] broader historical or institutional injustices” (Kohli et al., 2015, p. 10).

Kohli et al. (2015) described how CPD aligns with Freire's (1970) proposal that dialogic action offers a means to liberation as it “engages teachers in political analysis of their role as educators in the reproduction or resistance of inequity” (p. 11). In their description of CPD, Dover et al. (2019) explained it as “self-led, strategic, social justice-oriented professional learning” (p. 3). In a more recent article, Kohli (2019) defends that CPD “offers educators agency in their own development and affords space for complex reflections on their role in the reproduction or resistance of inequality” (p. 41). Kohli et al.'s (2015) CPD model highlights the need for PD that prompts both agency and criticality.

The importance of such a PD model is underscored by other studies that have revealed how challenging it can be for justice-oriented teachers to put critical theories into action without agency (Burke & Collier, 2016; Clark, 2016; Koonce, 2018; Mette et al., 2016; Sacramento,



2019; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015). Kohli et al. (2015) acknowledged the current limitations of CPD, though, noting that while it “exists in the US in various formats... it often emerges as a grassroots response to the banking methods and technical content of APD” (p. 21-22). In a more recent article, Sacramento (2019) also noted that CPD “exists primarily at the grassroots level” (p. 169). Recent research conducted by Fernández (2019) similarly highlights that forms of professional development with critical aims which “offer a decolonizing alternative” (p. 187) are often confined to organizations and groups that exist separately from the formal structures of schooling. In their introduction of CPD, Kohli et al. (2015) referenced this limitation and advocated for future research efforts “to follow teachers who attend CPD into the classroom to see how it actually impacts teaching and learning” (p. 22).

### ***A Model of Teacher Agency for Social Justice***

Pantić’s (2015) recent work provided an additional theoretical lens that could work in tandem with Kohli et al.’s (2015) model of CPD. Pantić (2015) responded to the “lack of conceptual clarity about the nature and purpose of teacher agency and change,” by developing a model of teacher agency that delineated social justice as “the desired direction of teacher agency” (p. 760). Her aim in developing this model was to provide units of analysis that could be used to conduct empirical research to examine the ways teachers engaged “in practices aimed at transforming the situations of exclusion and underachievement of some learners” (p. 760).

Drawing on Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration and Archer’s (2000) theory of relational agency, Pantić (2015) developed a theoretical model for agency with the help of 12 teacher representatives over the course of a year. In this way, the model for teacher agency itself was shaped by teachers and relevant stakeholders. At the conclusion of this iterative process, Pantić (2015) proposed four components that influence teacher agency for social justice. In her

more recent study, Pantić (2017) described:

In this model teacher agency is constituted by their *sense of purpose* (belief that a certain practice is worthwhile for achieving a certain outcome), *competence* (knowing how to influence a desired outcome in practice, scope of *autonomy* (power to make a difference within given structural environments) and *reflexivity* (a capacity to monitor and evaluate one's actions and structural contexts) (p. 220).

As Pantić (2015) explicitly discussed the model's utility for conducting research that could deepen our understanding of teachers as agents of social justice and inform professional development in support of agentic educators, its application to the design or study of liberatory PD could be generative. As she posited, "agency depends on structures and cultures which can either foster or suspend it, but also contributes to their transformation or reproduction over time" (Pantić, 2015, p. 763).

### **Synthesis of Findings Related to Liberatory PD**

Each of the studies reviewed in the previous section could inform both theory and practice. Collectively, they build a foundation for the investigation of liberatory PD models that empower teachers to develop the type of agency that Clark (2016) described as having the ability to help a teacher understand that his or her "purpose for teaching is not static, and is instead something to be achieved in context" (p. 8).

Approaches could be combined or restructured to become even more liberatory for teachers. For example, self-directed learning might involve dialogic feedback that could generate action research. Just the same, any of these approaches in isolation or in combination could be analyzed using the theoretical frameworks presented by either Kohli et al. (2015) or Pantić (2015). Overall, the focus of any inquiry into liberatory PD's utility, then, would be the ends and

not the means.

### **Current Limitations of Liberatory PD**

In considering the implications of literature reviewed, some limitations of the studies should be noted. For one, many of the potentially emancipatory approaches to PD examined were not large-scale efforts supported within or across school districts (Charteris, 2016; Garcia & Garcia, 2016; Hollingsworth & Clarke, 2017; Martinez et al., 2016; Navarro, 2018; Picower, 2015; Sacramento, 2019; Strahan, 2016). Often, they were examples of efforts to reshape and reframe approaches to preservice training that were not longitudinal in design (Dover et al., 2018; Dover et al., 2019; Hooley, 2013; Katsarou et al., 2010; Margolis, 2002; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015; Strahan, 2016). Also, with so many being qualitative studies, it becomes challenging to make claims about their effectiveness across contexts. Many of the PD opportunities that have been examined qualitatively have involved teachers who have willingly volunteered based on a vested interest in the program which certainly affects their impact. In this way, the qualitative inquiries recounted here may not represent a broad range of viewpoints.

### **Discussion and Implications of the Literature**

In synthesizing this review of the literature, the need for teachers to develop the kinds of agency that would allow them to foster greater autonomy over their professional growth was underscored (Clark, 2016; Imants & Van der Wal, 2019). In addition, the need for a more liberatory approach to PD that would specifically encourage critical reflection aimed at uprooting injustice was highlighted (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1998).

### **The Challenge of Developing Teacher Agency**

For one, the literature revealed that teachers find it difficult to enact their agency in transformative ways and on their own terms (Burke & Collier, 2016; Hardy, 2009; Mette et al.,

2016). Even teachers who seemed to possess clear intentions and a strong sense of their purpose seemed limited in their ability to put their agency to work (Hardy, 2009; King & Nomikou, 2018). In this way, the question that emerged was not whether teachers possessed agency, but rather how they were being encouraged to use their agency in transformative ways. The studies of agentic PD also called into question the ways in which PD programs could better position teachers to act and potentially transform their teaching contexts.

### **Need for Foundational Understanding of Teacher Agency**

Another finding that emerged from this literature review was the proposal that agency is not something teachers should wait to develop once they have their own classrooms (Biesta et al., 2017; Clark, 2016; Hooley, 2013; Margolis, 2002; Skerrett & Williamson, 2015; Skerrett et al., 2018); instead, the work to foster a deeper and more nuanced understanding of agency should begin during training and continue to evolve and develop over a teacher's career (Campbell, 2019; Picower, 2013; Woollen & Otto, 2013). Campbell (2019) posited that teachers need “to have a strong sense of their own identity and their own role as an unfolding, always developing professional engaged in a process of learning about teaching” (p. 36).

Researchers indicated that these efforts should begin at the outset of teacher preparation programs, and opportunities to enact agency should be embedded in program designs, as this could support educators in their eventual teaching contexts. Skerrett et al. (2018) proposed that novice teachers must cultivate agency that will allow them to clarify their needs as it relates to their professional growth, and that their agency should empower them to even “suggest and initiate alternative designs for their professional learning” if necessary (p. 142). In a similar discussion specifically focused on teacher activism, Picower (2012) argued that not only should teacher preparation programs “help candidates develop a political analysis of systems of

oppression” (p. 573), but that these programs should empower future teachers with the skills and confidence that they need to be able to take active steps towards uprooting the oppression they come to acknowledge within school systems. Some of these studies indicated that developing such capacity for decision-making as Clark (2016) encouraged, especially in a neo-liberal context that involves structures that limit such capacity, will require both time and creativity (King & Nomikou, 2018; Picower, 2011; Woollen & Otto, 2013).

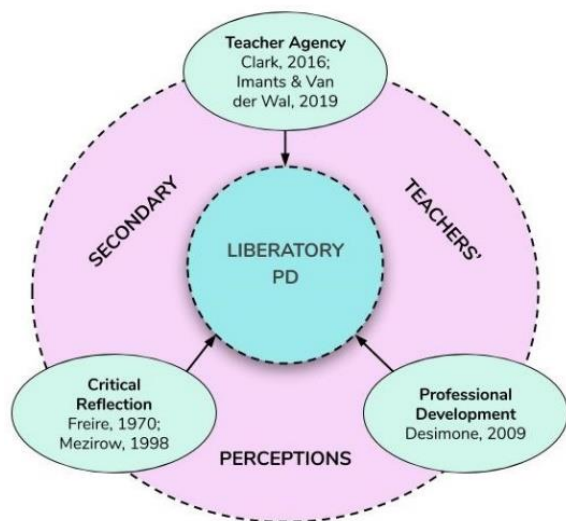
### **Gaps in Understanding**

This review revealed that research efforts offering credible evidence of PD’s effectiveness at the high school level are lacking (Guskey & Yoon, 2009; Yoon et al., 2007), and this is further evidenced by how many studies were focused on higher ed contexts (Hooley, 2013; Margolis, 2002; Skerret & Williamson, 2015; Strahan, 2016). Although some studies have looked at PD interventions within secondary contexts (Mette et al., 2016), very few studies have sought out secondary teachers’ perceptions regarding their own PD needs. This need for understanding more about teachers’ perceptions has been highlighted in other studies (Wolf & Peele, 2019). As Buchanan (2015) indicated in her study, how teacher identity interacted with school context had an impact on teacher agency, which “makes school sites an important location for both investigating and developing teacher agency” (p. 714).

As such, this review highlighted the need for research aimed at determining how secondary teachers themselves assess the utility of liberatory PD. One of the chief drawbacks highlighted in this review is that much of the PD secondary teachers experience places them in a passive role. Consequently, this study’s design aims to eliminate such passivity. As opposed to a study that implements a form of liberatory PD at a particular site and then collects data on its impact, this study places the teachers in an active role of defining their own perceptions of

liberatory PD. Understanding teachers' perceptions would be essential in determining both the utility and the potentiality of this approach to PD. Figure 2 presents a model of the what the study would seek to understand.

**Figure 2. Model for Study of Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Liberatory PD**



*Figure 2.* This literature review indicates a need for understanding how liberatory PD might be perceived by teachers working in the secondary school context. A need for a study of secondary teachers' perceptions of liberatory PD is represented by additional the circle surrounding the original graphic.

Some of the questions such an inquiry might set out to determine regarding secondary teachers' perceptions include: Do they believe it will enhance their agency? What benefits do they identify in adopting such an approach in their school setting? What drawbacks? How do they assess its potential effectiveness in their district?

### **Summary of Literature Review**

This review, conducted from the perspective of Clark's (2016) theory of agency as well as Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) model of agency for PD, indicates a need for PD to become more individualized as it pertains to the learning needs of teachers and their particular teaching contexts. As agentic PD was not enough to truly empower teachers to become agents of change, the need for a more liberatory approach to PD was underscored (Freire, 1970). Reimagining PD to

become more personalized by tailoring it to an individual's learning needs seems possible, cost-effective, and more than that, necessary (Rehm & Notten, 2016; Yoon, et al., 2017). On the other hand, it requires a disruption of power and a promotion of teacher agency that goes against the very framing of the profession as it relates to societal norms (Martinez et al., 2016). Such a shift, though, as Yoon et al. (2017) posited, may have liberatory results for teachers as well as students.

As Gameda et al. (2013) asserted, it is “imperative to abandon the deficit approach that considers teachers as passive recipients of information” (p. 84). From a Freirian (1970) perspective, this deficit framing may serve as a blockade that keeps teachers from obtaining liberation from the very structures that may work to constrain student equity. Considering the literature through this lens highlighted the need for more liberatory models of PD that would overtly encourage teachers to consider how their own learning might be constrained by oppressive structures. If PD efforts fail to equip teachers with greater capacity to make decisions that are not rooted in compliance, and without fostering this capacity to confront and deviate from the dominant discourse, it is reasonable to consider the ways in which student inequities will persist (Fernández, 2019; Kohli et al., 2015).

As this literature review was founded on the concept of teacher agency, the question remains: how do secondary teachers respond to the concept of liberatory PD? And more importantly, do they perceive that liberatory PD would lead to liberatory classrooms? Kennedy (2016) identified in her review of the literature that pursuing such an understanding necessitates gaining insight as to “whether programs are meaningful to teachers themselves” (p. 974). Thus, the secondary teacher's perspective would need to be prioritized in any such research pursuit.

Such an inquiry could seek to answer any of the following questions: In what ways do

liberatory models of PD foster teacher agency? Do models of liberatory PD exist in the secondary school context, and if so, how do secondary teachers perceive their effectiveness? From a secondary teacher's perspective, what could district-wide liberatory PD initiatives look like? Which aspects of liberatory PD seem accessible within the secondary school context? Which, if any, aspects of liberatory PD prove challenging for secondary teachers to enact? How might liberatory PD foster both agency and criticality among secondary teachers?

These questions foreground the study design proposed in chapter three. Overall, this literature review underscored the need for research that attempts to develop a deeper understanding of secondary teachers' perceptions regarding the potentiality of liberatory PD.



### **CHAPTER THREE: Methodology**

This chapter will provide a detailed description of this study's qualitative design. This will include an explanation for how participants were selected, what measures were used to collect data, the techniques used to analyze the data, as well as a review of the strategies employed to increase this study's trustworthiness. Before providing justification for each aspect of my methodology, I will provide a description of how my positionality and epistemology informed such decisions.

#### **Researcher Positionality**

Towards the middle of my eleventh year as a high school educator, I felt stagnant. This feeling, though, stood in stark contrast to my passion for the vocation. I loved teaching. It energized me. I stayed up late at night contemplating lesson designs and reflecting on my instructional decisions. Although I had no desire to change careers or leave the classroom, I could not shake the feeling that I had been stuck in a holding pattern as it related to my professional growth. And this was not for lack of effort on my part.

I pursued as many meaningful professional development opportunities as I could afford in my first ten years of teaching. I took part in a six-week long summer institute hosted by the Eastern Virginia Writing Project. I attended two out-of-state summer conferences hosted by the National Conference of Teachers of English (NCTE) and the International Federation for the Teaching of English (IFTE) Conference respectively. I audited a three-week long modern literature course at the University of Edinburgh. To participate in these PD efforts, I had completed applications, applied for scholarships, and saved money for registration fees all in hopes of refining my craft. These transformative PD opportunities had spurred me on to grow in my craft and deeply consider the implications of my pedagogical choices, but they had all

happened on my own time and on my own dime. They had not taken place alongside colleagues or even within the context of my school settings. More than that, their design, content, and even delivery were quite opposite of the mandated PD experiences I was having to attend at my school. This troubled me.

### **Searching for Solutions**

In working with more than 2000 students over the course of a decade, I had taken notice of recurrent problems in my classroom for which I struggled to find answers. And like I imagine many teachers in my position have experienced, my options for pursuing solutions felt limited. My required on-site PD hours were typically filled with prescribed learning that had been predetermined for me; any voice of dissent that I or my colleagues attempted to voice was met with contempt, frustration, or disregard from those leading the programs. The reaction among my colleagues was a mixture of defeat, compliance, and apathy. Across the four school settings in which I had worked, there existed a clear absence of space in which teachers could safely probe and contemplate classroom concerns alongside fellow educators. This raised a series of questions. Were other secondary teachers feeling stagnant like me? Were others on staff wanting PD that would offer them the ability to personalize their learning to better fit their classroom needs? Could I potentially lead efforts on this front?

After sharing my concerns with trusted colleagues, I felt limited in my ability to affect change from my position. In our discussions, fellow teachers expressed similar feelings of frustration, but our conversations seemed to amplify our collective inability to impact our circumstances. The general consensus was that unless I pursued an administrative position, my voice would have minimal effect. This is what led me to much of the research that foregrounds my proposed inquiry. I wanted to determine the ways in which PD could empower teachers who,

like me, wanted to empower themselves and their students from inside the classroom as opposed to outside of it. I wanted to conduct research that could provide insight as to how I could support secondary teachers who faced the same struggle: stuck, but not wanting to leave the profession; frustrated, but unsure how to push back against dominant structures; defeated, but uncertain as how to affect change.

### **Acknowledging my Idealism**

My desire to grow in my craft has only strengthened with time. I believe that most teachers similarly want to become excellent educators who experience continual improvement over the course of their careers. This idealism gives me the sense that PD can undergo a transformation to become more effective when teachers are involved in the process of changing it. To some degree, my project originated from a hypothesis that if teachers had greater agency over their learning, more socially just classrooms could emerge. Part of my goal in being transparent about my feelings regarding PD at this stage of the inquiry is to follow Finlay's (2002) suggestion that researchers should "examine their motivations, assumptions, and interests in the research as a precursor to identifying forces that might skew the research in particular directions (p. 536). To consider the possibilities of this inquiry reflectively from the onset of this project, I must acknowledge that not all teachers may share this perspective.

After reflecting on the findings indicated in the review of literature, I find myself equal parts discouraged and optimistic. As someone who is interested in disrupting domination as it relates to PD approaches, I was disheartened to discover that even well-intentioned, agentically-aimed PD can present educators with constraints that prevent progress. I cannot help but wonder how even liberatory PD approaches to PD may involve barriers that teachers find challenging to overcome. More than that, how might these barriers be perceived by teachers who do not share

my perspective? Teachers who may either be resistant or unaware of the structures in need of disruption might find my proposal of liberatory PD unnecessary or even offensive. Some participants may see liberatory PD as an optimistic concept as opposed to a realistic possibility. There may be teachers who are specifically resistant to the idea that PD needs to have more agentic and more critical aims. Admittedly, my hope is that this resistance might be rooted in a belief that such PD would not be plausible in the current accountability context as opposed to a belief that such PD lacks utility or value.

In my own experiences with PD, I have found that the teachers who were most resistant to PD expressed discontent with initiatives that treated them passively and gave them limited autonomy. I am hopeful that if teachers, even resistant teachers, could experience a different approach to PD- one that recognizes them as knowledge producers- they might finally be liberated to pursue PD that can result in more equitable student outcomes. My outlook is that if PD itself was restructured and reframed to position teachers as actors problematizing their own classrooms, resistance to PD would be overshadowed by a newfound sense of inquiry and imagination. In this way, my optimism leads me to believe that if there is a shift in the way teachers think about PD, their engagement with it and their response to it may shift as well. Just the same, though, my goal in conducting this study is to determine how my *participants* perceive PD, so it will be essential to craft a research design that searches to discover and consider *their* views as opposed to searching out confirmation of my own (McMillan, 2016).

### **Epistemological Perspective**

While this qualitative inquiry did not follow a perfectly predetermined series of steps, it maintained a continually evolving structure that attempted to respond and adapt to the data as it was collected. This inquiry, then, adhered to Maxwell's (2013) suggestion that the researcher

“construct and reconstruct” the research design throughout the entire project (p. 3). As an important part of this iterative process, Maxwell (2013) argued for researchers to make transparent all aspects of the research design and to explicitly “get it out in the open where its strengths, limitations, and consequences can be clearly understood” (p. 3). A researcher’s commitment to transparency “can help to clarify issues of research design” (Gray, 2014, p. 20), and even make evident the motivations for design decisions, so this chapter continues with a clear explanation of my epistemological perspective.

### *Constructivist Approach*

First and foremost, this inquiry aligns with beliefs about reality that are rooted in a constructivist approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study is centered on the belief that human knowledge is “created by the subject’s interactions with the world” and that meaning is constructed as opposed to “discovered” (Gray, 2014, p. 20). From this perspective, participants of a study are reframed as “co-collaborators” whom researchers “seek to learn to talk with, to empower, to transform, and to empathize” (Bochner, 2018, p. 363).

Constructivists contend that because inquiry entails human interactions it also entails human values (Lincoln, 2005). This orientation enables the same phenomenon to elicit multiple meanings. As Gray (2014) explained it, this means that “multiple, contradictory but equally valid accounts of the world can exist” (p. 20). Thus, constructivism embraces multiple realities in a way that an objectivist perspective does not. The constructivist seeks to unearth value positions of participants as a main aim of inquiry. My research will not seek to locate one single or collective truth regarding liberatory PD; instead, it will aim to understand how multiple secondary teachers construct their own understanding of it.

The constructivist approaches inquiry as an interpretivist (Gray, 2014). Bochner (2018)

explained that such work “is couched in a vocabulary that emphasizes horizons of human meaning, relational being, moral reflection, subjectivity, embodiment, compassion, empathy, and social justice” (p. 363). With this lens, understanding the lived experience of others becomes the focal point of research as opposed to the testing of variables in a controlled experiment (Bochner, 2018).

### *A Critical Theory Lens*

Critical theory aligns with a constructivist approach to research (Gray, 2014; Lincoln, 2005). According to Noblit (2005) the researcher who adopts a critical perspective “attempts to reveal the dynamics of power and ideology” that “dominate some in serving the interests of others” (p. 76). With this approach to inquiry, it is not enough to expose power dynamics; the researcher must work to criticize and disrupt all forms of oppression. Gray (2014) described that with critical inquiry, “the task of researchers is to call the structures and values of society into question,” (p. 27), so by introducing teachers to the concept of liberatory PD, this research will aim in part at having participants question the structure of PD itself.

Agee (2009) described how “one’s worldview often determines an initial choice of theory” (p. 439), and this was true of how this study took form. My beliefs about teachers and how they are traditionally framed as learners influenced the theories chosen to guide this inquiry. As explained in the literature review, applying Freire’s (1970) framework to the field of PD helped reveal the ways in which PD can serve as a system that oppresses teachers. The review also revealed how secondary teachers’ perspectives were underrepresented in the PD literature, so crafting a research project that engaged with these voices had critical aims as well. As a result, this study introduced the concept of liberatory PD to secondary teachers and created space for these teachers to engage in the kind of “praxis” for which Freire (1970) argued could be

transformative (p. 51). Hooley (2013) described that “critical praxis involves bringing together the ideas of ideology critique, self-reflective consciousness and emancipatory action for the public good” (p. 133). Thus, this critical inquiry sought to enable participants to not just interpret the world but consider the possibilities and implications of seeking to change it (Gray, 2014).

Freire’s (1970) critical theory is rooted in the belief that the oppressed must be involved in shaping and achieving their own liberation, so this inquiry sought to position participants to begin the work towards their own liberation. This is the very reason that the inquiry aimed to prioritize the teacher’s voice and beliefs regarding their own learning. Without first pursuing a rich understanding of teachers’ perceptions about liberatory PD and using those perceptions to inform future PD designs, liberatory PD has the potential to perpetuate as opposed to disrupt oppression. As Freire (1970) interrogated:

Who suffer the effects of oppression more than the oppressed? Who can better understand the necessity of liberation? They will not gain this liberation by chance but through the praxis of their quest for it, through their recognition of the necessity to fight for it. (p. 45)

Researchers who conduct research from a critical perspective seek to reveal, uproot, and eliminate all forms of oppression. Thus, the critical perspective has an “explicit and moral stance” (Noblit, 2005, p. 78). Critical researchers believe they have a responsibility to critique the cultural beliefs and social dynamics that cause individuals to come under the power of the more dominant in a society. More than that, they have a moral obligation of sorts to help free the less powerful from oppression. Carspecken (1996) claims that critical researchers should not just be “concerned about social inequalities”, but that they must “direct [their] work toward positive social change” (p. 3).

### **How these Perspectives Influence the Inquiry Process**

As a critical researcher, my research is rooted in the desire to begin a project that could lead to social change. Hence, this research aims to “in some way contribute to improving the human condition” (Rallis & Rossman, 2012, p. 155). More specifically, this research has overt aims rooted in the desire for PD to become a more socially just endeavor that frees teachers to have control over their own learning needs. One contribution towards that end is my hope that this research project will begin to bridge the gap between the theoretical and the practical.

Such a hope aligns with Hill’s (2012) notion of the “public intellectual” (p. 155). To serve in this role, Hill (2012) proposed that the researcher should be a “cultural critic” (p. 156), a “policy shaper” (p. 157), and an “applied worker” (p. 159) who intentionally seeks to make his or her work accessible to broader audiences. The current iteration of this inquiry allowed me to become an applied worker as “applied work typically demands an on-the-ground engagement with real-world issues” (Hill, 2012, p. 159). My specific decision to reenter the school context and engage in dialogue with secondary teachers about a problem that impacted my own professional practice was rooted in a desire to take on the role of an applied worker. Hill’s (2012) ideas about the need for researchers to be more entrenched with the public and for the research itself to be more accessible to the public have influenced both the design and articulation of this project as well as my positionality. This method of research, then, aimed to enlighten as much as it aimed to emancipate.

Furthermore, a critical theorist must work from a position that understands that even knowledge inherently provides power to those who obtain it. In further aligning this inquiry with a critical paradigm, reflexivity served as an exercise that shaped this research project (Finlay, 2002). The reflexive process invites researchers to purposefully reposition themselves to better



understand the world from the perspective of the oppressed. Routine reflexivity served as a purposeful safeguard to ensure that in supporting teachers toward liberation, my voice did not become another voice that simply told teachers how they should seek to learn. At every stage, this inquiry remained open to findings that did not support the proposition of liberatory PD as presented in chapter two. In thoughtfully examining the vision of liberatory learning as conceived by secondary teachers, this inquiry did not attempt to gain support for a singular vision of how that liberation might come to exist.

### **Research Design**

Agee (2009) contended that qualitative studies “involve asking the kinds of questions that focus on the why and how of human interactions” (p. 432). As previously noted, both my epistemological assumptions and the research questions guiding this inquiry aligned with a qualitative approach to research (Agee, 2009; Bochner, 2018; Maxwell, 2013; McMillan, 2016). Therefore, this study includes many of the key characteristics of qualitative research McMillan (2016) identified such as “direct data collection, rich narrative descriptions, socially constructed meanings, and participant perspectives” (p. 304). Using these approaches, this qualitative inquiry sought to understand secondary teachers’ views regarding liberatory PD. The study did not focus on statistical relationships or variance; instead, the study aligned with a “process orientation” that focused on “specific situations or people” and emphasized “descriptions rather than numbers” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 30). Accordingly, the study’s research questions best aligned with a qualitative approach as this inquiry took interest in how the participants themselves made sense of a proposed approach to PD.

### **A Critical Study of PD**

In her explanation of what makes for excellent qualitative research, Tracy (2010) argued

that research that “challenges well-accepted ideas” makes for a worthwhile inquiry (p. 840). As previously discussed in the literature, many PD approaches marginalize teachers, so this research aimed to collect data regarding teachers’ perceptions of an approach to PD that challenges well-established notions of the form PD should take.

Typically, critical researchers conduct qualitative studies aimed at exposing and potentially disrupting oppressive power dynamics. McMillan (2016) contended that as an approach to qualitative inquiry, “critical studies are distinguished by a researcher role as advocate to respond to the themes and issues of marginalized individuals” (p. 320). This design intended to “interrupt broad social trends” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 83) that typically position teachers in more passive roles. In this way, the study design itself adopted a more critical stance as it sought to disrupt any power imbalances that exist between the researcher and the participants (Freire, 1970).

By repositioning teachers to become active participants in this conversation about the possibilities for PD, this project aimed to empower teachers who have traditionally been limited in their ability to make decisions about their professional growth. Through conducting this critical qualitative study, the goal was to prioritize understanding what liberatory PD means for the teachers themselves (Maxwell, 2013). This inquiry’s use of qualitative methods enabled secondary teachers to define how they conceived of liberatory PD, how they assessed liberatory PD’s vision of teacher agency, and how they perceived their school contexts as influencing their responses. Thus, the project aimed to encourage the sort of teacher agency (through means of the praxis) that could build a foundation for the creation of more liberatory models of PD.

Additionally, my study took an inductive approach to inquiry. Such an approach enabled this study to remain flexible and responsive at every stage (Guba, 1981; McMillan, 2016). As an

example of this flexibility, even the research questions were subject to refinement as the inquiry unfolded (Agee, 2009). This inquiry aligned with Maxwell's (2013) charge that "the design of a qualitative study should be able to change in interaction with the context in which the study is being conducted, rather than simply being a fixed determinant of research practice" (p. 7).

According to Maxwell (2013), for research to be accurately described as a qualitative inquiry, "a study must take account of the theories and perspectives of those studied, rather than relying entirely on established theoretical views or the researcher's perspective" (p. 53). Thus, participant perspectives were used to generate emergent and grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guba, 1981). Approaching the inquiry critically required a commitment to ensuring that the participants' voices remained central to this project.

### **Description of Context**

The pool of potential participants came from nine high schools and twelve middle schools in a large mid-Atlantic school district that spans over 200 square miles. Collectively, the high schools and middle schools in this county serve over 27,000 students. These twenty-one schools have varying profiles as it relates to their student populations. For example, on one end of the county in a high school located in a suburban area, over 80% of the graduating class indicated their intentions to pursue a degree at a 4-year institution. On the other end of the county, a high school situated in a rural area, just over 30% of the graduating class indicated their intentions to pursue a degree at a 4-year institution. This large school district that serves both suburban, urban, and rural neighborhoods includes very high-performing schools as well as schools that face greater accountability pressures.

Student demographics by race and socioeconomic status vary in large part by physical location of the schools. Schools clustered on one end of the county, closer to the metropolitan

city this school district borders have larger percentages of students of color than their school counterparts located in the opposite end of the county. The other end of the district has a sprawling suburban area that continues to undergo development and growth. High schools and middle schools in this district that are situated closer to the city limits also have higher percentages of students who qualify for free and/or reduced lunch rates. Enrollment counts indicate a measure of variability, but there is no discernable pattern to this variability. Perhaps the individual building designs and accompanying fire codes determine how many students can be enrolled at each secondary school site.

Although these identifiers serve as evidence of demographic differences that exist among student populations at schools across this district, the numbers themselves offer minimal insight as to how these differences may influence individual school contexts. Having taught in this county myself for over thirteen years, it seems pertinent to discuss how these varying school profiles impact public perception of the schools located in this district. Schools located in the growing suburban end of the district tend to be viewed more positively and often receive higher ratings and receive national recognition for their strengths. Comments about how much “easier” it must be to teach in one of the schools located in the more affluent end of the county are often made at county-wide events and even in casual conversation with community members. It is important to note that these highly acclaimed schools are also marked by populations that comprise larger percentages or even a significant majority of white students.

Just the same, negative perceptions tend to prevail about the schools situated on the opposite end of the county. This portion of the district includes higher concentrations of families living below the poverty line, many of whom are not white. This end of the school district is often perceived by community members as having greater difficulty meeting accountability

standards and facing greater challenges hiring and retaining highly qualified teachers on staff. School ratings tend to be significantly lower on this end of the district.

To contextualize these differences even more, I think it is important to share that my analysis of how this district's schools are perceived based on location is rooted in personal experience. Having worked at high schools in both ends of the district, I can openly share that the kinds of questions and comments that parents and community members alike posed over the years were more often than not tied to the geographic location of the school where I was employed. In my early years as a teacher, questions about my safety were brought up frequently upon the knowledge that I was working at a school where a majority of the population were students of color. On the contrary, I often received commentary about how lucky I was to be on staff at the "one of the best" high schools that had a predominantly white student population where I worked later in my career. From my perspective, these dichotomous remarks are indicative of a level of subtle racism that perpetuates assumptions as to what type of learner a student may or may not be based on their race. I disclose this perspective in part because I believe the contexts across this county may present drastically different experiences for the teachers working at different school sites. For this reason, the school contexts themselves seemed an important consideration in this study's design. With this in mind, I purposefully aimed to secure participants from school sites that best reflected this level of variability within the district.

### **Description of Participants**

Each secondary school in this district has a teacher on staff who serves as the professional development planner. His or her responsibilities include organizing and managing staff data related to PD points as well as supporting staff members who may be seeking to renew their teaching license. Additionally, at some school sites this teacher takes part in helping to plan

or implement staff development opportunities. For the first phase of this study, any teacher currently serving in this PD planner role was eligible to participate. During the second phase of data collection, teachers that worked at the same school of the selected PD planner were eligible for participation.

### ***Phase 1 of Participant Selection***

Purposeful sampling procedures were used to initially secure participants for this study (Maxwell, 2013). After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the district's assessment and research office sent a participant recruitment email on my behalf to the 21 secondary teachers serving as PD planners at their respective schools. This recruitment email included an overview of my study and a link to a demographic survey (see Appendix A), as well as an acknowledgment of consent (see Appendix B) to be completed by interested teachers. The survey identified demographic characteristics as well as teaching qualifications of potential participants.

Part of the purpose for including a demographic survey was to gather an understanding of the "dimensions of variation in the population" that were most relevant to my study (Maxwell, 2013, p. 98). I carefully reviewed surveys as they were completed in hopes of carrying out maximum variation sampling (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) to select three individuals that would represent the most heterogenous sample possible as it relates to the available school contexts (Maxwell, 2013). Unfortunately, the recruitment email was sent out to the eligible elementary school PD planners across the district, so I had to sift through a handful of surveys only to determine that they were completed by potential participants who were not eligible to take part in the study.

After two weeks, I only had two PD Planners from two school contexts who had agreed to participate. In order to maintain the iterative approach to this research, I revisited the literature to determine which other sampling procedures would align with my constructivist approach<sup>1</sup>. Noy's (2008) article offered a strong case for the ways in which snowball sampling could align with my study's aims as it "makes use of natural social dynamics" (p. 329) that can actually work to alleviate some of the power relations that might be at play between researchers and participants. After seeking advice from an IRB representative, my dissertation chair, as well as the county's research personnel, I was advised to tap into any available contacts I had in the county who could suggest eligible participants. I reached out to a few former colleagues and each supplied me with contact information of the PD planners who worked at their schools. Through this process, I was introduced to a PD Planner from a third school context who was willing to participate. A description of the selected participants is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

*Characteristics of Professional Development Planners*

Participant*	Race/ethnicity	Content Area	Years of teaching experience	School site**
Jennifer	Caucasian	Innovative Learning Coach	16	1
Beth	Caucasian	Innovative Learning Coach	22	2
Linda	Caucasian	Economics/CTC	20	3

*Note.* \*All participants will be identified by pseudonyms. \*\*All school sites will be identified by a randomly assigned number.

Initially, I had chosen to follow sampling procedures that would assist me in obtaining the perspectives of PD Planners and teachers who best represented the variety of school contexts

<sup>1</sup> A more in-depth discussion of how the COVID-19 Pandemic required a unique adaptability and reflexivity in the midst of the data collection process will be provided in chapter 5 as I discuss the limitations of this study.

that exist across this expansive school district. Adapting my sampling procedures in order to secure participants did not cause this aim to be abandoned. Fortunately, the only three school sites to which I could gain access did reflect a measure of variability. A general comparison of these three school contexts is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

*Characteristics of School Sites*

School Site*	Grades	2019-2020 Student Enrollment	% of Population Receiving Free/Reduced Lunch	Type of Community Served
1	9-12	1904	18.47%	Suburban
2	6-8	760	62.89%	Rural/Suburban
3	9-12	1823	31.06%	Suburban

*Note.* \*All school sites will be identified by a randomly assigned number.

A description of each school site's context by the race/ethnicity of their student population is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

*Enrollment Percentages by Race/Ethnicity at School Sites in Fall 2019*

School Site*	Am Indian/Alaskan	Asian	African American	Hispanic	Caucasian	Hawaiian/Pac Is	Multiracial
1	0.2%	10.8%	17.9%	5.7%	60.5%	0.0%	4.9%
2	0.5%	0.4%	56.6%	8.8%	29.3%	0.4%	4.1%
3	0.1%	7.0%	12.3%	14.2%	61.8%	0.1%	4.5%

*Note.* \*All school sites will be identified by a randomly assigned number.

***Phase 2 of Participant Selection***

To secure participants for the second phase of data collection, the district's assessment and research office sent a participant recruitment email to 25 randomly selected teachers at each of the three school sites. This recruitment email included an overview of my study and a link to a demographic survey (see Appendix C), as well as acknowledgement of consent (see Appendix



D), to be completed by interested teachers.

This process enabled me to send around 75 participant recruitment emails to teachers across these three schools. This second recruitment email was similar to the first, aside from its description of the data collection instruments being used. After receiving responses, maximum variation sampling was initially employed with the goal of selecting two teacher participants from each of the three school sites. (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Maxwell, 2013). I hoped to secure a sample from each school site that included teachers with varying degrees of experience, teachers who taught in various content areas, and teachers who represented various race/ethnicities. As the participant surveys were completed, though, I found that I was only able to apply maximum variation sampling techniques at school site 1. At that school site, I had seven potential participants complete the survey expressing interest in the study which gave me the ability to choose a more heterogenous sample from that singular school site.

As I was not receiving an excess of responses from teachers at the other sites, I had to adjust my recruiting tactics once again. To remain reflexive (Guba, 1981; McMillan, 2016), I once again employed snowball sampling strategies (Noy, 2008) in an effort to recruit participants at school site 2. After waiting for close to three weeks with no responses from teachers at this school site, I decided it would be best to try and recruit participants with the help of someone with whom I had already established a relationship. After receiving guidance from my chair and the district representative, I emailed the PD Planner at school site 2 (referred to as Beth in this study) to see if she could suggest any teachers at her school that might be willing to participate. She offered several names of teachers she thought would be willing to participate, and of those teachers two expressed interest in taking part in the study.

For school site 3, I initially had three willing participants, but two stopped responding to my communication weeks into the data collection process. I had established an interview time with one, but I did not receive an answer when I reached out on the day of our scheduled conversation. At this time, I was well into the coding process and themes had begun to clearly emerge. As a result of these events, the one participant I did secure at school site 3 was chosen by default. After reviewing the data carefully, though, it was clear that data saturation (Guest et al., 2006) had been reached and that trying to recruit an additional participant would be superfluous. A description of the selected teacher participants at each of the chosen school sites who took part in phase 2 of the study are displayed in Table 4.

Table 4

*Characteristics of Teacher Participants by School Site*

Participant*	Race/ethnicity	Content Area	Years of teaching experience	School site**
Pam	Caucasian	Latin	19	1
Kirk	Caucasian	Social Studies/History	19	1
Courtney	Caucasian	Middle School Science	2	2
Melissa	Caucasian	Middle School Science	22	2
Karen	Caucasian	Exceptional Education: Emotional Disability	7	3

*Note.* \*All participants will be identified by pseudonyms. \*\*All school sites will be identified by a randomly assigned number.

**Measures/Instrumentation**

This qualitative study involved the collection of two main sources of data. These two sources provided greater depth of understanding than any single method might have provided (McMillan, 2016). Ravitch and Riggan (2017) asserted that decisions about what to study should be “tightly interwoven” with decisions about how to conduct the study and that the reasoning

that guided these decisions should be made explicit to readers (p. 79). In response to this directive, a description of each instrument, as well as a justification for its inclusion in this study is provided below.

### ***Semi-Structured Interviews***

As interviews “help you understand in rich detail participant experiences and events that you cannot observe directly”, they served as an essential part of this study’s design (McMillan, 2016, p. 344). This one-on-one format enabled me time to develop rapport with the participants and afforded the respondents greater freedom to draw attention to the issues that felt most relevant to explaining their lived experiences. Holstein and Gubrium (1997) implored researchers to recognize the active nature of interviewing; they encouraged respondents to be viewed as “constructors of knowledge in collaboration with interviewers” (p. 114). With this perspective, the participants who were interviewed were treated as collaborators who had specific insights regarding the district’s PD opportunities and policies as well how those policies unfold in their specific school contexts.

### ***Identity Maps***

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) contended that a researcher who seeks to examine marginalized populations must purposefully employ more disruptive techniques of data collection. They argued that “one’s research methods must interrupt broad social trends that serve to marginalize the voices of these research participants given the power structures and how they become instantiated and enacted within the research process itself” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 83). One such method involves having participants visually represent their identities as a way to provide participants with a greater sense of voice in the research process (Fine & Sirin, 2007; Sirin et al., 2008). Sirin et al. (2008) defined identity maps as “pictorial descriptions of

one's identity" (p. 266).

As a variation to Fine and Sirin's (2007) method, participants taking part in the second phase of data collection were asked to draw a representation of their identity as both a teacher and a learner. This method of data collection encouraged participants to consider their own positionality as it relates to their role as a teacher and their role as it relates to PD experiences. As previously noted, this study aimed to create space for the "praxis" that critical theorist, Freire (1970) contended could help liberate oppressed individuals. Much of the literature discussing the concept of teacher agency highlighted the need for teachers to have space to explore their beliefs about teaching through discussion in order to develop a sense of their own agency (Biesta et al., 2017; Buchanan, 2015; Kelly, 2006; Lee et al., 2007). This data measurement was incorporated into the study's design in hopes of not only providing a space for the teachers to explore their beliefs but also to serve as a way to frame our entire conversation as a dialogical endeavor free from power imbalances.

### **Procedures**

In all phases of data collection, I took on the role of a partial participant (McMillan, 2016). I previously worked in this district as a teacher for over thirteen years, and I reminded participants of my connection to the county and my initial reasoning for conducting this research. My openness was aimed at building rapport with these teachers. In line with Holstein and Gubrium's (1997) suggestion, I wanted to "establish a climate for *mutual* disclosure" throughout all phases of data collection (p. 119). Before each interaction started, I reminded participants of the efforts that I would be making to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. A detailed description of the procedures that were carried out during both phases of data collection is provided in the

following section.

### ***Description of Phase 1***

During the first phase of data collection, I conducted semi-structured interviews with each of the three PD Planners. They were considered to be key informants (McMillan, 2016) who could provide insights regarding PD as their role provided them with intimate knowledge of the PD procedures at their respective school sites. With the support of my committee members and additional qualitative researchers, I created interview protocols that aligned with my research questions which appear in Appendix E. These questions were intentionally crafted to be open-ended and to allow for participants to co-construct knowledge (McMillan, 2016).

Initially, I communicated with each PD Planner through email to schedule a time and place for our interview to take place. I was able to meet with the PD Planner working at School Site 1 in person. She has her own private office in the school building, so we met at the conclusion of the workday during the second week of March. I used the recording feature on my personal cell phone to capture our conversation and I took notes while she shared her responses.

Due to schools closing and the shelter-in-place directives ordered as a result of the national pandemic that unfolded, the remaining interviews had to take place virtually. To adapt to this turn of events, I downloaded the Rev Call Recorder app to record the scheduled phone interviews. Each interview lasted close to an hour. As these participants were adapting to teaching virtually and navigating childcare, the calls were all slated at times to suit their evolving schedules.

### ***Description of Phase 2***

During the second phase of data collection, the pandemic was still in full swing and the state was under strict regulations as far as people gathering in public spaces, so all interactions

had to remain virtual. After establishing a suitable date and time with each of the teacher participants, I emailed an agenda of how our time would be spent together on the phone. A few minutes before our conversation (so as to not prime participants before our dialogue began), I also emailed a digital copy of the necessary materials to the participant. I used the Rev Call Recorder app to record conversations. Each interaction began with the teacher completing the Identity Map prompt on their own paper. The prompt they received appears in Appendix F.

As they followed along with the digital copy, I first explained the instructions for completing the identity map. I had previously directed the teachers to have markers, colored pencils, or pens on hand. Participants took roughly ten minutes to create their maps. They then emailed me a copy of their maps (with a randomly assigned number written in the top corner of the page so that I could match their responses to other measures). These maps were then used to begin the semi-structured interview as each participant shared and explained the elements included on his or her map. Having the teachers open up the discussion in this way is intended to put them more in charge of the conversation regarding their own professional growth (Fine & Sirin, 2007).

Protocols for the second phase of semi-structured interviews appear in Appendix G. For the most part, the protocols used during the second phase of interviews with the teachers were similar to those that were used during the first phase of interviews with the PD Planners. Differences included the additional questions related to the identity maps, the exclusion of a question that was specifically developed to generate an understanding of PD from the perspective of the school's teacher PD planner, and a question that emerged to deepen understanding of a finding that emerged as data from the first phase of interviews were analyzed.

All phases of data collection were audio recorded and uploaded to Rev.com's secure

website as well as a password-protected folder on my computer. I wrote down descriptive and reflective field notes both during and immediately following each phase of data collection (McMillan, 2016). In keeping with Tracy's (2010) guidelines regarding rigor, a detailed and transparent explanation of how the data will be sorted and analyzed is provided in the following section.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began during the initial meeting with the first participant and continued until the final draft of the dissertation was completed (Maxwell, 2013). In this way, field notes, research memos, and transcriptions were all involved in the analysis. Immediately following each stage of data collection, I spent a few hours typing and organizing my field notes. I also uploaded the recordings of each interaction to the Rev.com website and sent the files off to be transcribed verbatim the same day interviews took place. I had received a financial award in part to pay for the transcription of my interviews, so I chose the reputable company Rev.com at the direction of a well-published member of my committee who had used their services in the past. Transcriptions were returned in under twelve hours. I started the analysis phase by reading each transcription at least once cold and then reading the notes I had taken during the interaction.

One of the most important stages of analysis occurred between the interviews with the school PD planners and the second phase of data collection involving teachers from each of the schools where these planners work. Reading over the transcribed interviews enabled me to better organize the protocols and even refine a few based on my initial findings. Approaching this process iteratively enabled greater saturation of data since I was able to guide the discussion to pursue deeper understanding of perceptions that were shared in the initial interviews (Noy, 2008). For similar reasons, I tried to schedule the phase 2 conversations in such a way that

allowed for time to review and analyze transcriptions before conversing with another interviewee.

### ***Software***

ATLAS.ti software was used to support the organization and analysis of all collected data. While listening to and reading the transcriptions of these recordings, memos and notes were recorded in this software program with the goal of developing “tentative ideas about categories and relationships” in the data (Maxwell, 2013, p. 105). This qualitative software made this process easier as notes and memos were easily aligned to specific units of data within the transcription. The software also made coding the data a more manageable process as the program is designed to support such efforts.

### ***Initial codes***

The coding process began immediately following the completion of the interview with the first PD planner. To start the coding process, McMillan (2016) suggested carefully reading through entire transcripts to “look for words, phrases, or events that seem to stand out” and to “create codes for these words or phrases” (p. 351). As both emic and etic data were added to the ATLAS.ti program, I began by applying the in vivo coding method to analyze the data (Saldaña, 2016). Saldana (2016) explained how these codes “derive from the actual language of the participant” (p. 77), and that this approach is appropriate for “studies that prioritize and honor the participant’s voice” (p. 106). Since my study centered on determining how secondary teachers perceive a more agentic approach to PD, it seemed natural to have codes rooted in their own words and stated perceptions. In my research design, I specifically discussed my desire to frame the participants as knowledge producers. Thus, the methodological choices related to data analysis remained consistent with this study’s critical aims that seek to prioritize the participants’



perspectives (Noblit, 2005). As I planned to potentially generate grounded theory from this research effort, in vivo coding was a good fit for initially coding the data. As I aimed to “ground the analysis” in my participants’ perspectives (Saldaña, 2016, p. 71) virtually every line initially received a code.

I developed a codebook both within the Atlas.ti program as well as within a Google Sheets file. The Google Sheet enabled me to easily add definitions for each code, exclusion and inclusion criteria, as well as examples of the code from the data set. This was a working file that underwent several evolutions, for as Saldaña (2016) asserted, “coding is a cyclical act” (p. 9). Coding just the first two transcribed interviews resulted in over 200 codes. In an effort to not be inundated with data or overwhelmed by codes, I heeded Saldaña’s (2016) advice to begin collapsing codes into related categories sooner rather than later. This was a systematic process that involved creating matrices and writing in-depth research memos in an attempt to consider how various codes aligned with the study’s research questions (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016).

### ***Categorizing the Codes***

While I initially planned to categorize the data in part by applying the categories from Pantić’s (2015) model of teacher agency for social justice to the data set, I quickly found that her theory’s focus on social justice failed to align well with my research questions. Researchers have discussed the pitfalls of trying to fit data into a predetermined framework as it can make it challenging to recognize new insights or discern how alternative frameworks might offer meaning to the analysis (Becker, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Until I began analyzing the data and considering my research questions more carefully, I could not fully recognize the limitations of this model’s utility in relationship to my inquiry. By not allowing the instrumentation to dictate the findings, this study aimed to be more credible in its representation of the participating

teachers' views.

Instead of using a framework to categorize the data, I began to examine the coded data for substantive categories that could be used to summarize the data (Maxwell, 2013). At this stage, I started by using both process and versus codes to begin to collapse the codes into more meaningful chunks (Saldaña, 2016). Both of these coding methods helped me to begin to see emergent patterns and relationships within the data set. While the categories were aimed at synthesizing the data, I still tried to focus on the "participants' own words and concepts" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 108) to label these categories so as to ensure that their voices did not get lost in the analysis. During this stage, I repeatedly reevaluated my codes. I searched for both similarities and contradictions across the teachers' responses.

In Atlas.ti, this process involved creating families and color-coding the codes within each family to begin to synthesize the patterns within the data set. Summarizing the coded data into substantive categories was a recursive process (McMillan, 2016). A constant comparison approach was used to search for evidence that both confirmed and disconfirmed the categories (McMillan, 2016). This involved rereading transcripts multiple times to reevaluate both the initial codes as well as the categorized codes. This was done in part to follow Saldaña's (2016) directive to remain as close to the data as possible. In total, the eight transcripts were each read over a dozen times. I repeatedly reevaluated my codes over the course of close to a month. Additionally, for each transcript I synthesized the key words and ideas from the participant onto a single index card. Towards the last two weeks of this code refining and categorizing process, I would begin my work session by rereading each index card and taking time to reflect and memo about each of the teachers' words and ideas.

After applying and reapplying the categorized codes to all eight transcripts, I found that no new codes were emerging. In this way, this inquiry aligned with Guest et al.'s (2006) construct of data saturation which they define as “the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change to the codebook” (p. 65). In its final iteration, my codebook included 15 major codes and 56 accompanying subcodes (McMillan, 2016). Those 15 codes were collapsed into 6 overall categories that best synthesized the entire data set.

In thoughtfully analyzing the coded and categorized data, 3 emergent themes were developed to interpret the findings. A synthesis of these key findings will be reported to include evidence in support of these findings in chapter four. Approaching the analysis in this way also allowed for a working theory to emerge from the data itself (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This theory will be unpacked in the discussion section found in chapter five. Relevant quotations from the participants, excerpts from field notes and memos, and examples of identity maps are all included to illustrate the results and build a case for the study's overall quality and rigor.

### **Quality and Rigor**

Qualitative research methods require the same degree of precision as do quantitative methods (McMillan, 2016; Maxwell, 2013). Conducting rigorous qualitative research, though, requires different methods for presenting evidence that rigor has been achieved. In particular, the researcher has a responsibility to make every effort to ensure that the study's findings accurately reflect the participants' views. Threats such as researcher bias, inadequate transparency, and sampling decisions can call into question a study's trustworthiness (Finlay, 2002; McMillan, 2016). McMillan (2016) offered a guiding question to help contemplate a study's credibility: “do the data and conclusions accurately, fairly, plausibly, and authentically portray reality?” (p. 308).

In response to these concerns, this inquiry's design and execution involved intentional efforts aimed at increasing the study's trustworthiness.

### **Reflexivity**

Agee (2009) described qualitative research as “a reflective process” (p. 431) and posed that reflection should be centered on carefully considering the researcher's positionality. With qualitative inquiries, the researcher becomes an instrument of the research (Guba, 1981; Maxwell, 2013). Lincoln (2005) explained, “since the researcher is frequently the ‘instrument’ in constructivist inquiries, it is mandatory that this human instrument reflect upon research practices, activities, relationships, decisions, choices, and his or her own values in those arenas” (p. 63). Finlay (2002) defined this process of reflexivity as “thoughtful, conscious self-awareness” (p. 532). Thus, an important part of any qualitative inquiry must be an interrogation of the researcher's own values and how they may be influencing the collection, analysis, or interpretation of the data.

Finlay (2002) argued that this reflexivity “should start from the moment the research is conceived” (p. 536). Bochner (2018) also posited that intentional efforts should be made to consciously try to level the playing field between the researcher and the participants. He claimed that engaging in reflexive exercises can help the researcher to resist taking on a more authoritative stance that might impede the collection of more accurate data (Bochner, 2018). To decrease researcher bias, then, this study prioritized reflexivity at every stage. McMillan (2016) acknowledged that with qualitative approaches, researcher bias “is a constant worry” (p. 309). Thus, as Finlay (2002) proposed, “to avoid reflexive analysis might even compromise the research itself” (p. 543). This study approached reflexive analysis both collaboratively and individually throughout the research process.

For example, in seeking to obtain secondary teachers' perceptions of liberatory PD, I thought it essential to craft interview questions that allowed for a range of responses and viewpoints. Meeting with a qualitative researcher who regularly conducts studies in the field was a reflexive exercise I pursued in hopes of reducing bias from my data collection instruments. By reviewing my protocols with the assistance of an expert in the field and making revisions as a result of his feedback, I sought to eliminate any bias phrasing from my protocols that might have influenced my participants to respond in a way that aligned with my own views. After revising my protocols several times, I conducted a pilot test by interviewing a former teacher and asking for her feedback on the protocols.

By asking for others to assist me in reflexively analyzing different aspects of my study such as the research questions, coding decisions, and even my presentation of the findings, my hope was to create a more credible study that could make a contribution to the literature. Approaching reflexive analysis collaboratively allowed me to identify and consider aspects of my study that needed to be revised, reconsidered, or even reconceptualized. Along with these collaborative approaches to reflexivity, I also engaged in reflexive analysis through individual efforts.

### ***Research Memos***

Throughout this inquiry, research memos were written in an effort to remain reflective at every stage of this inquiry (Finlay, 2002; Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). Maxwell (2013) proposed the benefit of "using this writing as a way to facilitate reflection and analytic insight" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 20). These memos included thought experiments, reflections on the relationships involved in this study, intensive self-critique, and other musings. Most importantly, they were a tool to help me develop my ideas and carefully consider my research decisions. They

were also used to help me better understand the data analysis process. Preparing a research memo immediately following each iteration of data collection helped me to engage in the sort of “serious reflection, analysis, and self-critique” (p. 20) for which Maxwell (2013) advocated in qualitative studies.

In particular, I found Saldaña’s (2016) list of 12 proposed suggestions for writing analytic memos (see p. 45-53) to be particularly generative. Every few days, I would complete one of his suggested prompts and often these memos were the most helpful in starting to identify the comprehensive narrative the data was telling. As I prepared memos throughout the coding process, I practiced “codeweaving” the data by integrating the most important words from the data into my analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016, p. 48). In this way, I kept the analysis grounded in my participants’ perceptions. I organized my memos by title, date, and number to make them as easy to interact with as possible. Memos that related directly to the codes and categories were composed within the Atlas.ti program and copied into a password-protected Word file. Memos that had to do with reflection about the procedures, research questions, relationships, values, etc. were recorded in just the Word file.

### ***Thick Descriptions***

Remaining vigilant about preparing memos and engaging in other reflexive exercises assisted me in being able to present more detailed, or what qualitative researchers describe as thick descriptions (Tracy, 2010). Thick descriptions were needed to adequately describe the context as well as the participants’ perspectives. This involved acknowledging things that are said as well as things that are not said during interactions with participants (Tracy, 2010). McMillan (2016) posited, “when participant perspectives are rich, detailed, and abundant, deeper understandings and more insights result, and the true meanings of the participants are revealed”

(p. 308).

Taking the time to read through each transcript multiple times and conducting various approaches to synthesis of my participants' perceptions all contributed to the thick descriptions that are recounted in chapter 4 as I unpack the results of this study. By completing interviews with both PD planners and teachers at three school sites, my study included eight participants in total. Having multiple perspectives from three separate school contexts represented in this inquiry enabled a much thicker description of the phenomenon being studied. Including multiple participant quotations to support these conclusions also serves as evidence that saturation was reached (McMillan, 2016; Guest et al., 2006).

### **Authenticity**

Pursuing authenticity is another method that not only minimizes researcher bias but also helps to build a case for a study's overall credibility. Authentically representing the participants' voices means "presenting all differences and views", not just the ones that align with the researcher's beliefs or even the theoretical framework (McMillan, 2016, p. 310). Making efforts to include all voices and representing them as accurately as possible was a goal from the onset of this inquiry.

### ***Negative Cases***

One such effort involved conducting a negative case analysis of the collected data (McMillan, 2016; Patton, 1999). Disclosing these negative cases in my findings was an essential part of presenting a more authentic study that acknowledged data that is contradictory to its emergent themes. Reflecting on these negative cases in the discussion section in this study's final chapter also helped build a case for the credibility of this study and it also helped to clarify the potential limitations of this inquiry's transferability to other contexts. Reporting these negative

cases also exposed the need for future studies that could further elaborate on these outliers.

### ***Multiple Data Sources***

McMillan (2016) explained, “participants’ language, based on social contexts, is central to data analysis” in qualitative inquiries (p. 304). Part of the justification for using two different sources of data in this data was to capture a more complete representation of the participants’ voices. Whereas a few participants shared their beliefs most candidly during the interview alone, others disclosed a more nuanced viewpoint during the identity mapping activity. Being able to better reflect this range of opinions in my results allowed my research to be more authentic and therefore more credible.

### ***Peer Debriefing***

Having an outside perspective from someone who is not as close to the data can often provide valuable insight to researchers (Guba, 1981). An outsider may be able to highlight moments of inauthenticity that the researcher missed in his or her analysis of the data. Therefore, two colleagues who have no connection with my study reviewed and evaluated both my codebook and my findings. One colleague actually tested my codes using de-identified excerpts from three of the transcripts. This occurred during the analysis stage to help ensure that my own bias was not detracting from the study’s credibility.

Both colleagues offered written feedback on my work. We spoke several times to discuss their reflections on my work and they suggested potential revisions to my findings. I found their feedback to be invaluable as it assisted me in seeing the utility of some of the negative cases as well as some of the implications for future studies within the field. Involving these additional perspectives in the research process helped increase my study’s authenticity and therefore its



trustworthiness.

### ***Member Checking***

To further build a case for authenticity of the study's findings, the participants themselves were involved in assessing my conclusions. At various stages in the study, I conducted member checks to verify accuracy of representations and findings (Guba, 1981; Tracy, 2010). First and foremost, this approach was embedded in every participant interview. As participants shared their responses I frequently asked for clarification or explanation. I often framed my clarifying questions such as, "I think you are saying "this", but will you clarify more about what you meant?" For some of the participants, these informal member checks resulted in the most salient comments of the entire interview.

Tracy (2010) described that "member reflections are less a *test* of research findings as they are an opportunity for collaboration and reflexive elaboration" (p. 844). Thus, participants received a copy of my findings to review and offer clarification. Each participant was informed of his or her pseudonym to make this review process easier. They each received an individual version of the initial interpretations that allowed them to add comments and feedback directly to the draft. I received feedback from six of the participants and a few small revisions were made based on their feedback. For example, Pam informed me that she had not started teaching at her current school site until the second year it was open whereas I had listed her as being a part of the staff from the school's beginning, so I corrected that before submitting my final draft.

All of the participants who participated in this final stage of the member checking process indicated feeling that I my findings aligned with their perceptions. Involving the participants in this way helped to ensure that their voices were accurately represented and more importantly it provided them a chance to elaborate on their perceptions (Tracy, 2010). In this way, the member

checking process also helped to reduce the threat of confirmability that McMillan (2016) cautions as a potential detriment to the trustworthiness of a qualitative inquiry's findings. In addition, these member checks were intended to increase rigor as they aligned with this study's design that sought to co-construct meanings alongside participants (Bochner, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gray, 2014).

### ***Triangulation of Data Sources***

Using two data sources assisted me in triangulating the data and thereby making a stronger case for credibility (Guba, 1981; Maxwell, 2013; McMillan, 2016; Patton, 1999; Tracy, 2010). More than that, having multiple interviews with teachers from three different secondary schools in the county helped ensure that the findings were more representative of secondary teachers throughout the district.

In addition to data collected from the interviews and identity maps, analyzing my field notes and research memos offered another means of triangulation. Even the member checks themselves served as another means of cross validating the data. As Tracy (2010) defended, "multiple types of data, researcher viewpoints, theoretical frames, and methods of analysis allows different facets of problems to be explored, increases scope, deepens understanding, and encourages consistent (re) interpretation" (p. 843). Gray (2014) posited that triangulation "helps to balance out any of the potential weaknesses in each data collection method" (p. 37).

Triangulating the data in this study was aimed at providing "a more complex, in-depth, but still thoroughly partial, understanding of the issue" (Tracy, 2010, p. 844).

### **Institutional Review Board**

This qualitative inquiry involved the study of human subjects. The degree of risk to participants was assessed (Agee, 2009) and approval was granted by Virginia Commonwealth

University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection began. Upon IRB review, this study qualified for exemption on February 19, 2020. Due to the pandemic, my study original study design had to undergo some alterations. As a result, I submitted a COVID-19 contingency protocol form to the VCU IRB on April 1, 2020. Amendments to my study were approved and my updated design qualified for exemption on April 3, 2020.

### **Timetable for Study**

After presenting my prospectus in early December 2019, the IRB application was submitted by my chair on December 12, 2019. Participant recruitment emails for the PD planners in phase 1 of the data collection were sent in late February to all eligible participants in the county. The first phase of data collection began in mid-March. Data analysis began the same day this first phase of data collection occurred. After making adjustments to the study and receiving IRB approval for my amended procedures in early April, recruitment emails were sent to over 30 randomly selected teachers at each of the three school sites in mid-April March. The second phase of data collection took place throughout the month of May and into the first part of June. The second half of June and most of July was dedicated to coding and analyzing the data. Peer debriefing took place during this time as well. Drafts of the final chapters were prepared during the months of August and September, and member checking occurred simultaneously. My dissertation defense was scheduled for the second week of November 2020.

### **Summary of Methodology**

In summary, this qualitative research project aimed to understand teachers' perceptions of liberatory PD and how that vision of PD might align with teachers' beliefs about their own agency, as well as their teaching contexts. Purposeful sampling with maximum variation as well as snowball sampling techniques (Maxwell, 2013; Noy, 2008) were employed to select three

participants who served as PD planners in the same school district and 5 additional secondary teachers from the three school contexts where each of these PD planners work.

This critical qualitative inquiry included semi-structured interviews (Holstein & Gubrium, 1997; McMillan, 2016) during the first phase of data collection as well as the creation of an identity map (Fine & Sirin, 2007; Sirin et al., 2008) during the second phase. Data analysis involved generating initial codes and applying these codes across the transcripts followed by collapsing codes into more salient categories (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). These were used to discern three patterns across the entire data set that represented larger themes. As I carefully considered these themes and thought about the relationship among them, a working theory emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Throughout this iterative research project, attention was given to avoiding threats that could infringe on the study's trustworthiness by engaging in reflexive analysis (Agee, 2009; Finlay, 2002; Guba, 1981; Lincoln, 2005), composing frequent research memos (Maxwell, 2013; Saldaña, 2016), triangulating the data (Guba, 1981; Maxwell, 2013; McMillan, 2016; Patton, 1999; Tracy, 2010), and carrying out multiple member checks (Guba, 1981; Tracy, 2010).

Prioritizing participants' voices was a central aim of this project, as was incorporating data collection tools that enabled secondary teachers to take part in the "praxis" that can lead to liberation (Freire, 1970; Hooley, 2013). As such, this qualitative project sought to align itself with Bochner's (2018) proposal that "as critics and narrativists, qualitative researchers who identify with artful science seek to help others understand themselves and the contingencies of living better and to produce more just societies" (p. 366). This study addressed identified gaps in understanding of secondary teachers' perceptions of liberatory PD. Thus, this inquiry aimed to

achieve the sort of “heuristic significance” that might serve as a starting point for further research in the field (Tracy, 2010, p. 846).

## CHAPTER FOUR: Findings

Although research has underscored the benefit of teacher agency and its relationship to professional growth (Biesta et al., 2015; Imants & Van der Wal, 2019; Strahan, 2016), recent studies have failed to reveal how secondary teachers cultivate or enact such agency when pursuing PD within their particular teaching contexts. As a secondary teacher myself, I have often struggled to determine how I could best advocate for my learning needs within a system that seemed to inhibit my ability to confidently express those needs. I pursued this study in hopes of not only finding answers for myself, but more importantly in hopes of determining how other secondary teachers perceived their agency in navigating their school-required PD experiences. As I first searched the literature, I found that secondary teachers' voices were not consistently prioritized within PD studies. In response to this gap in understanding, this critical study sought to develop an understanding of secondary teachers' perceptions of liberatory PD at three school sites in a single school district.

For this qualitative inquiry, the following research questions guided my work and assisted me in determining patterns in teacher responses:

*Research Question 1:* How do secondary teachers describe their agency in navigating the PD fulfillments required by their school?

*Research Question 2:* How do secondary teachers perceive the value of liberatory PD?

*Research Question 3:* How useful do secondary teachers find the vision of agency in liberatory PD?

*Research Question 4:* How do the differences in school contexts shape secondary teachers' responses to the concept of liberatory PD?

This chapter will describe the findings that arose while pursuing answers to these questions.

From this critical inquiry, three key themes emerged as participants shared their perceptions of liberatory PD. As secondary teachers in this study considered the implications of liberatory PD, they described 1) facing contextual constraints that limited their agency 2) desiring to be reframed as knowledge producers, yet 3) struggling to envision how their agency could support their liberation.

In what follows I will offer a detailed description of these three key themes and subsequent subthemes that surfaced from individual interviews with the eight secondary educators who participated in this study. An explanation of how each key theme ties back to the research questions will be included as part of the analysis. I will unpack these findings by sharing the words and ideas of the participants themselves while preserving their anonymity. As mentioned in chapter three, this will be done in an effort to carry out a study that aligns with constructivist methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) during which the researcher takes on the role of an interpretivist (Gray, 2014) who seeks to co-construct meanings alongside participants (Bochner, 2018). In this way, my synthesized interpretations will intentionally seek to preserve and prioritize the secondary teachers' voices throughout this chapter.

### **Theme One: Facing Contextual Constraints that Limit Their Agency**

The first research question guiding this inquiry asked, "How do secondary teachers describe their agency in navigating the PD fulfillments required by their school?" Overwhelmingly, participants across all three school sites disclosed ways in which their agency as it relates to PD was limited by various contextual constraints. The two most prevalent constraints that the participants discussed had to do with the lack of control teachers felt they had over their learning and the breakdown of trust they believed existed between those who design PD and those who must participate in PD.

## **Lack of Control**

To varying degrees, the participants expressed feeling a sense of powerlessness as it related to their inability to chart their own developmental trajectories within the confines of contractual obligations. In reviewing the teachers' responses thoughtfully, this lack of control seemed to be felt across these three school sites as a result of the top-down decisions that shaped many of the required PD designs, the delivery methods that were employed for required PD programs, and the illusion of choice that teachers were given as they navigated their school's PD requirements.

### ***Top-Down Decisions***

In all eight interviews, participants provided examples of how decisions about their PD requirements were typically made from the top down. Multiple participants drew a correlation between the state of PD at their school sites and the leadership in place in their various buildings. Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3, shared that "who the principal is" has a large impact on what PD looks like over the course of a school year and described how her level of involvement has "changed from principal to principal". Whereas she used to have more input, lately there's been a pattern of PD decisions revolving around what the administrators prepare to "give" to the staff at her school. When asked how much agency she felt teachers had as it related to their current school-required PD opportunities, Linda described her current situation in this way:

*It's kind of more loosely saying a dictatorship by, "we're going to be talking about..." and, "this is what we're going to be learning about..." and, "these are our expectations for you..." So I don't think it's teacher-driven. I think it's more- maybe it trickles down from a central office aspect down to our principals and admin, versus the teacher.*



Linda was not the only one to discuss this idea of feeling like there was a “dictatorship” in place charting the course PD would take in a school year. Beth, the PD planner working at school site 2 also claimed that at her school, under a recent leader, “topics were dictated by the principal”.

In spite of only have two years of experience, Courtney shared her observations related to how PD decisions are typically made from the top down. She disclosed that the planning “falls strictly on the administration team”, but she was also quick to share that this team of leaders “have a lot going on”. She commented on how the administrators prepare PD that feels “thrown together” as if “it's the week before professional development's happening- it's on the calendar and admin realizes that it's there and they have to do something quick”. With this remark, she hinted at the ineffectiveness she felt such an approach had. In particular, the PD planners and teachers working at school sites 2 and 3 discussed how under certain administrators, PD decisions were made from the top down with minimal to no input being sought out from the teachers on staff.

While some of the participants talked about how principals and building leaders controlled many of the PD decisions at their school, others pointed higher up to the ways in which the district controlled much of the required PD. As she defended the need for more teacher involvement in PD decisions, Pam, a Latin teacher in the county, shared: “another thing about PD is that there's something that's been a directive from the county that has to be sent out... That, I guess, you don't have really power over, at least content-wise”. With this comment, Pam acknowledged that when faced with county directives, she does not feel she has the power to influence or question such directives. Kirk, a history teacher who also works at Pam’s school, echoed this need for teachers to have more control over their PD when he explained:

*I mean, a lot of times there's county initiatives that come down I guess from year to year and then that takes up a lot of PD time. I think there's definitely been times where teachers have taken control of some of those things, but I would say, by and large, I don't think teachers are super involved in school-wide PD as much as they should be.*

As Melissa described the constraints she feels inhibit teachers from having more control over their PD pursuits, she shared: “I think sometimes that... we blame PD on the person presenting at our school, or admin or whoever, but really it's stuff coming from specialists or the county, or even the division saying, ‘This is what you need to do.’”. Along these same lines, Jennifer discussed how most recently there has been an expectation to provide PD focused on training teachers to use a particular software program “because the county has paid for every teacher” to have access to this program. Karen, a teacher at school site 3, went so far as to question how PD might look if teachers had more control as opposed to “central office making the decisions”. Overall, these secondary teachers’ comments reflected an acute awareness of the ways in which the district had significant influence over what form PD took at their schools. How those PD initiatives were implemented seemed to vary a bit from school site to school site, but participants at all three school sites acknowledged ways in which these district programs contributed to the lack of control teachers had over their PD pursuits.

Multiple participants felt that the tendency towards top-down PD decision-making constrained teachers in their ability to voice their learning needs. They indicated that PD decisions were more often than not made without any input from teachers. For example, Pam, a participant working at school site 1, shared in a matter-of-fact tone that “PD is usually chosen for us”. Beth, a PD Planner who also serves as her school’s Innovative Learning Coach, disclosed that under a recent principal, the teachers had “little influence on the organized schoolwide PD”

and that any PD designed and/or delivered by teachers at her school was “minimal”. Later in our conversation, Beth questioned how well top-down decisions could support teachers’ individual needs when “their voices were left out of the design”.

As a science teacher working in the same school setting as Beth, Courtney described the situation as follows:

*At my school, I would say the teachers get zero to no input as to what we're actually going to be learning. From what I've heard there's been a couple of teachers who've been asked to do presentations and to share what they're doing, but it's not asking in a way that allows them to say no. It's like they're being told to share what they're doing.*

Linda, who works at a high school across the county lamented in regards to the teachers at her school that “we as a group do not have a whole lot of opportunity to say what we would like to learn”.

Karen, who works in the same school context as Linda, revealed that she does not feel that her opinions regarding PD are sought out. With a hint of disbelief in her voice, Karen retorted:

*Before we even know that we're going to have professional development it's just, "This month we're having a professional development. Here's what we're going to learn." It's like, "Really? I don't want to learn that. Why didn't you ask me?"*

In this way, Karen, along with other teachers in this study, felt that her voice has been excluded as top-down decisions have been made regarding the PD requirements she must fulfill.

One participant in particular shared that she felt her voice was more than just excluded- to a degree she felt it was undesired. Melissa, a science middle school teacher, revealed that while working under her most recent principal, she felt there was no “safe space” to bring her

ideas or her concerns as it related to alternative PD approaches. She felt sharing her voice with this leader could lead to a “slammed door” or even worse, “retaliation”. Melissa went on to explain, “I feel as far as affecting change, a lot of it has to do with leadership in the building and having that safe space to even try to affect change.”

Overall, participants provided insights as to how this pattern of PD decisions coming from the top down within the county and within their individual schools constrained their agency; in most cases they felt they had limited opportunity to speak up about the PD designs they were required to follow. Regardless of whether the constraint came from a district leader or a building administrator, the teachers felt that their lack of voice in the decision-making process was a detriment. Melissa argued that just as she feels a teacher should honor student voices in the classroom that teachers “need a voice too”. As she shared her thoughts on the PD approaches teachers in the county experience, Beth remarked that “without [teacher] voices, it’s not really helping them get where they need to be”. In this way, secondary teachers in this study felt that the lack of teacher voice amidst the PD decision-making process only added to the lack of control teachers felt they had over their PD experiences.

### ***Delivery Methods***

Another constraint that compounded the lack of control these educators felt they had while navigating required PD had to do with the way in which PD was typically delivered. For one, participants commented on the lack of flexibility in how PD could be pursued. Across all three school sites, the teachers disclosed that PD took place during set times. Jennifer used words like “mandatory” and “designated” to describe the PD requirements at her school.

Teachers also expressed concerns over how little control they had over the timing of required PD sessions. The PD Planner at School Site 2, Beth, argued that in the past, those in

charge of PD at her school failed to respect teachers' schedules. She explained how under a recent administrator, "teachers were required to stay for an hour and a half of learning after they were supposed to go home". In her interview, Melissa (a coworker of Beth's) expressed her same frustration with these occurrences. She recounted: "it was more of a dictatorship with our time. On PD days, if it was a half day PD day, we expected to leave at 3:30 when we normally did, but it was like we were being held hostage until 4:30." For Melissa, this lack of control felt both inappropriate and inconsiderate. In this way, teachers having such minimal control over the dates and times of required PD sessions constrained their agency.

In spite of these fairly rigid expectations for how PD would be pursued at the three school sites, a few of the participants recounted ways in which the required PD often seemed to reflect a lack of planning on the part of those mandating it. As the PD Planner working at school site 1, Jennifer disclosed that she did not think there was a "year-long plan" for PD in place before the school year started this past August. Beth, the PD Planner at school site 2 (located across the county from Jennifer) discussed how the approach to PD felt "haphazard and kind of scattered" and that often at the direction of the administration, PD times would be "canceled" last minute. In this way, teachers expressed having little control over when PD would occur, or even if it would occur during the originally scheduled time.

Additionally, participants pointed out a lack of consistency in how or even what PD was delivered from month to month and year to year. The teachers expressed varying levels of frustration at this lack of commitment to PD programs. Kirk, a history teacher and an advocate for PD in his building, argued regarding PD: "I think the one-offs don't work very well. It has to be very purposeful and continuous". In our discussion he shared some examples of programs that did not stick around long enough to affect change.

In discussing one meaningful PD program that was offered at her school, Beth shared that it “was also sort of a one-off” because it was tied to a singular grant. Further in our discussion, Beth commented on the fact that although PD is deemed mandatory at her school, there is a lack of “follow-up” for those who miss sessions. She pointed on how this can send mixed messages to teachers as to the value of PD. Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3, critiqued the pattern of “constant change” in PD approaches. Multiple teachers in this study felt constrained in their ability to influence the level of commitment to a particular PD program.

Secondary teachers in this study also discussed how required PD was often delivered in a one-size-fits-all fashion. Both the content and the delivery seemed focused on meeting the majority’s needs as opposed to targeting teacher’s individual learning needs. Beth argued that “if you do a broad swipe of professional learning, there might be maybe half, let's just say half, of the school needs that learning. But the other half didn't”. Karen, a teacher who works with students who have an emotional disability, delineates this approach as “cookie cutter”. When asked to consider how teachers’ individual needs are being met by required PD at her school, Jennifer articulated that “in a lot of ways it feels like we are designing PD that could hit at everybody, which oftentimes just isn't real beneficial for anybody”.

At some school sites, PD delivery seemed to be centered more on promoting procedures and developing uniformity among staff members as opposed to supporting individualized growth. As Jennifer acknowledged, her school requires some PD that seems focused on “everybody getting on the same page as far as what was expected for lesson planning and reflection, so that ideally there would be consistency across the board from teachers”. Courtney, a science teacher working at school site 2 expressed her discontent with PD being used to regulate teacher behaviors. She explained that at times her school has had required PD sessions:

*...that are clearly designed for specific people but they're using PD as a cover to not offend almost. Like there was one on dress code. I mean come on. We don't need a professional development about that, we need a discussion with whoever's doing it.*

Courtney was not the only participant who discussed PD being used as a means to monitor or control procedures. Kirk indicated that he has participated in required PD that felt more like a “process that is built upon checking up on teachers to make sure they're doing their jobs”. Along the same lines, Melissa, a science teacher with over 20 years of experience, explained that under certain leaders, teachers have been expected to approach PD in the following manner:

*This is what you're going to learn today and you're going to implement this in your classroom, and we want to see it within the next weeks when we come in doing an observation." Can you tell we've heard that before?*

The participants from these three school sites, then, perceived that PD has at times been delivered in a way that prioritizes procedures as opposed to more personalized development. More than that, these participant remarks indicated that PD has the potential to be used as a means to try and monitor or even possibly control teacher behaviors.

### ***Illusion of Choice***

Jennifer, a PD planner in her 16<sup>th</sup> year as an educator, summarized what other participants expressed as she described the degree of teacher agency experienced by teachers navigating PD requirements in the district. She described that for the most part, teachers in the county are being offered the “illusion of choice” as it relates to their required PD content when in actuality they had little control over their PD designs.

Under the most agentic conditions described among these three school sites, teachers on staff would be surveyed as it pertains to their PD needs (often at the conclusion of a PD session), and from those completed surveys a few sessions were developed and offered to teachers on subsequent PD days. In some instances, a few select teachers who were either asked or who volunteered themselves would go on to lead these sessions. In describing this PD approach, participants were quick to commend their colleagues' efforts while at the same time pointing out that it seemed like the same handful of teachers were always leading these sessions. As Linda discussed this pattern, she disclosed, "it seems to be the same teachers who are considered the outstanding ones" and that the administration plays a part in empowering select teachers while potentially overlooking some talented educators who would do well to lead PD sessions. In this way, even the teacher-led sessions seemed to perpetuate selectivity and the "illusion of choice" at some school sites.

One participant in particular, though, voiced her skepticism of how effective these surveys were in responding to teachers' needs. Pam, a Latin teacher working at school site 1, claimed that even though she has completed multiple surveys over the years, she has never seen the option for a session on the topic she has repeatedly requested. What also remained unclear as participants described this survey approach was the response rate of these staff surveys at each school site as well as who oversaw analyzing the data collected from these surveys. When schools implemented this survey-style approach, leading up to PD days (sometimes a few days prior or sometimes only a few hours prior according to Courtney who worked at school site 2), teachers were given the option to choose which sessions they could attend. These session choices were limited to a few options and were potentially crafted in an effort to cover the most frequently requested topics based on survey responses. At some school sites, the options teachers



were provided for PD sessions did not originate from a teacher survey. In describing what this looked like at her school, Karen explained: “we're just given a menu to choose from, so nobody's really asked us”.

Opinions about the value of providing teachers more choice over their required PD sessions varied among the participants. Pam recounted that as far as PD options, “sometimes they'll let you choose, which is... I like that when we get to choose”. Melissa, a veteran teacher, seemed to acknowledge the constraints inherent to such an approach as she recalled, “we might have had options of choosing different things in a little window of time, a three hour time, take two out of three sessions, but the sessions were mapped out for us and so we had a choice of which one we went to, but we didn't have a choice of what kind of sessions we wanted.” On the other hand, Courtney, a teacher who has only been working at Melissa’s school for the last two years shared a more optimistic opinion regarding the opportunity for teachers to have more choice over their required PD sessions. She shared:

*I think if we were given options, almost like a student task sheet, if they gave one to teachers, a choose your own, these are the six options we're going to talk about today, choose four. Or even plan a month ahead. So after, once a month send out a survey as to what we want to learn about so we can set something up in time.*

These varying opinions may indicate that for some teachers in this study, even minimal choice over which sessions to attend on a given PD day would provide more control than teachers have typically been provided at their particular school sites.

Whether it had to do with who was making decisions about PD, how PD was being delivered, or the illusion of choice that teachers perceived, the teachers in this study indicated

that their lack of control constrained their agency as they tried to navigate the PD requirements at their various school sites.

### **Breakdown of Trust**

Along with feeling constrained by the lack of control they had over their professional learning, teachers in this study perceived a breakdown of trust between the teachers and those who were making PD decisions that similarly constrained their agency as they navigated school-required PD. In synthesizing the data, this concept of mistrust was most frequently discussed in conjunction with how teachers felt they were treated as they participated in mandated PD sessions and their general beliefs about the PD they were required to complete.

### ***Treatment of Teachers***

Although the participants discussed ways in which they were treated respectfully during required PD sessions, they also pointed out that they were not typically treated as active agents in charge of their own learning. In this way, they did not feel discredited by individual PD presenters but instead questioned the larger system that controlled their learning. Most of the educators attributed this inability to take on more active roles in large part to the lack of trust they felt county leaders had in their competence to make personalized PD decisions.

For the teachers I interviewed, mandated PD programs typically placed them in a passive role. Teachers used words like “given” and “recipients” to describe how they were typically taught. Jennifer revealed that at her school, “much of the PD that we offer is passive where they show up, they listen, they don’t have to do anything, and they walk away”. Similarly, Courtney described feeling treated “like college kids” in the midst of PD sessions as if teachers are “in a lecture and they’re just talking at you”. The majority of the teachers I interviewed did not feel

that the current school-required PD in which they must take part positions them to take on agentic roles as active learners.

More than that, the passive framing of the teachers in this study made it such that they felt they were expected to comply with whatever directives they were given. Beth described the situation at school site 2 as teachers “being forced to sit in the same PD experience that everybody else gets”. As a department chair working at school site 1, Pam recounted having to “take attendance” during school-mandated PD sessions and she questioned the appropriateness of being expected to monitor the compliance of other teachers on staff. As a teacher with 19 years of experience, Pam explained that with the current approach to required PD, there seems to be a mistrust in teachers to follow through with meaningful PD on their own terms. She compared this expectation to comply as teachers being “hammered” into place. She described:

*I think teachers like autonomy for... because there's a trust issue there. If you trust your staff that they're going to do it... It's that understood trust. You might have to talk to a couple people, "Hey, man. You got to get this done. Pick something cool." Then teachers feel better. They don't have a hammer over their heads, and they're not being hammered down into a little hole. You're going to do this. You're going to do this. You're going to do this because we say so. It's totally a trust issue. That influences a whole building, in my opinion, down to the student.*

Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3, indicated that administrators in her building presented PD as a “professional obligation” that teachers must fulfill. For the most part, participants discussed PD mandates in a way that made it seem like participation or even deviation from directives was not a viable option.

As various participants started to share their visions for how PD could take a different form, their language was couched in terms that reflected a sense of powerlessness. In my interview with Karen, an exceptional education teacher working at school site 3, she phrased her comment as “but if I would have been allowed to” as she considered how much more effective conducting an observation at a detention center would be in meeting her PD needs. Beth, a PD Planner at school site 2 recounted a previous summer meeting during which administrators were considering the possibility of “letting teachers be involved” in the PD planning process. The language of these sentences indicated that teachers in this study believed they would need to secure approval from someone with more power in order to deviate from the county’s or school’s PD mandates. In this way, multiple participants communicated that to a degree, teachers were not generally trusted to make their own decisions as it relates to PD. This was perhaps the most subtle example of how a breakdown in trust may impact teacher learning in this district, but a few participants were not remiss in directly commenting on the implications of needing permission to grow as educators. As Melissa, a veteran teacher argued: “if I’m doing something that’s bettering me as a teacher, then I should be allowed to do it!”.

A few of the teachers also shared ways in which this breakdown in trust between those making PD decisions and teachers that must complete said PD failed to align with the newest expectations the county has for its student population. As new guidelines for high school graduates have been rolled out in order to meet state standards, the county has crafted a profile that details the sorts of abilities that their graduates should develop before being awarded their degrees. As a few participants referenced their endorsement of this profile, they also voiced concerns regarding how its framing of student learners was incongruent with its framing of teacher learners. As Kirk unpacked his feelings on the matter, he reflected:

*I do feel like there's a lack of trust, there's a lack of trust in teachers. And it's funny even thinking about it right now in that the direction of teaching really is to give up control of the classroom to your students, right? And really trust them to give them the opportunity to show all the different ways that they can show their knowledge and very student-centered kind of things.*

He was not the only teacher who noted the incongruence between how teachers are treated as learners and how they are expected to treat their students. Pam similarly decried,

*We're told that we're supposed to give students choice, so give teachers choice. Give teachers a choice, do you want to go to this PD after school at 4:00, or would you rather do it at home after you worked out and then you're doing it on the computer? Why are you requiring us to be here because some people are cooked at 4:00, and they just need to go home.*

Melissa also expressed this idea when she shared: “We want our students to be engaged, but I think that's just as important for teachers to be”. These comments reflected a belief that perhaps those making PD decisions are not considering how their treatment of teacher learners might be counter to the instructional methods they are hoping teachers will implement in their classrooms. For the participants in this study, this dissonance seemed to be rooted in a belief that county leaders do not trust teachers to be in control over their PD experiences.

### ***Teacher Beliefs about Required PD***

Just as participants expressed the ways in which their treatment reflected a sense of mistrust coming from district, so too did participants express a mistrust in the district's decisions surrounding required PD. Across all three school sites, participants disclosed feeling a sense of

mistrust in the continuity of PD initiatives that were adopted in the county. Participants perceived this feeling of mistrust to be pervasive among teachers across the district.

Linda, a PD Planner who has been working in the county for the last 20 years, shared that many of the teachers at her school jokingly describe the county PD initiatives as the “flavor of the year”. With a hint of frustration in her voice she shared: “the expectation of the county every year seems to be something new”. She and other participants explained that they have seen so many PD initiatives come and go over the years that the teachers at their schools (in particular the more tenured teachers) are reluctant to buy-in on any new programs because they mistrust the continuity of such programs. In considering how he felt about required PD, Kirk provided the most positive perspective of all the participants, but he still pointed out the inconsistencies at play:

*I feel like some of the required PD sessions I feel like are not great and I think some of them ... Depending upon I guess what they are. Sometimes I see the need and I'm all in. Other times I know this is just an initiative that will go away in another year or two.*

This pattern of turnover was also acknowledged by multiple participants, some of whom discussed that they have even seen PD programs repeated. Pam, a Latin teacher with 19 years of experience, shared “sometimes it's something you've already had or it's repackaged from... If you're an older teacher, it's like, ‘Oh, we did this 20 years ago. This is how it is.’” Melissa, a middle school science teacher, depicted the lack of continuity it in this way:

*When the county... I've been in the county 22 years, and it's like how many... every year it's a new buzzword we're learning about or a new concept, and then you have to attend 15 PD's on it. I don't know. I just feel like a lot of it is because of stuff that's coming from outside of our control at the school level.*

On the whole, the participants acknowledged their sense of mistrust in the decisions being made about teacher learning.

Some of the teachers in this study indicated they struggled to trust the county or even their school to provide PD that would meet their learning needs. They felt their requests had either gone unheard or would go unheard were they to attempt to express them. Jennifer, the PD Planner at school site 1, candidly shared that “in the ideal world, we would be giving [teachers] what they're asking for”, but that with the current approach to PD this was not a reality.

Jennifer’s admission validated other teacher participants who felt their requests had either gone unheard or would go unheard were they to attempt to express them. She went on to explain that,

*...What we often find when we ask for input is that [teachers] ask to just be left alone.*

*And so we don't often get valid suggestions like if there's an afternoon they just wanna be free to work in their rooms. But that's... Grading papers isn't PD.*

With this comment, Jennifer conceded that teachers are making requests in how they feel they can develop as professionals, but that those requests do not align with expectations as to what counts as PD. From her perspective as a PD Planner at school site 1, asking for time alone in the classroom to work independently was not considered a “valid suggestion”.

In reference to the surveys she has completed over the years regarding her PD needs, Pam asserted: “I don't know if I personally have influenced anybody because of what I said, because I haven't seen what I've asked for”. Melissa shared that under a recent principal, she believed that in spite of teachers in her building having “great ideas on things we want to learn about in PD” they “never had that feeling of safety where we could bring it to the table”.

It must be noted, though, that not all participants communicated feeling this same mistrust in those who were making PD decisions. On the contrary, a few of the participants felt

they could share their concerns with leaders in their buildings. Kirk, for example, has a position in which he oversees curriculum decisions for a specific segment of the school population and therefore serves on his school's leadership team. He revealed: "I'm in a unique position in that because of my role I do have an ear on the decision-makers". Similarly, Karen commented that she might be able to go about "sharing her opinions" with leaders at her school. She went on to disclose that she had recently "asked" if she could take a college course and was granted permission to do so. These more optimistic opinions indicated that this mistrust in the county and its leaders' receptiveness to alternative PD approaches may not be universal for all the participants in this study.

During a few interviews, participants noted the ways in which they did not trust that required PD initiatives would serve as a good use of their time. Linda claimed that "40 percent" of the required PD she experiences is a "waste of time". Melissa's beliefs seemed to align with Linda's claims. As she unpacked feeling like required PD is often not a good use of her time, Melissa explained that part of feeling like required PD can be misuse of a teacher's time is rooted in the lack of commitment the school and/or county makes to PD initiatives. She maintained:

*I feel like from year to year, some kind of new thing is put into action. Yeah, it's not... building from year to year, or we were talking about something recently where we had this big to do about... now I can't even remember what the topic was, but I mean, this was a big deal and all this PD and it was gone the next year. It's like, "Really? That was a complete waste of my time.*

Even with being fairly new to the profession, Courtney declared, "if I'm at professional development until 4:30, 5:00 once a month and we've talked about dress code for a half an hour,



to me that's a half an hour wasted. And it feels like my jobs not being taken seriously and that I'm not, sometimes not treated as the professional that I am". In this way, participants in this study questioned how they were being required to spend their time during many of the PD programs their school or county had mandated.

These manifestations of mistrust between the teachers who must meet certain PD requirements and those who make decisions about the nature of those PD requirements serve as a constraint that limits teacher agency for the participants in this study. Not only do the teachers perceive that district leaders fail to place trust in their expertise, so too do the teachers express mistrust in the appropriateness of the district's decisions regarding their learning.

To summarize this first theme, both the lack of control and the breakdown of trust that these participants experience are perceived to create challenges for the secondary teachers in this study as they navigate their school-required PD. From the participants' perspectives, these main contextual constraints make it such that the school-required PD often falls short of meeting teacher's individual needs. In this way, these findings suggest that most of the participants would describe their agency in navigating PD requirements as limited, minimal, constrained. As indicated in the second key theme of this study, though, teachers may not feel they currently have the ability to influence decisions about school-required PD, but they most certainly have the desire.

### **Theme Two: Desiring to be Reframed as Knowledge Producers**

The second research question that guided this study explored, "How do secondary teachers perceive the value of liberatory PD?" The findings from this question were perhaps the most generative as they foregrounded the necessity for further studies (which will be discussed in chapter 5). All participants shared a desire to be reframed as knowledge producers, and all

participants assessed liberatory PD as a potentially viable and valuable means to that end. This theme of reframing was most evident as participants revealed how they saw themselves and as they expressed their perceptions of liberatory PD's value.

### **How Teachers See Themselves**

The secondary teachers in this study presented themselves as educators committed to growth and transformation. Of the eight total participants who took part in this critical study, 6 had been teaching for fifteen years or longer. Our conversations were candid as teachers talked openly both about their strengths and their weaknesses as educators. Across the interviews, these teachers perceived themselves to be life-long learners who were not only aware of their PD needs but also felt capable of pursuing individualized learning that would better support their needs.

### ***Life-long Learners***

In particular, the five teachers who participated in phase 2 of the study and created their own identity maps seemed eager to discuss the responsibility they felt to continually evolve as educators. At the start of our discussion, Pam, the Latin teacher working at school site 1, shared, "I like PD. I mean, as you can see from my identity map, I like school. I always like to learn about new things". Of the two Latin phrases Pam included on her identity map, one translates to "one learns by teaching," and as she circled back to point out this phrase before we ended our conversation, Pam asked the following rhetorical question, "because isn't that how we really learned our stuff?" in a way that implied that all teachers should consider themselves to be learners.

Along with Pam's, the four other identity maps also included words or symbols that indicated a commitment to life-long learning. During the first part of my interview with each of

these 5 participants, we began our conversation with the teacher explaining the identity map he or she had created. During this explanation, Karen, the exceptional education teacher working at school site 3 described feeling a “thirst for more” PD that would help her grow in her abilities to work with her specific student population. Karen’s identity map appears in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Karen’s Identity Map**

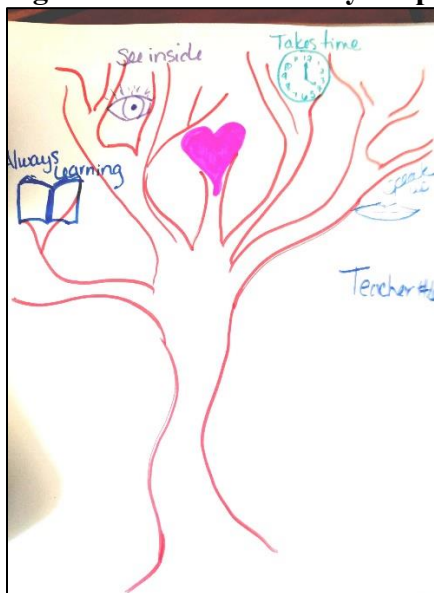


Figure 3. This is the identity map Participant #6, Karen, created to visually represent her identity as a teacher and a learner.

As we talked through her visual representation, as she explained: “So I drew a tree because a tree, it's constant growth from beginning until end. So there always has to be growth, I think, not only as a person but as a teacher”.

Courtney, a middle school science instructor in her second year of teaching echoed Karen’s beliefs as she described her identity map:

*So the first thing I thought was that if you're a teacher, you are almost by obligation a learner because in order to be a good teacher you need to stay up on new areas in your content and new ways of teaching something that is more engaging for students, you need to learn about these things to be able to use them. So to me they come hand in hand.*

Melissa, a coworker of Courtney's expressed feeling similarly. She even talked about posters she has hung in her classroom intended to remind her students of the importance of being a life-long learner. Melissa's identity map appears in Figure 4.

**Figure 4. Melissa's Identity Map**

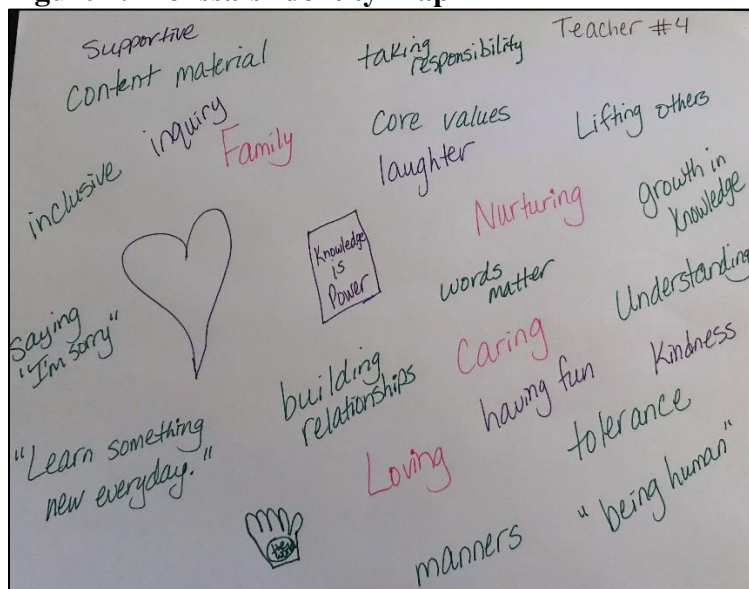


Figure 4. This is the identity map Participant #4, Melissa, created to visually represent her identity as a teacher and a learner.

As Melissa expounded her identity map, she asserted, “You learn something new every day. I've been teaching for 22 years, but I'm always learning new things. Learning doesn't... it never stops”.

Across all three school sites, the teachers discussed professional learning as both an expectation and an obligation that they must pursue to become better at their craft. These secondary teachers saw themselves as life-long learners who were committed to making continual efforts to grow as educators.

All eight of the research participants shared examples of these efforts. They recounted summer conferences they have paid to attend, conversations with colleagues that have been transformative, internet forums that have provided creative lesson plan ideas, and additional

trainings they have pursued such as National Board Certification as being exemplary PD experiences that assisted them in further developing their crafts. In spite of the limitations they felt required PD placed on their agency, these participants described the myriad of ways they have sought out professional growth on their own terms. These teachers all exerted effort (often at financial or personal sacrifice) to improve their skillset.

Kirk, a social studies teacher in his 19<sup>th</sup> year of teaching shared his desire to seek out professional growth:

*I find myself oftentimes going down these rabbit holes of trying to find either new lessons, or new ways, or strategies of teaching a specific history content that maybe I've done for two or three years but I need something new.*

Kirk went on to label himself “an anomaly” in that he felt not all teachers feel the same degree of passion in developing as educators that he does, but most of the other participants in this study seemed to share his enthusiasm and desire for learning. Beth spoke of taking “additional classes” and getting her “PhD” as experiences that she pursued to try and improve. Pam also talked about obtaining her master’s degree and how some of her coursework contributed towards her professional growth. Karen also discussed having gone “back to school” to further develop her skillset. Jennifer applied to a leadership academy within the county. After being selected, taking part in this academy afforded her the opportunity to develop an “action research” project of her own choosing and design.

A few of the teachers even shared their persistence in trying to seek out continual growth. As a high school Latin teacher, Pam is currently unable to secure her National Board Certification because of the content she teaches. When faced with the reality that this

professional growth opportunity was not available to her, she said she began to compare herself to teachers in her building that have completed their certification:

*How can I be better? How can I take what they've done even though I can't go through the process? How can I figure out what they're doing so I can be better? Because I think in that broad definition of professional development for the teachers, that's how I think.*

Even as teachers in this study like Pam came up against closed doors, they kept knocking, so to speak, in hopes of becoming more effective teachers. Feeling like she was not growing in the way she needed to grow, Karen researched course options at a local university and “asked” if she could take a course. After receiving approval, she enrolled and said that in taking the class, “I learned more from that class than I had any class”.

Along the same lines, Courtney discussed efforts she has made to attend technology conferences and to obtain certifications that support her professional growth. She explained:

*Well I feel, myself as a teacher and a learner, I go out of my own way to do professional development for things that intrigue me. Like I paid for and went to Ed Tech this year and I loved it. And I take a lot of online courses and I reach out to specific people, but that's my own personal learning track, not based on the school.*

In this way, Kirk was not alone in his quest for professional growth. Both the novice teacher like Courtney and the more seasoned teachers like Pam and Karen talked enthusiastically about the efforts they had exerted to grow and learn. Overall, though, the participants acknowledged that most of their meaningful and lasting professional growth experiences have happened apart from their contract or their school context. For the majority of these teachers, seeing themselves as life-long learners in many ways coincided with their desires to be reframed as knowledge producers.

### *Awareness of PD Needs*

In spite of sharing inspiring examples of their own efforts to grow as educators through various PD opportunities, participants struggled to identify examples of school-required PD experiences that have helped them develop into stronger teachers. With the exception of Courtney, who specifically described a required PD session that was dedicated to helping the staff better understand their school context and the demographics of their student population, the majority of these participants discussed their general dissatisfaction with school-required PD. This is not to imply that these teachers were against professional development in general; instead, they expressed a longing for professional development that would help them to be more effective with their students. Secondary teachers in this study were quick to name their needs, many of which aligned with the qualities of effective PD detailed in chapter one of this study.

**Time to Develop.** To my surprise, many of the participants expressed having the desire for more time dedicated to PD. To clarify, though, they wanted this PD time to be protected, purposeful, and properly planned. Multiple teachers suggested having PD on a monthly basis. Courtney described this frequency as part of her ideal PD approach. Jennifer, the PD Planner at school site 1, said that her PD experience with the leadership program was particularly beneficial. She felt that the monthly meetings afforded her “time to develop”, and she offered that being given such time in future PD efforts should be a top priority. In describing her school’s typical PD requirements, she contended that inadequate time is “probably the component that’s missing”. Along with Jennifer, Beth, the PD Planner at school site 2, also advocated for the benefits of PD occurring at least “once a month” in order for it be more productive and cyclical. As she described how she would design PD if given the opportunity she maintained:

*I really feel like there's not enough time devoted to professional learning for teachers in the school year, as it has happened in my experience, in 20 years. I would like to see more dedicated time for teachers, where they actually have a specific day, at least once a month, if not more often, but at least once a month, where the kids don't come to school, the teachers are able to meet either with each other, or there are instances provided by the district, or even conferences by the state.*

As he recounted his most recent experience with a small cohort of teachers who were experimenting with a different approach to PD at school site 1, Kirk went so far as to suggest the utility in having weekly PD. He shared that having “a concrete time” that was built into the school day made it so that this PD program did not “fall to the wayside” as others have done in the past. He also shared that the best PD he has experienced has provided him with “concentrated time to work with other teachers towards a common goal”.

In our interview, Melissa shared feeling that part of what made required PD feel like a “waste of [her] time” was that it was not “building from year to year”, so from her perspective this desire to have more time to develop extended beyond the confines of a single school year.

**Intentional Reflection.** As teachers discussed this yearning for more time, a few also shared that having more time would provide them greater opportunity to thoughtfully reflect on their learning needs and the needs of their students. As a teacher with 19 years of experience teaching Latin at school site 1, Pam contended that reflection is a practice that is emphasized while teachers undergo training but often overlooked once teachers enter their own classrooms. Pam asserted that, in her opinion, “a big problem with teaching” is that there is little time dedicated to regularly reflecting on one’s practice. She argued that this lack of time to reflect



was, “a big missing piece” for many educators. Melissa, a veteran teacher working at school site 2 put it this way:

*I think... for teachers especially, we get stuck in this black and white area with rules and things like that, which I understand because deadlines and things like that. But I think if we stop and put ourselves in the kid's situation, if I were this child going through everything that this child is going through, would I possibly act the same way? Or would I possibly not give two shakes about homework because I'm trying to put my little sister and little brother to bed and feed them dinner while my mom's at work.*

Others alluded to the significance of this “missing piece” in their own words. Karen, an exceptional education teacher working at school site 3, similarly reasoned for PD that would help teachers to become more “self-aware”. She argued that teachers need to have time to “consider what they're teaching and how they're teaching it, but more importantly who they're teaching it to”. Later in our conversation, Karen asserted that when PD requirements are simply dictated to teachers, the whole process becomes a bit automated. She explained that when teachers are told “here's your selection, here's your menu, pick, go to your class, see you tomorrow” that this rushed process makes it so, “there's no time to reflect on that, there's no time to practice what we've learned, if we've learned anything”. In this way, teachers at all three school sites discussed an awareness of their need for PD to prioritize intentional reflection among teachers.

**Conversation and Collaboration.** Participants also expressed the need for PD that would encourage conversation among colleagues. Jennifer, the PD Planner at school site 1, argued that receiving “insight and guidance” from another professional who “has no evaluative control” over a teacher can be a particularly transformative approach to PD. For Beth, the PD Planner at school site 2, her self-proclaimed “utopian professional learning” would provide

teachers with “time to go into those classrooms and do peer observations and have those sit-down conversations with teachers”. She went so far as to suggest a shortened school day that would allow teachers time after students left to sit down with one another and “keeping learning from each other” through discourse focused on practice.

Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3, claimed that PD should incorporate “more peer to peer training”. She commented that a few of the core departments at her school share a common planning period and that this opportunity to regularly discuss and plan together has been something these teachers have loved having. Kirk, who teaches at a high school in a different part of the county, made mention of how beneficial it would be if the teachers at his school could share common planning times within their departments. Melissa presented the idea that PD would be more transformative if it helped teachers build relationships with other teachers in the building. She suggested team-building activities and more communication-focused approaches to PD. Overall, these participants were acutely aware of their need for PD that would encourage more consistent conversation and collaboration with their colleagues. In this way, they desired for their coworkers to be reframed as knowledge producers just as they desired to be reframed themselves.

**Teacher Input.** Multiple participants discussed the need for school-required PD sessions to involve greater input from teachers. As exemplified in the first theme that emerged from this study, teachers felt that their voices were often excluded from decisions made about the required PD programs they were expected to complete. Jennifer discussed that as a PD Planner she is often left to make decisions based “on what we think [teachers’] needs are” instead of directly involving them in the decision-making process. When asked if the current level of teacher involvement with PD decisions is appropriate, Pam quickly retorted, “Probably not, no. I think

there needs to be more”. When asked this same question, Courtney, a teacher working at a middle school on the other end of county from Pam answered as follows: “I don't think so. I think, like I said before, I’m of the opinion that teachers are learners. So we do want to learn how to be better teachers, but we also have our own input”.

Beth, the PD Planner at Courtney’s school said that there are some structures in place such as coaching and PLCs that allow teachers to “more directly influence their learning”, but that these are separate from the required PD that occurs within the school year. Further in our conversation, Beth criticized the fact that the teachers at her school are not “empowered to help chart the course”; this comment indicated Beth’s own belief that teachers should be reframed as knowledge producers when it comes to PD decisions. She felt that having their input would help them to be more invested and more engaged in PD. Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3, reiterated this need as she asserted:

*I feel that to make it worthwhile for your teachers who are a majority in this building they need to be involved, you need to listen to, you meaning the administration or whomever is making the decisions, that the teachers need to be involved because they're the ones who are the ones who are going to turn around and use the PD in the classroom or amongst themselves.*

Overall, these participants felt they needed to have more say over their PD requirements, and this longing further revealed their desire to be reframed as knowledge producers.

**Autonomous Approaches.** These participants, though, did not want to just be able to have greater influence over their PD requirements, they also wanted the ability to pursue PD more autonomously. Across multiple interviews, participants described a desire for greater control over their PD requirements. Jennifer recounted that “being able to choose” her own

research topic during her recent leadership training experience was “wonderful” and “empower[ing]”. Beth, a PD Planner at school site 2, shared that her position as an Innovative Learning Coach allows her and other teachers in this same position (there is one coach per school site within the county) to “design” their own professional development. This is why she claims, “I’ve had a lot more development than some teachers have had” because she’s been in the driver’s seat of her own learning.

Pam exclaimed that PD “should have no boundaries” and that teachers should be able to be in control of what type of learning they pursue, as well as how and when they pursue it. She advocated that teachers need to have “choice of what they want to learn” and that at the very least PD should involve a “flexible delivery and a range of topics”. Karen, a teacher at school site 3, seemed to agree with this viewpoint as she explained, “I think we need more involvement so we can pick what's going to help each teacher the most and in the way that they learn”. In Kirk’s words, the ideal PD would be “voluntary” in that participation would be rooted in teacher choice. Courtney also commented on the value she saw in PD that allowed teachers to “choose” based on what they felt they needed.

Overall, these participants communicated a belief that the mandated PD they were receiving was not in line with what they would be producing if they had more input. They felt that not only were they aware of their learning needs, they were also competent enough to seek out knowledge that could meet those needs if necessary.

### ***Capable of Individualized Learning***

As most of these educators disclosed the independent efforts they made to improve, it was evident that they chose not to rely on the PD that was provided to them by their school or district as the sole means to their growth. They often made personal sacrifices of both time and

money to learn more about their craft. In synthesizing their responses, it became clear that these teachers perceived themselves as capable of carrying out a more individualized approach to learning. Not only that, but they also expressed a willingness to commit to PD they saw as meaningful and more than that seemed excited to take part in professional growth they believed would benefit their craft.

Jennifer made such efforts when she applied to the county's leadership academy. Participation in this academy involved having to dedicate a full day of her time each month. This required preparing plans for her substitute as well as completing assignments that were due for the program. She described the experience (in spite of how it increased her workload) as "incredibly motivating". She was not the only participant who described feeling a sense of excitement amid individualized PD pursuits. Pam, a teacher at Jennifer's school, talked about the efforts she made to attend every one of the teacher-led PD sessions that were scheduled monthly. Attendance to these morning sessions was optional, but Pam shared that choosing to participate helped her feel reinvigorated as a learner. She explained: "I heard some awesome, awesome, awesome stuff going on in the building because I went to those. What other people are doing... It just makes you as proud and excited". Kirk shared that his voluntary participation in a PD that involved a small team of teachers at his school this past school year was personally beneficial. He contended:

*So that was purposeful this year and even though I don't feel like we have tangible results of it, internally I learned a lot about myself or, you know, just thinking about these things. So that was very purposeful and I feel like that'd probably ... I'd like to continue doing that.*

For Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3 who teaches economics, even in the midst of her participation in this study she was pursuing knowledge independently in hopes of growing in her capacity to deliver better online instruction to her students. She described that in response to the pandemic and the closing of schools, that she was networking more with other teachers in the county. She explained:

*We're kind of all leaning on each other in regard to what websites are out there or what activities and this is certainly an opportunity to kind of learn and then maybe go back in the fall and say these are some resources that I've used while we were in quarantine and this could be a whole new way of teaching and learning because of what I have learned online.*

In this way, Linda was not reliant on required PD or county directives to adapt and grow; she saw a need and attempted to respond to it with the help of other educators.

As these teachers provided examples of the great lengths they had gone to in personally seeking out professional learning, they also referenced ways in which their colleagues had proven capable of completing more individualized PD pursuits as well. For example, Pam's discussion of the teacher-led PD sessions served as evidence of the ways other teachers in the county were making efforts to produce and share knowledge on their own terms. Linda's school recently adopted this same practice of providing extra PD through teacher-led sessions. In thinking about her coworkers' efforts, she argued: "I think that they've done a lot of research, a lot of work, it's obvious in their presentations how well they've done", which indicates that like Pam, she felt confident in her colleagues' abilities to learn independently and then share what they learned with other teachers in the building. Linda reiterated multiple times in our conversation that she saw "peer to peer training" as the most effective approach to PD. Jennifer

also commented on the value she found in being able to “get ideas” from other teachers in her building.

Beth, the PD Planner at school site 2, recounted a shift in PD that occurred under a recent leadership change that happened mid-way through the previous school year. Her tone became discernibly more positive as she explained the way that teachers became more involved in the PD decision-making process:

*It really was much more teacher-directed. We asked what teachers wanted to learn, what they wanted to see, maybe things they heard about from other teachers. Then once we had those topics, then we reached out to other teachers in the school who could present on those topics. Then we provided a day where it was rotating sessions, almost like a mini conference, where teachers could select the sessions they wanted to attend. It really was a much different experience for the teachers.*

When asked about the experiences that have helped her grow the most, Karen was quick to respond that she felt other educators have contributed most significantly to her development. As she described it, “Honestly, I think I have grown the most by watching, and learning, and observing, and those hallways conversations with highly respected teachers that are passionate about what they do”. Along the same lines, Courtney alluded to an email list she has developed to “share ideas back and forth” with other teachers she has met through various PD experiences. Kirk similarly shared that completing his National Board Certification alongside other teachers was perhaps the most transformative PD he has ever undergone. He also shared that in more recent years he has been teaching a college course at a local university, and that preparing to lead instruction at this level has been a whole new form of PD for him personally.

In this way, teachers at all three school sites saw both themselves and their peers as capable of investing in a more individualized approach to professional learning. They personally felt a desire to be reframed as producers of knowledge, but they wanted this reframing to occur for all of the teachers in their schools and in their district, not just a select few.

At the very beginning of each interview, I asked teachers to describe what PD would look like if they could plan it for a year. What was interesting was that not only did each participant express creative ideas, most of their suggestions aligned with the model of liberatory PD proposed in this study. Kirk discussed having a group of teachers to meet with during monthly, if not weekly, meetings where they could chart their own course as it relates to inquiry. This proposed group would establish norms, set learning goals, measure the success of the goals, and ultimately reevaluate their goals in an iterative fashion. Jennifer proposed PD efforts that would involve mentorship and a more horizontal approach to accountability and support from peers. She also proposed having a design that would promote teacher leaders to be more in charge of guiding their peers in PD efforts as opposed to building administrators making the bulk of the decisions. Linda discussed building community partnerships that could better support her learners in making real-world connections. Beth proposed instituting a sort of Genius Hour in which teachers could develop their own learning trajectories over time. As we were talking, Pam formulated the idea for an ongoing discussion board that could specifically focus on encouraging practitioner reflection. Immediately after sharing this suggestion, Pam revealed with excitement: “Ooh, that would be actually a really good... I just came up with a good idea!”

With time to consider the possibilities, these participants were quick to offer innovative approaches to professional growth that involved aspects of critical reflection, autonomy, and agency within their imagined designs. As such, not only could they recount ways in which they



had previously (and successfully) pursued knowledge on their own terms, they could also easily imagine new approaches to individualized learning that they felt might be productive and transformative.

Collectively, these participants saw themselves as committed learners who could not only name their learning needs but could also independently pursue any knowledge or growth that their school or county-required PD failed to provide. Seeing themselves in this way seemed only to fuel their desire to be reframed in more active roles as it related to their professional learning. How these participants saw themselves also seemed to justify their perceptions of liberatory PD.

### **Perceived Value of Liberatory PD**

Overwhelmingly, the teachers in this study expressed interest in the possibility of adopting a more liberatory model of PD at their schools. All participants expressed feelings of optimism when asked to describe their perception of liberatory PD's utility and/or value. They perceived that liberatory PD might better position them to take on active roles in the midst of their professional learning, and they seemed drawn to the ways such an approach to PD might serve to reframe teachers as capable and competent producers of knowledge. These secondary teachers perceived that not only would such an approach be beneficial to teachers, it would potentially have a positive impact on the school context at large as well.

### ***Benefits to Teachers***

As questions switched from talking about current PD requirements to liberatory PD possibilities, so too did participants' demeanors (as evidenced by the tone of their voice and their word choice). In a few cases, teachers made direct mention of how these sorts of conversations about the potential for new approaches to PD "excited" them and that its affects could be far-reaching. Pam contended that it "would be valuable to every school in the county". Some even

went so far as to make claims regarding its potential effectiveness were it to be embraced regionally or even nationally. For example, Beth argued that “this is the type of professional development that I think would be so beneficial for teachers, not just in my school, but in a lot of places”.

**Sense of Ownership.** In carefully examining their responses, this perception of liberatory PD’s value and utility was in large part rooted in the participants’ beliefs that it would help teachers develop a sense of ownership over their learning. Even in the earliest stages of data analysis, the concept of ownership seemed to be a significant one based on how frequently it was mentioned. There is certainly an underlying implication here that perhaps current PD requirements do not consistently enable these participating teachers to feel a sense of ownership over their professional learning. Although this is speculative, it foregrounds some of the most important points of discussion that will be explored in chapter 5.

Multiple participants expressed the belief that liberatory PD would put the teacher in control of his or her learning. They felt this control, or as many of them called it, ownership, would be meaningful because it could potentially garner greater investment among teachers at their respective schools. Several participants shared that required PD initiatives do not typically receive a great deal of support from teachers on their staff. Pam talked about the resistance that can often be felt and the “complain[ts]” that can heard in the midst of whole-staff PD. Linda shared that teachers on her staff have been known to grade papers while they are “supposed to be listening” to PD presenters.

When the conversation began to focus on aspects of liberatory PD, though, participants began to hypothesize about how this collective pessimism and resistance could potentially be stymied as teachers took over ownership of their professional learning. Jennifer, the PD Planner

at school site 1, asserted that an initiative founded on teacher autonomy would help teachers to potentially approach PD with more open-mindedness. She defended, “it also gets teachers to buy into it more. So they... If they get to choose what they're doing, and how they're doing it, then they're more likely to actually want to do it.” She also claimed that liberatory PD would be beneficial to teachers because it “would make them responsible for learning and accomplishing on their own” and that this would be perceived as “significantly more interesting” and engaging than the typical approach to required PD at her school.

Interestingly, all three PD Planners brought up this concept of ownership. Beth, who works at school site 2, explained:

*...making it more personalized makes it more meaningful for the teachers. Then when it's more meaningful, then they, I think, take more ownership of it, to help themselves get better.*

Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3, similarly defended liberatory PD's value as it “puts more responsibility on the teacher” and that “it give more ownership and it's more meaningful” than approaches that do not frame teachers as active producers of knowledge. In analyzing their comments, these three PD Planners all noted a correlation between the degree of ownership PD encourages and its degree of meaningfulness.

This correlation was made by other participants as well. Pam, the Latin teacher working at school site 1, claimed that a liberatory PD approach that offers teachers more input and control might help teachers feel more invested and therefore more eager about PD. She proposed:

*I feel like if more teachers were part of that, I think the PD would maybe, I would like to think, more meaningful and more... Since there's more skin in the game for people, they'd be more enthusiastic.*

When asked to imagine how she might feel if she were to participate in liberatory PD, Karen, the high school teacher who instructs students with emotional disabilities, predicted that she would feel “engaged and kind of refreshed”. Further in our conversation, Karen articulated:

*I think that if we went to more of a liberatory professional development, I think we would have more enthusiastic teachers. I think there would probably also be less burnout.*

Kirk, a high school social studies teacher, felt that a liberatory model of PD that would encourage teacher autonomy would be empowering to teachers. As he reflected on how this approach to PD might benefit teachers, he talked about the intrinsic value that might result from teachers making their own decisions. He contended: “There’s a lot more ownership in that and so I think that’s a big, I don’t know, golden nugget there if you can get teachers to buy into that”.

For these participants, they assessed a liberatory PD model that would enable teachers to have greater ownership to be both desirable and potentially transformative. They perceived that liberatory PD’s propensity to provide them ownership was beneficial in large part because it aligned with their desires to be recognized as producers of knowledge as opposed to recipients of knowledge.

**Productive Reflection.** The majority of the participants also perceived liberatory PD to have value because of its focus on critical reflection. After proposing that PD “should inspire reflection”, Jennifer went on to explain:

*... when teachers have a say in what and how they’re learning as professionals, they are more likely to take that learning, implement it in their classroom, reflect on it, and then return to that process again and again.*

Similarly, Karen, an exceptional education teacher at school site 1, asserted: “I think we would get teachers that were more enriched and had more buy-in if they were asked to do some critical

reflection”. Based on their comments, both Jennifer and Karen felt that reflection and a sense of ownership were not mutually exclusive. They saw the reflection component as being an essential part of how teachers would be better positioned to take control and become more invested in their PD pursuits.

Kirk explained that in his own experience, pursuing his National Board Certification aligned with many of the tenets of liberatory PD and most significantly with its focus on critical reflection. He said that completing the work made him “take ownership” of every classroom decision he made as he had to reflect on his practice and justify the decisions he presented as evidence of his instructional aptitude. He says this intentional reflection was transformative to his practice, and therefore advocated for liberatory PD’s utility as an effective PD approach worth pursuing.

Courtney, a middle school science teacher in her second year of teaching, agreed that reflection would be an important element of PD that could help teachers think about growth as a long-term investment. She explained, “I think if that reflection piece was there and you realized your agency, then you’d better be able to plan for the future and what you need and want”.

As mentioned earlier, the teachers in this study felt that their required PD did not typically incorporate time for reflection. The secondary teachers in this study considered this “missing piece”, as Pam called it, a detriment to one’s practice. Melissa had this to say about the lack of reflection:

*I don't think as teachers, we do that enough and I know... I feel like as often as I do it, I feel like sometimes I need to do it a little more because we're so concerned about our deadlines with things and getting these kids ready for state mandated tests and things like*

*that, that sometimes we lose the humanity part of it, you know? We have to remember these kids aren't robots.*

For Melissa, she saw this lack of critical reflection within required PD programs as playing a part in the dehumanizing aspects of current schooling practices. She saw great utility in liberatory PD because of its ability to encourage more consistent and more teacher-directed reflection.

By embracing a PD approach predicated on reflection, these participants felt that meaningful changes would be more likely to occur in their teaching contexts. They perceived an immense benefit to having the teachers reflect on their own learning needs and then pursue inquiry based on their reflections. For these participants, liberatory PD's focus on critical reflection was perceived as a major aspect of its utility as it would help to position teachers in more active roles as it relates to their learning pursuits.

**Reframing Teachers as Leaders.** In becoming more critically reflective and taking ownership over their own development as educators, the participants in this study felt that liberatory PD would also help teachers to be recognized as leaders. Whereas many of the required PD programs these secondary teachers recounted involved teachers taking on passive roles, they perceived value in liberatory PD's potential to help eliminate this passivity.

As a proud teacher leader himself, Kirk contended that the focus on development of agency that liberatory PD promotes would be beneficial to teachers. He asserted:

*I do think that's another component of this. I also see a huge benefit in that just simply because the teachers get a chance to investigate things they want to investigate, and so I think there's a lot of power in that.*

Recently the county has encouraged more teacher leadership by creating Innovative Learning Coach positions for which teachers can apply. There are also some other coaching

models that some select schools have been piloting, but based on these eight interviews, it seems that most teachers in the county would not be quick to label themselves as leaders. Kirk saw this as something that a liberatory model could help to change. Although he was the most outspoken about this belief, he was not alone in it.

Jennifer discussed how liberatory PD could help teachers to feel more “accomplished”. As she imagined possibilities for what liberatory PD could look like in action, she proposed teachers to serve in non-evaluative roles to help their coworkers pursue professional growth and that these “teacher leaders”, as she called them, could serve in the role of “experts” within this PD model. Similarly, Beth proposed that teachers in her building could be the ones “developing” the PD for one another. Linda also advocated for having more teacher-led sessions, and for greater representation of these teacher leaders across the entire staff at her school. Along the same lines, Courtney proposed having a group of teachers that would collectively formulate plans for PD.

As these examples indicate, multiple participants discussed how encouraging teacher autonomy and agency through liberatory PD would help reframe teachers as leaders; they felt this reframing could be transformative for teachers and for the school settings in which they work. In this way, some of these secondary educators perceived liberatory PD as valuable because they felt this approach could support their desires to be reframed as active leaders in charge of their own learning.

### ***Benefits to School Context***

Although the participants focused a large part of their conversation on their perceptions of how liberatory PD would benefit teachers, many also mentioned how it could benefit the

school context at large. Teachers at each school site shared ways in which they felt like their teaching context could be improved through the adoption of liberatory PD.

**Relevant Changes.** For one, they felt that such an approach to PD would help inspire relevant changes within particular school contexts. Beth claimed the “broad swipe” PD approach that her school has typically embraced makes it so that “while you helped maybe half of the school, you've still got this other half that's trailing behind because they didn't get something that they needed”. If Beth’s estimate is correct, this means that things that need changing potentially go unchanged from year to year for close to half of the teachers on staff. Since liberatory PD eliminates this “broad swipe” approach and instead takes on a more micro focus on teacher learning and growth, she and other participants perceived that it could assist teachers in making more relevant changes to their practice.

Melissa, a teacher at Beth’s school, claimed that teachers would be more apt to make changes that need to be made if they were in charge of their own learning. She argued, “I think when we have our own choice of what we're going to do as far as PD, then we'll actually pay attention. We'll actually take those things we learned and actually apply them”. Melissa seemed to believe that liberatory PD and its emphasis on autonomy could inspire teachers to consider making changes to their practice in a way that current PD requirements have not inspired.

Towards the end of the interview, Melissa asserted:

*“So if I can pick and choose what I go to for PD, then I'm more likely to want to go back and talk about it and say, "Hey, we've done X, Y and Z all these years. Not working. Let's try something else.”*

Along with other participants in this study, then, she felt liberatory PD could result in relevant changes to the school context at large.



These participants believed that a more inductive approach to PD had the propensity to empower the people closest to the problems of practice to seek solutions most appropriate to their individual teaching contexts. Beth, the PD Planner at school site 2 proposed: “When a teacher can personalize what they need to learn, to benefit their own students in the classroom, then that's going to have a more significant impact”. Jennifer, the PD Planner at school site 1 seemed to agree with this assessment as she proposed, “I think it gives the teachers the opportunity to really look at their own practice and then make changes that are relevant to their particular needs and their particular students”.

Jennifer went on to explain this idea of relevancy in more detail. She reasoned:

*[teachers] intimately know the challenges of the school based on what happens in their classroom and the students that they teach. And so if they're determining their PD, ideally, it's because of what they're seeing in their classroom, or what they see is missing in their classroom. And so that gets at changing what actually needs to be changed.*

Jennifer felt that having a PD approach like liberatory PD that relinquish control to teachers regarding what they must learn would lead to more purposeful change.

In this way, some of the teachers ascribed value to liberatory PD approach because they felt it made greater sense to put the learners’ needs (who in the case of PD are the teachers themselves) first. Their remarks indicate a questioning of why decisions regarding how they needed to grow as educators were consistently being outsourced.

**More Hopeful Approach to PD.** Multiple participants commented on how liberatory PD seemed more promising than other PD approaches. Linda described liberatory PD as “an awesome opportunity”. From Pam’s perspective, good and motivating PD becomes “contagious” and it makes learners want to “stay there” and learn more. She felt that liberatory PD would be

contagious as it would help to reinvigorate the school climate. Beth, too, described liberatory PD as having “tremendous potential”. She saw this approach as more hopeful in part because it could have a wider impact on the entire school. She explained it this way:

*...when the teachers really are able to identify what changes they need to make, that's going to improve their own classroom. Then when we have all of the individual classrooms being improved because teachers are getting the specific learning and resources and development that they need, then that pushes the whole school up at the same time. Because every individual classroom is improving.*

Kirk discussed that when his school site first opened, there was a much smaller staff of teachers and they worked in very close proximity to one another. A sense of wonder and delight came over him as he reflected on how this time afforded him firsthand experience with some of the key components of liberatory PD (without being mandated). He said lunch conversations were generative and content focused. He described a sort of collective energy that made the work environment incredibly motivating. He called this ability to be together and have more autonomy as a “big, meaningful thing”. From his perspective, this felt like a form of PD that emphasized critical reflection among the group of teachers that were helping to shape the norms as it related to professionalism and school culture. He described this time as a “grassroots” approach to PD that “wasn't taught down, it was sort of bottom-up”. From his assessment, this past experience could be considered a form of liberatory PD, and because he feels it was so meaningful, he sees such an approach as being more hopeful than many of the required programs he has had to attend over the years.

Courtney also perceived liberatory PD as a more hopeful approach to PD. She claimed, “I think that would be a wonderful change. I think the more say that teachers have in their own

learning, I think the more engaged they would be”. Later in our conversation she unpacked her perceptions of liberatory PD in greater detail as she explained: “I think it would make a huge difference in engagement and in just the general atmosphere”. Melissa, a coworker of Courtney’s and a fellow science teacher, echoed Courtney’s belief that liberatory PD would be a more hopeful approach that could benefit the school context at large. She saw one major benefit as being an increased openness to learning and a better attitude about PD. In thinking about how teachers’ responses to liberatory PD might impact the learning environment, she asserted: “I think they could just... their attitude would be better, you know? When you have a better attitude, your mind is more open to learning new things”.

**Impact on Students.** Although secondary teachers in this study did not mention PD’s potential impact on students as much as I had predicted they would, the comments regarding the impact on students were almost exclusively related to teachers’ perceptions of liberatory PD. A few participants assessed liberatory PD as having a potentially positive impact on students. As Beth discussed the way liberatory PD would prioritize teacher autonomy, she hypothesized:

*...when they can recognize what they personally need to help their students succeed, then I feel like that's when we would see a much broader increase in student performance. Because we're getting better, to help the students specifically.*

A coworker of Beth’s, Melissa, also felt that liberatory PD might benefit students in more than just their performance. Melissa brought up the idea that adopting PD that promotes teacher agency could help not only boost teacher confidence but also student confidence. She proposed:

*And then as far as students, I think it would help them see that the teachers are doing something positive that maybe they can do things that are positive too. So if that if the teachers are doing it, they would probably explain to the students too, "Hey, this is what*

*we did." Now how can we do it on a student level? I think that would help, and I think it would help both students and teachers with confidence.*

In this way, she felt Melissa felt like having more empowered teachers could translate to having more empowered students.

Although Karen works with a different population of students, her comments seem to align with Beth's and Melissa's beliefs. In discussing the potential effects of embracing a liberatory model of PD, she defended:

*I think you would have teachers that felt more empowered, and when teachers feel more empowered. I think it reflects onto their students and their students may feel more empowered. The teacher might encourage them to be more empowered.*

From Karen's perspective, liberatory PD would be valuable because she thinks it would "engage our students not just our teachers".

When asked for their opinions concerning a PD that would prioritize agency, autonomy, and critical reflection, these participants responded with palpable enthusiasm and interest. Across the interviews, participants perceived liberatory PD to have benefits to both the teachers in their schools as well as their school contexts at large. Their comments indicated that part of this ascribed benefit had to do with liberatory PD's potential reframing of teachers. These teachers saw themselves as learners who were deeply committed to their own growth as educators, and they perceived liberatory PD as a means to help invest in that growth more easily and more productively.

### **Theme Three: Struggling to Envision How their Agency could Support their Liberation**

In spite of their perceptions regarding liberatory PD's potential utility, the participants' responses reflected a tension between wanting to be free from the constraints of required PD

while simultaneously remaining compliant with many of the structures they recognized as constraining. The third research question for this study was stated as follows: “How useful do secondary teachers find the vision of agency in liberatory PD?” Analyzing the data related to this question led to an emergent theory that will be explored in greater detail in chapter 5. Overall, these participants expressed feeling limited in their ability to transform their teaching contexts, and their responses indicated a tendency to default towards PD designs rooted in external control.

### **Feeling Limited in Ability to Transform Context**

For the majority of the participants (specifically those who did not serve in leadership roles at their schools), considering ways that they could feasibly and specifically impact their school’s required PD programs appeared to be challenging. This is not to imply that the teachers felt they could not generate creative solutions or propose innovative ideas; instead, it seems they felt limited in their ability to take agentic steps that could facilitate lasting change within their school settings.

### ***Attempting to Assert Agency***

One manifestation of agency recounted by the participants had to do with teachers’ approaches to participation. Quite candidly, Linda shared that in many of the whole-staff required PD sessions that took place in her school’s library, “half the people are grading, the other half are asleep”. As such, those in attendance at her school were not necessarily engaged and fully present. Along with Linda, most participants described teachers at their schools attending required PD out of a sense of obligation. As Jennifer explained, she believes that for many teachers, PD “feels like just one more thing for a person to do”. Similarly, Courtney claimed, “I would say PD just feels like an obligation that we know we need to do”.

Some participants described how a few teachers at their various schools frequently scheduled absences or appointments on PD days. Pam described that the degree of agency teachers have when it comes to required PD days comes down to a teacher deciding, “I choose to go or I don't choose to go”. Melissa expressed this attempt towards acting agentially in more colorful terms: “when people hear PD they want to eat glass or get a root canal, or schedule a doctor's appointment so they don't have to go”. She talked openly about how teachers at her school would often “call in sick” on scheduled PD days.

Whether choosing to use a sick day and avoid the mandated PD altogether or choosing to be physically present and mentally absent during required PD, the approaches to participation teachers took at these three school sites reflected their efforts to assert their agency. As Beth contended, some teachers at her school determined that that there would be no follow-up after an absence or repercussion for multi-tasking during presentations, so they asserted their agency by circumventing PD programs they did not assess as being meaningful or necessary to attend. In this way, the agentic actions teachers on their staff have taken described by these participants had more to do with avoidance and resistance as opposed to overhaul or transformation.

According to participants at each of the school sites, another example of teacher agency was discernible in the attitude teachers chose to have as they approached mandated PD. Both Pam and Kirk discussed having made efforts to assert their agency by choosing to approach PD mandates positively, at least on the front-end of initiatives. Not all the participants in this study, though, felt like a positive mindset was the appropriate attitude with which to approach mandated PD. Across the interviews, the participants acknowledged ways in which teachers at their school sites often approach required PD with a negative attitude. Jennifer, the PD Planner at

school site 1, described high school teachers as “cynical by nature” and that they tended to not be overly receptive during required PD sessions.

Melissa, a middle school science teacher, claimed that “when you're told you have to attend something for a certain amount of time, people automatically have a sour attitude”. She went on to describe what she felt was the common scenario at her school: “People are looking at the clock wondering when it's going to end. Could there be a snowstorm come out of nowhere to save us? You know? Just frustrating.” When asked how she felt when she was participating in her school’s required PD sessions, she bluntly responded: “In a lot of them, it is... I'd rather have a root canal”. Courtney, a teacher who works with Melissa at school site 2, argued,

*I think a lot of teachers look at professional development as something negative. It's just been thrown into such a light and been a chore for so long that when you think about it and the extra two hours it's going to add onto your work day, I see where that dread kind of comes from. And I have a lot more fun doing my own professional development outside of the school setting.*

At one point in our conversation, Courtney claimed there was a degree of “pushback from teachers” at her school when it came to the changing initiatives year after year, but she did not indicate ways in which that pushback had ever manifested itself beyond teachers voicing skepticism or disapproval.

Some participants described teachers overtly vocalizing disdain for PD initiatives both before and during required PD programs. Pam, the Latin teacher who discussed trying to approach required PD with a positive attitude admitted that she may be considered an outlier among her staff. She explained:

*Required PD sessions usually involving the whole faculty, honestly, is sometimes really hard because people complain. I mean, before you walk in or as you're walking in, people are like, "Oh my gosh. What do we have to do?"*

Even with the proclivity towards learning and continual growth these educators seemed to possess, participants described a teacher workforce who approached required PD with a sense of dread as opposed to enthusiasm. In this way, expressing a negative attitude seemed to be another way in which teachers attempted to assert their agency.

Some participants recounted efforts they have taken to make requests regarding their PD desires. Most of these requests, though, were fairly passive in nature. For example, Pam recalled filling out surveys about her PD needs that came both from the county and the district at various times in her career. She explained, “we'll get a couple surveys, or we have gotten surveys in the... This is over the whole range of years. What are you interested in learning about? What would you like to see? That type of thing.”. She also discussed signing up for a PD committee that was recently proposed based on the school’s improvement plan, but she could not recall whether this committee was ever officially formed. Jennifer, the PD Planner at Pam’s school, was open about how required PD fails to respond to some of the requests that are made. She disclosed, “we do listen to their suggestions and try to offer what people are suggesting, but it's still just becomes, you know, choose from these options. It's not everybody does what they think they need”. As the PD Planner at school site 2, Beth’s perspective is that this failure to respond to teachers’ requests has recently made teachers at her school feel “like what their needs were didn't matter”.

Karen, a teacher who works with students with emotional disabilities, shared that she actually found that her negative attitude towards required PD activated her agency. In regards to her school’s required PD, she claimed, “I think it empowers me by making me frustrated and



asking for something different”. She went on to describe how feeling frustrated made her seek out more personalized PD. Although her agency assisted her in obtaining permission to complete a course she felt would be more relevant, she was still expected to attend the school’s required PD sessions throughout the year.

Out of all of the participants, Melissa, a middle school science teacher working at school site 2, seemed able to enact her agency most productively. As a representative for her grade level, she proposed a teacher-led, conference-style approach to PD that was approved under an interim leader. Melissa shared, “so that really did help, but I feel as far as effecting change, a lot of it has to do with leadership in the building and having that safe space to even try to affect change.”. Her comment indicated that she believes her agency may have only been this effective at transforming her teaching context because of the change in leadership. In this way, teachers like Melissa who are willing to take agentic steps towards transforming the PD norms that exist in their school contexts might still face constraints as they attempt to advocate for approval and/or support from building leaders.

It is important to note that a few participants did express feeling that they might be able to potentially influence decisions regarding PD designs based on their leadership positions. For example, Kirk, who disclosed that his role on the staff affords him strong relationships with building leaders, celebrated that he “went to the principal” and directly “advocated” for the opportunity to attend a summer conference along with a small group of teachers at his school. Similarly Beth, as the Innovative Learning Coach at her school, expressed her content with being able to attend local and national PD programs that she feels will support her growth. She explained: “In the role that I have, I am able to do some of those much more organized professional development activities, going to conferences, local and state, and on rare occasions

going to a more national level conference as well.” Although their agency seemed to result in professional growth on a personal level, even these two these educators’ agentic actions did not serve to alter school-wide PD requirements and procedures.

Whether through their attitude, their attendance, or even their advocacy, it appears the various attempts teachers in this study or teachers at their schools have attempted to make in an effort to navigate required PD agentic acts have failed to generate lasting transformation. Although the teachers in this study recognized some subtle ways in which teachers assert their agency when faced with PD requirements, they also acknowledged the limitations that have constrained teachers in their efforts to influence the ways PD is approached within their various teaching contexts.

### ***Limitations Specific to School Context***

The fourth and final research question that guided this inquiry asked, “How do the differences in school contexts shape secondary teachers’ responses to the concept of liberatory PD?” Although participants at all three school sites perceived liberatory PD as having both value and utility, the potential limitations they expressed about its overall reception by their respective staffs varied a bit by site. These limitations presented unique challenges that made some of the participants feel it would be difficult to transform their school contexts.

**School Site 1.** Two of the teachers working at school site 1 specifically discussed ways in which the staff culture has shifted since the school first opened. Kirk has been at the school since the doors opened and Pam starting teaching Latin at the school the following year. In each of their interviews, both talked about the original teachers working at this school as a group of educators that could be described as enthusiastic and invested. Kirk explained, “it was a small group of teachers, but everybody was chosen to be there for a specific reason”. From Kirk’s

perspective, having this “group of teachers to talk to” that all seemed to “feel passionately about teaching” and “had the same mission” led to significant professional growth for him. Pam seemed to share his sentiments. In talking about their school, she defended, “I always felt like we were so new that everything was exciting”. She described the school as “fresh” and “cutting-edge”.

From both of their accounts, though, the dynamism that first existed among the teaching staff has started to diminish. Kirk reflected, “I learned a lot about teaching professionally in that experience and have continued to, but I’ve noticed that as it gets bigger and secluded that was a shorter timeframe that that happened”. He described feeling like at times teachers in the building seem to be in their own “silos”. He recounted a previous approach to PD at his school that involved peer observations and felt that this had helped to get teachers out of their own classrooms; he also felt that it inspired them to think about instruction in a new light. As time has passed and the staff has changed, though, he felt that initial energy that led to more informal PD occurring even amidst lunch conversations has faded a bit. Pam described it in this way:

*In the last couple years, it's changed. I feel like, not that we've slumped, but that we've kind of slumped and that includes the PD because I feel like before, there was more, not joking around, but people would say stuff that kept it light and fun for required PD. It's not quite that same way. It's more serious now.*

Although Jennifer, the school’s PD Planner, did not directly allude to this shift, she did describe the current staff as being “a tough audience” who are typically “skeptical of anything they are asked to do”.

In considering these participant responses, it appears that the limitations at school site 1 have much to do with the staff culture. Although there may have been a season when most of the

staff at this school were open-minded and receptive to innovative professional development approaches, it seems that collective positivity has shifted somewhat. As Kirk and Pam both discussed their continued efforts to approach school-required PD positively, it seems their efforts to model optimism have not been sufficient in transforming their teaching context.

**School Site 2.** In comparison to the other two sites, participants working at school site 2 were markedly more vocal about the challenges they faced in their settings. For one, participants referenced the challenges that have arisen from the school's geographical location. As the school is located in the far end of the county in a more rural setting, this has created multiple issues for staff members as they approach their professional growth. In regard to substitutes who are unwilling to pick up jobs at her school, Beth remarked: "the comment that they have made is that it's just too far". Beth went on to describe this inability to get substitutes as a "horrendous problem" at her school site. According to Beth, the school's isolated location has historically made it challenging to secure substitutes which has translated to teachers often being forced to sacrifice planning time in order to cover colleagues' classes

Many of the teachers who work at this location reside in other parts of the county and make a daily commute of up to a half hour or more in some cases. As Beth defended, "To ask them to stay back for another 30 minutes to an hour after school puts them home that much later. Then when they're coming home, they're right in the middle of rush hour traffic". The main highway that is accessible to the school is the one in the area that most often sees rush-hour traffic, so planning after-school PD that ends right before rush hour begins has presented unique challenges to staff members, especially those who must be available pick up their children from daycare at specific times.

Additionally, because many of the teachers on staff are not a part of the communities their school serves, they have encountered cultural mismatches that at times have made it challenging for teachers to feel connected to their students and vice versa. Courtney described the situation in this way:

*Our school is very diverse, a lot of schools around here are... which is wonderful, but it proves challenging some days just because you don't know how to make connections. You don't know about any of these kids' backgrounds unless you have a very deep conversation with them.*

She went on to share about one school-wide PD that focused on trying to bridge that cultural divide. She described the experience as “meaningful”, but also indicated that it was a singular event. Melissa discussed a conference she was selected to attend that focused on equity and inclusivity. She said that having a learning experience that was “geared toward the population” where she taught was important as it helped her grow in compassion for her students. With a pang of disappointment in her voice, Melissa said, “I feel like that was something that I wish our whole staff could have been involved in”. In this way, both of these teachers emphasized the need for teacher training that is focused on their specific student population.

Aside from the challenges that arise from the school’s location, the participants also noted the limitations they have faced based on what they perceived as the school’s pattern of oppressive administration. Beth, the PD Planner, described how the PD content was solely “dictated by the principal” and often on a whim. She recalled how the principal would approach her with the idea for PD sometimes less than 48 hours before a program was scheduled with the expectation that it be ready for the staff in time. Courtney confirmed this when she shared that

teachers at her school have often been forced to prepare something last minute because the administrators have made the request, but “it's not asking in a way that allows them to say no”.

Both Beth and the other two teachers I interviewed who work at this school described a leadership style that had perpetuated a culture of fear. Whether it was a PD session centered on dress code expectations or a PD meeting that highlighted student test scores broken down by teacher performance, it seemed that the teachers felt demoralized under this leader. On top of that, Beth recounted how during some PD sessions, teachers were expected to stay up to 90 minutes after “they were supposed to go home”. Melissa assessed this treatment as teachers feeling like they were “being held hostage”. Under this recent principal, Melissa similarly described feeling fearful of retaliation were she to suggest something with which this leader did not agree or assess as valuable. She described how teachers might be met with a “slammed door” if they offered ideas to the administrator. She mentioned multiple times in our conversation that under this leader teachers did not feel “safe” to express concerns or share thoughts on how things might improve.

According to these participants, an interim principal took this leader's place in the middle of last school year. Beth asserted that the “culture and with that professional learning changed dramatically” when this change in leadership occurred. Courtney claimed that with this shift the “whole school had started this huge turn around”. Melissa disclosed that this change made her feel safe to share ideas on behalf of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade teachers she represented, and that more than that, her ideas were put into action. As of the last of my interviews, though, a new principal had not been named. Although these three participants were pleased with how the interim administrator approached professional learning, they did not know for certain what style of leader would ultimately take the reins at their school moving forward.

According to the three participants I interviewed at school site 3, the school's location and its recent leaders have created significant limitations for the teachers who might aim to help transform their school context.

**School Site 3.** After only securing interviews from the PD Planner and one additional teacher at school site 3, conclusions about the limitations specific to this school context were made with the awareness that they may not be as representative of how other staff members feel. In spite of only having two transcripts to analyze, a few noteworthy findings did emerge.

At this school site, the age and/or experience of teachers on staff was mentioned by both participants. As Linda, the PD Planner, considered how staff members at her school might react to a liberatory PD model, she was quick to assert that younger teachers on staff might be more open to it, partly because they have not grown used to PD requirements looking a certain way year after year. She claimed, "I think having to become more engaged and have conversations and do activities- I think that would be more challenging for our more tenured teachers". To some degree, Linda lumped herself in that category. She articulated:

*I know when we walk into professional development and there's pieces of paper and crayons or dice or color-coded Ziploc bags, everybody in my age group they cringe they're like uh what am I going to have to do now?*

For Karen, the exceptional education teacher who works with students who have emotional disabilities, she felt that highlighting the resistance of more tenured teachers might be an important step in helping these seasoned staff members make the decision to step away from the profession. She shared:

*I think if we started to let teachers expand their wings you would see those teachers who would resist because, "That's going to take too much of my time and that's not the way*

*I've done it. I've taught it this way for 15 years and I'm not going to teach it any other way."*

Both Linda and Karen, alluded to the fact some of the older staff members might express a resistance to learning, and that this resistance could serve as a limitation for those teachers who were actively working to try and usher in change within the school context.

Linda also expressed ways in which she feels like her school's specific PD needs are not always recognized or met by county-wide initiatives. She voiced frustration with the "feel good activities" she thinks take place during the annual district-wide PD days. As she defended,

*Teachers don't want that. They want the opportunity to either stay within a three mile area with some common schools and discuss common students or activities that have been successful for them because what's successful on [one] end may not be as successful on the [other] end of [the county].*

Linda also perceived the lack of PD opportunities catered to her particular student population to be a limitation. She disclosed feeling like PD is too often focused on "the student in need or the student who has free and reduced lunch, or our minority students". She expressed the need for "more in-house activities or at least in school activities that are meaningful".

Both Linda and Karen had concerns regarding the receptiveness of tenured teachers working within their school context. From their perspective, these more seasoned teachers might make instigating change difficult at their school site. In addition, Linda felt that the school's needs as it related to their student population were also being overlooked; she felt this oversight was unique to her school setting as well.

### ***Longing for Transformation***

In spite of the unique limitations noted at each of their school settings, participants at all



three sites discussed a longing for their settings to undergo transformation as it related to how their PD requirements were designed and delivered. All eight participants perceived that liberatory PD could benefit the school context in which they worked. Although the participants described encountering some elements of liberatory PD in previous PD experiences, they shared that their school-required PD had never simultaneously prioritized all three of the aspects embedded in a liberatory approach.

In particular, the teachers seemed most drawn to the autonomy that a liberatory PD approach would offer them. Jennifer imagined teachers picking their “own topics” and seeking out a “mentor”; Beth envisioned teachers “investigat[ing]” things they feel would be pertinent to their classrooms; Linda offered ideas about economics teachers (like herself) engaging with local business owners; Pam proposed teachers pursuing growth “at their own pace”; Karen highlighted the potential value of an apprenticeship approach to PD; Courtney expressed a longing to lead PD for other teachers. In this way, these participants were easily able to recommend approaches to PD that would be autonomous. In some cases, you could detect the desire they felt for such a shift in how their voices changed as they offered their ideas. Excitement and enthusiasm became evident at these moments in the interviews. At the same time, though, as teachers talked about their ideas, they seemed less able to communicate how they could practically play a part in influencing the adoption of a more liberatory PD approach to PD at their schools. Ironically, then, these participants could easily conjure up suggestions for what autonomous PD could look like in action, but they seemed less confident in the degree of autonomy they had to feasibly to turn their suggestions into realities. Although they expressed a longing for transformation, they seemed to feel limited in their ability to shape the way required PD was pursued in their teaching contexts.

A few teachers proposed trying to join or form a group of teachers that could have more input over PD designs at their school sites. Courtney, for example, offered:

*I guess if I could get a couple other teachers together and we came up with some ideas or formed some sort of group that plans for learning and works with administration so that it's not just falling on one person to plan it once a month and make it so rushed, maybe I could help set up some sort of committee to be able to take that off. Share the love. And the work.*

Using the word “could” implies that such a step is within the realm of possibility, but it does not indicate intention to carry out the action. After noting that my question was not meant to be accusatory, I specifically asked Courtney why she had not done something like that to date. She explained that her time is already stretched so thin by both volunteer and required commitments at her school that she has not been in a position to do that effectively.

Pam, who teaches at a high school across the county from Courtney, expressed feeling like she “could go in to talk to somebody”, but as she unpacked this comment a bit more, it became clear that when it came down to it practically, she might not have that ability. She confessed:

*Do I have time to do that? Not during the regular school year. I haven't been thinking about that right now, not a bit, not a single bit. I feel like I have the, I'm going to say, ability, but I don't act on it. I don't think it's because I'm not interested in it. It's kind of lack of time because I feel like I have other things filling in.*

For Pam, this idea that she “could” impact change would remain hypothetical until her time was not as constrained by all the other responsibilities that came along with teaching. While both Courtney and Pam expressed a desire to take steps towards transforming their contexts, the

realities of their workloads made it near impossible for them to do so. In this way, their discussion of how a liberatory approach might come to exist was couched in phrases that implied an inability to take immediate or personal action that could lead to transformation.

Participants could rhetorically question, like Jennifer did, how “people who aren't actively in the classroom day after day” were the ones making PD decisions even though their limited viewpoint fails to provide “an accurate vision or view of what really the student body needs”. On the other hand, very few could offer an idea for where and to whom such questions could be directed. As mentioned previously, Karen felt confident enough to question those above her when she became frustrated with the mandated PD content and ultimately advocated for herself to take an alternative route towards PD by signing up for a course, but this action only transformed her own experience and not that of her school context at large.

This was true of Kirk and Beth as well. They both revealed feeling that their positions afforded them a degree of autonomy that most other teachers may not experience, and they discussed ways in which they had experienced PD they would consider to be liberatory. For example, Beth shared that she and the other Instructional Learning Coaches across the county set their own agenda for their monthly PD meetings. She shared: “We basically design our own professional development for ourselves monthly.” In reflecting on his experiences having greater control over his learning, Kirk revealed that those experiences have helped him implement changes in his setting. As he discussed a recent topic that he was afforded the opportunity to spend time researching, he recounted:

*I could've easily taken this and will take this and then help make changes in the school, mentoring other teachers on how to use these kinds of methods in their classroom and be a resource for other people which I think would help change the school as well.*

In carefully considering his response, it seems that Kirk could certainly impact his environment by sharing knowledge with others, but he does not propose ways in which he could advocate for others in the building to have the same degree of autonomy as he experiences. In this way, both Kirk and Beth felt that adopting a liberatory PD approach could benefit their school sites but did not disclose ways in which they could be a part of instigating such an adoption.

In synthesizing these participant perspectives, it became clear that although they communicated a longing for their context to undergo transformation as it relates to required PD and even a longing in some cases to play a part in advocating for such transformation, these educators still felt limited in the ways they could bring about change within their school settings.

On the whole, these participants' responses indicated that they struggled to articulate ways in which their agency could practically play a part in transforming their teaching contexts. They could recount ways in which staff members were expressing agency, albeit fairly unproductively; they could recount the limitations that were unique to their school sites; they could even clearly communicate their desire and their rationale for why required PD should undergo transformation. Just the same, though, they struggled to convey how developing and enacting their agency could feasibly help them overcome the limitations to make such transformation possible.

### **Defaulting Towards Designs Rooted in Control**

This struggle also became evident as participants critically assessed the potentiality of adopting liberatory PD at their various school sites. When the participants talked about liberatory PD in theory, they had only positive and hopeful comments to share; when it came to considering the practical implications of enacting such an approach, though, they began to impose limitations on how the approach should be pursued. These suggested impositions

indicated that to varying degrees, a disconnect existed between the participants' beliefs about PD and their behaviors surrounding PD efforts.

### *Potential Challenges of Liberatory PD Model*

When asked to consider the challenges they could foresee were a liberatory model of PD to replace their current PD requirements, participant responses were somewhat varied. The majority of their responses indicated that these educators perceived a bigger system was at work that made it hard to imagine a more teacher-centered approach to PD being allowed, much less encouraged by those who currently make PD decisions.

**Reducing Outside Control.** Some participants felt that that district leaders would find it difficult to support a liberatory PD approach. They felt an overhaul of the typical approach to required PD would be considered too challenging from both a logistical and financial standpoint. As far as logistics, Kirk explained it in this way:

*I think logistics are another thing that are difficult. I think one of the reasons why the required PD is the way it is is because you can logistically do it in a hour at a faculty meeting, or you can do it in a half-day format.*

He went on to describe liberatory PD as having the potential to become “a big logistical nightmare in terms of scheduling”. In this way, Kirk indicated a degree of skepticism that leaders would be open to transitioning to a less rigid, less scheduled approach to PD.

Karen alluded to potential costs associated with the shift, as she defended: “I mean, obviously there's going to be monetary, and I get that, expenses and budget and that type of thing”. She did not explain what she thought those costs might be, but she was not the only participant to describe finances as presenting a potential challenge. In considering why such an

approach to PD had not been embraced by the county already, Courtney contended, “without further time or budgeting from the county, I could see how it takes a back burner”.

Karen discussed that giving up control might cause a bit of a power struggle at the district level. She argued, “if they just give us a list then they have control of what's being offered” and that not being in control of the “master list” as she called it, might go against the county’s desire to steer teacher learning in a particular direction that best aligns with the district’s goals. Melissa, a middle school science teacher felt similarly. She asserted:

*But I think... those are going to be the challenges that... we want to adopt that philosophy or that model, but the county may say, "Yeah, but you do have to do this. You have to do this PD, or you have to do that PD." So I think the challenge is going to be from outside, not necessarily in the school.*

Both Karen and Melissa shared that even though they felt drawn to liberatory PD, they may not have much power to affect the policies that have traditionally come from the top down.

Pam, a Latin teacher with over twenty years of experience, mentioned that even building leaders might struggle to relinquish control to teachers. She stated that “there's sometimes some strong personalities at the leadership level that feel like there needs to be more control on attendance and stuff like that. I don't know. That could be a challenge.” Acknowledging that both district and building leaders could impede liberatory PD’s goals and its potential effectiveness reveals that the educators in this study were accustomed to PD designs rooted in control. More than that, they may struggle to believe a more teacher-centered approach would be feasible.

A few of these educators also felt that having inadequate time dedicated to teacher learning could be a potential challenge for schools trying to adopt liberatory PD at their sites.

Courtney described time as “the elevating factor” in that liberatory PD would require much more thoughtful planning and preparation on the front end to be effective.

For some, though, the language surrounding this concern turned passive as teachers voiced these concerns. As Kirk described,

*I think ideally everybody always says, "Yeah, I'd love to have the time." So I think time's a challenge. "I'd love to have the time to do whatever." I mean, I think a lot of the required PD stuff and the reason why PD is the way it is is because of time.*

This phrase “I’d love to have the time” implies a degree of powerlessness as if teachers do not have much say as to how they must use their time. Beth contended that “providing time for [teachers] to implement this with fidelity” could be challenging at her school. This default towards the idea that teachers would need to be “provided” or “would love to have” time reiterates the lack of control teachers have and reinforces the idea that someone other than teachers must decide how teachers should spend their time.

**Doubting Colleagues.** On the other end of the spectrum, multiple participants focused less on the district-wide challenges that liberatory PD could cause and instead expressed doubts concerning their colleagues’ efforts if liberatory PD were to be embraced. They predicted that there might be some teachers in their buildings who would take advantage of a system free from regimented programs and designated PD sessions by responding with inaction. For example, Kirk proposed that “if you're giving the teachers a lot of control there's a fear that they're not going to do anything with it”. Jennifer, the PD Planner at Kirk’s school, seemed to feel similarly. She explained her perceptions in this way:

*I would be concerned that people would do the bare minimum. So, if they're making their own decisions, I'm worried that they're going to choose what looks like the easiest and*

*least amount of work, even if something else might actually be more intriguing and beneficial.*

Beth, the PD Planner at school site 2, seemed to agree with this assessment. She argued,

*If we just started saying that everybody can just kind of choose their own PD, then I feel like, currently, there would be some teachers who just sort of opt out and are like, "I don't need any PD. This isn't what I want to do."*

Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3, also acknowledged that the freedom liberatory PD would bring may not be utilized by all teachers. In a matter-of-fact tone, she said, “there's going to be the few that are going to go out there and do as little as possible, but that's going to happen regardless”.

Multiple participants mentioned that adopting a liberatory PD model would necessitate some measure of oversight to be instituted. This finding pointed to the ways in which these participants tended to default towards PD rooted in external control. Karen explained it in this way, “I think they should have all control over it. I mean, yes, it should be approved, right? But they should be able to select or research first, not pick from a menu”. In this way, even as Karen argued that teachers should “have all control over it”, she followed that immediately with the proposal that “approv[al]” should still be obtained before control should be relinquished.

A few went as far as quantifying the degree of control teachers should be allowed to have over their learning. Jennifer proposed that teachers should have “at least 75%” control over their PD experiences. She defended:

*I think that if you give them 100% control, you risk a contingent doing nothing or making poor choices. And there has to be some kind of like approval process or... even a*



*feedback, maybe the approval processes is too strict but like a feedback process where they are kind of given some guidance.*

Beth, the PD Planner at school site 2, proposed that teachers should have “maybe like 80%” control over their learning because there are some “school specific” trainings that everyone needs and then “maybe after that, then it would be, ‘Well, what do you need to learn?’”. She went on to discuss ways in which it might be challenging to help “teachers identify their own learning that's purposeful”. Linda proposed that “about 90%” would be the appropriate amount of control teachers have over their PD pursuits. In particular, she voiced concerns about those who would not pursue PD on their own terms and then potentially not be eligible to renew their teaching licenses because they had not accrued any PD points over the years.

Kirk argued that the degree of control should be based on the aptitude of the teacher. He asserted:

*This is so hard because I feel like good teachers should have a lot and bad teachers should have none. But yeah, I think that ... I guess I would err on the side of more. I feel like teachers should have more control over their PD experiences than they currently have.*

Courtney, who was only in her second year of teacher, stated, “I would think that teachers should have most of the control, but I do understand there are some times that there needs to be a school wide professional development on something”. Melissa, a veteran teacher at Courtney’s school claimed that teachers should have “a lot of control... As much as... can be”. She followed up that statement with a qualification as she defended, “Again, I understand that there's certain things the county mandates that we have to do, but I feel like we should have a lot more control over what we do- how we spend our time”. These comments reveal that teachers in one way

voiced a longing to have control, but simultaneously expressed that perhaps there should still be some limitations as to just how much control they are allowed to have.

Although participants in this study highlighted both macro level and micro level challenges that might result from the adoption of a liberatory PD approach, the concerns they discussed reflected their tendency to default towards PD designs that still relied on people aside from the teachers themselves controlling elements of teacher learning. As opposed to offering ideas about how they could enact their agency to influence or even reform the system at large, their default was to offer solutions that maintained elements of the system already in place. By offering solutions to these challenges that would continue to place constraints on how teachers would be allowed to pursue PD, these responses indicated that the educators in this study may struggle to envision how their own agency could play a part in liberating them from PD programs that frame them as passive recipients.

### ***Disconnect between Beliefs and Behaviors***

As passionate as the participants were in expressing their desire to be reframed as knowledge producers and their perceptions that liberatory PD could serve as a means to that end, there seemed to be a disconnect between their beliefs and their behaviors. Whereas they spoke with noticeable enthusiasm about the autonomy, agency, and critical reflection that liberatory PD would prioritize, many spoke with a measure of frustration and defeat as they discussed their typical experiences with required PD. In spite of this difference, most of the participants deliberated their perceptions in a manner that indicated their beliefs about required PD may not be aligned with the actions they have taken in the midst of fulfilling their PD requirements.

**Purpose of PD.** As previously discussed, all the educators in this study expressed a desire to grow in their craft. They felt PD's main purpose should be to help them do just that.

Karen proposed that the goal of PD should be to make teachers “better”. Similarly, Pam contended:

*When you walk away from a professional development session, you should feel like you should have something you can use as a better teacher in the classroom, as a better teacher on the faculty staff, or as a teacher, as an employee. I think that's the whole point of it.*

Kirk proposed that part of the process of becoming better involves becoming aware of what exactly one needs to improve. He explained:

*Yeah, I think that a role of PD is to basically bring to the conscious level, to make teachers aware of things that they should be doing or ... And then, therefore, give them a chance to experiment with it or try new things... I think that should be an underlying goal of PD is to basically make ... Not just tell teachers, "This is what you have to do." But also make them more active participators in becoming professionals.*

Melissa, a middle school science teacher, similarly claimed, “we should have PD that would help teachers want to affect change”. On the whole, these participants believed that PD should help teachers grow and become better educators, that it should consistently instigate change.

Multiple participants also expressed their belief that teacher agency and PD should be mutually inclusive. They believed that one’s agency plays an important role in one’s growth.

Coming from the perspective of a PD Planner, Beth explained this relationship more specifically:

*With agency, when you're aware of what you need, then you can develop your own PD path. It's not like you're developing your own thing, but you can create that path to identify what you need. Then you can find resources to help you get what you need or reach out to other people who will help you get what you need.*

When asked if PD should help teachers develop agency, Courtney, a teacher at Beth's school, replied:

*I want to say it almost is the purpose. I mean, if a teacher can identify what their own needs are, then they are aware of what they need. Then if they're aware of what they need, then they can make the choices that they need in order to fulfill those needs.*

When asked the same question, Pam, a teacher working at a high school across the county, retorted, "isn't that the whole point of professional development?"

Kirk discussed the idea that as teachers grow, they should recognize the "need to advocate for themselves" and that "PD should help with that". Kirk talked about individual experiences when he enacted his agency in order to pursue PD more autonomously and could defend how "empowered" he felt as a result; others in the study spoke about this kind of agency in more hypothetical terms.

In spite of having strong opinions regarding the purpose PD should serve and its need to empower teachers, multiple participants acknowledged that the required PD they had to attend often failed to serve such purposes. When asked to describe how required PD has helped her to become more agentic and critically reflective, Karen argued "We have nothing like that, I don't think. I've never seen anything like that". Melissa claimed that in her opinion teacher training fails to fully prepare teachers to do well at their jobs and that district and/or school PD requirements often fail to fill in the learning gaps.

From the participants' perspectives, required PD was often reduced to an agenda item as opposed to a source of growth. Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3, alluded to this when she asserted, "I would like to see PD to be more beneficial than it just being earning points". Kirk, a passionate proponent of PD, openly shared that even though he thinks required PD initiatives are

moving in the right direction at his school, he feels they currently fail to fulfill their purpose in helping to empower teachers:

*I think for the most part, required PD has good intentions but I don't see as ... I think they're getting better at the reflection part and trying to get people to be critically reflective but there's just not as much agency or not as much autonomy in it.*

Overall, the majority of the participants felt that required PD did not consistently fulfill the purpose they believed it should.

**Accepting the Status Quo.** Whereas the teachers were vocal about their beliefs regarding the purpose of PD, many like Karen admitted that they have remained silent when required PD has not aligned with those beliefs. She confessed:

*I don't think I have a lot of agency, I guess, towards my professional development opportunities now. But I think schools and central office would be open to changing the way they viewed how we got our professional development. I don't think anybody's ever said, "Why do you just always give me a list of classes I can choose from? Why can't I research classes and give you a list and let me pick from those?" Let me go out and research what I'm interested in and say, "Okay, this is what I want to learn about, and now you go out and find me those opportunities." They've just kind of given us a list and we've just always done it that way. But I think, at least I know my school would be open to that, saying, "Okay, go out and find a couple lists, give them to me."*

In spite of feeling that school and district leaders would be open to feedback regarding alternative PD approaches, Karen admitted that she has yet to personally disrupt the silence surrounding this topic. Such silence, whether a result of fear as in Melissa's experience or lack of time as in Pam and Courtney's experience, seemed prevalent across school sites. Similar to

Karen's comment about not having vocalized her concerns, Courtney disclosed, "but that being said, I don't feel that people have truly stepped, nobody has- myself included- nobody's stepped up to make that a reality". In this way, Courtney takes some responsibility for accepting PD requirements instead of trying to transform them as she has never taken active steps towards changing the status quo.

As some participants confronted this disconnect between their beliefs and their behaviors, they offered various justifications for their behavior. Jennifer seemed to accept PD for what it was based on the perceived complexity that would come with trying to personalize it. She explained, "when you have 100 plus teachers in the building, it's hard to get something that's truly meaningful for everybody". Later in our discussion, Jennifer admitted, "Ultimately, we'd like to get to more choice and more autonomy in that, but that's where we are right now. And I think that that's pretty much where it's been for years past".

Pam exemplified this degree of acceptance as she explained in a matter-of-fact tone: "when you have the beginning of the year, you have to have required things". Linda argued, "our older teachers are used to being told to sit down and this is what you're going to be doing for the professional development". When probed to consider why PD approaches have not changed much over time, Karen asserted, "You know, that's the way we've always done it. That's the way we've always done it". Based on these comments, there seems to be an acceptance of this dissonance among the participants. This acceptance, though, does not seem rooted in apathy or lack of desire for change. In some ways, it appears these teachers have been expected to accept PD in whatever form its delivered for so long that they struggle to conceive of a PD that would not be rooted in control.

Aside from the coworkers who exerted their agency through absenteeism (whether physical or mental), the participants at these three schools talked about how most teachers at their schools commonly respond to PD mandates by complying with whatever expectations are delivered year after year. They accepted that they did not have the time or energy to question the process, and as Karen described, they went along with it because they have “always done it that way”.

According to Linda, teachers at her school have “always worried about renewal points” and the need to adhere to their contractual obligations more than attempting to shake up the system or question the process. In spite of the countless way Kirk feels he has benefitted and grown from PD that was more personalized, he described himself as “a good soldier” when it comes to following the expectations of mandated PD. Even if the required PD would not inspire him to “make a change”, he would still show up and try his best to have a good attitude.

These participants seemed to adhere to PD mandates with the knowledge that most of the time those mandates would not result in professional growth; whether consciously or unconsciously, they also accepted that they would need to pursue additional PD beyond the school’s requirements if they wanted to have their learning needs fulfilled. Across the three school sites, then, educators who had no issue pointing out the shortcomings of their required PD programs simultaneously discussed ways in which they typically complied with the requirements. Their justification seemed tied to tradition as opposed to principle.

**Paradox of Domestication.** Ultimately, this tendency towards compliance pointed out a paradox at work amid these educators’ experiences. This *paradox of domestication* as I will call it, will be further theorized in chapter 5. To briefly summarize, though, I will argue that the domestication an oppressive PD system can cultivate over time makes it so those who are

oppressed become so accustomed to their oppression that even as they critique their situation, they may at the same time accept their situation. This paradox of domestication emerged in my analysis as I took note of how many of the interviews involved contradictory statements from individual participants. From my assessment, the coexistence of seemingly opposite beliefs did not reveal dishonesty among the interviewees; instead, it seemed to indicate that the participants in this study were struggling to rationalize the condition of their circumstances.

In some cases, our conversations were causing participants to confront this paradox directly. For example, early on in our conversation Kirk stated, “I guess my perspective is it doesn't matter if I'm a 19-year veteran or a first-year teacher. Sometimes I need to understand that first-year teachers don't know this and so they're trying to create PD for the masses”. Towards the end of our conversation, though, Kirk referenced the ways in which some of his responses were contradictory. As he discussed the challenges that liberatory PD might instigate, especially in regard to colleagues who might not take full advantage of the opportunity such a PD approach would afford, he acknowledged:

*But it's kind of funny. I feel like if that's the direction that we want teaching to go- to give more to students... then maybe we need to do the same with ... Give more to the teachers. Like the ability to choose how they use their PD, you know? And I guess it's a risk, right? Because it's just like there's those students that don't take ... Like they don't actually do what you want them to do or take advantage of the opportunity you're providing to them. I'm sure there'll be teachers that will not take advantage of the liberatory advantages that they're given or being provided, but you probably would get a lot more people that would.*



Whereas Pam contended that she “always feels” like she has been treated “well” by those who lead required PD, later in our discussion she contended that teachers need more “autonomy”. Similarly, Linda, the PD Planner at school site 3 disclosed, “I would say for the most part the learners are treated with respect; however, I think maybe the time that the learners put in could be utilized in other areas”.

These contradictions not only highlighted the disconnect between participants’ beliefs and behaviors, they also revealed the ways in which participants tend to default towards PD designs that are rooted in control in spite of their expressed desires to have more freedom over their professional learning. The contradictions also underscored the ways in which these participants may struggle to see how their own agency could play a part in liberating them from complying with oppressive PD approaches.

### **Summary of Findings**

In carefully analyzing the interviews conducted with eight secondary educators across three school sites in a single school district, three key themes emerged. As participants shared their perceptions of liberatory PD, they described 1) facing contextual constraints that limited their agency 2) desiring to be reframed as knowledge producers, yet 3) struggling to envision how their agency could support their liberation. A discussion of these findings along with a presentation of a broader theory of PD stagnation that emerged from the analysis will be provided in the next chapter. Additionally, the final chapter will include a discussion of this inquiry’s limitations as well as suggestions for future research that could potentially support and extend this current study’s findings.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion

This final chapter will offer an in-depth discussion of the study's key findings. To begin, the working theory on PD stagnation that emerged from the findings will be presented along with examples of data that contributed to the development of this emergent theory. Next, a discussion of the implications of this study's key findings will be articulated using both this theory and pertinent literature. This will be followed by a description of the limitations of this current inquiry and suggestions regarding the study's potential transferability to similar settings and/or participant populations. Finally, future directions will be proposed to extend and build upon the current iteration of this critical study on PD.

### **An Emergent Theory of PD: The Cycle of PD Stagnation**

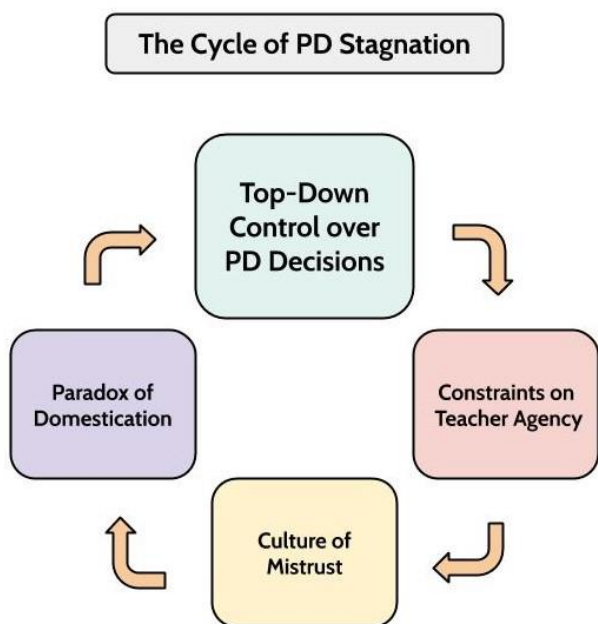
After carefully analyzing the three key thematic findings and considering how these themes were related to one another, a theory of PD stagnation emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I developed this working theory while synthesizing this study's findings and drawing conclusions about the tensions that were reflected in the participants' perceptions of liberatory PD. In this way, the theory was intentionally rooted in the participants' constructions of knowledge (Bochner, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gray, 2014, p. 20). This theory, the *Cycle of PD Stagnation*, comprises four barriers, as I will call them, each of which stalls productive growth and progress for teacher learners. An exploration of this theory will reveal how the presence and persistence of these barriers can cause the cycle to reproduce itself over time.

### **Overview of the 4 Barriers**

The Cycle of PD Stagnation is initiated by displacing control over PD decisions away from teachers. The fallout from this displacement then creates a feedback loop that ultimately

creates conditions that keep the cycle in motion. The four barriers within this cycle of PD stagnation include: (1) top-down control over PD decisions, (2) constraints on teacher agency, (3) culture of mistrust, and (4) paradox of domestication. In the midst of this cycle, PD is taking place, but growth is often not. A visual representation of this theory is provided in Figure 5 and will be followed by an explanation of its 4 barriers and how each contributes to the cycle's continuation.

**Figure 5. A Visual Representation of The Cycle of PD Stagnation**



*Figure 5.* This is a visual representation of The Cycle of PD Stagnation. It shows the 4 key barriers and how they are related to one another. The first barrier is purposely larger in scale as it tends to be the initiating barrier that causes the cycle to begin, and it keeps the cycle thriving.

### ***Top-Down Control Over PD Decisions***

When multiple teachers in this study discussed how the approach to PD decision-making at their school sites was comparable to that of a “dictatorship”, they seemed to be emphasizing the degree of powerlessness they felt. Participants described PD programs that were designed “for the masses” and those that were at times used to monitor and control teacher behaviors as

both Courtney and Kirk discussed. According to Linda, with this authoritative PD approach, teachers were expected to “sit-and-get” knowledge that had been chosen on their behalf. Even PD sessions that involved a measure of teacher choice were still often mediated by building leaders, hence Jennifer claiming teachers were only offered the “illusion of choice” when it came to their PD pursuits.

This barrier of top-down control frames teachers passively and makes it so they are subject to the whims of building and district leaders. The majority of educators who took part in this study commented on how changes in leadership often led to changes in PD programs. In this way, not only does the power reside outside of the teachers’ sphere of influence, but it may be in constant flux if schools undergo frequent changes in administration. Taking decisions about learning out of the hands of the learners is potentially what initiates the Cycle of PD Stagnation, but once the cycle has begun, the cycle itself works to uphold and potentially even strengthen this barrier.

### ***Constraints on Teacher Agency***

Having a PD approach in which learners have minimal control over their learning works to constrain teacher agency. This barrier within the Cycle of PD Stagnation seems to be influenced and potentially even caused by decisions being made from the top down. Logically, if teachers do not have the power to chart their own course, they are going to be expected to follow whatever mandates they are given. Although some may try to resist through absenteeism like Melissa mentioned or disengagement like Linda referenced, for the most part this lack of control makes it so teachers do not have the means to influence or even advocate for their learning needs.

Considering this barrier through the lens of Clark's (2016) socio-cultural definition reveals how this cycle works to constrain teacher agency. Clark (2016) contended that a part of a teacher's agency is "their capacity to make choices in the context of schooling" (p. 1), so if teachers cannot make decisions regarding the type of PD they want or need to pursue, their agency is constrained. Melissa alluded to this idea as she talked about teachers lacking "confidence" in themselves as their voices are often stifled by current school structures such as required PD. When decisions are made for teachers regarding the time, content, structure, etc. of PD, they are not encouraged to become more autonomous or more agentic. The means through which teachers are often mandated to complete PD do not encourage them to develop a greater capacity for decision-making within their contexts; instead, these constraining means work to limit their agency from the onset. In this way, when the cycle is in motion, teacher agency is not cultivated or activated; on the contrary, the cycle works to suppress and subtly discourage it.

### ***Culture of Mistrust***

The Cycle of PD Stagnation also sustains a culture of mistrust that can serve as a barrier to professional growth. Within this cycle, teachers are expected to trust others to make decisions for them regarding their learning needs, but this may lead to feelings of skepticism regarding the appropriateness of such decisions. This was evident in how many of the participants openly discussed their mistrust in the county's commitment to PD initiatives. Linda shared how teachers at her school jokingly call these initiatives the "flavor of the year", and Pam similarly mentioned a pattern she saw in PD programs repeating themselves over the years. There was evidence that this sense of mistrust may evolve into feelings of resentment among some teachers. For example, Melissa said she would "rather have a root canal" than have to attend some of her school's

mandated PD sessions, and Courtney spoke of the frustration she felt when she was forced to stay beyond her contractual hours and endure a PD focused on teacher dress code expectations.

The culture of mistrust that contributes to this Cycle of PD Stagnation is not one-sided. Just as participants in this study expressed feeling like the district did not place enough trust in teachers to make wise PD decisions, so too did they share concerns about the level of trust they had in some of their colleagues were this cycle to be broken. Beth, Kirk, Linda, and Jennifer all made direct mention of how they would struggle to trust all the teachers at their schools to be in complete control of their PD pursuits. They felt that some teachers may not have the desire or drive to pursue meaningful learning on their own terms. They feared minimal effort and withdrawal might be common responses among the less-committed teachers on staff. In this way, as top-down decisions are made and teacher agency is constrained within the Cycle of PD Stagnation, so too do teachers seem to grow in mistrust of themselves, their colleagues, and the district as a whole.

### ***Paradox of Domestication***

The final barrier in this cycle, the paradox of domestication, is one founded on contradiction. In spite of the mistrust teachers may feel in the validity of PD decisions that are being made on their behalf, they tend to comply with the PD mandates they are given. As this cycle constrains agency and as it generates a culture of mistrust, this compliance may not indicate a hypocritical teacher workforce, much less a naïve one. On the contrary, educators may be fully cognizant of the conflicting feelings that the Cycle of PD Stagnation produces.

For example, Kirk talked about how his answers were “contradict[ory]” at times as he considered the implications of his desire for autonomy in comparison to his fears about less passionate teachers abusing said autonomy. Courtney, Linda, and Melissa all shared their

frustration (to varying degrees) with the PD sessions they were required to attend, but at the same time they did not discuss what it could look like to question or overturn these mandates. Jennifer admitted that those making PD decisions may not have “an accurate vision” of what would be best for teachers to learn to better support their students’ needs, but she still advocated for some limitations to be placed on the degree of control teachers have over their learning. Karen spoke openly about how ineffective PD was in meeting her learning needs as she worked with a more specialized population, but even after receiving permission to take a class on her own terms she still abided with the expectation that she continue to attend her school’s required PD sessions.

Although these participants could openly discuss the shortcomings of their PD requirements, they still resisted classifying their experiences as experiences of oppression. They articulated an awareness that PD could look differently and even disclosed their beliefs that it should undergo transformation, but many struggled to offer ways in which they could feasibly play a part in any such transformation. Although they might have had some awareness of the role they were being forced to play in enduring a system which they assessed as being ineffective, the lack of obvious solutions and the limited opportunities to pursue potential solutions made it such that they had become somewhat domesticated to their situation. In this way, they may have had the desire for liberation from this oppressive cycle but means for pursuing liberation did not seem plausible to them at the time of our interactions.

One way to interpret these teachers’ arguments is to use Freire’s (1970) idea of the domestication of oppression. In his writings, Freire (1970) considered people to be the main culprit of oppression, but his critical work also highlighted how systems can work to perpetuate oppression. Freire (1970) claimed that “any situation in which ‘A’ objectively exploits ‘B’ or

hinders his or her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression” (p. 55). As such, he would deem a system of PD predicated on decisions made for learners as opposed to with learners as oppressive. According to Freire (1970), when stuck in an oppressive system, the oppressed can become domesticated to their oppressive circumstances. Because the Cycle of PD Stagnation conditions teachers to accept top-down decisions unquestioningly, it can domesticate them to this reality. It may not empower them to question much less change their oppressive circumstances because it is designed to do just the opposite.

This final barrier, the paradox of domestication, seems to be the one that most detrimentally perpetuates the cycle of stagnation. Even as teachers are somewhat aware of how the cycle keeps them stagnant (as evidenced by their consistent pursuits of PD outside of the county or school’s requirements), they can become conditioned to comply with the system that perpetuates their stagnation. This compliance, then, makes it so that more and more top-down decisions can be made on behalf of teachers, and the cycle repeats itself. Their acceptance of this cycle, or rather their domestication to the powerlessness it generates, thereby contributes to its reproduction.

### **Reproductive Nature of the Cycle**

If teachers are stuck in this Cycle of PD Stagnation for years on end, it may be challenging for them to imagine ways to disrupt the cycle. As part of the cycle diminishes their opportunity to cultivate agency- agency that could potentially empower them to disrupt aspects of the cycle- teachers remain stuck in a holding pattern of sorts. Teachers confined within this cycle may continue to comply with the mandated PD, but they will fail to make much progress as a result of their compliance. Taken as a whole, the cycle keeps teachers in motion, but it does not assist them in moving forward.



As Freire (1970) argued, the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires (p. 47).

Paradoxically, then, teachers in this cycle may feel they are left with little choice other than to accept things as they are in spite of having some awareness that their compliance more often than not fails to produce transformative professional growth.

As other studies have indicated this default towards compliance may be a common response among teachers (Buchanan, 2015; Campbell, 2019; Hartman, 2016; Robinson, 2012; Woollen & Otto, 2013), it seemed essential to engage with this finding a bit more thoughtfully. Upon reflection, it seems plausible that the teachers in this study may not deem disruption of this cycle to be a top priority given their lack of time and the constraints that limit their agency as it relates to required PD. Their compliance or their “domestication”, then, may be rooted in a measure of choice as opposed to Freire’s (1970) description of how the oppressed tend to “fatalistically ‘accept’ their exploitation” as result of their ignorance to the reality of their circumstances (p. 64).

As evidenced by their individual efforts to seek professional growth outside of the county’s mandates as well as their focus on building relationships with their learners, it may very well be that these participants have accepted to abide this cycle because they have found other aspects of their jobs where they can enact their agency more productively. This is speculative, but perhaps this is why teachers may not choose to take agentic steps aimed at transforming required PD procedures; they may very well feel the limited time they do have would be better

spent making curricular decisions and focusing on areas of their career where they can affect change without having to overcome so many barriers.

Overall, the cycle encourages a compliance when it comes to PD mandates. It encourages a teacher workforce that embraces PD mandates unquestioningly, so to expect an educator to reject compliance with such mandates would be to expect that educator to have a degree of agency that the cycle itself works to suppress. Another important caveat worth acknowledging is there is a distinct possibility this compliance may be a result of teachers consciously choosing their battles, so to speak. Whereas the PD system may seem too large to try and overturn, teachers like the ones in this study may choose to comply with the system in place and spend their energy instead on resisting mandates that feel more threatening to their classrooms or their learners.

In analyzing the Cycle of PD Stagnation and its implications, though, it becomes clear that liberation from this pattern of PD stagnation would be challenging to achieve for even the most critical and passionate of educators who find themselves confined within this cycle. The utility of this proposed theory will be further explored in consideration of what it contributes to the discussion of this study's key findings.

### **Implications of Key Findings**

As I began to consider conclusions that could be made based on the results of this study, I found myself scrutinizing over the proposed theory that emerged from the data as well as the literature that framed this inquiry. This reflective process helped me to identify important implications about what this study and its emergent theory add to the body of literature on PD as well as what they contribute to the research focused on teacher agency. The implications of this study's emergent theory in light of its key findings will be unpacked in the following section.

### **A Cycle that Cultivates Unproductive Agency**

In looking at the participants' responses, it would be inaccurate to say they lacked agency altogether as they navigated their PD requirements. Kirk, Karen, and Melissa, for example, all recounted specific ways they had advocated for themselves and/or their colleagues to pursue professional learning through more autonomous means. Their agentic efforts, though, had not worked to break the cycle of PD decisions being made from the top-down. In this way, the degree, form, and productivity of agency teachers can assert from within this cycle should all remain in question.

According to multiple participants, the only way teachers in the district seemed able to impact the cycle was through avoidance or apathy. Scheduling appointments, taking sick days, or even grading papers during mandatory PD experiences were common methods that teachers would use to resist participation at these three school sites. Teachers in the county who employed any of these modes of resistance may have felt empowered by refusing to abide a cycle they deemed ineffectual, but their actions did not lead to change at a macro level. The literature indicates that although such actions may not appear to be productive ways to enact agency, these forms of disengagement may serve as "a means of self-preservation" (Kohli, 2019, p. 47) and they may allow teachers to persist in the midst of constraints (Hartman, 2016). In spite of the fact that they did not help to transform PD practices at the school sites, these attempts to assert agency may have helped sustain teachers in the midst of a cycle that constrained them.

Although teachers have found ways to survive the cycle, the cycle itself does not seem to generate productive forms of teacher agency. In particular, the cycle does not encourage opportunities to express dissent. According to Jennifer, teachers at her school have often asked to be "left alone" to do their work. She and other participants like Beth questioned the "validity" of

requests for PD time to be used for grading and other tasks. It is important to consider how the desire to be "left alone" is not considered a legitimate or "valid" request for teachers to make. If this was a common response, it seems worthwhile to obtain more insight as to why teachers are wanting to be left alone. Does it mean they do not desire growth? Does it mean that they do not deem the typical school PD mandates as being beneficial to their craft? Does it mean they feel like they do not have time as it is to complete their duties and so PD feels burdensome? Instead of dismissing such requests, it seems that seeking to understand the rationale behind such requests would be more productive.

This issue of time is another way in which the cycle impedes productive agency. As I reviewed the transcripts, I was struck by how many participants discussed time as a constraint that kept them from attempting to assert their agency as it related to PD requirements. As Kirk claimed, "a lot of times there's county initiatives that come down I guess from year to year and then that takes up a lot of PD time". In spite of their awareness that their time was constrained in part by county directives, the participants did not present district leaders in an overly negative light when they discussed wanting more control over their learning. Karen even perceived a degree of openness to change that might exist among personnel at the county level. Time, though, presented a major limitation that made such proposals or conversations seem near impossible for these participants to initiate.

As Imants & Van der Wal (2019) defended, a "teachers' agency is embedded in multi-faceted and multi-level work environments" (p. 2). One major aspect of this work environment, then, is how a teacher is expected to use his or her time. Perhaps, then, decisions about PD within this cycle may come from well-intentioned leaders, but the fact that teachers feel they have limited time and perceive "grading papers" as potentially more productive than a county-

supported PD initiative is telling. Returning to Clark's (2016) definition that discusses agency as having to do with the "capacity" to act, the many comments surrounding time constraints indicate that although these teachers possessed an "awareness" of their individual needs and even expressed their "intentionality" (p. 1) to affect change within their contexts (as in the case of both Courtney and Pam), there was no time to realistically make choices that might lead to transformation of PD requirements. Because the district controls how so much of a teacher's time is spent, it appears that there is little opportunity to question this cycle of PD stagnation much less take agentic moves aimed at disrupting the cycle.

Overall, the findings from this study indicate that teachers who are confined by a PD cycle founded on top-down control may be limited in their ability to assert their agency in productive ways. They may find ways to evade the cycle or abide it, but the cycle impedes their ability to enact their agency as learners in ways that would lead to transformation of their teaching contexts.

### **A Cycle that Suppresses Critical Reflection**

In spite of how eager these participants were to talk about their desire for growth, the majority admitted that they had not critically considered the implications of their PD requirements. When we began our conversations, many of them initially discussed their experiences with mandated PD in a matter-of-fact manner. As our conversations progressed, though, many participants were vocal about how rarely they had been prompted to think and reflect on their PD experiences. In the midst of our interview, for example, Linda admitted, "I'm glad you're making me think". Based on their responses, it did not seem that these participants were encouraged to regularly reflect on the content or the means of their mandated PD

experiences. Accordingly, the cycle of PD stagnation seems to suppress critical reflection that could be transformative for both teachers and students alike.

From Mezirow's (1997) theoretical perspective, expecting transformation and growth to occur without critical reflection seems implausible as "becoming critically reflective of one's own assumptions is the key to transforming one's taken-for granted frame of reference" (p. 9). Mezirow (1998) explained that critical reflection of an assumption must involve the "critique of a premise upon which the learner has defined a problem" and that "significant personal and social transformations may result from this kind of reflection" (p. 186). In this way, PD that involved consistent critical reflection would specifically challenge educators to consider the assumptions they bring to their instruction as well as their students.

Although a few of the participants were quick to express support for a PD that would incorporate reflection, they were less expressive when it came to discussing their ideas concerning the concept of critical reflection. In spite of asking direct protocols regarding participants' perceptions of critical reflection's relationship to PD, I was most surprised by what was left unsaid. Whereas recent literature has overwhelmingly focused on the need for PD to involve critical reflection overtly aimed at disrupting student inequities (Burke & Collier, 2016; Dover et al., 2018; Dover et al., 2019; Fernández, 2019; Garcia & Garcia, 2016; King & Nomikou, 2018; Kohli, 2019; Kohli et al., 2015; Milner & Laughter, 2015; Morrell, 2014; Navarro, 2018; Picower, 2015; Riordan et al., 2019; Sacramento, 2019; Skerrett et al., 2018), I was perplexed by how little these participants talked about the need for PD to empower such disruption.

Kirk and Melissa both mentioned a recent PD training they underwent that was focused on promoting inclusivity, and although they both spoke of their experiences with enthusiasm,

they both shared that the program had been phased out after a year. They described how they personally grew through their participation in the summer training but both lamented that most teachers at their schools had not been able to attend the more intensive training they had received. Pam, a coworker of Kirk's, directly referenced the difference she saw between those who had participated in the more intensive summer training and those like herself who received a modified program spread out over the school year. From her perspective it seemed "something was lost in translation" and she admitted that she felt unsure as to the PD's overall impact. As she contemplated why the PD potentially failed to spark enthusiasm among the rest of the staff like it did for those select few who attended the summer session, she shared, "I guess I need to go back and learn".

Aside from Courtney mentioning a required PD focused on educating the staff about student demographics specific to her school site, most teachers did not speak about how PD could be geared towards promoting student equity and inclusion. More than that, Linda, the PD Planner at School Site 3, actually expressed the belief that too much required PD is focused on the "minority student". Just as this Cycle of PD Stagnation does not encourage teachers to routinely reflect on the PD they are receiving, it seems that it also fails to prompt teachers to critically reflect on their positionality. As evidenced in recent studies, though, this lack of reflection may not be unique to the district where this research occurred. For example, Fernández (2019) asserted that:

Professional development training, even when it offers concrete methods and practices for the classroom, always runs the risk of being devoid of approaches that will encourage a re-humanizing approach in the classroom and a conscious effort to offer teachers an

opportunity to self-reflect particularly on their identities and how they are tied to racial constructs. (p. 189).

Such self-reflection, though, seems more essential than ever. Close to 80% of the teaching force in the United States remains white while students of color account for more than 50% of the total K-12 population (U. S. Department of Education, 2016). As this predominantly white teaching force works to educate a student population that becomes more diverse by the year, intentional reflection aimed at contemplating how one's identity and perceptions of race may impact their instruction seems both vital and urgent. I would be remiss to not remind readers that all eight participants identified as white in their demographic survey. I will further explore potential explanations for this silence as I discuss the study's limitations, but it seems important to acknowledge the implications of what these participants were *not* saying. They talked about reflection in terms of best practice and pedagogy, but none talked about how PD that included critical reflection might help them confront their own biases or work towards creating a more socially just classroom. This study indicates that PD cycles perpetuated by top-down control appear to impede critical reflection aimed at promoting social justice and may even promote silence regarding the need for such reflection.

### **A Cycle that Masks Oppression**

Just as the cycle stymies reflection, so too does it mask its oppressive treatment of teachers. Teachers who find themselves in this cycle may be somewhat blinded to the ways in which the cycle represses their freedom and ingenuity as learners. In all of the interviews, participants were able to justify various reasons for why required PD existed in the form it did. Whether it was because of "time" like Courtney and Karen claimed, "logistics" like Kirk offered,



or even “control” like Melissa mentioned, these participants could rationalize their PD experiences even as they criticized them.

It is important to note, too, that this criticism was consistently tempered. Participants were measured in the way they talked about their circumstances. Whereas they felt comfortable being overtly critical about the PD itself, as in Melissa stating she would “rather eat glass” than attend mandated PD, they seemed more hesitant to critique those who maintained the system. This hesitation or uncertainty came up in a few of the interviews as I asked participants to consider the appropriateness of their treatment as learners. On the one hand, teachers communicated feeling respected as it related to PD, but they simultaneously expressed frustration with how their time was being managed by mandates. Kirk said he never felt “condescension” coming from PD leaders, but he did go on to express the desire to have more autonomy over his PD opportunities.

For the most part, participants did not seem to perceive specific disrespect coming from decision-makers, but at the same time, they struggled to feel validated in their learning needs. This inability to reconcile the implications of their treatment may be a direct result of how the cycle frames them. To propose that the cycle to which they comply oppresses them might seem extreme to educators similar to those who participated in this study. Their experience of oppression may instead be considered business as usual. This was evidenced by Linda’s comments about older teachers on her staff being accustomed to “being told to sit down” and receive the PD that has been prepared on their behalf as well as Jennifer’s comments that although it would be ideal if teachers had more choice, “that’s where we are right now”. As the cycle limits their control and their agency, and as it cultivates a culture of mistrust, participants

seem to grow accustomed to their circumstances such that the cycle's structures themselves can become normalized. In this way, the cycle also works to perpetuate oppression.

### **A Cycle that Perpetuates Oppression**

Oppression is perpetuated in large part by the top-down decisions that initiate the cycle, but it is also kept in motion by way of domestication. As teachers adapt to the cycle, they may not be afforded the time or space to question its functionality much less the implications of how the cycle positions them. More than that, the cycle may begin to normalize oppression in a way that makes PD free from external control seem out of place or inappropriate. As discussed previously, one barrier in the cycle is the culture of mistrust that it generates. This mistrust can lead to doubts in one's own capabilities as well as doubts about other's capabilities. In considering the implications of their concerns regarding liberatory PD, it seems that this mistrust in others that serves as a barrier in the cycle that may also serve to perpetuate oppression.

When given the chance to imagine and consider liberatory approaches, the educators in this study initially proposed learning approaches without "boundaries" as Pam described. They seemed enthusiastic and optimistic about a PD approach that would promote agency, autonomy, and critical reflection. As they considered the potential limitations of such an approach, though, many of the participants began to return towards PD approaches rooted in control.

While voicing concerns about peers who would potentially exploit aspects of a liberatory PD approach, they began to propose the same sort of monitoring and external control that they had previously admonished. Jennifer discussed the need for "approval" and Beth asserted that teachers may need "assistance" in identifying personalized learning goals. Within minutes of offering innovative ideas for liberatory PD, they made amendments to their ideas that would strip the PD of some of its liberatory qualities. Freire (1970) claimed:

Unfortunately, those who espouse the cause of liberation are themselves surrounded and influenced by the climate which generates the banking concept, and often do not perceive its true significance or its dehumanizing power. Paradoxically, then, they utilize this same instrument of alienation in what they consider an effort to liberate (p. 79).

At the core of this desire for control seemed to be a mistrust in colleagues to approach liberatory PD responsibly. One way to interpret the implications of this mistrust would be to apply Freire's (1970) proposal about what happens when those who have been oppressed start to pursue autonomy. Freire (1970) explained:

but almost always, during the initial stage of the struggle, the oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors" as "the very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped (p. 45).

In applying his theory to these findings, it becomes plausible that the teachers may have defaulted towards PD designs rooted in control in part because this system of oppression they have been under has normalized aspects of oppression. In this way, proposing the monitoring of other staff members may align with the framework for required PD that these participants have always experienced, and therefore may seem appropriate in spite of its incongruence with their beliefs about PD in general. From this interpretation, the cycle domesticates learners to a system of oppression, and it works to keep oppressive conditions in motion. More than that, it primes its learners to gravitate towards an approach to learning that mirrors the way they have been forced to approach learning within the confines of this cycle.

In looking at these findings in a different light, it is important to also consider the implications of the pragmatism of these participants' proposals. They communicated desires for

required PD to look differently, but they also seemed accepting of its imperfect design. This might explain why they did not consider their treatment to be oppressive. They could recognize the brokenness of the required PD system, and they could critique its shortcomings, but perhaps they chose to expend their energies on working to influence or transform other aspects of schooling in need of overhaul. In this way, their suggestions regarding the need for less oversight, but still some oversight, may have less to do with maintaining oppression and might be considered a move in the right direction from their perspective. This interpretation might begin to explain why the concept of teacher agency can be challenging for teachers to define or even describe. If they are consciously abiding certain systems and structures and simultaneously enacting their agency in other areas they deem more essential, then it makes sense that they would not see themselves as disempowered by the flawed systems they have chosen to accept.

### **A Cycle that Sustains Misconceptions of Teacher Agency**

Taken as a whole, the participants recognized how required PD limited their ability to pursue more individualized PD and perceived liberatory PD as a worthwhile approach that could help them overcome these limitations. Based on their responses, though, some aspects of the liberatory PD model seemed more accessible and easier to discuss than others. In thinking about how the Cycle of PD Stagnation functions, this may not be a surprising finding.

Whereas they could communicate more easily about critical reflection and autonomy, the concept of agency proved more challenging to articulate and unpack for the participants. Most significant to this study's theoretical framework is how well its findings align with the literature previously reviewed on teacher agency. The findings indicate that the teachers in this study have misconceptions of what their agency is and how it can be cultivated within their teaching ecologies, and other researchers have previously reported similar findings (Biesta et al., 2015;

Biesta et al., 2017; Clark, 2016; Robinson, 2012). Jennifer, for example, honed in on “self-reflection” as being a catalyst for agency and she even shared feeling that agency could build “excite[ment]” among teachers, but she did not clearly articulate how it could be developed among teachers at her school site. When asked if PD should help teachers develop agency, Beth responded: “I don't know. I'm trying to mull this over in my head. I'm not sure if PD helps them develop agency, but through agency they identify their own PD. Does that make sense?” For her, then, agency had to do with being able to make choices. Linda proposed that a PD that promoted agency would be contingent on its degree of perceived meaningfulness. With a degree of uncertainty, Karen offered, “I don't think I have a lot of agency, I guess, towards my professional development opportunities now”, but then went on to propose that she felt district leaders would be open to more feedback if it were presented to them. Courtney contended that “if that reflection piece was there and you realized your agency, then you'd better be able to plan for the future and what you need and want”. From her perspective, then, agency was something teachers may unknowingly possess, and reflection would help them become cognizant of it. Examining these responses and others revealed a lack of consensus or even clarity regarding the concept of agency among these participants. On the whole, these teachers seemed unclear as to what agency was exactly, and how it could practically be enacted within their particular contexts.

According to Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) assessment:

agency is associated with individuals who, alone or in groups, in a given situation, make decisions, take initiatives, act proactively rather than reactively, and deliberately strive and function to reach a certain end. This implies that agency is about individuals or collectives who are *interacting with and within* specific contexts (p. 2).

With this definition in mind, it would be appropriate to conclude that the participants in this study, as it related to their current PD requirements, were either lacking aspects of agency or they were stunted in their ability to productively mobilize their agency. Beth assessed that teachers had “currently very limited” agency when it came to their school-required PD opportunities. Pam spoke candidly about her inability to find time during the regular school year to initiate conversations with PD decision-makers. Courtney expressed similar concerns. Melissa shared that certain administrators had not been receptive to conversations about changing the way PD is done at her school; she even discussed the lack of “safety” she felt in trying to broach the topic with a recent building leader. As the outlier, Kirk seemed to be the most agentic as he seemed to have “the ear[s]” of decision-makers in his building, but even his agentic actions were not working to transform the school context at large. His agency seemed to be personally beneficial as it allowed him the opportunity to attend conferences and take part in experimental PD programs, but it did not seem to generate change that benefited others in his building.

On the whole, teachers in this study seemed to lack aspects of agency that would be necessary to confront and disrupt the larger system of required PD to which they were subjected. They were limited in their ability to “take initiatives” or to “act proactively rather than reactively” as Imants & Van der Wal (2019) outlined in their definition of agency (p. 2). They seemed unclear as to how they could “make choices in the context of schooling” (p. 1) as Clark proposed to practically influence school-required PD decisions. Just the same, though, they seemed able to easily express feelings of mistrust or resentment towards their circumstances such as the “root canal” analogies Melissa made, the explicit frustration Karen disclosed, and even the degree of acceptance for the status quo that both Jennifer and Linda expressed. They could communicate their dissatisfaction with required PD programs, but they struggled to identify how

their agency could play a part in affecting change to such programs. As such, their conceptions of agency seemed to be constrained as well. This finding aligned with the findings Biesta et al. (2017) presented in their study that explored what teacher talk reveals about their sense of agency.

Buchanan's (2012) study discussed how a teacher's context may play a role in his or her ability to do more than enact an agency limited to pushing back as opposed to stepping up and initiating change. As Clark (2016) contended, resistance to constraints within a context "requires positive or productive forms of agency to move beyond simply resisting social norms" (p. 3). This sort of productive agency that would move beyond "grading papers" during a PD session or taking a "sick day" to get out of required PD days altogether would require teachers to develop a clear perception of what contributes to their own agency and how it can be enacted within their specific teaching contexts. More than that, working to productively overhaul and transform a PD cycle founded on external control would require a collective agency among teachers that such a cycle fails to cultivate. As opposed to encouraging the self-awareness and capacity for decision-making that Clark (2016) argued is at the core of a teacher's agency, then, the Cycle of PD stagnation subtly sustains misconceptions of teacher agency.

### **How Praxis Can Potentially Break the Cycle**

In spite of their misconceptions regarding their agency, these teachers seemed to possess a desire to affect change in their school contexts as it relates to PD approaches. As our interviews progressed, many of the teachers seemed to communicate greater confidence towards the end of our conversations. In looking at this trend, it seems to support Freire's (1970) claims regarding the how the praxis must involve both "action" and "serious reflection" (p. 65).

As I first crafted the conceptual framework for this inquiry and chose to pursue a critical qualitative study, I was warned to keep my expectations realistic. Wise and well-published researchers cautioned my aspirations of hoping to see evidence of teacher agency being cultivated simply through means of the interview process. This advice grounded me, and to some degree helped me to approach conversations with participants more thoughtfully. In the end, though, I was thrilled to encounter moments indicating that a few participants may have become more aware of their agency through our dialogue.

Some of the participants commented on how they perceived our conversation to be purposeful. For example, Kirk saw value in our discussion as he claimed that it helped him to “verbalize” and consider his “teaching philosophy”. He asserted that such conversation among educators should happen more consistently. Pam stopped mid-sentence to reflect on the benefit of our discussion. As she proposed a possible liberatory PD approach, she shared with delight, “and then they have to reflect, and so either it's a discussion board or... Ooh!! that would be actually a really good... I just came up with a good idea!” At the very end of our interview, Jennifer disclosed:

*We have talked about kind of the ideas that we have for next year and moving forward. And it... Every time we have these conversations, I leave them really excited. And I think that, that says a lot to what that kind of agency can offer to teachers where they, they can pick what they want to understand more or get better at, and they get to spend their time working on that in a way that's meaningful for them.*

These representative comments indicate that teachers in this study perceived discussion about PD and teacher agency to be both valuable and productive.



Although our conversations were no more than 90 minutes long, it seemed that the interviews may have supported a few of the participants in developing an awareness of either their positionality as it relates to required PD or their agency as it pertains to taking action to potentially transform the requirements to become more liberatory. In their recent study, Biesta et al. (2017) argued that “enhancing the discursive resources of teachers—through initial teacher education and ongoing professional development—remains an important avenue towards a more agentic teacher profession” (p. 52). As the participants expressed the value they perceived in our conversations and the belief that more discussion should occur regarding PD approaches in their schools, the findings in this current study appear to support the claim that teachers benefit from developing their “discursive resources” (Biesta et al., 2017, p. 52).

This sort of action-inspiring conversation, or “praxis” as Freire (1970) called it (p. 65), seemed to impact participants to varying degrees. For some like Kirk and Pam, it seemed it help them identify the need for more critical reflection regarding PD programs in general. For Karen and Courtney, it seemed to bring to their awareness that perhaps they could be the ones to initiate conversations with building or district leaders- if they could find the time to do so. This variability should be expected according to Freire’s (1970) assessment. He claimed, “critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever stage of their struggle for liberation” (p. 65). From this lens, whether teachers were conscious of their oppression or not, critical dialogue would be the only catalyst that could lead to their liberation. According to Freire’s (1970) critical theory, to pursue any other means of communication aside from dialogue “is to attempt to liberate the oppressed with the instruments of domestication” (p. 65). As the Cycle of PD Stagnation limits teachers’ voices and prioritizes the viewpoints of decision-makers who may be separated from the classroom, it may eliminate

opportunities for teachers to engage in the sort of critical dialogue that could lead to the disruption of the cycle altogether. This study's findings highlight how praxis can potentially assist in breaking the cycle. Looking at two participant interviews will help substantiate this claim.

Based on their feedback, the critical dialogue that took place during our interviews seemed most generative for Linda and Jennifer. After saying several times in our conversation how she appreciated that I was "making [her] think" about her situation more carefully, Linda ended our conversation with a request. She inquired, "when we do start planning for PD for the fall and the 2021 school year, are you be open to me using some of your ideas?". She talked about scheduling a meeting with her principal to initiate conversations about implementing changes based on our conversation about liberatory PD.

Similarly, Jennifer ended our conversation talking about the excitement she felt from sharing ideas about PD that would reframe teachers as active producers of knowledge. Whereas I initially thought that was where things were left- in a place of hopeful idealism moving forward, I heard from Jennifer again in mid-August. She wanted to go over the proposal with me that she was pitching to her administrative team later in the week. We talked for a little over a half hour and worked together to refine the PD process she was presenting to the building leaders. After collecting data at the end of the year and securing input from multiple teachers on staff, she had generated a plan for PD that would put teachers in the driver's seat of their own learning. Her plan was to group teachers in cohorts based on their self-identified learning needs and allow them to create knowledge together over the course of the school year. They would be establishing both individual and group goals, as well as creating some evidence of their learning to share with the entire staff at the end of the year. This would result in a mini conference of

sorts during which all teachers on staff would be able to give and receive feedback throughout this designated time of knowledge sharing.

Her proposal was well-received, and as of our most recent conversation, this new approach to PD is in full swing at her school. I received a separate email in late September from Pam, a participant who works at Jennifer's school. She wanted to acknowledge the changes that had been initiated by Jennifer (whom she did not know was a participant in my study as well). Regarding this new, more liberatory PD approach, Pam disclosed that "the reaction to the group I am in has been very positive". Consequently, what started as dialogue about what liberatory PD could look like in action turned into an actual enactment within the span of a few months at school site 1.

Linda's intention to act within her context might suggest that she was beginning to enact her agency as Clark (2016) defined it. Jennifer's efforts to transform the way required PD has been pursued at her school site reflects Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) conception of what teacher agency entails where individuals "take initiatives, act proactively rather than reactively, and deliberately strive and function to reach a certain end" (p. 2). Whereas other teachers in this study have not communicated such direct effects of our dialogue, the fact that a few could communicate their perception of the dialogue's value in real-time still seems to indicate a degree of the dialogue's utility.

Such communication- rooted in critical reflection and focused on action- carried out alongside secondary teachers, then, has the propensity to bring some clarity to the misconceptions that seem to prevail regarding teacher agency, and in some cases may even serve to cultivate agency in some teachers. Considering the implications of this study's findings

reveals, then, that praxis may be an effective means of disruption for secondary teachers who find themselves confined within a Cycle of PD Stagnation.

### **Study Limitations**

In recounting this study's limitations, I intend to achieve three main goals. First, I will offer a detailed description of the limitations in hopes of remaining reflexive in my research approach to the very end. In disclosing this study's limitations thoughtfully and honestly, then, I aim to strengthen the study's overall trustworthiness. Next, I hope to provide a clear understanding of how this study's limitations may impact the transferability of this study's findings to similar contexts and/or participant populations. Finally, I want to foreground the suggestions for future studies that I will propose by indicating where this current inquiry failed to provide sufficient insight.

### **Adapting to COVID-19 Disruptions**

Within a few days of conducting the first interview during phase 1 of my study, schools were closed indefinitely due to COVID-19. In its original design, the second phase of this study involved conducting 2 focus group interviews with 5 to 6 teachers per group at each of the 3 school sites. The literature indicates that focus groups "offer social spaces" (Fine & Sirin, 2007, p. 29) and allow for discussion and interaction among participants that may feel more natural to participants than taking part in an individual interview (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Morgan, 2019; Wilkinson, 1999). With the stay-at-home orders and even the closing of most public spaces, trying to carry on with focus groups seemed unwise. After talking with my chair as well as the VCU IRB representative who oversaw my project's initial review, we collectively thought it would best to eliminate the focus groups and switch to virtual phone interviews during the

second phase of my study. After submitting revisions, I received an updated approval letter from IRB on April 3, 2020 stating that my study still qualified for exemption.

These changes may have led to some limitations. Whereas I had planned to hear from up to 36 additional secondary teachers across 3 school sites, the data collection adaptations made it so that I only interacted with 5 additional secondary teachers across the 3 school sites. Although the numbers would not have changed my ability to generalize findings, hearing from multiple teachers at each school site could have helped me capture a richer, more nuanced picture of secondary teachers' perceptions regarding liberatory PD. Additionally, I believe that my fourth research question (How do differences in school context shape secondary teachers' responses to the concept of liberatory PD?) may have been more generative if my study had included more voices from each of the 3 school sites. I also think that the focus groups may have been productive in ways that individual interview might not have been. The literature has indicated that there is value in promoting teacher discussion (Biesta et al., 2017; Buchanan, 2015; Kelly, 2006; Lee et al., 2007; Martinez et al., 2016), and I had hoped that by creating a space that prioritized such conversation that the teachers themselves would co-construct knowledge through their discourse. Co-construction still occurred through the individual interview format, but I cannot help but wonder if it might have been more prominent had focus group interviews occurred. Although COVID-19 instigated some changes to my study's design, it challenged me to consider my methodological choices more thoughtfully than I had before; for that I can appreciate how it indirectly bolstered my reflexivity and hopefully this study's trustworthiness.

### **Limitations Related to the Participant Population**

Although COVID-19 did impact my participant population, it was not the sole source of

limitations. As the study evolved over the span of a year, I faced other limitations related to securing participants. These will be carefully reviewed in the following section.

### ***Inability to Incentivize***

One thing that initially caused a setback with my study was the discovery that I was not allowed to incentivize participation. I had received a generous research scholarship from the VCU School of Education with the intention of using part of it to compensate teachers who agreed to participate in the study. Once I received feedback from the county where I intended to conduct my study, though, I was informed of a district policy they had that made using those funds to encourage participation an impossibility. I had hoped this incentive of a \$20 gift card would encourage more teachers to consider taking part in my research. As this was such a unique moment in our history and so many were facing economic uncertainty, I believe that being able to incentivize participation would have potentially garnered a larger participant pool that could have perhaps resulted in more variability in my participants and perhaps their perspectives.

### ***Securing Sufficient Participants***

Even with a reduction in the overall number of participants, securing sufficient participants proved to be a challenge. After speaking to all parties involved (my chair, my IRB representative, and the research coordinator for the district), it was decided that I could tap into any available connections to try and secure the third PD planner and the two additional teachers at each of the three school sites. I reached out to former coworkers who now worked at schools across the county, and through this networking, I finally secured a third PD Planner and thereby a third school site. At school site 3, I was only ever to secure one additional teacher participant, so my study only involved eight total participants. In talking with my dissertation chair, though, this does seem to be an alarming deficit, especially considering the circumstances surrounding

this research. These recruitment issues, though, may have presented additional limitations that need to be acknowledged.

### ***Snowball Sampling***

Making adjustments to my sampling procedures in the midst of my study may have limited the variability of my findings. By having to reach out to contacts and recruit participants through snowball sampling techniques, it is plausible that some of my participants shared similar viewpoints regarding their perceptions of liberatory. As people typically gravitate towards like-minded coworkers, it is quite possible that these findings may not be representative of all teachers on staff at the three school sites in this district. Both Maxwell (2013) and McMillan (2016) caution qualitative researchers to consider how the nature of the participants may limit conclusions that can be made about their perceptions. As such, I feel it is important to acknowledge the fact that using snowball sampling to secure some participants for this study may have skewed responses towards a consensus that may not be representative of all the teachers on staff at each school site.

### ***Participant Interest in PD***

In thinking about the potential transferability of these study's findings to similar contexts, it is also important to consider how the sampling procedures may have caused limitations. Even before snowball sampling procedures were implemented to secure additional participants, it is plausible that teachers who responded to my recruitment email had some general interest in discussing PD with a researcher. They volunteered after only reading a small blurb indicating my desire to collect data on their perceptions of PD, so it may be that they had a particular interest in PD before this study ever began. Perhaps if this study had not used purposeful sampling procedures, the findings may have been quite different. As so many of these participants saw

themselves as life-long learners who expressed a desire to grow as educators, they may not have been representative of all the teachers on staff at their school sites. Securing greater variability in the sample might have generated more negative cases in the data. Consequently, hearing from educators who do not share the same degree of interest in PD as these participants did could have resulted in findings that negate some of this study's claims.

### ***Lack of Variability***

Maxwell (2013) claimed that one of the criteria for good purposeful sampling is to provide heterogeneity in perspectives. The lack of heterogeneity present in my study, therefore, may present a limitation as it relates to assessing just how representative these findings are for secondary teachers within these three schools or even across the county. As much as I attempted to collect a maximum variation sample, the final pool of participants was a more homogenous sample than I had hoped to secure.

As mentioned earlier, I was surprised by the figurative silence that resulted amongst many of the questions surrounding critical reflection. Participants like Pam and Kirk were proponents of PD that would encourage reflection, but in looking at the interviews as whole, there was not a significant focus on what teachers should be reflecting upon in PD beyond their pedagogy. Courtney, Melissa, Kirk, and Pam did all discuss some required PD that engaged them with concepts of inclusivity and equity, but they did not connect those experiences to the questions surrounding their perceptions of critical reflection. In this way, these participants were not vocalizing whether reflecting on their own racial identity or the racial identity of their students should be an aspect of required PD. Other recent studies have indicated that this silence may not be uncommon (Milner & Laughter, 2014) and that it may be indicative of the



constraining structures that limit teacher agency and criticality (Biesta et al., 2017; Miller & Laughter, 2014; van Woerkom, 2010).

In looking at the demographic characteristics of participants, it seems essential to acknowledge that the entire sample was composed of white educators. The average years of teaching experience across this sample was 15.8%. More than that, only two of the eight participants had less than 16 years of experience. There was slight diversity in gender, as one participant was male, and there was also diversity as it relates to the three school sites where these participants were teaching. Overall, though, the limited variability within the sample itself may have skewed the findings towards those that represent the perceptions of experienced white teachers in the county as opposed to the perceptions of novice teachers or teachers of color.

### ***Threat of Reactivity***

McMillan (2016) explained that reactivity can occur when a researcher's presence influences participants to respond or behave differently. As I was formerly employed at one of the school sites selected for this study, I think it is important to acknowledge that the threat of reactivity may have presented an additional limitation. Having worked at the school site for seven years, I built relationships with many teachers and administrators in the building. This may be why I received the largest response rate at this school site. In selecting 2 participants from the 6 total teachers who expressed interest in my study at this school, I was careful to choose teachers who represented the greatest variability, which in this case was limited to content area and years of experience. Even the interviews involving participants with whom I had no former relationship, though, may still have been susceptible to reactivity. On a few occasions, participants asked questions such as "Is that what you're looking for?" or "Is that good?", to which I would respond with a reminder that there were no right or wrong answers and that I only

sought to capture an understanding of their opinions. I do not feel that the threat of reactivity presented a major limitation to this study's findings, but disclosing this information felt pertinent to this study's claims of trustworthiness.

### **Limitations to my Criticality**

In many of the critical studies I read to prepare for this inquiry, there seemed to be a more overt critical agenda than my own study achieved. In spite of framing the inquiry from a critical stance, I feel like my execution of the data collection fell short in some ways. In particular, my protocols may not have been as strong as I originally thought they were. In my attempt to ask unbiased questions, I may have focused more on achieving objectivity at the expense of aligning my protocols with the critical aims of my conceptual framework. I assume that most researchers experience a bit of the "hindsight is 20/20" feeling after they are well into the data analysis stage. This, then, is not so much a problem as a regret. While coding the data, I often found myself jotting down questions I wished I had asked or writing a memo about things I felt were missing from my conversations with the participants.

As I reflected on the content of these memos in context of this study's emergent theory, I came to the realization that perhaps I was not well-equipped to generate a truly critical inquiry that could seek to "reveal the dynamics of power and ideology" that "dominate some in serving the interests of others" (Noblit, 2005, p. 76) and one that could effectively carry out efforts to disrupt such dynamics (Carspecken, 1996). In preparing the analysis and even considering the implications of this study's findings, I was faced with the awareness that for years I had uncritically abided a system I did not agree with when I previously worked as a secondary teacher in the county. I had to confront my own "domestication" (Freire, 1970) and my own contribution to the Cycle of PD Stagnation in which I had participated. Although I hoped my

research would make a contribution towards disrupting the power dynamics I felt negatively impacted teacher learning, I had to recognize the ways that my research design and specifically my protocols could have aligned more effectively with the critical theories that led to this inquiry's inception.

### **Transferability of Findings**

In light of these limitations, it is important to carefully consider the transferability of these findings to other contexts. Before comparing or applying these findings to other school settings, it would be essential to recall that this study drew from a small sample of secondary educators that was fairly homogeneous. It would be important to reflect on how these were educators who either volunteered or were encouraged by colleagues to volunteer and as such may have had an inclination towards PD thus skewing their responses towards a more positive perception of liberatory PD. In this way, there is an "uncertain representativeness" of this sample that makes it such that the study's findings can only offer "suggestive answers to any question framed in general terms" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 79). As this was a critical study focused on a singular school district, its findings should be appropriately contextualized before attempting to apply them to other settings.

Although this study's limitations make it such that its transferability should be contemplated cautiously, they did help to foreground the need for future studies. Most importantly, these limitations caused me to more carefully consider future iterations that this research could take that might better align with the work of critical theorists in the field.

### **Future Directions for this Study**

As there is still so much to understand about the relationship between PD and teacher agency, there are many research directions that could help expand the body of literature in these

two fields. In what follows, I will outline some broad directions that could be taken as well as some directions that could be taken to specifically support a deeper understanding of the particular context within which this current inquiry took place.

### **More Critical Studies Focused on PD**

As disclosed in my review of the limitations, I fear that this study may have fallen short of adequately aligning with the work of critical theorists in the field. Although this study made claims regarding the oppressive treatment of teachers, it may have been limited in its ability to encourage or inspire disruption of such treatment. As such, conducting studies that more overtly confront secondary teachers' perceptions of their treatment could be generative. This may also mean that studies that involve teachers in research design decisions from the onset could be productive in achieving more critical aims. Overall, research efforts involving more emancipatory research approaches would be appropriate to pursue.

### ***Different Design Approaches***

More in-depth studies that look at how liberatory PD could help teachers develop greater agency and criticality within the secondary context are warranted. This could mean incorporating different instruments of data collection such as conducting observations of PD initiatives or collecting written responses from secondary teachers about their perceptions of PD programs. It could also mean carrying out studies that involve prolonged engagement with the secondary teachers being studied. Research necessitating multiple interviews over time in a longitudinal study might also yield greater insight into secondary teachers' perceptions of liberatory PD. Since all participants in this study perceived utility in liberatory PD, a study could be conducted before and after a liberatory PD model is implemented at a secondary school site, and teachers'

perceptions could be compared before and after its adoption to measure its perceived effectiveness.

### ***A More Critical PD***

After contemplating this study's limitations, I concluded that perhaps the model of liberatory PD I proposed does not prioritize criticality enough. If the teachers in this study did not indicate the need to critically reflect on issues of race as a result of being introduced to the concept of liberatory PD, then there's a chance that the approach fails to serve its intended purposes. Perhaps collecting data regarding secondary teacher's perception of Kohli et al.'s (2015) critical professional development (CPD) would be more productive. In considering the context we currently find ourselves in- one that is more openly discussing systemic racism and the ways in which such racism is reflected in schools across America, it seems necessary to determine more about educators' perceptions of PD's role in supporting more equitable learning environments. In her recent study, Kohli (2019) advocated for overt efforts to develop racial literacy within teacher candidates, and she indicated that CPD can provide a means to that end.

In light of this study's findings, it seems plausible that without establishing an overt social justice agenda, teachers who begin to pursue more autonomous means for PD as proposed in the liberatory PD model may not choose to engage with the issues most relevant to fostering student equity. According to Riordan et al. (2019), studies focused on PD that purposefully seek to promote student equity and a problem-posing approach to education are still limited. In this way, perhaps the research needs to focus on understanding more about PD approaches that assist teachers in engaging with issues of race while simultaneously learning to cultivate their own agency. Although recent studies have indicated many promising benefits of CPD, the studies have predominantly focused on its application to the field of teacher education programs (Kohli,

2019; Dover et al., 2019). Thus, a study focused on understanding secondary teachers' perceptions of or engagement with CPD would contribute to the body of knowledge.

In thinking about how liberatory PD and CPD could complement one another, a future study that examined the various paths secondary teachers determine to take to pursue CPD through autonomous means could support a deeper comprehension of the relationship between PD and teacher agency. Similar to Ritchie's (2012) study, studies aimed at determining if and how teachers form networks in the midst of pursuing CPD could also be generative.

Additionally, critical studies that move from assessment to action would be warranted. Whereas this study only sought to understand secondary teachers' perceptions, critical studies that begin to consider actions that could be taken in response to this study's findings could help to move from serving diagnostic purposes towards searching out viable solutions.

### ***Missing Voices***

Considering how many stakeholders are potentially invested in PD, it seems that quite a few voices are missing in the research. Whether or not teachers experience meaningful PD impacts not just teachers, but it also impacts students. Simultaneously, it impacts principals and district leaders as well.

In their recent critical inquiry of two urban schools attempting to create and engage with equity-focused PD, Riordan et al. (2019) acknowledged that "students voices are often absent from professional learning research" (p. 328). Their study is one of the first of its kind in the field that purposefully incorporated student focus groups as a part of their data collection process. This marks a significant and promising shift in how PD is evaluated as it relates to its effectiveness. As noted in chapter one, in recent decades, student assessment scores have been used as the main indicator of a PD program's success (Flint et al., 2011; Picower, 2015;

Rodesiler & Pace, 2015; Tang & Choi, 2009), but this practice may serve as a tool of dehumanization that reduces students to scores. Critical studies that sought to incorporate students' voices into the conversation surrounding PD and teacher agency might help to disrupt the often inappropriate framing of students who become represented as data points on a chart as opposed to people with their own perceptions.

Morrell (2014) argued that the ultimate goal of PD should be seeking to positively transform students' lives through their educational experiences. If this is the end goal, it seems that students themselves should be involved in assessing the success of particular PD initiatives. In order to embrace a more critical approach to any future study of a liberatory PD program's effectiveness, it seems essential to invite students into the inquiry process. Inviting students "to describe their experiences in classrooms where teachers are formally engaged in professional development" has the potential to provide more nuanced understandings of a PD's impact than one-dimensional test scores could offer (Riordan et al., 2019, p. 332). Pursuing a study to better understand secondary students' perceptions of their teachers' growth as a result of participating in a liberatory PD model could provide important insights currently missing in the literature. Riordan et al. (2019) suggested that "we need to expand the voices engaged in creating and understanding teacher professional development" and that "students can provide rich data about the alignment of design and practice" (p. 342).

The voices of principals and district leaders are also missing from much of the literature on PD and teacher agency. Designing studies that would intentionally seek to involve these voices in the research might serve to inspire critical reflection regarding the way PD is typically approached. A critical study involving a focus group that included both teachers and leaders

could foster the sort of praxis that Freire (1970) proposed would be the only means towards emancipation and transformation.

### ***Involving Teachers in the Inception and Evaluation of PD***

In an article advocating for dialogism to serve as a means for transformative PD, Wells and Mitchell (2016) argued that “if we wish to support teachers in bravely embracing open-door teaching that resists the status quo of instructional practices, we need to start with reenvisioning our professional development models” (p. 35). This claim aligns with Freire’s (1970) claim that the oppressed “must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform” (p. 49). With this in mind, more research focused on teacher-designed or teacher-led PD needs to be conducted.

Studies that seek to understand more about the relationship between agency and PD are also warranted. For example, a quantitative study examining a teacher-generated PD focused on promoting teacher agency at a school site could be assessed by teachers before and after they receive the PD intervention to determine its effect. Just the same, a qualitative study using either Imants and Van der Wal’s (2019) model or Pantić’s (2015) theory as a framework to assess the degree of agency teachers felt an autonomous PD approach provided them could provide new insights.

Teacher-designed research investigating any aspect of the relationship between PD and teacher agency would also align with work that critical theorists in the field are attempting to pursue. As such, participatory action research involving secondary teachers who begin to enact their agency in the midst of their PD pursuits (such as in the case of Jennifer or Linda in this current iteration) might be particularly generative. This sort of research would ground the studies in teacher agency as it would naturally reframe the teachers conducting the research as



knowledge producers instead of knowledge recipients. Navarro (2018) implored for the allowance of “radical imagination” as it pertains to teachers seeking to put their agency to work in the midst of constrictive schooling systems (p. 354). Prioritizing and encouraging practitioner-initiated research would be one productive way to reimagine how teachers enact their agency.

Traditional PD models that rely on top-down decisions such as the ones described by the participants in this study often fail to prioritize opportunities for networking among educators. Biesta et al. (2015) examined the ways in which collective discourses influenced teachers’ beliefs and actions as they navigated a national reform. To extend their work, future studies could focus on determining more about the ways in which teacher conversation and collaboration cultivates agency. More specific to this current inquiry, a study seeking to understand how particular PD programs could promote collective agency among secondary educators would make a valuable contribution to the field as well.

### **Studies Specific to the Current Context**

In analyzing the data collected in this study and considering its findings as well as its limitations, it becomes clear that there is still a great deal to be learned about how secondary teachers in this district perceive liberatory PD. A natural progression from this current study would be to first collect individual data from every teacher at one school site to determine more about his or her beliefs concerning PD. As this qualitative study sampled a total of only eight teachers across three school sites, it is limited in its scope and certainly cannot make claims of generalizability regarding its findings. A quantitative survey that involves a much larger sample of teachers would provide greater insight as to teachers’ perceptions of a liberatory PD approach. It might also provide a broader range of opinions as to the perceived utility of such an approach.

Another future direction for this study would be to implement a liberatory PD approach at each of these three school sites and conduct further qualitative inquiry into teachers' perceptions of the approach as they experience it. Observations, reflective journals, focus groups, and interviews could all serve as means for collecting data in order to capture teachers' perceptions as they chart their own PD course.

As indicated in this study, there are fears regarding the fidelity of new PD initiatives in this county, so an important consideration to make before implementing a liberatory approach would be to carefully consider the length of time this PD approach should be embraced. According to Imants and Van der Wal's (2019) model, PD that promotes teacher agency "considers the outcomes as parts of a continuing cycle" (p. 7). As such, schools in this county aiming to adopt a liberatory PD model should be advised to treat this PD approach cyclically for as long as it is embraced; therefore, longitudinal studies seeking to determine liberatory PD's perceived effectiveness would be warranted as well.

If a liberatory approach were adopted at each of these school sites, possibilities for further inquiry would be vast. Individual teachers could be studied using phenomenological methods to determine more about the critical reflections they developed in their quest for professional growth. Quantitative surveys could be assessed to determine how this PD (treated as an intervention) impacted teacher agency at each school site. A mixed methods approach could be used to begin to draw conclusions about how the approach impacts the student achievement gap. These are just a few of the potential directions that could be taken to extend this iteration of inquiry.

Given the framing of this current study and its emphasis on the need for teacher voice to be prioritized in future PD designs and research intending to assess those designs, action research

generated by the teachers in the process of pursuing liberatory PD themselves could be a generative means to develop a richer understanding of the approach's potentiality. Empowering teachers to not just pursue PD on their own terms through a critically reflective lens but also to investigate the effects of such PD could make a significant contribution to the body of literature.

As indicated by this study, PD that promotes the sort of critical reflection which both Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1997) deem as transformative does not seem to be provided or protected within the rhythm of this district's calendar. More than that, spaces that encourage teachers to critically reflect on their positionality do not seem to be prioritized within this county's approach to PD. Although Melissa, Kirk, and Pam all mentioned a PD program that was briefly adopted by the district that focused on helping teachers understand more about inclusivity and equity-focused practices, they did not describe the program as having had lasting effects on their fellow staff members or their school culture. Carrying out research in conjunction with county initiatives such as this one would provide insight as to why such programming failed to transform teacher practice. As very few teachers in this study discussed the necessity of critically reflecting on issues of race, studies aimed at trying to understand this silence also seem pertinent. Such studies could help determine potential deficits in teacher thinking and/or deficits in available PD programming.

In addition, safe spaces to voice concerns about the way teacher learners are positioned may not be available to teachers at some school sites as indicated most overtly by Melissa and Courtney. The teachers in this study had critical feedback to offer regarding their school-required PD, but some seemed constrained in their ability to share this feedback with those who currently control PD initiatives. In this way, studies regarding the dynamics between building leaders and teachers could be enlightening. Determining leadership factors that serve to stifle or stimulate

teacher agency as it relates to PD could provide district leaders with insights that might influence future hiring procedures or principal training programs.

Teachers in this study seemed to understand aspects of their agency but constraints such as lack of time and lack of autonomy seemed to stymie their ability to enact their agency in transformative ways. As such, studies that seek to develop a more nuanced understanding of teacher agency from the perspective of teachers themselves would be useful. As Biesta et al. (2015) found examining the collective discourse surrounding teacher agency to be productive in their study situated in Scotland, perhaps replicating aspects of their study design would be similarly generative for understanding more about the agency of secondary teachers in this school district situated in America.

Specific to implementing a liberatory approach in this district, county leaders might consider creating a new role at each school site in order to support the staff in repositioning themselves as knowledge producers as opposed to knowledge recipients when engaging in PD activities. Studies could then be conducted to determine the effectiveness of having a teacher at each school who is solely responsible for supporting teachers in their adoption of a liberatory PD approach. Creating this role that promotes a new avenue for teachers to develop as leaders would offer additional qualitative research opportunities aimed at determining more about how teachers perceive their agency in relationship to this leadership position. Additionally, these PD teachers could also participate in a study aimed at determining more about each school's unique needs from his or her perspective.

Overall, there are so many productive directions this research could take in the future to build a stronger knowledge base of the literature focused on PD and teacher agency. Whether specific to the school district where this current inquiry took place, or whether broader in scope,

any inquiry that could provide a deeper understanding within these two fields would be a worthwhile pursuit.

### **Conclusion**

In a recent virtual gathering among members of NCTE, Gholdy Muhammad (2020) claimed resolutely, “our teachers have genius”. She followed that statement, though, with a telling qualification: “often times, our curriculum and our policies in schools have sucked the genius out of our teachers” (Muhammad, 2020). The Cycle of PD Stagnation theorized in this study represents one such policy that may serve to stifle the “genius” of teachers. As opposed to being an avenue for teacher genius to be cultivated and nurtured, the sort of PD that perpetuates a cycle of stagnation works to stifle teacher agency and ingenuity alike. Wells and Mitchell (2016) asserted that

as a living network of professionals, we are continually growing and changing, yet most sit-and-get professional development sessions don’t recognize this constant state of becoming. Just as we are continually becoming as educators, our professional development opportunities should evolve to meet changing needs (p. 39).

In looking carefully at their responses, the teachers who participated in this study did not describe their PD requirements as having adapted to their needs over time; instead, they described a teacher workforce who had adapted to PD mandates that often failed to stimulate professional growth. This sort of adaptation, though, may be a detriment to teachers and students alike.

As high school graduates today are increasingly expected to leave high school as autonomous and critically reflective individuals capable of contributing to the good of society, it seems they should participate in classrooms that can prepare them for such a feat. If traditional

PD that is founded on a one-size-fits-all approach continues to be the dominant mode of teacher learning, though, having such lofty goals for graduates seems unrealistic and ill-advised. If teachers are not experiencing learning that encourages autonomy and critical reflection, how can they be expected to effectively cultivate such a learning environment for their students? Freire (1970) claimed that “liberating education consists in acts of cognition, not transferrals of information” (p. 79), but as evidenced in this study, some secondary teachers may be stuck in a system built on the expectation that they receive knowledge that has been chosen for them to learn. This system, defined here as the Cycle of PD Stagnation, fails to encourage the sort of knowledge production that teachers are then expected to inspire in their classrooms.

In their study, Riordan et al. (2019) indicated the benefit of teachers identifying “the importance of engaging in the kinds of professional learning experiences that they were trying to transfer to their classrooms” (p. 338). As they argued, “if we want to create more equitable classrooms for kids, that equity should be reflected in the learning opportunities for teachers” (Riordan et al., 2019, p. 339). Teachers, then, need to take part in problem-posing PD in order to better facilitate problem-posing instruction.

A problem-posing approach to education is rooted in critical reflection and dialogue, or as Freire (1970) calls it, “praxis”. As it challenges learners to not only consider their oppressive circumstances but also to take steps towards transforming those circumstances, problem-posing can provide the means to rehumanize and liberate those who are oppressed. Any approach to teacher PD that does not prioritize a problem-posing model, deemed antialogical PD by some (Kohli et al., 2015) may inadvertently inhibit the development of teachers who effectively promote equity through their pedagogical decisions.

Problem-posing PD seems more essential than ever before as we find ourselves at a unique moment in history when people are more directly confronting problems of access and equity within our nation's schools. Picower (2013) argued that the current educational context often "masquerades as neutral" when in reality, schools are often highly contested spaces which require teachers to develop a critical awareness in order to best navigate. From the perspective of critical researchers, schools are one very prominent site where systemic racism persists and too often results in learning disparities for marginalized learners, so the way we carry out schooling should be under great scrutiny (Kohli et al., 2015; Picower, 2013; Riordan et al., 2019). All aspects of schooling, including the way we support teachers in their learning, should be examined to determine what practices need to be reimaged, transformed, or even completely overturned.

In synthesizing this research, I am left considering some pressing questions. If required PD can lead to the type of stagnation recounted in this inquiry, how is this stagnation impacting students? If traditional PD approaches reliant on top-down control thwart teacher agency and work to silence dissent, how is this approach to instruction potentially being replicated in classrooms across America? If teachers have become accustomed to receiving deposits of knowledge without having the time, space, or outlet to question what they are being given, how might they be unconsciously treating their students in a similar fashion? How might these ubiquitous, one-size-fits-all approaches to PD that have been embraced in the name of efficiency and bottom-line demands be contributing to the student achievement gaps growing along racial lines?

In light of the racial inequality in America that has been publicized more overtly in the last few months and the protests that have erupted across the nation in response to these

injustices, it seems more urgent than ever before to provide space and time for teachers to take part in PD that aligns with a liberatory model that would encourage teachers to critically reflect on their positionality and participate in purposeful dialogue aimed at transforming any teaching practices or beliefs that perpetuate racial disparity.

In their discussion, Riordan et al. (2019) posited that without explicit attention during professional learning to systemic issues of power, race, gender, class, ethnicity, and other areas of equity and injustice, teachers are unlikely to find coherent and consistent ways to support students in addressing those issues in classrooms and in their own lives (p. 341).

The Cycle of PD Stagnation theorized in this study may be one culprit of systemic racism in need of overhaul. As it subtly perpetuates the oppression of teacher learners, it may simultaneously and just as subtly perpetuate the oppression of student learners. More than that, it may perpetuate inequity along racial lines as it encourages a lack of criticality and as it maintains a system in which dominant directives are expected to be followed unquestioningly. As Picower (2011) described in her research, with such constraints in place, even justice-oriented teachers may “find themselves complicit in a system in which they are forced to reproduce the very inequalities they went into teaching to ameliorate” (p. 1106). In this way, determining more about how PD could empower teachers to develop the kind of “productive agency” that Clark (2016) contended would allow them to “transform their teaching context” (p. 8) and determining more about agentic approaches to PD that would position educators to become effective “change agents” (p. 1) as Imants and Van der Wal (2019) proposed seems more essential than ever before.



Our country is at a critical crossroads, and our schools can become sites of greater equity and access or they can work to maintain the status quo that perpetuates racial injustice. Teacher PD is just one aspect of schooling that needs to be carefully examined and further researched in order to determine ways that teachers, as they seek knowledge, can translate their growth into classrooms that promote justice and inclusion. As traditional approaches to PD limit critical reflection and teacher agency (both individual and collective), it is hard to imagine their place in schools aiming to become more just.

As Picower (2013) defended, “teachers must engage in critical self-reflection to reveal the ideological nature of their own understandings of current structures and how oppression historically and currently operates to reinforce and maintain inequality” (p. 173). Thus, PD that encourages and prompts such reflection may prove productive in helping to uproot oppression. Riordan et al. (2019) proposed that teacher learning can serve “as a pivotal lever for transformation” (p. 342), but this will require all educational stakeholders to reconceptualize how teachers are framed as learners. In synthesizing the relevant literature and considering this current study’s findings, such reframing will require that teachers be repositioned as agentic learners who take an active role in shaping their own development. Taking steps both in theory development and in practice that would seek to rehumanize PD approaches seems more essential than ever before.

Although this study began long before protestors took to the streets to voice their outrage at the killing of marginalized community members across the nation, its conclusion seems timely. Further inquiry that seeks to explore systems of schooling that may contribute to marginalization seems more essential than ever before. Deepening our understanding about the relationship between teacher agency and PD, and specifically how research in these fields can

support educators in cultivating classrooms that promote inclusivity and celebrate diversity seems both necessary and imperative. We need teachers who are better prepared to navigate conversations surrounding injustice, better equipped to question how their own habits and behaviors may contribute to racial inequity, and better able to activate their agency and advocate for systems that promote the cultivation of learning environments that are equitable for all students. Liberatory PD may be one such means to those ends, and for that reason, pursuing additional research regarding this critical approach to PD is both warranted and encouraged.

## References

- Agee, J. (2009). Developing qualitative research questions: A reflective process. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4), 431-447.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390902736512>
- Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, 36(5), 258-267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960903028727>
- Au, W. (2009). High-stakes testing and discursive control: The triple bind for non-standard student identities. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 11(2), 65-71.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960903028727>
- Ball, S. J. (2003). The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity. *Journal of Education Policy*, 18 (2), 215-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0268093022000043065>
- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1-26.
- Becker, H. S. (2007). *Writing for social scientists: How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article* (2nd ed.). University of Chicago Press.
- Bevins, S., Jordan, J., & Perry, E. (2011). Reflecting on professional development. *Educational Action Research*, 19(3), 399-411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2011.600643>
- Biesta, G., Priestly, M., & Robinson, S. (2015). The role of beliefs in teacher agency. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 624-640. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044325>
- Biesta, G., Priestly, M., & Robinson, S. (2017). Talking about education: Exploring the significance of teachers' talk for teacher agency. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 49(1), 38-54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2016.1205143>

- Biesta, G., & Tedder, M. (2007). Agency and learning in the lifecourse: Towards an ecological perspective. *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 39(2), 132-149.  
<http://orbilu.uni.lu/bitstream/10993/7192/1/agency%20and%20learning%20in%20the%20lifecourse%202007.pdf>
- Bochner, A. P. (2018). Unfurling rigor: On continuity and change in qualitative inquiry. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 24(6), 359-368. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417727766>
- Buchanan, R. (2015). Teacher identity and agency in an era of accountability. *Teachers and Teaching*, 21(6), 700-719. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044329>
- Burke, A., & Collier, D. R. (2016). 'I was kind of teaching myself': Teachers' conversations about social justice and teaching for change. *Teacher Development*, 21(2), 269-287.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2016.1235607>
- Burns, M., & Pachler, N. (2004). 'Inquiry as stance': Teacher professional learning and narrative. *Teacher Development*, 8(2-3), 149-164.
- Campbell, L. (2019). Pedagogical bricolage and teacher agency: Towards a culture of creative professionalism. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 51(1), 31-40.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2018.1425992>.
- Carspecken, P. (1996). *Critical ethnography in educational research*. Routledge.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Sage.
- Charteris, J. (2016). Dialogic feedback as divergent assessment for learning: an ecological approach to teacher professional development. *Critical Studies in Education*, 57(3), 277-295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2015.1057605>
- Clark, J. S. (2016). Critical intentions and "care of the self:" Reconsidering the role of agency in

- preservice teachers' thinking. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*, 5(1), 1-10.  
<https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v5n1p1>
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2010). *The Flat World and Education: How America's Commitment to Equity Will Determine our Future*. Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L., & McLaughlin, M.W. (1995). Policies that support professional development in an era of reform. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 76(8), 597-604.
- Darling-Hammond, L., Wei, R. C., Andree, A., Richardson, N., & Orphanos, S. (2009). *Professional learning in the learning profession: A status report on teacher development in the united states and abroad*. National Staff Development Council, 504  
<http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquestcom.proxy.library.vcu.edu/docview/1238186427?accountid=14780>
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Introduction: The discipline and practice of qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., pp. 1-32). Sage.
- Desimone, L. M. (2009). Improving impact studies of teachers' professional development: Toward better conceptualizations and measures. *Educational Researcher*, 38(3), 181-199.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X08331140>
- Desimone, L. M., Smith, T. M., & Ueno, K. (2006). Are teachers who need sustained, content-focused professional development getting it? An administrator's dilemma. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(2), 179-215. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X04273848>
- Dover, A. G., Henning, N., Agarwal-Rangnath, R., & Dotson, E. K. (2018). It's heart work: Critical case studies, critical professional development, and fostering hope among justice-oriented teacher educators. *Multicultural Perspectives*, 20(4), 229-239,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/15210960.2018.1527154>

- Dover, A. G., Kressler, B., & Lozano, M. (2019). "Learning our way through": Critical professional development for social justice in teacher education. *The New Educator*, 16(1), 45-69. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1547688X.2019.1671566>
- Fernández, A. E. (2019). Decolonizing professional development: A re-humanizing approach. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(2-3), 185-196. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1649610>
- Fine, M., & Sirin, S. R. (2007). Theorizing hyphenated selves: Researching youth development in & across contentious political contexts. *Social & Personality Psychology Compass*, 1(1), 16-38. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2007.00032.x>
- Finlay, L. (2002). "Outing" the researcher: The provenance, process, and practice of reflexivity. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12(4), 531-545. <https://doi.org/10.1177/104973202129120052>
- Firestone, W. A., Mangin, M. M., Martinez, M. C., Polovsky, T. (2005). Leading coherent professional development: A comparison of three districts. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 41(3), 413-448. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X04269605>
- Flint, A. S., Zisook, K., & Fisher, T. R. (2011). Not a one-shot deal: Generative professional development among experience teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(8), 1163-1169. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2011.05.009>
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, Trans.) Continuum.
- Garcia, S. S., & Garcia, C. F. (2016). Transformative professional development and the promotion of literacy through culturally responsive pedagogy. *The CATESOL Journal* 28(1), 175-194. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1111622.pdf>

- Gemeda, F. T., Fiorucci, M., & Catarci, M. (2014). Teachers' professional development in schools: Rhetoric versus reality. *Professional Development in Education, 40*(1), 71-88.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2012.759988>
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Aldine.
- Glickman, C. D., Gordon, S. P., & Ross-Gordon, J. M. (2018). *Supervision and instructional leadership: A developmental approach* (10<sup>th</sup> ed.). Pearson.
- Gray, D. E. (2014). *Doing Research in the Real World* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) Sage.
- Guba, E. G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *Educational Communication and Technology Journal, 29*, 75-91.  
<https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02766777>
- Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y.S. (1989). *Fourth generation evaluation*. Sage.
- Guest, G., Bunce, A., & Johnson, L. (2006). How many interviews are enough?: An experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods, 18*(1), 59-82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1525822X05279903>
- Guskey, T. R. (2009). Closing the knowledge gap on effective professional development. *Educational Horizons, 87*(4), 224-233. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/42923773>
- Gusky, T. R., & Yoon, K. S. (2009). What works in professional development? *Phi Delta Kappan, 90*(7), 495-500, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003172170909000709>
- Hardy, I. (2009). Critiquing teacher professional development: Teacher learning within the field of teachers' work. *Critical Studies in Education, 51*(1), 71-84.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17508480903450232>
- Hartman, S. V. (2016). Cultivating teacher agency: How teachers persist in the face of school

- mandates. *English Journal*, 106(2), 16-21.
- Hill, M. L. (2012). Beyond ‘talking out of school’: Educational researchers as public intellectuals. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 35(2), 153-169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1743727X.2012.675834>
- Hollingsworth, H., & Clarke, D. (2017). Video as a tool for focusing teacher self-reflection: supporting and provoking teacher learning. *Journal of Mathematics Teacher Education*, 20(5), 457-475. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10857-017-9380-4>
- Holstein, J., & Gubrium, J. (1997). Active interviewing. In J .A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*. (pp. 113-129). Sage.
- Hooley, N. (2013). Exposing the intricacies of pre-service teacher education: Incorporating the insights of Freire and Bourdieu. *Review of Education*, 1(2), 125-158. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rev3.3011>
- Imants, J., & Van der Wal, M. M. (2019). A model of teacher agency in professional development. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 52(1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1604809>
- Ingvarson, L., Meiers, M., & Beavis, A. (2005) Factors affecting the impact of professional development programs on teachers’ knowledge, practice, student outcomes & efficacy. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 13(10). [http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=professional\\_dev](http://research.acer.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1000&context=professional_dev)
- Katsarou, E., Picower, B., & Stovall, D. (2010). Acts of solidarity: Developing urban social justice educators in the struggle for quality public education. *Teacher Education Quarterly*, 37(3), 137-153, <https://www-jstor-org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/23479502>
- Kelly, P. (2006). What is teacher learning? A socio-cultural perspective. *Oxford Review of*



- Education*, 32(4), 505-519. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980600884227>
- Kennedy, M. K. (2016). How does professional development improve teaching? *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 945-980. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0034654315626800>
- King, H., & Nomikou, E. (2018). Fostering critical teacher agency: The impact of a science capital pedagogical approach. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 26(1), 87-103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2017.1353539>
- Kohli, R. (2019). Lessons for teacher education: The role of critical professional development in teacher of color retention. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 70(1), 39-50. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487118767645>
- Kohli, R., Picower, B. Martinez, A., & Ortiz, N. (2015). Critical professional development: Centering the social justice needs of teachers. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, 6(2), 7-24. <http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/viewFile/1057/849>
- Koonce, J. B. (2018). Critical race theory and caring as channels for transcending border between an African American professor and her Latina/o students. *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, 20(2), 101-116. <https://doi.org/10.18251/ijme.v20i2.1432>
- Krueger, R. A., & Casey, M. A. (2014). *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research* (5<sup>th</sup> ed.). Sage.
- Lasky, S. (2005). A sociocultural approach to understanding teacher identity, agency and professional vulnerability in a context of secondary school reform. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 21(8), 899-916. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2005.06.003>
- Lee, O., Luykx, A., Buxton, C., & Shaver, A. (2007). The challenge of altering elementary school teachers' beliefs and practices regarding linguistic and cultural diversity in science instruction. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching*, 44(9), 1269-1291.

<https://doi.org/10.1002/tea.20198>

Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). Perspective 3: Constructivism as a theoretical and interpretive stance. In

Paul, J. L. (2005). *Introduction to the philosophies of research and criticism in education and the social sciences* (60-63). Pearson Publishing.

Little, J. W. (1993). Teachers' professional development in a climate of educational reform.

Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED) <http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/docview/62785318?accountid=14780>

Liu, K., Miller, R., & Jahng, K. E. (2016). Participatory media for teacher professional development: Toward a self-sustainable and democratic community of practice.

*Educational Review*, 68(4), 420-443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2015.1121862>

Margolis, J. (2002). Re-Form-ing reflection (and action) in English education. *English*

*Education*, 34(3), 214-236. <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/stable/40173128>

Martinez, A. N., Valdez, C., & Cariaga, S. (2016). Solidarity with the people: Organizing to disrupt teacher alienation. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 49(3), 300-313.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2016.1194104>

Maxwell, J. A. (2013). *Qualitative Research Design: An Interactive Approach*. 3rd Edition. Sage.

McMillan, J. H. (2016). *Fundamentals of educational research* (7th ed.). Pearson.

McNicholl, J. (2013). Relational agency and teacher development: A CHAT analysis of a

collaborative professional inquiry project with biology teachers. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 36(2), 218-232, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2012.686992>

- Mette, I. M., Nieuwenhuizen, L. & Hvidston, D. J. (2016). Teachers' perceptions of culturally responsive pedagogy and the impact on leadership preparation: Lessons for future reform efforts. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 11(1), 1-20.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). Transformative learning: Theory to practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 1997(74), 5-12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401>
- Mezirow, J. (1998). On critical reflection. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(3), 185-98. <https://doi.org/10.1177/074171369804800305>
- Milner, H. R., & Laughter, J. C. (2015). But good intentions are not enough: Preparing teachers to center race and poverty. *The Urban Review*, 47(2), 341-363. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-014-0295-4>
- Morgan, D. L. (2019). *Basic and advanced focus groups*. Sage.
- Morrell, E. (2014). Toward a critical model of teacher learning: Lessons from the South Carolina Reading Initiative. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 30, 207-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2014.907715>
- Muhammad, G. (2020, May 5). *NCTE Member Gathering with Gholdy Muhammad* [Video]. Vimeo. <https://www.vimeo.com/415296470>
- Navarro, O. (2018). We can't do this alone: Validating and inspiring social justice teaching through a community of transformative praxis. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 48(3), 335-358. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2018.1468212>
- National Council of Teachers of English. (2019). Shifting from professional development to professional learning: Centering teacher empowerment. <https://ncte.org/statement/proflearning/print/>
- Noblit, G. (2005). Perspective 7: critical theory. In Paul, J. L. (2005). *Introduction to the*

- philosophies of research and criticism in education and the social sciences* (76-79). Pearson.
- Noy, C. (2008). Sampling knowledge: The hermeneutics of snowball sampling in qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *11*(4), 327-344. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645570701401305>
- Pantić, N. (2015). A model for study of teacher agency for social justice. *Teachers and Teaching; Theory and Practice*, *21*(6), 759-778. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044332>
- Pantić, N. (2017). An exploratory study of teacher agency for social justice. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *66*, 219-230. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.04.008>
- Patti, J., Holzer, A. A., Stern, R., & Brackett, M. (2012). Personal, professional coaching: Transforming professional development for teacher and administrative leaders. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *11*(1), 263-274. <https://doi.org/10.12806/V11/I1/AB4>
- Patton, M. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research*, *34*, 1189-1208.
- Picower, B. (2011). Resisting compliance: Learning to teach for social justice in a neoliberal context. *Teachers College Record*, *113*(5), 1105-1134.
- Picower, B. (2012). Teacher activism: Enacting a vision for social justice. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, *45*(4), 561-574. <https://doi.org/10.1080/106665684.2012.717848>
- Picower, B. (2013). You can't change what you don't see: Developing new teachers' political understanding of education. *Journal of Transformative Education*, *11*(3), 170-189. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344613502395>
- Picower, B. (2015). Nothing about us without us: Teacher-driven critical professional

- development. *Radical Pedagogy*, 12(1), 1-26.
- Podolsky, A., Kini, T., Bishop, J., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). Sticky schools: How to find and keep teachers in the classroom. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 98(8), 19-25.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0031721717708290>
- Rallis, S. & Rossman, G. (2012). *The research journey: Introduction to inquiry*. Guilford Press.
- Ravitch, S. M., & Riggan, M. (2017). *Reason & Rigor: How Conceptual Frameworks Guide Research* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Sage.
- Rehm, M., & Notten, A. (2016). Twitter as an informal learning space for teachers!?: The role of social capital in Twitter conversations among teachers. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 60, 215-223. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2016.08.015>
- Rinke, C., & Valli, L. (2010). Making adequate yearly progress: Teaching learning in school-based accountability contexts. *Teacher College Record*, 112(3), 645-684.
- Riordan, M., Klein, E. J., & Gaynor, C. (2019). Teaching for equity and deeper learning: How does professional learning transfer to teachers' practice and influence students' experiences? *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(2-3), 327-345.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1066584.2019.1647808>
- Ritchie, S. (2012). Incubating and sustaining: How teacher networks enable and support social justice education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 63(2), 120-131,  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487111428327>
- Riveros, A., Newton, P., & Burgess, D. (2012). A situated account of teacher agency and learning: Critical reflections on professional learning communities. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 35(1), 202-216. <http://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje>  
[rce/article/view/837/1169](http://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje/article/view/837/1169)

- Robinson, S. (2012). Constructing teacher agency in response to the constraints of education policy: Adoption and adaptation. *Curriculum Journal*, 23(2), 231-245.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2012.678702>
- Rodesiler, L., & Pace, B. G. (2015). English teachers' online participation as professional development: A narrative study. *English Education*, 47(4), 347-378.  
<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/EE/0474-jul2015/EE0474English.pdf>
- Sacramento, J. (2019). Critical collective consciousness: Ethnic studies teachers and professional development. *Equity & Excellence in Education*, 52(2-3), 167-184,  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2019.1647806>
- Saldaña, J. (2016). *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (3rd ed.) Sage.
- Sannino, A. (2010). Teachers' talk of experiencing: Conflict, resistance and agency. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 26(4), 838-844. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2009.10.021>
- Sirin, S. R., Bikmen, N., Mir, M., Fine, M., Zaal, M., & Katsifias, D. (2008). Exploring dual identification among Muslim-American emerging adults: A mixed methods study. *Journal of Adolescence*, 31(2), 259-279. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.adolescence.2007.10.009>
- Skerrett, A., Warrington, A., & Williamson, T. (2018). Generative principles for professional learning for equity-oriented urban English teacher. *English Education*, 50(2), 116-145.  
<http://www.ncte.org.proxy.library.vcu.edu/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/EE/0502-jan2018/EE0502Generative.pdf>
- Skerrett, A. & Williamson, T. (2015). Reconceptualizing professional communities for preservice urban teachers. *Urban Review*, 47(4), 579-600.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-015-0325-x>

- Smardon, D., & Charteris, J. (2017). Raising the bar for teacher professional learning and development? Or just cruel optimism? *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, 52(1), 177-183. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-017-0075-2>
- Smith, E. (2011). Teaching critical reflection. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16(2), 211-223. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.515022>
- Sprouse, M. L. (2016). Collaborative professional development through a critique protocol. *English Journal*, 106(2), 62-67.
- Strahan, D. (2016). Mid-career teachers' perceptions of self-guided professional growth: Strengthening a sense of agency through collaboration. *Teacher Development*, 20(5), 667-681. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2016.1190782>
- Tang, S. Y. F., & Choi, P. L. (2009). Teachers' professional lives and continuing professional development in changing times. *Educational Review*, 61(1), 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013191080268748>
- Timperley, H., & Alton-Lee, A. (2008). Reframing teacher professional learning: An alternative policy approach to strengthening valued outcomes for diverse learners. *Review of Research in Education*, 32(1), 328-369, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X07308968>
- Tracy, S. (2010). Qualitative quality: Eight "big-tent" criteria for excellent qualitative research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 16(10), 837-851, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800410383121>
- U.S. Department of Education. (2016). *The state of racial diversity in the educator workforce*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning,

- Evaluation and Policy Development, Policy and Program Studies Service.
- Valli, L., & Buese, D. (2007). The changing roles of teachers in an era of high-stakes accountability. *American Educational Research Journal*, 44(3), 519–558.  
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831207306859>
- van der Heijden, H. R. M. A., Geldens, J. J. M., Beijaard, D., & Popeijus, H. L. (2015). Characteristics of teachers as change agents. *Teachers and Teaching: theory and practice*, 21(6), 681-699. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2015.1044328>
- van Woerkom, M. (2010). Critical reflection as a rationalistic ideal. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 60(4), 339-356. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713609358446>
- Wall, H., & Palmer, M. (2015). Courage to love: Coaching dialogically toward teacher empowerment. *The Reading Teacher*, 68(8), 627-635. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1353>
- Wells, M. S., & Mitchell, D. J. (2016). Dialogism in teacher professional development: Talking our way to open-door teaching. *English Journal*, 106(2), 35-40.
- Wilkinson, S. (1999). Focus groups: A feminist method. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 23(2), 221-244. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1471-6402.1999.tb00355.x>
- Wolf, S., & Peele, M. E. (2019). Examining sustained impacts of two teacher professional development programs on professional well-being and classroom practices. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2019.07.003>
- Woollen, S., & Otto, S. (2013). Intended consequences: Challenging white teachers' habitus and its influence in urban schools implementing an arts-based educational reform. *Urban Review*, 46(1), 86-111. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-013-0235-6>
- Yoon, K. S., Duncan, T., Lee, S. W.-Y., Scarloss, B., & Shapley, K. (2007). Reviewing the evidence on how teacher professional development affects student achievement: Issues &



answers. Regional Educational Laboratory at Edvance Research Southwest Inc.

<http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/docview/62058850?accountid=14780>

Yoon, S., Yom, J. K., Yang, Z., & Liu, L. (2017). The effects of teachers' social and human capital on urban science reform initiatives: Considerations for professional development.

*Teachers College Record*, 119(4), <http://proxy.library.vcu.edu/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.proxy.library.vcu.edu/docview/1969010898?accountid=14780>

Yost, D. S., & Vogel, R. (2007). Urban professional development working to create successful teachers and achieving students. *Middle School Journal*, 38(3), 34-40,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00940771.2007.11461581>

*Appendix A*

## Phase 1 Secondary PD Planner Participant Recruitment Email

Dear School PD Planner,

I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I am looking for professional development planners to interview for a study on secondary teacher's perceptions of professional development (PD). In light of the COVID-19 situation, I have adapted my study to include only virtual interactions with participants.

As part of a research project on this topic, I would like to interview you once virtually to discuss your views about teacher professional development. If you agree, we will schedule a phone interview at a time that best fits your schedule. The interview will last for about an hour.

I will audio record interviews. Recordings will be listened to by me and the established, reputable company hired to transcribe interviews. However, at no point will your name appear in any publication or presentation associated with this research.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete the following [link](#) which will direct you to a demographic survey and a consent form. I will use this information to help me select 3 total interviewees from a range of backgrounds. Within two weeks, I will contact you to let you know if you have been selected for participation.

Thank you for your time and consideration,  
Christine Moore  
Student Investigator  
School of Education  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
804-317-8743  
[moorecc3@vcu.edu](mailto:moorecc3@vcu.edu)

## Further Information about this Research Project

This study has been approved by Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board, the board which oversees and approves research projects involving human subjects. Participation in the project is voluntary. Before the completion of the project, you will have the opportunity to review the findings of the interview to ensure that conclusions developed during the research analysis accurately represent your perceptions. Digital drafts will be made available for your review.

Reports and publications generated from this study will not identify individuals, schools, or the school division, and all research materials will seek to accurately represent the party conducting the study.

If you agree to participate but then decide to withdraw from the study, you can stop your participation at any time without any form of penalty. Simply tell me you are withdrawing from the study in an oral statement, an e-mail, or a letter.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please contact me using the information provided above or contact VCU's IRB:

Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research Subjects Protection  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
800 Leigh St., Suite 3000  
BioTech One Building  
PO Box 980568  
Richmond, VA 23298  
Office phone: 804-827-2157

## *Appendix B*

### Phase 1 Information and Consent Form for PD Planners

#### **TITLE: A Critical Examination of Secondary Teacher's Perceptions of Liberatory PD**

This consent form outlines important information about a research study in which you are being asked to participate. Please ask the researcher to explain any information in this consent document that is not clear to you. You may take home a copy of this form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this research study is to understand secondary teachers' perceptions of professional development (PD). The study is part of a dissertation research project in Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education. You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a secondary teacher who serves as a PD Planner on behalf of your school.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT**

This research seeks to understand various ways secondary teachers in your school district perceive their PD experiences. In this study, you will be asked to participate in one virtual interview concerning your opinions of PD based on your experiences as a secondary teacher in the school district where you are employed. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. It should last between 45 and 60 minutes. Before the completion of the project, you will have an opportunity to review the findings of the interview to ensure that conclusions developed during the research analysis accurately reflect your perceptions. The interview will be conducted at a time most convenient to your schedule.

#### **RISKS, BENEFITS AND COSTS**

It is unlikely that participation in this study will cause you any risk or discomfort. However, sometimes talking about teaching experiences causes people to become upset. You do not have to talk about any subjects you do not want to talk about, and you may leave the project at any time.

You may not get any direct benefit from this study, but the information we learn from this study may help us think about teacher PD and PD approaches that foster teacher growth in new ways.

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the interview and the time you spend analyzing the accuracy of your contribution to the study's findings.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of this consent form, audio files of interviews, transcripts of interviews, researcher field notes, and various journal entries. A fake name will replace your name in documented field notes and will not be connected to names on the consent form. All electronic data will be kept in password protected computer files. Hard copies of data will be kept in locked filing cabinets. Transcripts of interviews will be kept for a minimum of five years after the completion of the study. All other data containing identifiable

information on computer files and hard copies will be destroyed upon completion of the research study. Reports and publications generated from this study will not identify individuals, schools, or the school division, and all research materials will seek to accurately represent the party conducting the study.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study. If you leave the study, you will be given the option of having any data already collected about you destroyed and not used in the project.

### **QUESTIONS**

In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

#### **Student Investigator**

*Christine Moore*

*School of Education*

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

*804-317-8743*

*moorecc3@vcu.edu*

Or

#### **Faculty Instructor**

*Ross Collin, PhD*

*School of Education*

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

*rcollin@vcu.edu*

<b>Acknowledgement of Consent</b>	
<hr/>	
Adult Participant Name (Printed)	
Adult Participant's Signature	Date
Name of Person Conducting Consent Discussion (Printed)	
Signature of Person Conducting Consent Discussion	Date

*Appendix C*

## Phase 2 Secondary Teacher Participant Recruitment Email

Dear Secondary Teacher,

I am a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). I am looking for secondary teachers to interview for a study on secondary teacher's perceptions of professional development (PD). In light of the COVID-19 situation, I have adapted my study to include only virtual interactions with participants.

As part of a research project on this topic, I would like to interview you once virtually to discuss your views about teacher professional development. As a part of this virtual interview, you will also be asked to create an identity map that reflects how you see yourself as a teacher and a learner. (Materials, further instructions, and time will be provided for this activity during our virtual meeting.) If you agree, we will schedule a phone interview at a time that best fits your schedule. The identity map creation as well as the interview should last no longer than an hour and a half.

I will audio record the virtual interview, and I will obtain a digital copy of your identity map. Recordings will be listened to by me and the established, reputable company hired to transcribe interviews. However, at no point will your name appear in any publication or presentation associated with this research.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please complete the following [link](#) which will direct you to a demographic survey and a consent form. I will use this information to help me select teacher participants from a range of backgrounds. Within two weeks, I will contact you to let you know if you have been selected for participation.

Thank you for your time and consideration,  
Christine Moore  
Student Investigator  
School of Education  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
804-317-8743  
[moorecc3@vcu.edu](mailto:moorecc3@vcu.edu)

## Further Information about this Research Project

This study has been approved by Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board, the board which oversees and approves research projects involving human subjects. Participation in the project is voluntary. Before the completion of the project, you will have the opportunity to review the findings of the interview to ensure that conclusions developed during the research analysis accurately represent your perceptions. Digital drafts will be made available for your review.

Reports and publications generated from this study will not identify individuals, schools, or the school division, and all research materials will seek to accurately represent the party conducting the study.

If you agree to participate but then decide to withdraw from the study, you can stop your participation at any time without any form of penalty. Simply tell me you are withdrawing from the study in an oral statement, an e-mail, or a letter.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please contact me using the information provided about or contact VCU's IRB:

Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research Subjects Protection  
Virginia Commonwealth University  
800 Leigh St., Suite 3000  
BioTech One Building  
PO Box 980568  
Richmond, VA 23298  
Office phone: 804-827-2157



## *Appendix D*

### Phase 2 Information and Consent Form for Secondary Teachers

#### **TITLE: A Critical Examination of Secondary Teacher's Perceptions of Liberatory PD**

This consent form outlines important information about a research study in which you are being asked to participate. Please ask the researcher to explain any information in this consent document that is not clear to you. You may take home a copy of this form to think about or discuss with family or friends before making your decision.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this research study is to understand secondary teachers' perceptions of professional development (PD). The study is part of a dissertation research project in Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Education. You are being asked to participate because you are a secondary teacher currently working in one of the school contexts selected for this study.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT**

This research seeks to understand how secondary teachers in your school district perceive their PD experiences. In this study, you will be asked to participate in one virtual interview concerning your opinions of PD based on your experiences as a secondary teacher in your current school district. As a part of this interview, you will also be asked to create an identity map that reflects how you see yourself as a teacher and a learner. (Materials, further instructions, and time will be provided for this activity during our virtual meeting.) The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. The identity map creation as well as the interview should last no more than an hour and a half. Before the completion of the project, you will have an opportunity to review the findings to ensure that conclusions developed during the research analysis accurately reflect your perceptions. The phone interview will be conducted at a time most convenient to your schedule.

#### **RISKS, BENEFITS AND COSTS**

It is unlikely that participation in this study will cause you any risk or discomfort. However, sometimes talking about teaching experiences causes people to become upset. You do not have to talk about any subjects you do not want to talk about, and you may leave the study at any time.

You may not get any direct benefit from this study, but the information we learn from this study may help us think about teacher PD and PD approaches that foster teacher growth in new ways.

There are no costs for participating in this study other than the time you will spend in the interview and the time you spend analyzing the accuracy of your contribution to the study's findings.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of this consent form, audio files of interviews, transcripts of interviews, researcher field notes, and various journal entries. You will receive a randomly assigned number that will be used to identify your identity map as well as your comments during the interview. A fake name will replace your name and/or in documented

field notes and will not be connected to names on the consent form. All electronic data will be kept in password protected computer files. Hard copies of data will be kept in locked filing cabinets. Transcripts of interviews will be kept for a minimum of five years after the completion of the study. All other data containing identifiable information on computer files and hard copies will be destroyed upon completion of the research study. Reports and publications generated from this study will not identify individuals, schools, or the school division, and all research materials will seek to accurately represent the party conducting the study.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study. If you leave the study, you will be given the option of having any data already collected about you destroyed and not used in the project.

### **QUESTIONS**

In the future, you may have questions about your participation in this study. If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about the research, contact:

#### **Student Investigator**

*Christine Moore*  
*School of Education*  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*  
*804-317-8743*  
*moorecc3@vcu.edu*

Or

#### **Faculty Instructor**

*Ross Collin, PhD*  
*School of Education*  
*Virginia Commonwealth University*  
*rcollin@vcu.edu*

**Acknowledgement of Consent**

---

Adult Participant Name (Printed)

---

Adult Participant's Signature

---

Date

---

Name of Person Conducting Consent Discussion (Printed)

---

Signature of Person Conducting Consent Discussion

---

Date

## Appendix E

### Interview Protocols for PD Planners

Welcome! Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today. The purpose of this interview is to gather information about your perspective on professional development. The interview will take about an hour.

To provide you with a bit more context, I am a former teacher in the school district, and I am pursuing this research in hopes of understanding more about how other teachers perceive their professional development experiences. Please be assured that this information and all your responses will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be reported in such a way that identification of individuals will be impossible. In the written summary of this interview, no names will be attached to comments. Your individual responses will not be shared with any other teachers or administrators in the building.

Before we begin, I want to review some guidelines that will help the interview run smoothly. First, I want to inform you that I will be audio recording the session so that I can accurately capture all your comments. Please know that you can stop being interviewed at any point during our discussion. I am interested in both your positive and your negative viewpoints. Please be specific and thorough in your responses. Do you have any questions before we begin?

To ensure that we are on the same page in thinking about the topic of PD, I want to clarify that this study aligns with a broad definition of professional development provided by Desimone's (2009) description of PD:

Teachers experience a vast range of activities and interactions that may increase their knowledge and skills and improve their teaching practice, as well as contribute to their personal, social, and emotional growth as teachers. These experiences can range from formal, structured topic-specific seminars given on in-service days, to every day, informal "hallway" discussions with other teachers about instruction techniques, embedded in teachers' everyday work lives (p. 182)

Opening questions:

- \* What are some experiences that have helped you grow professionally as an educator?
- \* If you could design your own PD, what might it look like over the course of a year?

Now that we have discussed your general opinions regarding your PD experiences, I want to give you with a chance to look over two definitions to ensure that the terms I will be using in the rest of the interview do not cause any confusion. If you have any questions about either of these terms, I am happy to discuss them with you.

Definitions:

The researcher approaches *teacher agency* from a socio-cultural perspective. This study draws on Clark's (2016) definition which contends that a teacher's agency "represents awareness of

their self, their intentionality, and their capacity to make choices in the context of schooling” (Clark, 2016, p. 1).

The researcher intends the term *liberatory professional development* to indicate any approach to PD that positions teachers as autonomous and active participants in control of their own professional growth. Additionally, liberatory PD prioritizes critical reflection aimed at empowering teachers to develop an understanding of their own agency and how that agency can be enacted in specific teaching contexts.

**RQ1: How do secondary teachers describe their agency in navigating the PD fulfillments required by their school?**

1. Please describe how your school provides PD to teachers in a typical school year.
2. How involved are teachers in influencing school decisions about PD?  
\*In your opinion, is this level of involvement appropriate?
3. How are learners treated when it comes to the school’s required PD?
4. How does participating in your school’s required PD empower teachers to affect change in your school building?\*
5. How effectively does your school’s required PD support teachers’ individual learning needs?\*
6. How much agency do you feel teachers have as it relates to their current school-required PD opportunities?

**RQ2: How do secondary teachers perceive the value of liberatory PD?**

1. What do you see as the potential benefits of adopting a more personalized approach to PD that emphasizes critical reflection? And how effective do you think this approach to PD would be in your school?\*
2. What challenges do you think the staff at your school would have in adopting a more autonomous and critically reflective approach to PD?\*
3. How does this more personalized approach to PD compare to the required PD offered at your school?

**RQ3: How useful do secondary teachers find the vision of agency in liberatory PD?**

1. How much control should teachers have over their PD experiences?\*
2. In what ways, if any, should PD help teachers develop more agency?
3. How might having greater control over their learning help teachers implement changes in their school?\*
4. What, if any, experiences have you had in designing your own PD? How did that process make you feel?

**RQ4: How do differences in school contexts shape secondary teachers’ responses to the concept of liberatory PD?**

Protocols marked with an asterisk will be used to generate data to answer this 4<sup>th</sup> research question.

**Final Protocol:**

Do you have any other comments you'd like to share regarding your perception of liberatory PD's potential value or utility in your school?

*Appendix F*Identity Map Instructions for Teacher Participants  
(Adapted from Sirin et al., 2008)

Directions for Creating your Identity Map: Please pull out a piece of blank printer paper and write the words “**Teacher # \_\_**” in the top corner of the page. For this activity, please draw an illustration that represents your identity as both a teacher and a learner. This identity map should reflect how you see yourself as **BOTH a teacher and a learner**. You have complete freedom as to how you design your map. Feel free to use symbols, drawings, words, etc.- whatever will enable you to best express these two aspects of your identity.

Identity Map Definition:

For the purposes of this study, identity maps will be defined as “pictorial descriptions of one’s identity” (Sirin et al., 2008, p. 266)

Please be assured that this information and all your responses during today’s virtual interview will be kept strictly confidential. Data will be reported in such a way that identification of individuals will be impossible. Your assigned identification number allows this information to be compared with your responses on other measurements or observations. Take 8-10 minutes to complete this activity thoughtfully. When you are finished, please take a picture of your creation and email it to me at moorecc3@vcu.edu.

## Appendix G

### Interview Protocols for Teacher Participants

To start, participants will email me a digital copy of their identity maps.

**Opening reflection question:** Please describe how you see yourself as a teacher and a learner based on what appears on your identity map.

At this point, I will provide a digital copy handout of the following:

To ensure that we are on the same page in thinking about the topic of PD, I want to clarify that this study aligns with a broad definition of professional development provided by Desimone (2009) broader description of PD:

Teachers experience a vast range of activities and interactions that may increase their knowledge and skills and improve their teaching practice, as well as contribute to their personal, social, and emotional growth as teachers. These experiences can range from formal, structured topic-specific seminars given on in-service days, to every day, informal “hallway” discussions with other teachers about instruction techniques, embedded in teachers’ everyday work lives (p. 182)

Opening questions:

- \* What are some experiences that have helped you grow professionally as an educator?
- \* If you could design your own PD, what might it look like over the course of a year?

Now that we have discussed your general opinions regarding your PD experiences, I want to give you with a chance to look over two definitions to ensure that the terms I will be using in the rest of the interview do not cause any confusion. If you have any questions about either of these terms, I am happy to discuss them with you.

#### Definitions:

The researcher approaches *teacher agency* from a socio-cultural perspective. This study draws on Clark’s (2016) definition which contends that a teacher’s agency “represents awareness of their self, their intentionality, and their capacity to make choices in the context of schooling” (Clark, 2016, p. 1).

The researcher intends the term *liberatory professional development* to indicate any approach to PD that positions teachers as autonomous and active participants in control of their own professional growth. Additionally, liberatory PD prioritizes critical reflection aimed at empowering teachers to develop an understanding of their own agency and how that agency can be enacted in specific teaching contexts.

**RQ1: How do secondary teachers describe their agency in navigating the PD fulfillments required by their school?**



1. How involved are teachers in influencing school decisions about PD?  
~In your opinion, is this level of involvement appropriate?
2. As a learner, how do you feel when you are participating in your school's required PD sessions?  
~Does the way you are treated during school-required PD seem appropriate given your level of expertise and/or training? Why or why not?
3. How does participating in your school's required PD empower you to affect change in your school building?\*
4. How could you practically impact your school's plan or design for required PD?
5. How effectively does your school's required PD support your individual learning needs?\*
6. How much agency do you feel have as it relates to your current school-required PD opportunities?  
\*You might consider reflecting on your identity map to answer this question.

**RQ2: How do secondary teachers perceive the value of liberatory PD?**

1. What PD experiences, if any, have you had that have encouraged you to critically reflect on your role as teacher?  
~How have these experiences impacted your teaching philosophy or instruction?
2. How could a PD design that emphasizes critical reflection potentially benefit teachers and/or students at your school?
3. How could a PD design that emphasizes teacher agency potentially benefit teachers and/or students at your school?
4. How could a PD approach that emphasizes teacher autonomy as it relates to its design potentially benefit teachers and/or students at your school?
5. How does a liberatory model of PD (keeping in mind that liberatory PD emphasizes agency, autonomy, and critical reflection) compare to the required PD you currently participate in at your school?
6. How effective do you think adopting a liberatory model of PD would be for your school?\*
7. What challenges do you think the staff at your school would have in adopting a liberatory model of PD?\*

**RQ3: How useful do secondary teachers find the vision of agency in liberatory PD?**

1. How much control should teachers have over their PD experiences?\*
2. In what ways, if any, should PD help teachers develop agency?
3. How might having greater control over your learning help you implement changes in your school?\*
4. Based on our discussion, think back on any experiences have you had participating in PD that you would consider to be liberatory. How did participating in such PD make you feel?  
~If you haven't had such PD experiences, how do you imagine participating in liberatory PD would make you feel?
5. In your opinion, why has a liberatory model of PD not been previously adopted in your school or district?

**RQ4: How do differences in school contexts shape secondary teachers' responses to the concept of liberatory PD?**

Protocols marked with an asterisk will be used to generate data to answer this 4<sup>th</sup> research question.

**Final Protocol:**

Do you have any other comments you'd like to share regarding your perception of liberatory PD's potential value or utility in your school?